Female Shamanism, Goddess Cultures, and Psychedelics

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The Goddess came consciously into my life after I moved to Berkeley, California, in 1975. I began attending Goddess rituals, studying with psychic healers, practicing yoga, and looking at images of goddesses in prehistoric and indigenous art. Many experiences came together in rapid succession to lead me to co-create the *Motherpeace* Tarot deck with Vicki Noble. The *Motherpeace* deck is based on iconography and consciousness of the Goddess, with the psychedelic worldview represented in the deck by *Amanita muscaria*, peyote, cannabis, morning glories, *datura*, poppies, and tobacco.

The viewpoint I gained from psychedelics and my ongoing relationship with the Goddess propelled me to search for the roots, the history, and practices associated with the three important threads in my life: female shamanism, Goddess cultures, and psychedelics. I wanted to know about my lineage and I was following a calling to research these realms and create art that was informed by my exploration. As part of my quest, I carved in wood a close replica of a relief carving from the Louvre of two women, or goddesses, holding mushrooms (fig. 1). The original carving is on a funeral marker or *stèle* from Thessaly in northern Greece, dated around 470 BCE. It is through the story of this particular image I will explore what might have happened in ancient Greek culture to the Goddess, female shamanism, and psychedelics in the transition to a more patriarchal way of life.

Our human ancestors had the ability to self-medicate because of our animal heritage. Animals are incredibly discerning at diagnosing ailments and seeking out certain plants or minerals to treat a variety of ailments. Animals are also very precise about using the correct dosage. Animals also know how to get intoxicated. Some even use psychedelics. (Engel, 2002). Caribou seem to love to ingest the hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (Devereux, 1997). Our ancestors also knew about psychedelics. Human use of psychedelics may be as old as humanity and women healers have been around as long as there have been women. I think these early women healers had many skills and much knowledge, which eventually developed into a tradition of female shamanism.

The roots of female shamanism may go back more than 5 million years and be linked with our ancestors’ upright posture. Once our ancestors stood upright there would be a need for midwives, according Ian Tattersal (1999), one of the leaders in the study of human evolution and curator at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. It is rare for women to give birth alone and most cultures typically had midwives. An exception, the !Kung San or Ju/'hoansi (pronounced: zhu-twasi) as they prefer to be known, a gathering and hunting people of Botswana in southern Africa, are reported to prefer giving birth alone. According to Marjorie Shostack (1981) in her book *Nisa*, a woman may give birth alone, but close enough to camp that she could call out for help. Shostack explains:

A !Kung woman will have on average, four of five live births during her reproductive life. With each successive birth, she is more likely to attain the ideal of delivering alone. Without telling anyone, she walks a few hundred yards from the village, prepares a cushion of leaves, and gives birth.
to her child. Accompanied or not, most births occur close enough to the village so that others can hear the baby’s first cries. This signals the woman’s female relatives and friends that the child has been born and that the mother may welcome assistance in delivering the afterbirth, cutting the umbilical cord, and wiping the baby clean. Perhaps carrying the baby for her, other women will accompany her back to the village. Only the most experienced and determined woman insist on being alone during these last stages. (p. 181)

Humans are almost unique in our use of midwives. Most animals give birth alone, though midwives have been observed among elephants, dolphins, and bats. The human need for midwives undoubtedly increased, as the size of newborns heads increased. In our evolution humans have struck a delicate balance with our large heads: Our big brains make for difficult births. The trend in the human line (hominids) has been for our babies to be born less mature so a great deal of the brain growth happens after a baby is born. As a result of this evolutionary strategy, human babies are born immature and need care for a longer period time compared to other animals. This puts a range of demands on social structure and nursing mothers in particular. It also must have increased the demands on and for midwives. Midwives have the experience of catching babies and usually at some points in their lives have also been pregnant and given birth. This double experience, over millions of years, gave midwives a vast body of knowledge about pregnancy, birth, and child rearing. This body of knowledge also would have included what to do if something were to go wrong or if someone became sick or hurt. The importance of midwifery as a response to human evolution seems to me to be the logical root of female shamanism.

