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Linking Afro-Asian and European Traces of Bovine Veneration to India's Sacred Cow

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Abstract

India is unique among many contemporary cultures because parts of its Hindu population continue to revere an animal that is an important contributor to the survival of many pastoral and agricultural communities, the cow. Yet the cow also played a significant cosmological role in the lives of numerous peoples who inhabited the regions west of India. Visual remains in the form of bones from cattle burials, depictions of bovid iconography in cave art, pottery, relief and sculpture, as well as cow imaginings rendered visible through mythological accounts, point toward how the cow appears to have been associated with notions of creation and the divine feminine, which along with ideas of abundance, fertility and well being, are attributed to her by countless Hindus today.

In India, many Hindus consider the cow a wandering goddess. She is thought of as an incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and as an augmentation to the Vedic goddess Sri, whose odour of cow-dung betrays where she makes her home. The cow represents a living icon of goodness: she is a wandering goddess who freely dispenses milk as well as other useful by-products. Milk and *ghee*, clarified butter, are employed both as food and in ritual, and numerous rural, as well as some urban-dwelling, Hindu women not only use cow-dung as a fuel and a building material, but also apply it within religious contexts. Dung is a malleable substance ideal for sculpting images of goddesses and popular folk deities, and a cow-dung wash spread onto floors and walls of mud homes not only physically cleanses and renews domestic spaces, it also rids them of psychic or spiritual / psychological contamination. Emanated by a goddess, all cow by-products are at times, and during various circumstances, invested with notions of sanctity and purity, and cow-dung is considered a semi-divine substance endowed with disinfecting and purifying qualities.

According to the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures composed between 1500-1200 BCE,¹ the cow gave

birth to the “gojātah,” the cow-born Aryan gods,² and today, besides representing Lakshmi, the cow is also thought of as Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow, and as Surabhi, the cosmic cow who houses all the gods and goddesses of Hindu cosmology. An early poem from the Atharva Veda praises the cow:

Worship to thee, springing to life, and worship to thee when born!

Worship, O Cow, to thy tail-hair, and to thy hooves, and to thy form!

...

The Cow is Heaven, the Cow is Earth, the Cow is Vishnu, Lord of Life.

...

For Right is firmly set in her, devotion, and religious zeal.

Both Gods and mortal men depend for life and being on the Cow.

She hath become this universe: all that the Sun surveys is she.³

Even though in our society the cow is considered a crucial and economically viable animal contributing considerable wealth to industrialized nations, we have lost our reverence for her and have reduced cows to commodities who either give birth to future steaks and hamburgers or, via perversely prized and oversized udders, produce lucrative mountains of butter and cheese. However, we once considered the cow worthy of veneration. In this article I will explore via visual remains and mythological accounts, how many historical peoples outside of India - from North Africa, the Middle East and Europe - would never have dreamed of treating the cow with the disrespect we show her today, but rather appear to have regarded this animal as a sacred being associated with fertility and creation.

Historical Reverence for Cows in North Africa and the Middle East

Cattle were once elevated to a divine or semi-

¹ BCE refers to Before Common Era. CE denotes Common Era.

² Asis Sen, *Animal Motifs in Ancient Indian Art* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1972), 61.

³ Atharva Veda X:10, quoted and revised in Ainslie T. Embree ed., *The Hindu Tradition. Readings in Oriental Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 40-41.

divine status in many parts of the world, and this idea was neither restricted to India nor to “Indian religious philosophies.”⁴ One of the clearest and most obvious links to India’s holy cow may be found in visual remains from Egypt where statues and relief inscriptions point toward a widespread veneration of the goddess in the form of the cow.

In ancient Egypt, the most prominent goddesses Isis and Hathor are represented either as cows, or with some bovine attributes such as cow’s ears, a cow’s head or horns on their head-dress. Similar to the Hindu idea of the cosmic cow or cow mother to the Ayrans gods, Hathor, “linked with the sky goddess Nut,” assumed the body of a celestial, or cosmic, cow and gave birth to the universe and all it contains.⁵ She was “the mistress of the stars,”⁶ her heavenly body was conceived of as the night sky and she nourished humans from a river of stars, the Milky Way.⁷ Hathor stood firmly upon the earth and her four legs formed the pillars of the four quarters: her legs held up the night sky, her belly was the firmament and the Milky Way flowed across it. At sunset, the god Horus, the golden solar falcon, would fly into her mouth holding the sun in his beak. The moon, travelling through the sky, was seen as his eye as he flew through Hathor’s body.⁸ At dawn Hathor would give birth to Horus and the sun.⁹ Thus Hathor was conceived of as a cosmic being associated with the birth and creation of day and night. This linking

⁴Deryck O. Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷http://www.intent.com/nfgc/nicki_scully.html (18 Jan. 2002).

