

Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

The Transition from Transcendent to Anthropomorphic Deities

With the advent of agriculture, we had a new relationship with nature; it was at least partly under our control. And with this we see the arrival of anthropomorphic deities. These are more powerful and more beautiful than we, but they resemble us. They can be reasoned with; they are close to us. Indeed, they seem to like us, and all the more if we propitiate them. Furthermore, they could be loyal to specific groups of us, which reflects the emergence of settlement and city dwelling. Each settlement could have a goddess or god of its own, who might be persuaded to live there and give it her or his protection. We built homes for them, which we called temples, and provided food or other offerings for them.

Eventually there was a veritable tribe of goddesses and gods, each responsible for some or other facet of life. Each of these was a dilution of the power of the Great Goddess, the Eternal Mother, for it was from her, originally, that all of their powers came.

The relationships between the goddesses and gods thus created reflect the relationships of land to men. The Earth, the land, was increasingly seen as the possession of men, to be cultivated and made profitable. Similarly, the Goddess, little by little, was made subordinate to new male gods. The new male deities were increasingly assertive and demanding of obedience. They were lords and masters, patriarchs and warriors. They controlled the Earth and, by implication, the Goddess, in whichever form she appeared.

For women, this had severe consequences, because the triad Goddess-Earth-Women contains human women. The three elements of her subjugation, taming nature through large-scale agriculture, controlling the Goddess by placing male gods above her, and disempowering women by making them the chattels of men, are indivisible.

As the Sumerian polytheism developed, both goddesses and gods were served by priestesses. Having priestesses in a position of power retained a balance in the broader culture. In any society where the right to rule is conveyed to a monarch by the deity via the hands of a prelate, the priestly class has great influence. While women's control over their sexuality and fertility was no longer absolute, collectively they retained political power through the priestesses.

Although the Goddess would persist, the first fateful steps that would lead to the systematic exploitation and subjugation of over half the world's population had been taken.