Shamanism is a concept that has many meanings attached to it. The more I’ve studied shamanism the broader I’ve become in my use of the term. I think it encompasses a worldview as profound and yet very different from other world religions. I think there are many ways of being a shaman and using shamanic energy. And we all have shamanic moments in our lives, such as in birth and death.

Some people draw distinctions between true shamans and herbal practitioners. Others draw the line between shamans, doctors, and priest/priestesses. I think it is impossible to make such distinctions. A shaman is a profession or calling with no set rules about how to enter the profession or precisely what is done once someone is a shaman.

A shaman may gain the position hereditarily through a lineage or family tradition. People in a community or extended family will see that a young child has talents or special experiences. For example, Bonnie Glass-Coffin (1998) worked with female healers in northern Peru. Glass-Coffin reports some of the healers inherited their mesas or altar and healing tools from relatives after the relative died.

Recognized talents and experiences of an individual may grow into a calling to undertake a period of apprenticeship to become a shaman. The period of apprenticeship may include many ways of learning. A person may study with one or more shamans, or someone may study directly with a certain plant or substance. The apprenticeship may include accidental or chosen “ordeals” both physical and mental. Through this time of apprenticeship an individual develops a reputation based on results. Eventually the individual is acknowledged for her abilities as a shaman.

An individual may be recognized for certain talents such as midwifery or healing a particular class of diseases; protecting, or finding things (i.e. plants, animals, or lost objects); or controlling weather. A shaman may use touch and massage, sweats, medicinal plants, animals, and minerals. These techniques or substances can produce altered states or be medicinal in other ways.

A shaman may be particularly adept at entering trance and altered states and dealing with unseen forces, restoring balance and engaging in “soul retrieval”. The repair work or healing may be for an individual or community or the earth itself. These so-called world-renewal ceremonies and dances are still performed by the local tribes in many of the roundhouses throughout northern California.

A shaman may also harm others by being a poisoner or sending darts to bring about illness or death. A shaman may make or have power objects that are believed to be sources of their power. A shaman may be an artist, storyteller, or ritual leader. A shaman
may use sandpaintings, songs, dances, and community rituals to create and heighten the energy used to heal. Shamans may use power for war and peace and to control environmental factors. Some shamans may be feared or be afflicted with what might be called mental or physical illness. In other cases a shaman can be an exceptionally strong and clear individual who is loved and respected by an extended community.

The respect, participation, and belief of a community in shamanism enable individual talents to flourish and grow. Shamans interact and trade plants and techniques with each other. Shamanism is a group activity and a worldview. It is easy to be dazzled by someone’s talents and forget all that goes into making the magic, ritual, or healing happen. Many people tended and collected the plants, gathered and ground the pigments, painted the rock walls, created and learned the songs and dances and made the regalia that were used in the rituals of the shaman. Shamanism as a community activity is especially visible when it comes to female shamanism. Bonnie Glass-Coffin (1998) explains female healing traditions with the term coessence: Coessence, in contrast to both transcendence and immanence, locates shamanic power and spiritual energy upon which shamans draw neither within nor without the boundaries of this world. Instead, coessence implies that this thing flows between worlds. When the shaman taps into this source of power, she is not transcending dichotomies and she is not healing “on behalf of” her patients. Instead, she is facilitating a reestablishment of the energy flow between spirit and matter, between individual and group, and between shaman and patient. Shamanic power and shamanic voyage is, thus, inherently relational. (p.188–189)

Human experience of altered states that became so vital to shamanism is evident in the Paleolithic, around forty thousand years ago, in a creative flowering of art and ritual. At this time what I call Goddess Culture took hold in artwork in a number of places around the world, a significant milestone in the development of female shamanism. Indeed, the geometric and other abstract patterns of this early art painted on rock and cave walls have often been linked with female imagery. My own personal experience with the Goddess and discovery of prehistoric goddess cultures came after my first experiences with psychedelics creating an altered state of consciousness. I felt immediately connected with this early art because the things that I had seen and felt on psychedelics were reflected in these first images of forty thousand years ago. In my mind it makes sense to put together the great mysterious realm of shapes and colors of psychedelics with my experience of the Goddess.

