

**Rewriting the Past to Save the Future: A Review of  
*The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future.*  
(Riane Eisler. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987. 261 pp.)**

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**Abstract.** The revival of a prehistoric religion of the “mother-goddess” has been championed as the solution to many modern ills. The archaeological evidence for the existence of such a goddess is examined and found wanting. It is suggested that this revival is predicated on ideas about the nature of women that differ little from 19th-century ideals that saw women as purer and nobler than men. The role of archaeological interpretations of data in promulgating such ideas is discussed.

**INTRODUCTION**

Although we like to think we are doing objective science, archaeologists are coming to grips with the fact that what we are really doing is creating the past. The nature of the task means that, even if we believe there is an objective, knowable past, we may never find out what it is. This is due to the fact that we can never discover all there is to know about the past; most of it is not preserved in a way that is archaeologically discoverable. Of that which is preserved, resources dictate that only a small portion can be dealt with archaeologically. Given these constraints, choices must be made as to what will be ignored and what explored. Hence, it is crucial that our interpretations recognize the ambiguity of the data base. The public will accept what we say and use it for other purposes, not willfully misrepresenting the data and conclusions but using them without fully understanding the nature of the evidence or the underlying assumptions.

Such is the case with a book that has enjoyed acclaim in recent years in popular feminist circles. Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* grew out of her lifelong concern with human brutality (which she experienced early in life when she and her parents fled Nazi Austria) and a tendency she sees in humans that “tilts us toward cruelty rather than kindness” (1987:xiii). How did this tendency develop? Is it inevitable? Can we change it? Her exploration of these questions has taken her into the archaeological past to a time when, according to some interpretations of the archaeological record, people lived in peace and prosperity in a world that was not “male dominant, violent and hierarchic” (1987:xvi).

Eisler contends that humanity stands at an evolutionary crossroad: We can destroy ourselves and our planet through ecological catastrophe or nuclear annihilation, or we can choose to prevent this holocaust through radical behavioral change. Our hierarchically ordered, androcratic society is the cause of the current crisis. Far from being the natural order of things, this type of society is the direct result of historical factors dating back some 4000 to 6000 years: the westward expansion of androcratic, hierarchical Indo-Europeans who exterminated the egalitarian, "partnership"-based societies in their path. By replacing this "dominator" model with a renewed partnership model, in which "diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority" (1987: xvii), modern society will allow a fundamental "rebalancing" of women's and men's roles and the attainment of global cooperation rather than the exploitation of both people and resources so common under the dominator model. As proof that the partnership model can work, Eisler suggests that it was the prevalent form of social relationships for much of human prehistory, basing this claim on evidence from an evaluation of the archaeological record for the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic of Europe and West Asia. Her argument, however, rests on unwitting misuse of the archaeological record and is underlain by unprovable psychological theories about the nature of humanity.

An adequate analysis of Eisler's thesis and assumptions requires examining the book in three dimensions: its place in American millenarian literature, the validity of the archaeological evidence used, and the author's underlying assumptions about human nature.

### MOTHER GODDESSES AND THE MILLENNIUM

Millenarian movements are a common feature of American life, and, although they differ radically in their social manifestations, they share underlying assumptions and messages. The old order has failed: It has been found to be "diseased and corrupt, tottering inevitably toward destruction," and only extraordinary human effort can rewrite the outcome (Foster 1981:5). Such human efforts have taken many paths. Social flux in a rapidly growing 19th-century America, as well as concern over America's growing industrial power, have been credited with igniting millenarian concerns and feeding the development of a multitude of new religious sects like the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists, and the Mormons (Foster 1981; Judis 1993). Millenarian sentiments in the second half of the 20th century have been fueled by apocalyptic views of environmental degradation and life in a post-industrial world. Those concerned with "the limits to growth" and "the population bomb" have predicted global population and industrial

collapse and the destruction of life as we (those of us in the West, anyway) know it (Ehrlich 1968; Meadows et al. 1972). The environmental movement, however, sees salvation not through an improved relationship with god but through consecration of self to personal and political acts, new laws, and new ways of living.

