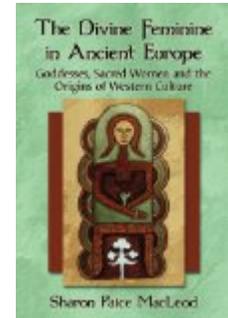


**Sharon Paice MacLeod.** *The Divine Feminine in Ancient Europe: Goddesses, Sacred Women, and the Origins of Western Culture.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013. 244 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7138-6.



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The topic of goddess worship enjoyed a great period of scholarly and popular attention during the latter half of the twentieth century, spurred largely by the work of Marija Gimbutas, who, among her many contributions to the field of archaeology, published three volumes on the subject. Gimbutas's work appeared in the United States during the feminist movement, and an academic focus on goddesses ostensibly confirmed ideas that the role of women in the past had been overlooked and undervalued. Unfortunately, some high-profile publications included claims that could not be tested, did not necessarily align with the data, and therefore did not stand up well to subsequent critique.[1] Subsequent, rigorous analytical work has played a crucial role in shifting the dialog from being largely androcentric to much more inclusive of all genders. Since the 1990s, feminist perspective and gender roles have increasingly been utilized in archaeological and anthropological case studies across a broad geographic and temporal range. While many integrate discussions of women with religious beliefs

in past and present, the topic of goddess worship in and of itself has been generally avoided, perhaps in part because of the knee-jerk reaction to the initial, flawed studies. In *The Divine Feminine in Ancient Europe*, Sharon Paice MacLeod revisits the nature of goddess worship in European prehistory by utilizing dozens of archaeological and ethnographic studies to determine how diverse practices and beliefs helped shape Western notions of spirituality and identity.

Developments in anthropological and archaeological theory over the past few decades, particularly work on gender, identity, phenomenology, agency, and social memory, hold enormous potential for facilitating analysis of ancient religious practice and belief. MacLeod, however, is not an archaeologist, although she relies on archaeological and anthropological sources for her case studies and to support her arguments about the connections between ecology, identity, and the nature of the divine. Therefore, this text is arranged differently from the standard academic text: each chapter begins with a brief, fictional account of a

specific point in time in the past, based largely on archaeological findings and analysis. This approach has been critiqued in the past, but in this work it functions to illustrate the author's main point for each chapter. Also included in most chapters are perspectives from practitioners of current indigenous traditions from around the world. For the general reader who already follows MacLeod's main premise--that we can know the past, connect with it, and change our world for the better--these messages are largely affirming. For scholars, these provide an interesting counterpoint to the archaeological evidence being presented, although the interwoven morality lessons can in general get a bit heavy-handed.

MacLeod traces the evidence for goddesses and other feminine aspects of religious practice from our hominid ancestors through each era until the Middle Ages. The discussions of the pre-Neolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Ages are interesting but necessarily broad and inconclusive based on the currently available evidence, which MacLeod readily concedes makes it difficult to discuss the "divine feminine" with any degree of certainty. The most thorough and convincing arguments put forth are those that utilize historical texts, exemplified in her discussion of the late Iron Age and early medieval period (chapters 8 through 10), including analysis of the role of Germanic and Viking gods and goddesses and the changing understanding of deities during and after the conversion of Europeans to Christianity. MacLeod's discussion of Arthurian legends (chapter 11), particularly the evolution of Guinevere, is a fascinating read: she argues that Guinevere initially symbolized a sovereign goddess and that she is maligned in later texts by those who do not understand the origin of her name or her role in choosing the king. Given the extent of European societies that practiced some type of sovereignty ritual during this time, this should come as no surprise to academics, but it will probably surprise some general readers.

MacLeod focuses much of her work on the British Isles, an area of particular personal interest for her. She addresses the rights of women in early medieval (circa AD 400-1200) Irish society, as detailed in a corpus of texts, written and retained in ecclesiastical contexts and collectively called the Law Tracts. These texts suggest that the society was preoccupied with rank, status, laws, and fairness. MacLeod references the Law Tracts repeatedly, although she does not note that these texts survive in much later form and might not necessarily reflect the reality of the time. Although the texts suggest that women would hold specialized occupations and status, evidence thus far suggests that these individuals and circumstances were relatively rare. This discussion would have benefited from inclusion of information from Lisa Bitel (*Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* [1996]), which is listed as a reference in the book but not utilized in this chapter.