This eruption of art forty thousand years ago is remarkable because it happened in many places in the world around the same time. Paintings and engravings on rock walls (I will use the term “rock art” to refer to paintings and engravings on rocks including those inside caves) from around the thirty to forty thousand years ago are found in Africa, Asia, and Europe. The Americas may be added to the list, if controversial early dates are substantiated. The sudden worldwide proliferation of art forty thousand years ago is shocking. The only vague explanation I’ve found is something called “a slow acting neural transformation in the human brain” (McKie, 2000 p. 195). I think this is a fancy way of saying: we don’t know how or why art started at the same time in different location that had no known contact.

Even if we don’t know why art began, many scholars have tried to figure out what the early art means. David Lewis-Williams (Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1998), a South African archeologist, has become well known in the field of rock art. He has used the innovative approach of interviewing people from cultures where rock art is still used. He discovered that the San (!Kung San or Ju/'hoansi) people go into altered states or trance by touching the images on rock walls. Lewis-Williams also studied altered states with T.E. Dowson. They developed a system of three stages of visual imagery that people experience when in altered states. The stages are a way of recognizing and discussing imagery that can seem to be random. The incomprehensible array of dots, lines, and geometric shapes are considered to be the first stage and supernatural beings are the third stage. The second stage is an intermediary between the two in which a thing may be recognizable, but not animated or mythological as in the third stage. However, Lewis-Williams
states there are no hard and fast lines between the three stages. In other work, Lewis-Williams collaborated with Jean Clottes, an eminent scholar of the rock art of Ice Age Europe (Cave art in Europe is often called Ice Age art because forty thousand years ago Europe was in a period of glaciers). Lewis-Williams and Clottes believe this early rock art is evidence of shamanism and argued that the art comes from shamanic practices, rituals and altered states of consciousness.

Female figurines also say something about Paleolithic humans and their worldview. These so-called Paleolithic “Venus” figurines are found in great numbers all over Europe. There is speculation about what they represent ranging from goddesses to early male pornography. I personally think they are goddesses. Additionally, they seem to be very good depictions of what it must feel like to be pregnant. I would venture to say that whoever made these early sculptures knew from the inside what it was like to be pregnant. If that is true then artists of the figurines were most certainly mothers. This flies in the face of the assumptions that sculptors of hard materials, like stone, must be male.

In order to gain understanding, anthropologists are encouraged to participate in the culture they are studying. In archeology this practice is called hermeneutic archeology. (Schaafsma, 1997). I am not Paleolithic despite what some of my friends might say, but I am a sculptor of hard materials. I have found I need inspirations that are strong enough to motivate me to sit for countless hours chipping, etching and slowly, almost imperceptibly, grinding away at hard surfaces. I also need time to sit for long hours. No matter how much the Paleolithic mind and culture may differ from our own, I do not see that a Paleolithic sculptor was all that different from me in these essential qualities, whether that person was male or female. The labor-intensive work of the Paleolithic sculptors and painters is evidence that these artists had a good deal of time to be creative and make art. The nature of the inspiration is open to speculation.

The goddess figurines are often said to be symbols of a fertility cult. I think that is too narrow. Instead I believe they speak of many things, including a profound sense of awe around birth and death. The Goddess is a midwife, as well as the mother from which everything is born. These early goddesses are impressive expressions of the pregnant state. They are also good depictions of a baby’s view in which a mother is a large, round, encompassing being. In many of the Paleolithic figurines I also see old age and the forces of gravity and erosion, returning matter to the earth. These figurines could represent the knowledge that we come from the mother in birth and we return to her in death. Perhaps these figurines were shamanic tools of midwives in their important role as priestesses to new life and healer/shamans when necessary.