⁸Hat-hor means “house of Horus.” Joseph C. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* (1962), 53. http://www.xmission.com/~dmacleod/religion/jlindsey/FQ_Abraham2.shtml#meso (18 Jan. 2002).

⁹ This idea of the stable cow standing firmly on four legs provides an analogy to the Four Yugas, the Hindu world cycle. In his explanation on the Yugas, Heinrich Zimmer describes a stable universe using the cow as a metaphor. The Krita Yuga, the golden age, is the perfect or “four-quartered yuga” seen to be standing “firm on its four legs, like a sacred cow.” The Treta Yuga, the silver age, associated with three or the triad, is a world no longer in balance, and the Dvapara Yuga, the brass period, “is the age of dangerous balance between imperfection and perfection, darkness and light.” Dva means two and now “the cow of ethical order, instead of firmly standing on four legs, or resting safely on three, now balances on two.” Not only is the cow here seen as the cow of heaven and earth, but also of *rita*, “cosmic, moral and social order,” and of time. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton, 1992), 13-14.

of a cow with dawn also resonates with the Ayrans goddess Usas, the goddess of dawn, who is mentioned in the Rig Veda. She is likened to a cow whose milk, streaming forth from her udder, is thought to illuminate the world with ribbons of light.¹⁰

Hathor is also described as “the goddess of creation and guardian of the dead.”¹¹ A recent excavation of a tomb in Saqqara reveals a larger than life statue of Hathor as a cow wearing a disc between her horns and standing guard over Ramses.¹² He functions as a welcoming figure who is receiving Netjerwymes, a high ranking official from c. 1200 BCE, to the afterlife.¹³ In the realm of the dead, Hathor may also be depicted as a slender woman wearing a crown of horns supporting the solar disc. She is seen painted on the wall in Thutmose IV’s (1401 – 1391 BCE) tomb offering life in the form of the ankh to the deceased king.¹⁴ Figure 1 is an example of how Hathor is represented as a woman wearing the cow horn / solar disc headdress, here shown in communication with Seti I (1300 BCE).

One of the earliest surviving depictions of Hathor is engraved at the top of the Palette of Narmer, a slate relic from 3150 BCE.¹⁵ Here her presence is indicated in the form of a stylized cow’s head. Carved at the top of the palette, she seems to preside as a “protective” force over the events occurring below her, which show King Narmer of Upper Egypt smiting his foes and conquering his enemy of Lower Egypt.¹⁶

By the eleventh dynasty (2040 – 1991 BCE) cows marked with a distinctive physical feature were believed to be incarnations of Hathor on earth.¹⁷

¹⁰David R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 8.

¹¹Alain Zivie, ‘A Pharaoh’s Peacemaker,’ *National Geographic* (October, 2002), 26-31.

¹²An excavation conducted by French archaeologist Alain Zivie, research director at France’s Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Zivie, *Ibid.*, 26-31

¹³Zivie describes Ramses as Ramses the Great, one of Egypt’s most powerful rulers, who reigned from approximately 1279 to 1213 BCE, *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 125.

¹⁵ Hathor was the Hellenistic form of the name Het-Hor or Athyr, whom the Greeks identified with Aphrodite the goddess of love.

¹⁶ Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 96.

¹⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson, ‘Otherworld cattle,’ *At the Edge*, no.1,(1996), <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/Ocattle.htm> (20 June 2002). Hilda Ellis Davidson is a lecturer at Royal



Figure 1. Hathor and Seti I. After a bas-relief in the Louvre Museum, Paris. Illustration, Eve Millar.