As with earlier millenarian crises, though, years pass and the sky does not fall. The problems don't disappear but reappear in new guises, and new solutions are fervently proposed. In *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler argues passionately that we stand at an evolutionary crossroads, a "potentially decisive branching point" where "the lethal power of the Blade—amplified a millionfold by megatons of nuclear warheads—threatens to put an end to all human culture" (1987:xviii). In common with 19th-century sects, she sees a change in social relations between the sexes as the key to salvation. The Shakers preached celibacy, the Mormons plural marriage, and the Oneida Perfectionists complex (or open) marriage. Each group believed that its practices would guarantee it a place in Christ's second coming and the millennium of peace and harmony to follow.

Twentieth-century millenarian movements differ notably from those of the 19th century in the source of their authority. The 19th-century groups mentioned above drew on Biblical authority. Twentieth-century movements look to science. Environmental concerns have spawned and drawn from a panoply of biological studies. Eisler looks to psychology and archaeology.

For Eisler, new social relations are to be built around a new reality, one that incorporates feminine principles into both science and spirituality. Practically speaking, this means recognizing the importance of Maslow's "actualization needs": Humans need not only food, sex, and safety but also growth and personal fulfillment (Maslow 1968). It also means incorporating the "female ethos of love/duty" (Eisler 1987:190) and acknowledging the importance of "feminine" intuitive thinking patterns. Eisler argues that the "male-dominant" structure (which she terms an "androcracy") of most modern societies is responsible for the aggression that threatens to destroy the world today. Redemption lies in transformation to a "partnership" model of society, rather than the "dominator" model. Partnership societies, for which she coins the word "gylany," successfully link ("l") female ("gy") and male ("an") in "actualization hierarchies," rather than the now common dominance hierarchies. While not defined, actualization hierarchies can best be thought of as body systems, interrelated, interdependent, and working toward a common goal, without any one system in charge.

## FEMALE FIGURINES: FACT AND FANTASY

Eisler's archaeological research, drawn extensively from Gimbutas (1974, 1982, 1989) and Mellaart (1964, 1967, 1975), indicates that gynanic societies were common, perhaps the norm, in prehistoric societies of hunter-gatherers and early village societies. Several chapters are devoted to evidence for the nurturing and giving natures of such societies, symbolized for Eisler by the chalice. Her earliest evidence is drawn from the Upper Paleolithic of Europe and deals with the symbolism seen by many in burials with cowrie shells and red ochre. Since James' *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess* (1959), certain shells have been seen as representative of the female. Cowries represent "the portal through which a child enters the world" (James 1959:16), and conch shells represent female reproductive organs (see Jordan 1982:21-25 for a short discussion of shell iconography). Red ochre, of course, represents the "life-giving or menstrual blood of woman" (Eisler 1987:2).

Eisler's discussion of female figurines in the Paleolithic and Neolithic assumes that all the figures, no two of which are identical and which span several thousand miles and years in space and time, represent a universally worshipped "mother-goddess." The meaning of the figurines has been much debated in the anthropological literature (see Bahn and Vertut 1988, Ehrenberg 1989, and Nelson 1990 for reasonable discussions). Eisler sees them, as well as the cowrie shells and red ochre, as "early manifestations of what was later to develop into a complex religion centering on the worship of a Mother Goddess as the source and regentrix of all forms of life" (1987:6).

The figurines may well have been fertility charms, portraits of loved ones, toys, teaching aides, or any of a myriad of other things (see Vandiver et al. 1989 for informed speculation on ritual uses of Upper Paleolithic figurines). But it seems unlikely that they represented anthropomorphic forms of a deity. Ehrenberg offers the most apt refutation:

A universal religion based on a specific female goddess is unlikely in a society such as that of Palaeolithic Europe, both because it assumes closer and more detailed contact between different groups over a wide area of Europe than is implied by links in other aspects of material culture, and particularly because religion based on deities would be very unusual in similar societies today. The belief systems of forager and other small-scale societies, who are closely in touch with the natural world and whose own social systems are based on greater equality than that of later socially stratified societies, typically centre on general spirits and forces, rather than on personified gods and goddesses (1989:73-4).