Though the roots of shamanism are probably much older, Siberian shamanism is often used as the model for all shamanic tradition because it was one area where shamanism was first extensively studied. Among the many tribes found across Siberia, the word used to indicate a male shaman varied, whereas the term for female shaman was the same. Archeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball (2002) concludes: “In fact, if we are to believe the linguists, women were also the first shamans. The roots of shamanism are to be found in Paleolithic Siberia, where a single term... always referred to the female shaman” (p.236).

So, here we are forty thousand years ago with evidence of female shamanism and Goddess Culture. What about the third thread: psychedelics? There is no direct evidence that our Paleolithic ancestors used psychedelics, yet I believe our animal lineage indicates humans always knew about them. “The use of hallucinogens is in fact one of humankind’s most widespread practices. Everywhere people in small-scale societies have remarkable knowledge of plants and there psychoactive properties, and this was almost certainly the case in the Upper Paleolithic” (Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1998, p. 22). Based on this assumption and my own experience noted earlier, I would say that the use of psychedelics was an intricate part of female shamanic tradition and the developing Goddess Culture.

I use the term Goddess Culture not because I think there was a monotheistic ideology of goddess worship sweeping across the world during the Paleolithic. Instead I am painting broad brush strokes across time to show a pattern and possible trend in human history. To me the widespread creation of
female figurines means the great mysterious spirit realm began to be personified as the Goddess. What I have always loved about the Goddess is that I have my own idiosyncratic relationship with Her. She can have many aspects or personas. I learn from others’ experiences and certainly have been inspired by all sorts of images, writings, and rituals. Still it is all mediated through my direct experience and relationship with the Goddess.

There are two intriguing images that come from widely separated cultures both around ten thousand years ago; to me both look like possible connections between goddess-based cultures and the use of psychedelic mushrooms. The first is from a famous and extraordinary rock art complex called \textit{Tassili} in southern Algeria (fig. 2). In this image, a large goddess figure gestures to a smaller individual in a mask and a net garment sprouting four mushrooms. The other image (fig. 3), from a site in Turkey, depicts a mushroom-headed goddess who, with her prominent vulva, may be giving birth.

While I would link female shamanism to midwifery and psychedelics, but I do not think psychedelics were necessarily used in labor. And currently I know of only two cultures that use any psychedelics as part of labor. Midwives among the Mazatec of Mexico sometimes use morning glories (Harrison, 2000). Women among the Huichol may take peyote during pregnancy (Valadez, personal communication 2002). Stacy Shaeffer (2002) reports that Huichol women use peyote “especially while in labor, to ease the birth process” (p. 56). Rather psychedelic experiences were and, for several cultures remain, integrated into a culture as a whole. It informed and effected daily life in many ways, from the patterns in the artwork to the entire worldview of a group. And even if a particular individual had not taken a psychedelic, they were already living in a psychedelic culture. For example, \textit{datura} was used widely in a number of California Indian tribes yet some individuals may take \textit{datura} only once in their lifetime (Bean, 1992).

The gathering and hunting cultures of Paleolithic Eurasia lasted for around thirty thousand years from the emergence of art forty thousand years ago until around ten thousand years ago. Then, most likely women since they were the primary plant gatherers invented methods to grow plants and select for more productive crops. This new subsistence strategy emerged in a number of cultures around the world (Hawkes, 1976). The tending of plants and animals enabled settled agricultural civilization to flourish in what is called Neolithic Europe from ten thousand to three thousand years ago. These cultures continued to make art and goddess figurines remained the predominant and pervasive features of the art created by the people of Neolithic Europe.

There is a great debate about how goddess-centered cultures of Neolithic Europe ended. Some believe that warrior-nomadic–horse cultures invaded from the eastern steppes. Still others look to causes from within the cultures. There is also evidence for cataclysmic events, such as drought and flooding, displacing people. Whatever the specific cause, one thing is known the Neolithic was changed five thousand years ago by the discovery of metallurgy. This
led to the need for huge amounts of wood for smelting the raw ore into usable metal. It began with copper, eventually leading to bronze and iron. One of the first large-scale operations was on the island of Cyprus. The island was endowed with an excellent source of copper, iron, and trees. The forest was cut down and re-grew at least sixteen times over two thousand years of copper mining and smelting. (McPhee, 1993). Finally the trees were decimated and the island abandoned by 90 percent of the inhabitants (Perlin, 1989).