These living animals were envisioned as providing a direct link between the Pharaohs and the gods. In Memphis, Hathor's earthly representatives were white cows kept and milked in the goddess' temple for the purpose of feeding this 'divine' milk to the Pharaoh's babies.¹⁸ Here Hathor's head is carved into capitals, her face flanked by cow's ears. The idea of having sacred cows attached to temples was not restricted to Egypt; temple dairies also existed in Sumer and thrive in India today. The cow goddess Hathor, an ancient pre-dynastic goddess, gradually assumed many roles over time; she combined both maternal cow goddess and creative sky goddess duties with roles as earthly queen, guardian of the dead and protector of kings.

Just as Hathor was ascribed to the heavenly spheres, Ishtar in Sumer, another goddess depicted with cow horns in old Babylonian art, also had celestial associations. In fact, Westenholz notes "every divinity in Mesopotamia wore a horned headdress," a fact that would again attest to the

sacred associations attached to the cow.¹⁹ Ishtar in particular was aligned with celestial bodies: she was identified with Sirius and with Venus. Like Hathor, Ishtar's womb was described as the gateway to heaven.²⁰ She was granted the ability to increase cattle herds and she eventually assumed the attributes of a cow, gradually usurping many of the functions of the Mother Goddess, Ninhursag, a powerful Mesopotamian goddess who was in charge of a temple dairy, which provided "milk for royal children."²¹ A frieze from the temple of Ninhursag in Al Ubaid, Iraq (2500 BCE) shows cows being milked and "temple priests preparing and storing the holy milk of Ninhursag, the nourishment of kings."²² Like Hathor's cows in Memphis who provided food for royal babies, these temples devoted to the goddess Ninhursag often had sacred cattle herds attached to them. In India, temples continue to host aging and disabled cattle in *goshalas*, cow shelters established to house cows that have outlived their usefulness, but many temples also keep herds of sacred cows for milk, which is used for ritual purposes. It is clear that milk and cows played a significant role in ancient Egyptian and Sumerian cosmology and that these ideas are also significant in India, where milk and butter today still feature prominently as a vital component in ritual.²³

These important early cow goddesses link Egypt and Sumer to the bovine inspired practices of India, but many aspects of Egyptian art, iconography, thought and language also link Egypt and India. These connections point towards a shifting and moving population exchanging goods, ideas and people. S.M. el Mansurai believes that thousands of years ago India was an integral part of an Ancient East that extended from the Mediterranean to the Ganges Valley.²⁴ He asserts that the practice of hollowing out rocky chambers emerged in Egypt and spread by 600 BCE to Iran and then to India where

¹⁹ Joan Goodnick Westenholz. 'Goddesses of the near East,' in *Ancient Goddesses*, 73.

²⁰

<http://www.louisville.edu/~aoclar01/ancient/sumer/ishtar.htm> (18 Jan 2002).

²¹ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 30.

²² Lodrick, *Sacred Cows*, 44.

²³ In a rite called *Abhiseka*, milk, curds or other substances such as honey or scented water are used to bathe or anoint an image depicting or representing the divine. *Ghee*, butter, is also employed as a sculpting medium to completely wrap deities in garments of ghee that are embellished with beads.

²⁴ S. M. el Mansurai, *Art-Culture of India and Egypt* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1959).

Holloway College in London and author of numerous books.

¹⁸ Davidson, 'Otherworld cattle.'

Buddhist Chaitya halls were built between 300 - 200 BCE.²⁵ According to el Mansurai, the Mauryan polish, a technique employed by Indian Buddhist Emperor Ashoka's craft workers around 300 BCE to lend stone surfaces a lustrous sheen, also originated in Egypt, and he asserts linguistic elements provide further links between the two cultures.²⁶

Another link between the two cultures is the veneration of an ithyphallic deity represented through the erect male principle and connected to a bovine element. Egyptians once worshipped the phallus of the god Osiris who was married to Isis, one of Egypt's earliest cow goddesses. Although the Hindu god Shiva's phallus, venerated in India today as the *lingam*, is not directly linked to a cow goddess, part of worshipping rites surrounding this deity involve extensive ablutions of his lingam with cow's milk, thus making contact between these two deities, the cow goddess and Shiva, not only intimate, but frequent.