Eisler's interpretation of Neolithic iconography is the stuff of religion, not science, as it must be accepted on faith. She relies on the Jungian universal archetype of the "Great Mother," which asserts psychic continuity of female symbols over 25,000 years of human existence. It is unlikely that such continuity would exist in all times and at all places independent of local historical developments and traditions. Such a hypothesis is not untestable, perhaps, but Eisler has not tested it, just asserted it. For this she cannot be blamed, because she has merely adopted the views of noted archaeologists like Gimbutas and Mellaart.

Gimbutas has long been known for her (controversial) semiotic interpretations of the designs on the pottery of Neolithic Europe: The chevrons, zig-zags, V's, M's, X's, meanders, and streams all represent the life-giving body of the Goddess. In fact, a perusal of Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) demonstrates that practically every geometric design on a European Neolithic pot can be interpreted as a symbol of the female principle around which these societies were organized.

Mellaart's views on Neolithic religion stem from his excavations at Çatal Hüyük, on the Anatolian plateau, in the early 1960s. He identified one-fifth to one-quarter of all the rooms he excavated as shrines, based not on architectural evidence, given that shrines and residential rooms were similar in plan and structure, but on their more elaborate decoration or content. The shrines are incorporated into residential areas, where each seems to serve four to five residential rooms. In many societies the main, most public rooms of any house are more highly decorated than are the working or sleeping quarters. Although modern western society tends to make a distinction between religion and the rest of life, many other groups do not, and it is not uncommon for a family to install some sort of altar or shrine in part of this public room. Hence, concluding that these special rooms were shrines reserved for ritual activities may be overstepping the bounds of both the archaeological and ethnographic evidence.

As to the objects of worship, Mellaart has concluded that the Neolithic religion of the inhabitants was created by women and featured a female supreme deity. The identification of the deity is based on the presence of small figurines of females, which Mellaart assumes to be representations of the goddess at various stages of her life. He suggests that women were responsible for creation of the religion because there is little that is vulgar or erotic about the statuettes (1964:102). This probably tells us more about Mellaart's 19th-century views of men and women (the former are lascivious, the latter chaste and religious) than it does about the archaeological record.

In any event, as Eisler sees it, until about 6000 years ago Europe was a gylanic (if not gynocentric) society based on nurturing and giving, with respect for life. Into this ordered, peaceful, and loving world swept bands of nomadic Indo-Europeans, the Kurgan Wave of Aryans, bringing warfare, slavery, sacrifice, and a dominator model of society that soon replaced the partnership Neolithic societies of Europe. How or why the invading hordes developed a dominator society themselves is not discussed. The dominator model has persisted, however, and is the cause of many of our political problems today (globally speaking). Only by returning to gylanic principles, Eisler says, can we hope to avert the impending disaster.

Several comments must be made on Eisler's use of anthropological evidence.

1. In general, Eisler's review of the archaeological evidence tends to stress the female to the exclusion of the male. There are some clearly male figures in Upper Paleolithic art (there are vastly more animal depictions than human, a fact that Eisler also ignores). In a study of 410 pieces of wall and portable art in Western Europe, 10 percent were male, 25 percent female, and 65 percent neutral (Bahn and Vertut 1988:137). Her discussion of early Sumerian deities will leave the uninformed with the impression that the Sumerian pantheon was exclusively female.