The increased trade of metal and other goods created a need for bigger boats, which also required more and more trees. Imagine this pattern occurring over and over across Europe for several thousand years. This had to be a tremendous factor in the development of warfare to find, control, and steal resources and then move on; a familiar pattern to this day. Repeated raids and invasions transformed the Neolithic civilizations of Europe. People fought back, ran, hid, and adapted.

The pressure of war and raiding may have been a major reason for the breakup of the large settlements that had developed across Neolithic Europe including cultures in Thessaly. I think war came from many locations, including city-states expanding their domain and nomadic cultures raiding and conquering. I do not know who started war, but once it got going it became impossible for large peaceful communities to survive. Some were able to continue for a time on islands such as Crete. By this time Thessaly had become a key factor in the struggle between the city-states of Athens and Sparta for domination of the Greek peninsula and lands beyond. This is the backdrop for life in Thessaly when the grave marker or stele was created in 470 BCE that inspired my carving in figure 1.

Thessaly is in an important geographic location for a number of reasons. For one thing it sits at the doorway to the vast timber resources of Macedonia. Athens power was based on dominance of the sea. In order to maintain this position of power they needed reliable access to wood to build more ships and forge metal weapons. Whoever controlled Thessaly could block attacks by land because they controlled the mountain pass that led from Macedonia into Thessaly and the rest of Greece. That would force anyone that wanted to attack Greece to do so by ship. Thessaly tried to make an alliance with Sparta. Sparta declined and Thessaly made a deal with Athens. Athens became the dominant power until it fell to Sparta in the Peloponnesian war fought during the later part of the 5th Century BCE.

By 470 BCE earlier invaders of the Greek peninsula had already pushed many of the previous inhabitants of Thessaly into the mountains and off the rich soil of the plains of Thessaly. These former inhabitants are presumed to have been descendents of earlier Neolithic goddess civilizations of Thessaly. These so-called mountain people are important links to the earlier female shamanism of the Neolithic Goddess Culture of Thessaly. From Neolithic Thessaly, including the archeological sites of Nea Nikomedia, come numerous female figurines. These artifacts as well as others, indicate a strong orientation to the Goddess existing in that part of Greece at least six thousand years ago. Vicki Noble (2003) believes the name Nea (new) Niko (victory) Medea (wise woman) may be referring to a “dynastic” legacy or lineage of shaman–priestesses (Noble, 2003). The most compelling evidence these Neolithic goddess cultures may have used psychedelics comes from a site around 400 miles north of Thessaly near Belgrade. Mushroom stones from a Neolithic goddess culture site from seven thousand years ago have been found in area known as Vinca. The archeologist and renowned scholar of Neolithic European Goddess civilizations Marija Gimbutas (1974) says: “The fact that the mushrooms were carved out of the best available stone alone speaks for the prominent role of the mushroom in magic and cult...and it is possible that the Vinca mushrooms were connected with intoxicating drinks”( p. 220) (figure 4).

By the time the stele was made, the earlier inhabitants, who had become the people of the mountains, were a number of different tribes renowned for their horse-riding skills and herbal practices. In fact they are believed to be the legendary centaurs. While the most well-known image of the centaurs is the horse and human amalgam; there are numerous other animals that are mixed together known as centaurs. The centaurs were known as sorcerers or witches and practiced the shamanic art of shapeshifting by turning into animals or using animals as allies to augment their human power (Lawson, 1964). The ancient
Greek writer Apollodorus said Thessaly was “always the home of magic” (Harrison, 1963, p.81). Jane Ellen Harrison (1963), a scholar of ancient Greece, states “magic was no hole and corner practice but an affair of public ritual, performed with full social sanction” (p.82). There is evidence the people of Thessaly coped with drought by having rituals to make rain and the rainmaking ritual is said to have included a dance on hobby-horses, which is a further link to the centaurs (Graves, 1996, p.199).