Moving back in time, it is interesting to speculate when the recognition of the cow as an aspect of the divine feminine emerged. In India the memory is alive and well although little exists in terms of monumental visual evidence to suggest how wide-spread cow worship is or was, evidence that assumes such a vital position along with myth and folklore in determining the importance of an ideology or a religious practice. So based on visual and verbal clues, how far back in Afro-Asian folk memory can cow veneration be traced?

According to professor of anthropology Dr. Fred Wendorf, excavations on Turkey's Anatolian plateau and in the eastern Sahara provide the earliest evidence of cattle depicted within a religious or devotional framework. In 1994, Wendorf discovered two small (7-8 m diameter) tumuli he described as ceremonial complexes, filled with cattle remains in Nabta Playa, the Eastern Sahara desert. The Neolithic tumuli (6500-5500 BCE) housed a "fully articulated" bovine of the long-horned African variety placed in a carefully sealed, wood-covered pit the likes of which were used to bury important

²⁵ Ibid, 12.

²⁶ Pharaoh is a Hebrew form of an Egyptian word "per-o," which means "the great house." In Bengal today many historically important old villages are still called *pero*. In addition, names given to pets in India show a typical non-Sanskritic system of nomenclature resembling Egyptian. This is seen in names like Tepi, Gua, Zoti or Nofra. Ibid., 12. El Mansurai also believes that a Bengal medicine known as Totka, is derived from Thoth-ka, a science of medicine connected with Thoth, the Egyptian god of medicine. Ibid., 94.

individuals.²⁷ Previous excavations in this area, in Tushka, Nubia, revealed horn cores of cattle placed in burial pits as early as 10,000 BCE. These findings suggest that bovids played a prominent role in mortuary rituals and the elaborate burials of cows and bulls taking place around 6000 BCE in Nabta Playa indicate that cattle "were an integral element of religious sentiments and beliefs."²⁸ Wendorf views "the apparent presence of a 'cattle cult' at Nabta [...] as intriguing, particularly [when] considering the importance of cattle in early Egyptian mythology."²⁹ These findings not only correlate with other discoveries of cow goddesses of Egypt, but also with the status cows apparently enjoyed at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük on the Anatolian plateau.

In Çatalhöyük, James Mellaart uncovered the remains of a thriving cattle cult dating to around 6500 BCE. Much of the material was preserved due to fires, which seem to have randomly swept through the township halting all further bacterial growth on remnants of lower layer dwellings. Cloth, fur, bones, wood and even basketry survived the passage of time. Many of the excavated rooms, filled with horned bovid heads and female figures, appear to have been used for religious activities, which centered around a totemic cult dedicated to the divine feminine in association with cattle.

Homes in Çatalhöyük were decorated with horns as well as with other bovine motifs. Plaster "breasts" implanted with "jaws of carnivores (weasels and foxes), wild boar tusks or beaks of vultures" protrude from walls and are interspersed with bovine heads.³⁰ Mellaart interprets these decorations as "bulls' heads," "breasts" and "goddess figures," and he argues that these motifs dominate in the rooms he describes as "shrines."³¹ Although these horned

²⁷ The wooden fragments yielded a radiocarbon date of 6470±270 BCE.

<http://www2.smu.edu/anthro/old/fwendorf.html> (13 June 2002). Dr. Wendorf is Professor of Anthropology at Southern Methodist University, USA.

²⁸ Fekri A. Hassan, 'The Earliest Goddesses of Egypt,' Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, *Ancient Goddesses. The Myths and the Evidence* (Madison, 1998,) 104.

²⁹ See <http://www2.smu.edu/anthro/old/fwendorf.html> (13 June 2002).

³⁰ Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29.