One of the strengths of the book is the critique of how images of women and "goddesses" have been portrayed in today's society: as icons of fertility, wisdom, peace, and equality. In chapter 2, MacLeod provides a discussion of the many, varied female figurines of the Upper Paleolithic, the iconic objects that are normally represented as characterized by large hips, rounded belly, and heavy breasts, as seen in the Venus of Willendorf. MacLeod points out that although this is generally the image presented, among this large corpus of figurines from across Europe there are varied representations of women--young and old, thin and not. While these figures tend to emphasize breasts, hips, and sometimes genitalia, we do not know what they meant to Paleolithic peoples, and these are not necessarily intended to represent fertility. Likewise, when discussing the pre-Neolithic period, she points out that "the existence of female imagery does not necessarily correlate with peacefulness, prosperity or female rule" (p. 72).

Despite much insightful analysis, MacLeod also includes statements such as “the rich spiritual traditions of the Celtic people are enticing and mysterious, and yet strangely familiar. They evoke a deep memory of ancestral wisdom, a sense of eternal connection with sacral landscapes, and knowledge of symbols and practices not yet entirely forgotten” (p. 159). This is, on the surface, a benign personal statement of pride, connection to her heritage, and longing for a specific history, to which many readers will surely relate. However, the idea that the past is somehow familiar is problematic for a variety of reasons, not least of which is because it leads to interpreting archaeological finds through modern understanding and social mores. Archaeologists, such as Bettina Arnold and Michael Dietler, have cautioned that the past, particularly an idea about a “Celtic” heritage, has been appropriated on numerous occasions for less than honorable political and social movements.[2] A discussion of how one balances these issues is necessary but MacLeod contributes to the dubious application of this concept rather than interrogating it.

MacLeod misses several other opportunities to provide a more theoretical, in-depth discussion about the nature of gender, identity, religion, and life in the ancient world. She briefly discusses the third-gendered “magical practitioners known as *Enarees*” (p. 125); this would have been the ideal place to talk about the potential roles of other genders in religious practice beyond the traditional focus on gods and goddesses. Her references to gender studies and discussion of gender as it is used within anthropology and archaeology are extremely limited, and this more than anything should be expanded. The important work of such scholars as Arnold, Margaret Conkey, Janet Spector, Rosemary Joyce, John Robb, and many more who address the topics of gender, embodiment, agency, and identity should have been included, as many of these scholars work in Europe.

While MacLeod endeavors to present an objective overview of how the divine feminine manifested and changed in ancient Europe, she also argues that embracing the knowledge of the past is crucially important in creating a better, more environmentally sustainable future—a highly subjective enterprise. Her primary contribution to serious scholarship on the topic is the important point that discussion of “goddess worship” needs to include much more than stereotypical understandings of the meaning of woman in the ancient world: “In many cases, the power of these goddesses did not derive primarily (or solely) from the potency of the female reproductive system or reproductive energies. To reduce the power of the goddesses to their biological functions alone is to diminish their stature, and to diminish the potential of mortal women as well” (pp. 209-210). MacLeod’s work is not thorough or theoretical enough in scope to satisfy advanced scholars, but she provides a thought-provoking introduction to the topic for the general public and a solid basis from which to expand her own research.

#### Notes

[1]. See Pamela Russell, “The Paleolithic Mother-Goddess: Fact or Fiction?” in *Reader in Gender Archaeology*, ed. Kelley Hays-Gilpin and David S. Whitley (London: Routledge, 1998), 261-268.

[2]. Bettina Arnold, “The Contested Past,” *Anthropology Today* 15, no. 4 (1999): 1-4; and Michael Dietler, “Our Ancestors the Gauls’: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe,” *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 96, no. 3 (1994): 584-605.

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