The Greeks were able to dominate the land of the earlier inhabitants, but not the spirituality and healing practices of the people. The name of the Thessalian Goddess is Enodia. She is represented riding a horse on the coins of a city in Thessaly beginning 480 BCE (Rabinowitz, 1998). Enodia became the Greek Goddess Hekate in the fifth century. Hekate was originally a multifaceted Goddess who was associated with childbirth, death, the crossroads, and healing. She actually embodied the mother (Demeter), maiden (Persephone), and Crone. She was also sometimes called Artemis and both were goddesses of childbirth and of wild places. Hekate is considered a midwife to birth and death. The following quote from Hesiod speaks to Hekate’s power over birth and death: “and those whose business is in the grey uncomfortable sea, and who pray to Hekate and loud-crashing Earth Shaker, easily the glorious goddess gives great catch, and easily she takes away as soon as seen, if she so will” (Rabinowitz, 1998, p.20). Eventually Hekate was relegated to the image of a crone and Goddess of witches and the underworld. Thessaly was renowned for its female healers or witches, as they are called in the writings of Greek historians. Robert Graves says, “that Zeus did not deny her [Hekate] the ancient power or granting every mortal his heart’s desire is a tribute to the Thessalian witches, of whom everyone stood in dread” (Graves, 1955, p.124-125).

Part of what must have made people stand in dread was the female shaman-priestesses’ ability to use poisons such as aconite and hallucinogens such as datura. According to Robert Graves (1955) aconite was called becatis, named for Hekate who first used it. Aconite creates a numbing sensation and was used by the Thessalian witches to make a flying ointment. Datura stramonium is what the English herbalist Gerard thought the Greeks called hippomanes, known for driving horses mad (Schultes & Hoffman, 1992).

Originally when I carved my version of the stele from Thessaly I thought the figures were Demeter and Persephone. I had read that the stele was connected with the Eleusinian Mysteries, which is associated with Demeter and Persephone and the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (Samorini, 1998). Samorini further felt the stele suggested that hallucinogenic mushrooms may have been utilized in association with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Ludovic Laugier, Scientific Collaborator of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the Louvre Museum said of the stele: “Here, the dead woman seems to be on the right; she’s the one receiving gifts. We don’t know whether this indicates a mother and daughter or two sisters. Another mystery: The contents of the bag of seeds being handed over by the survivor. Perhaps in receiving seeds, the deceased is receiving symbols of renaissance? This is but a hypothesis” (personal communication, 2001). Speculation is tricky business especially when it is based on an image. I wanted to see female shaman-priestesses; Ludovic Laugier sees flowers and seeds in a funerary image of symbols of death and rebirth. Giorgio Samorini sees mushrooms and a mushroom presentation bag. In his opinion the presence of mushrooms connects the stele to the Eleusinian Mysteries with Demeter and Persephone depicted.

The site of the Eleusinian Mysteries was a temple 14 miles outside of Athens. The first temple was built...
in the 8th Century BCE. It was destroyed during the Persian Wars around 480 BCE. The temple was rebuilt after 460 BCE. It became widely known for the Eleusinian Mysteries after it was rebuilt. This chronology seems important to me because the stele was made during a time when there was no temple at Eleusis and before the new one was built.

What actually occurred during the ceremonies in the temple is secret. We do know that participants drank something called kykeon and had amazing experiences of life and death. It certainly sounds as if the drink was hallucinogenic. Psychedelic or entheogen scholars have tried to discover what was in the brew. Some people think it was ergot, a fungal parasite on grain that can have effects similar to LSD. There are many strains of ergot and it can be a tricky and toxic hallucinogen. Others think the Eleusinian drink contained some other hallucinogenic mushroom containing psilocybin. Some suggest it was a combination of ergot and psilocybin. Perhaps it was a combination of ergot and psilocybin or some other species of hallucinogenic mushroom such as panaeolus or Amanita muscaria as other scholars have proposed (Graves, 1960; Samorini, 1998). Whatever the actual content of kykeon, it is an impressive feat to dose and conduct a ritual in a temple with three thousand people in an altered state.