³¹ The use of quotation marks here indicates my hesitation in applying these terms coined by Mellaart. These images may be breasts or bull's heads, but they could just as well be other protuberances, such as the heads of smaller animals, or cow's heads, and they were quite likely

heads could belong to cattle of either sex, Mellaart consistently refers to them as bull's heads. He also describes the female figures as goddesses, even though there is no proof that people living 8000 years ago regarded them as such.³² In these interior spaces, female figures painted on the walls or inscribed in plaster are depicted with raised arms and legs giving birth to taurine heads. The women birthing cattle, sometimes consisting of "twin goddess" figures, are features repeated in many of the rooms and often painted abstract patterns or handprints mark the space below these sculpted motifs, an element which seems to indicate that they were of ritual importance. Red pigment was used to highlight muzzles and ears, to demarcate the bodies and to inscribe rings around horns.³³ Red may have been applied within a sacred context to connote reverence for life, a conclusion not only based on red's obvious symbolic significance of representing blood, but also on contemporary practices in India in which *kumkum* (red vermilion powder) is used to demarcate the sacred.³⁴

At Catalhöyük these "shrines" or sanctuaries are also decorated with *Bucrania*,³⁵ low-lying pillars adorned with cattle horns. Due to their angle, these would have cast flickering animistic shadows, implying the presence of living creatures. In addition, many of the rooms house benches ornamented with sets of horns. The stucco sculpted protrusions, the sexually ambiguous sculpted heads of cattle, the images of women giving birth and the presence of built-in recliners point to abundant female symbolism and suggest these spaces may have been devoted to midwifery, shamanism, healing or ritual activities. Catalhöyük likely represents one

created with ideas and ideals in mind other than what we perceive today filtered through our desires of history.

³² In their book, *Ancient Goddesses*, editors Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris suggest that Mellaart built "massive assumptions" into arguments for a goddess based culture and neglected contrary evidence such as phallic symbols also discovered at Catalhöyük, 8.

³³ Many consist of real horn cores. Mellaart, *Catal Hüyük*, 122.

³⁴ Just as the cow is remembered as a goddess in India, this practice of marking the sacred with red pigment may also be an aspect of ritual and worship that was forgotten elsewhere but survives in India where folk memories carried on through generations appear to have deep roots and where the tradition of reciting and remembering ancient Vedic sacred texts from 1500-1200 BCE has been carried forward in time.

³⁵ "Bull's pillars," is a phrase coined by Mellaart. Ian A Todd, *Catal Hüyük in Perspective* (Menlo Park, CA: Cummings Publishing Company, Inc, 1976), 63.

of many similar communities that stretched across ancient Europe and Asia Minor. Although later European societies were to revere the bull, this practice cannot be assumed for the people of Catalhöyük, and neither can the bovine heads and horns automatically be relegated to the male of the species. It is just as likely that it was the cow who held a special position in this society.

Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas writes, "With the advent of sedentary life, horns, bucrania, [...bovid] figurines and tauromorphic vases became omnipresent in the art of the Near East and Old Europe."³⁶ She discusses miniature clay bucrania stemming from 8000 BCE discovered in Tepe Guran, Iran, and a number of visual remnants scattered across Europe that not only depict numerous women in the Catalhöyük birthing position but also link the bovine to creation and the feminine. She suggests this linking occurs because the shape of a bull's head closely resembles the female organs, and as such it is a symbol of regeneration. This semblance could have been discovered in prehistory and may have provided a further link between the female's seemingly magical child bearing abilities and the "horns of the bull."³⁷ Since cows also sport horns, her attachment to the male species is rather curious, especially in light of the overwhelming evidence of Egyptian goddesses depicted as cows. This link to the bull also seems inappropriate when Gimbutas points out how "the Egyptian hieroglyph for uterus depicts the two-horned uterus of the cow."³⁸ It seems more likely that women were linked to cows, not bulls, and that the rise of the bull cult that became so prominent in southern Europe grew out of a tradition that once venerated the female of the species.

One of the most stunning links between the feminine and the bovid, and one clearly pointing toward human reproduction / creation, occurs in an artifact from Bilcze Zlote (western Ukraine).

Here a female figure imagined in the "hourglass shaped" form of what Gimbutas describes as the "bee goddess," is depicted on a stylized cattle skull stemming from around 3500 BCE (see Figure 2).³⁹ A remarkable rendering, the punctuated silhouette of this woman, with her pubic triangle clearly emphasized and her arms raised upwards, beautifully

³⁶ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 265.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁹ Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 186.

echoes the shape of the material on which she is carved.