2. Eisler discusses the possible misinterpretation (by male archaeologists) of Upper Paleolithic harpoons. Following Marshack (1967), she considers that much of what we call weapons actually represent plants. On some "harpoons" the "barbs" point the wrong way and are more likely to be plants, by implication a female domain. It is true that plants clearly identifiable as such are lacking in Upper Paleolithic art in Western Europe (Bahn and Vertut 1988), but not because they have been misidentified. The florescence of Upper Paleolithic art in Europe coincided with the last glacial maximum. Flora of economic importance to humans (edible nuts, seeds, and berries) were rare. Humans were hunters, or scavengers, by necessity, and this has clearly influenced their art.<sup>1</sup> Eisler apparently relies on a modern artificial distinction between man-the-hunter and woman-the-gatherer. While it may be that male strength is necessary to fell a large animal, in a society primarily dependent on the hunt all members of the community would have been involved in slaughter and carcass processing.

3. The peaceable nature of small-scale hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies, both prehistoric and modern, is a subject of debate even among the anthropologists who study them. Ethnographic hunter-gatherers have been known to engage in both alliances and warfare (Ember 1978; Upham 1987). No one can say definitively whether the Upper Paleolithic

“*homme blessé*” depicted on the cave wall at Pech Merle with seven arrows or spears through him (or her; the sex is unclear) was the result of a terrible hunting accident or intentional homicide (Bahn and Vertut 1988). Evidence from Mesolithic cemeteries in France, Ukraine, Denmark, Romania, and Nubia, where points have been found embedded in human bone, indicates extensive, if small-scale, interpersonal hostility (Vencl 1984). At Jebel Sahaba, Sudan, at least half of a population of 59 died violently, judging from the projectiles embedded in bone (Wendorf 1968). The massive wall at prepottery Neolithic Jericho may be a water diversion device, but its sheer size indicates it was more likely built as defense against hostile neighbors (Kenyon 1981).

4. It is a mistake to assume that a preponderance of female figurines in the Paleolithic and Neolithic implies that supreme deities were female. As Warner (1976) demonstrates in her study of the cult of the Virgin Mary, abundant iconographic representation does not necessarily mean power. The Virgin Mary is well represented in Catholic iconography, but she is merely a model for women and an intercessor for the faithful with the real sources of power, male deities.

#### ARCHETYPAL ASSUMPTIONS

While sympathizing with Eisler’s concerns, one cannot be impressed by her use of the archaeological evidence, nor by her underlying assumptions. By assuming that all the ills of the world are the result of male dominance and, further, that stronger incorporation of female principles can only help to correct these ills, Eisler resorts to the basest form of biological reductionism, attributing to the male a violent and controlling nature and to the female a giving and nurturing one. It would seem that the democratic argument that all people are created equal has been abandoned in favor of the idea that female is inherently superior to male. Secondly, she assumes that hierarchical society is violent because it is androcratic. Hierarchy and violence may perhaps be inevitable outcomes of social size and complexity, but does this mean that androcracy is necessarily violent? Violence may as likely be due to competition over resources as the result of an innate drive to violence. Although Eisler notes that there are violent women and gentle men, her solution to violence and dominance (the introduction of the female principle as a corrective) reveals her underlying assumption that violence is connected to the Y chromosome.

At bottom, it is Eisler’s acceptance of the feminine archetype — the Great Mother — as the quintessence of all women that forms the crux of her argument. All women carry within themselves the capacity not just for

birth but for transformation and rebirth, of ourselves and our species. This archetype has a long tradition in anthropological and psychological literature. The archetype itself was developed from 19th-century archaeological finds in the European Upper Paleolithic by Bachofen (1967 [1861]) and refined by Jung (1972 [1934]) and Neumann (1991 [1955]). It has come full circle in the work of Gimbutas and Mellaart.<sup>2</sup>

But archetypes are not biological facts: They are human creations. To ascribe universal creeds to humans separated by 25,000 years is to deny history, and acceptance of the Great Mother archetype by archaeologists like Mellaart and Gimbutas has transformed history into nature (Barthes 1972; Warner 1976).

In a curious way, Eisler's reliance on the female principle embodied in the "Great Mother" to act as a force for the salvation of civilization is a throwback to the 19th-century "cult of true womanhood," which saw woman as purity and innocence, a corrective to the baser instincts of man (Foster 1981; Welter 1966). Although no longer expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic (Welter 1966:152), woman today shall be peaceful, giving, and nurturing, at one with nature, the source of human transformation and rebirth (Eisler 1987:36). Ascribing the "Great Mother" archetype to all women does as much violence to 20th-century women as the "cult of true womanhood" did to 19th-century women.

#### AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANTIDOTE TO A PSYCHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPE

The study of prehistoric belief systems is in its infancy, and facile acceptance of universal archetypes threatens to smother the baby in its crib. Many of the works mentioned above have taken an anthropological look at "goddess" figurines and other prehistoric depictions of women, considering their cultural and archaeological contexts and chronology (Bahn and Vertut 1988; Ehrenberg 1989; Nelson 1990; Vandiver et al. 1989). Their conclusions make it unavoidably clear that there is no solid reason for assigning "deity" to any of these depictions.

Many archaeologists make assumptions about the connection between women and horticulture, women and weaving, women and ceramic technology. The archaeological record has so far been silent on the subject. But analysis of early Sumerian and Assyrian texts has shed light on these connections. Frymer-Kensky (1992) has suggested that the roles of goddesses in early Mesopotamian literature modeled the roles of human females. Because the patron deities of writing, clothmaking, beer-brewing and other technical activities were goddesses, Frymer-Kensky believes that



this may be evidence that women, in their roles as housekeepers and managers, were responsible for these cultural developments. It is up to archaeology to test this notion.

Crosscultural work on both gender inequality and mother worship offer rich data for archaeological model building. Gender inequality is an undeniable aspect of modern societies, and the study of how it developed is a legitimate anthropological undertaking. A positivist approach to how female roles develop in differing societies led Sanday (1981) to a crosscultural study of the environmental conditions under which female subordination to male power may occur. She concludes that although male dominance is not an automatic or universal development, it does tend to occur in times of reduced resources and environmental stress.

Crosscultural studies of mother worship occasionally tend to abstract the same ideas Eisler does about the primacy of a female deity in prehistory, probably because they are relying on Gimbutas, Mellaart, and various general textbook rehashes of their material. But they do offer informative looks at the roles of female deities in modern societies (Preston 1982). Sometimes "mother symbolism is a direct reflection of the role of women as mothers in the real world, in other instances goddess symbols are inversely related to their human counterparts." Mother worship is conspicuous in some societies and absent in others (Freeman 1982).

Interpreting other people's cultural symbols is a risky business, especially when interpreters with little understanding of their own cultural biases unwittingly impose those biases on other cultures in the name of "objective science." Excluding large sections of data, as has been done by concentrating almost exclusively on the meaning of female symbols while ignoring both male symbols and a large body of indeterminate human figurines (as well as animal figurines), cannot tell us anything about how prehistoric people may have constructed gender roles, or even whether such objects can be used for such studies.

What does it mean that in Upper Paleolithic depictions of humans 65 percent are not identifiable as to sex? Is this the result only of formation processes, or does it tell us something about Upper Paleolithic views of sex and gender roles? If all the females depicted are goddesses, what are the males and the animals? Do human representations in later prehistoric cultures follow similar patterns? What are the contexts of the depictions and to what degree are they polysemic?

Archaeological views on the "meaning" of female figurines have run the gamut from objects of male fantasy to depictions of goddesses. These two extremes reflect competing ideas of females in modern society—the

madonna/whore complex. Modern ideas on gender construction cannot be simply imposed on the archaeological record. "Engendering archaeology" does not simply mean putting women in the record (Moore 1991). It means understanding enough of our own biases about sex, gender, the division of labor, and social roles, so that archaeology *can* tell us something about the past and not just serve to legitimate the present.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Whether the animals portrayed in cave art represent the diet of Upper Paleolithic humans is a matter of debate; see Sieveking (1979) and Rice and Patterson (1985).

<sup>2</sup>Eisler has, in fact, borrowed only half the archetype. Carl Jung was quite clear on the idea that archetypes incorporate both positive and negative principles, the latter exemplified by the goddesses Kali and Hecate (Jung 1972:32-34).

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