The Eleusinian Mysteries seem to have provided an important experience of ecstasy and Goddess energy through Demeter and Persephone during a time when women were virtual slaves in Athens during the 5th century BCE. They were under male authority and expected to stay in the home. For all its so-called democracy Athens was firmly in the grips of patriarchy. The Eleusinian Mysteries may have provided a controlled outlet for lost freedom. Through the power of psychedelics people could experience the Goddess and the mysteries of life and death. These ritual events likely functioned as a revitalistic practice and reaction to the repression of Goddess Culture and ecstatic experiences of an earlier era. Revitalistic is an anthropological term applied to practices that happen when cultures are in times of great change. People create ceremonies to bring back old ways that are being swept away and repressed by new power.

I think the desire to link the stele from Thessaly to the use of hallucinogens at the Eleusinian Mysteries is important to psychedelic or entheogen scholars because it can be used to give a history and distinguished lineage to the use of psychedelics. Having a lineage or history has been important to many current users of psychedelics. If psychedelics were used in Greece, at the birthplace of western civilization, psychedelics are civilized. In other words the use of hallucinogens may be associated with literate as well as preliterate people. But the stele comes from Thessaly and there is no reason to assume the two women are Demeter and Persephone. Steles or funeral markers are thought to show the deceased person’s life and not to depict deities. Also the stele is dated 470 BCE, which predates the emergence of Eleusinian temples and thus one could presume no Eleusinian Mysteries. It was only after the first temple was destroyed and rebuilt that the Eleusinian Mysteries gained widespread fame.

The tradition of steles is thought to represent an important event or aspect of someone’s life. Perhaps the stele is an image of two priestesses honoring the death of one of them. The two women in the stele look the same age, not younger and older. To me the women in the stele are entranced with each other and the mushrooms. I think this stele is of two shaman–priestesses. I believe the long tradition of shaman–priestesses played an important part in the development of cultures and it makes sense the tradition would be represented and honored on a funeral stele. I think these shaman–priestesses of Thessaly were commemorating their relationship as colleagues and the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms.

What is that so-called bag in the hand of the woman on the left? In the carving I did of the piece, I left the object obscure, because it looked to me like she could actually be holding the end of the other woman’s peplos (dress or robe). Were they lovers? Or perhaps the removing of the peplos had symbolic meaning. A Greek ritual existed in which a larger than life wooden “puppet” of a goddess would be renewed yearly by redressing the goddess with a new peplos or robe (Harrison, 1913). The removing of the robe could be a symbol of rebirth.

In my own experience, death and psychedelics go hand in hand. In my first experiences with psychedelics over thirty years ago, I was mesmerized by the visual effects and sensations in my body. I’m still astounded visually and physically. Over the years, as I
have developed in the rest of my life, I have learned to navigate the psychedelic terrain and stunning visual and body effects. I have also learned how to work with patterns and disharmony, repairing, and soothing what is broken or tangled in the design of the world and in my life.

A near-death experience when I was eighteen preceded both the Goddess and psychedelics. I was unconscious for two days with a fractured skull, the result of a car accident. When I woke suddenly I was flooded with the most extraordinary and powerful feeling of love. I know there are all sorts of brain chemistry reasons why I might have awoken telling my mother and everyone else I knew that I loved them. I was changed and opened in a way I will never forget. This experience has continued to fuel and inform my life. Certainly it deeply colors my expectations about death. It was my initiation into my future work with psychedelics, the Goddess and love. In the course of my research I found this quote from the Jungian therapist and scholar Nor Hall (1980) in which she refers to the stele, which she believes depicts Demeter and Persephone holding poppies. No matter, she gives a lovely summing up of goddesses, female shaman-priestesses, and psychedelics: “The frieze of the poppy-bearing goddesses arrests them eternally in the moment of passing into each other. Sometimes the point of passage is thought of as the Maiden Well, where Demeter sat grieving awaiting ‘the flowering from the depths’” (p. 63). Hall warns:

Hekate becomes a witch whose power is magic rather than realization, and the passing of the phases or psychological states into each other is accomplished—if at all—by the use of too many “aids” (seeds, brew, grass, chemical), rendering the experience inaccessible and antipodal to consciousness. Hekate can poison as well as intoxicate, turn ecstasy into madness, and cause death where incubation—or short journey—was intended. (1980 p.63–64)

In this passage Hall is using Hekate to represent the negative or shadow side of psychedelics. Psychedelics are a powerful tool for healing. Psychedelics can certainly be misused or over used. People can become numb or deluded when the primary focus becomes high dosage, frequent use, and multiple combinations without a sacred setting.

It has been important to me to link the use of psychedelics to shamanism and the Goddess. Susana Valadez (1992) says of women’s ritual among the Huichol, who use peyote and other hallucinogens:

Women perform many rituals for healing and shamanic powers where they invoke the Mother Creator, Tacutsi. The goddess reveals knowledge the women seek only after a long arduous path. Magical plants and animals provide the women with the power objects and “tools” they need in order to successfully channel communication from the spirit world into their everyday lives. (p. 39)

Shamanism, the Goddess and psychedelics are widespread despite the concerted efforts to stamp them out. The inquisition did significant damage wherever the hand or ideas of the church reached; but people are good at hiding, retreating to wild places, disguising, and adapting practices. The Mazatec Indians pray to the Virgin of Guadeloupe in their mushroom ceremonies. Ayahuasca takes on a Christian flavor in Santo Díame. Southern California Indians developed Chingchinix, a syncretic mix of Christianity and Datura. Our modern day inquisition makes hallucinogens and other mind-altering medicine illegal. In addition tactics of ridicule, accusations of pre-scientific thinking, superstition, and co-opting have negatively impacted old, well-developed practices of shamanism, Goddess worship, and psychedelic use. Much is lost, yet many practices remain, some taking root in new soil.

There is an image from a Greek vase that I found instructive (fig. 5). The horned snake is coiled around a tree. Two mushrooms grow at the spring flowing from the roots of the tree. One priestess steps on her vase to begin her ascent. The second priestess floats beside the tree offering the snake a plate. The third priestess descends with her vase filled.

To me the ritual use of psychedelic mushrooms is clear in this image. Go to a sacred space. Empty yourself as you begin the climb. Enjoy yourself, and honor, respect and feed the snake guardian of the medicine. Receive the healing and descend back to the ground with you vase refilled.

My hope is that everyone, who wants to, can find productive, healing and ecstatic uses for psychedelics within the sacred contexts. Female shamanism, the Goddess, and psychedelics have a long history and lineage. I hope in particular, women may continue to develop psychedelic healing traditions that serve us all in the future.

References


Crime Scene Investigation

States evidence
Photographs of a murder
a rape
Some homicide of delight and terror.

I look away
I turn away
I shove the pictures into
the manila envelope.

It’s all there in black and white
Typed up in neat words,
lean sentences.
The notes in spare police
handwriting.
I refuse to read, but the words
sink into my brain anyway.
Rope.
No visible scars or tattoos.
Female.
White.
Indeterminate age.

The position of the body shocks me,
but not as much as the expression
on her face.
I wipe away sweat, but I
can’t wipe it away.

The map on the wall.
As I turn, I see notes
and worse, photos on the other wall.

Why am I here?
Am I supposed to solve this crime?
Even with DNA, the killer
could still get away.
The list of suspects, seems endless.

The kidnappers note, more like
a love letter

Trapped, without a clue.

—Anne Westlund

Westlund, A. (2012). Crime scene investigation. Restoration Earth: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Nature & Civilization, 1(2), 74. Copyright © The Authors. All rights reserved. For reprint information contact: oceanseminary@verizon.net.