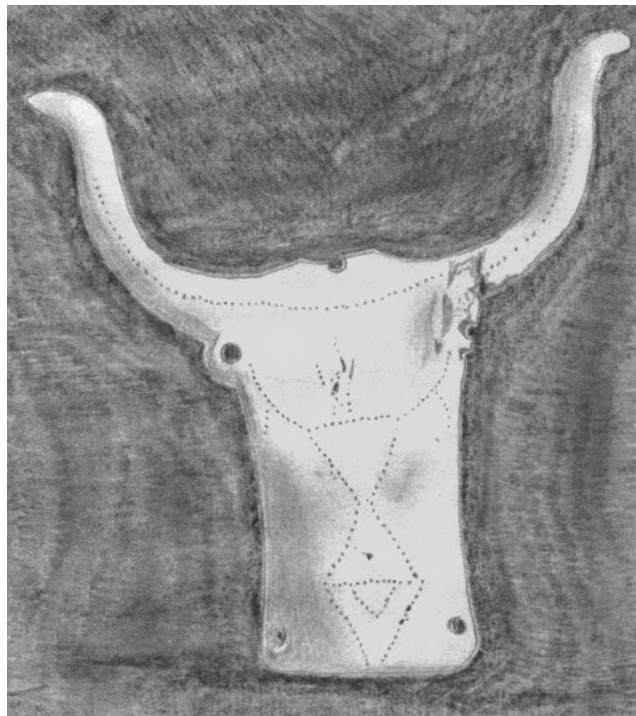


Figure 2. The punctate silhouette of a woman inscribed on a stylized cattle skull of bone. Bilcze Zlote, northwestern Ukraine, 3500 BCE. After a photograph in Marija Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982) 188. Illustration, Eve Millar

Female attributes are also explicitly linked to the bovid through a horned terra cotta stand from 5000 BCE found at the Vinča site south east of Belgrade. The horned stand is gendered - below the horns breasts emerge to resemble a tiny torso. These horn stands, albeit without the breasts and described by Gimbutas as “horns of consecration,” are numerous at the Vinča site and also occur in abundance in Minoan art (3000-1000 BCE)⁴⁰ where a painting rendered in the palace complex in Knossos, Crete (1550 BCE) again links a woman with the bovid. She is seen grasping a bull by its horns in a sport described as bull jumping.⁴¹

Historical Reverence for Cows in Europe

Based on Gimbutas’ findings, it may also be ascertained that the bovine is tenuously linked to creation and the feminine through the relationship between the female reproductive cycle and the lunar

cycle, a connection noted in some vessels that are taumorphic and shaped to look like cattle, or sport bucrania, bovid heads and horns, as well as abstracted motifs resembling crescent moons or horns. A taumorphic lamp from 4500-4300 BCE covered in swirled designs and painted black on red was unearthed in northeastern Greece, and another taumorphic vase from Bavaria (5000 BCE) is also decorated in concentric circles and features four dots on the animal’s forehead that Gimbutas interprets as possibly representing the four phases of the moon.⁴² It is interesting to consider the connection here between the cow as luminary vessel and the moon as a source of light. This is a linking that also occurs in the Vedas in association with Usas, the previously mentioned cow goddess of dawn; it is also a relationship English-speaking children are familiar with through a seemingly non-sensical nursery rhyme describing the cow jumping over the moon.

Further links between the lunar and the bovine may be seen on designs inscribed on a vessel found in northeastern Romania (dating from 3700-3500 BCE) that shows a sculpted relief of horns, as well as painted versions of crescent shaped lunar symbols,⁴³ in hundreds of subterranean tombs in Sardinia (4000-3000 BCE) where bucrania modeled in low relief on walls were discovered “with an egg or moon between the crescent shaped horns,” and finally in cattle skulls with horns buried into the foundations of Neolithic homes that were situated beside children’s burials in Hungary.⁴⁴ According to Gimbutas, the purpose of this burial practice was to encourage a speedy rebirth symbolically reflected in the horns representing the moon’s regular regeneration of itself every twenty-eight days.

Moving even further back in time from the Neolithic to the Paleolithic, a vivid rendering symbolizing the link between the lunar menstrual cycle and cattle is presented in a voluptuous female figure with large breasts and a swelling abdomen. The figure, carved in deep relief on a limestone block outside a rock shelter in Laussel, southern France (25,000 BCE), holds a bovid horn. She is usually interpreted as a goddess figure and, like the figures from Catalhöyük, she shows remnants of red pigment (ocher), which possibly mark her as sacred.⁴⁵ Her worn out body looks like that of a woman who has given birth to many children. The lunar shaped horn she carries is marked with thirteen

⁴² Taurine vase from Heinheim, Bavaria, ca 5000 BCE. Gimbutas, *Language of the Goddess*, 267.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 1.

⁴⁰ Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, 93.

⁴¹ Stokstad, *Art History*, 140.

notches, which seem to indicate the thirteen lunar months and the relationship between women's menstrual cycles, the moon, renewal, childbearing and creation.

When considering the number of prehistoric depictions of cattle that survive from caves in Chauvet, France (c. 31,000 BCE), Altamira, Spain (16,000 to 14,000 BCE), Lascaux, France (c.15,000 - 10,000 BCE) and Tassili N'Ajjer, Algeria, it is clear that bovinds enjoyed an elevated status. Although the purpose for these creations is unknown, a cow / bull cult appears to have been widely dispersed. The animals were frequently depicted in clearly visible locations in caves, and Gimbutas argues that the "central position probably derives from the intimate relationship between the bison and the Goddess," a link she further establishes by the fact that both women and bison have gestation periods of equal length, nine months.⁴⁶ According to material evidence stemming from the Paleolithic and then moving forward in time to visual remains from the Neolithic, bovinds in the form of bison or cows were clearly not only significant in parts of early Europe, Asia and Africa, they were often also thought of as magical or divine. Egypt, India and Sumer provide both physical and contemporary evidence for their status as goddesses, but folklore and myths from northern Europe also discuss the cows as divine.

One of these divine cows imagined as a creatrix, and by extension a goddess, was Audhumla. She is the primordial cow of Norse mythology who is thought to have emerged at the beginning of time from ice. She existed in the barren pre-world by sustaining herself through licking salt from hoarfrost and blocks of ice; this sufficed for her to produce milk that flowed in "four milk-rivers...down from her full udder."⁴⁷ These rivers nourished the giant Ymir. As Audhumla licked the ice, she shaped it into a handsome man whose son Bor married Bestla, the daughter of a giant. Their union produced three gods, Odin, Vili and Ve, who slaughtered Ymir and created the earth from his body. The cow Audhumla was thus an Ur-being extant before the world was born and an Ur-mother, nourishing the earth (Ymir) before it was formed.⁴⁸ Her emergence as a cow from a sea of ice and mist bears a remarkable resemblance to the story of the cosmic Indian cow, Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling or wish-granting cow, who,

⁴⁶ Gimbutas, *Language of the Goddess*, 265.

⁴⁷ Margul Tadeusz, 'Present Day Worship of the Cow in India,' *Numen*, vol. 15 (1968), 72.

⁴⁸ Lynda Welch, *Goddess of the North* (Samuel Weiser, 2001) and Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1998), 38.

according to the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, arose from an ocean of milk that the gods, with the help of their enemies, were churning in order to obtain *amrita*, the nectar of immortality.

In Ireland, images of cows also arise through stories and fragments of texts. According to A.T. Lucas, who studied written Irish sources from the seventh to the seventeenth century, everything people wrote about pertaining to the Irish and life in Ireland "teems with allusions to cows."⁴⁹ It is not cattle in general, but milk-yielding cows that were held in the highest esteem. Cows played a vital and central part in the Irish economy. They were the unit of value, dowries consisted of cows, cows were presented as gifts and many of the great Irish epics center around cow-raiding as a theme.

In this period, Irish society showed great reverence for the cow and some of the practices employed around cows point to similarities in customs between Ireland and India. Considering the geographical distance between these two countries, claims of links between Ireland and India may seem initially preposterous, but Indian goods and ideas travelled far where they left their legacy in South East Asia in the form of Buddhism, the Wayang shadow puppet theatre and in a Hindu *weltanschauung* unique to Bali, and to pre-Europe through trade. An ivory engraving of Indian origin was found in Pompei, and there is evidence that not only goods but also people travelled west.⁵⁰ Indian dancers, who arrived in Spain around 500 BCE and performed religious dances for royalty and at particular festivals, influenced Flamenco⁵¹ that today still retains elements of the original Indian dance.⁵²

Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, a Brahmin scholar and artist from Chennai (formerly Madras), south India, notes that from birth to death the cow and her calf play a vital role in Brahmin's lives, not only marking vital transitions, but also signifying minor life altering events. According to her,

when you [have a] house warming, then the cow and the calf are brought in. They are asked to walk...into the household first, before the people walk in. For everything we have to have the cow and calf. Even after the death of a person - you

⁴⁹ A.T. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, (Kilkenny, 1989), 3.

⁵⁰ Susan Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 113.

⁵¹ Gwynne Edwards and Ken Haas, *Flamenco!* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 31.

⁵² Dancer Karen Avery, In conversation, (Victoria: November 15th 2002).

are supposed to...donate...to the priest, a cow and a calf as your finances allow, otherwise a token payment for a cow and a calf. So from birth to death, for every ritual, the cow plays an important role.⁵³

In Ireland, saints were offered tributes of cows, a man's wealth was based on the number of cows he owned, cows were offered at funerals to churches or monasteries, they were provided as gifts of pardon and they were also offered as payment for poems. In addition, newborn babies were often bathed in cow's milk. The Irish word for cow is "Bo," and cattle pounds were called Gobhang.⁵⁴ Interestingly, "go" is the Sanskrit word for cow.

One of Ireland's beloved saints, Saint Brigid, is closely linked to cows and milk. St. Brigid is thought to originate from the earlier Celtic goddess Brigid. Brigid's father was the good god, the Dagda; her mother was Boanne the goddess of bounty and fertility whose totem was a sacred white cow.⁵⁵ The river Boyne is named after Boanne, and this link to rivers and cows also makes up a large component of Indian lore.⁵⁶ Brigid was born on the threshold between day and night; she rose with the sun and was known as "the bright one" or "the high one," terminology reminiscent of that used to describe Usas. Brigid was born to a milkmaid at dawn, just as her mother was walking over the threshold with a pail of milk. Then the newborn was bathed in milk, and because she could not digest ordinary cow's milk, she had to be nourished on milk provided by the fairy cow, or "the Otherworld" cow.⁵⁷

Brigid is the guardian goddess of domesticated animals. Her festival is celebrated on February first, Imbolg, meaning "of the womb," a day when livestock was traditionally let out to graze for the first time. On this day Brigid is believed to travel with her white milk cow and bring blessings to each

⁵³ Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, In conversation, Chennai, May 2002.

⁵⁴ Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 24.

⁵⁵ See

www.village.fortunecity.com/berhard/864/pantheon.html (20 June 2002).

⁵⁶ In India a number of rivers are named after goddesses and conceived of as feminine. Some are also named after cows or cow by products: such as the Payosni River, "cow's milk;" the Narmada, "cow's urine;" the Yamuna, "cow dung;" and many rivers flow through naturally or artificially created *gomukha*, or "cow's muzzles." See Anne Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood* (Oxford, UP: 1995).

⁵⁷ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 36.

household. Even today in some areas of Ireland and Scotland, people leave offerings of food and grass on their doorsteps for her cow. It is also customary to leave a piece of cloth to be blessed by Brigid on the night of Imbolg's Eve. This cloth, known as St. Brigid's mantle, is used throughout the year to help cows with their calving and to encourage mothers to lactate. So devout was the fervour of the Irish toward Brigid that when Christianity arrived in Ireland her identity was molded to fit the ideology of the church. Brigid acquired status as the Virgin Mary's midwife.

The otherworld or fairy cow, which nourished the saint, is a common being in British folk legends. Usually this cow provides an endless supply of milk so that those in need will all be looked after. One tale of a pure white fairy cow who appeared on the top of a hill during a famine and allowed each family to milk one pail was captured pictorially when it was carved into a church pillar in 1879 in Shropshire, England.⁵⁸ The same idea is behind the naming of cow hill in Preston, Lancashire, where this legendary cow's bones are said to reside. In parts of Ireland, the cow with the endless supply of milk is said to have emerged, like India's cosmic cow Kamadhenu and Norway's cow goddess Audhumla, from the sea, which is interesting because these similarities, like so many others discussed, point to ancient folk memories that span not only generations, but cultures. Jung would describe these as archetypal memories.⁵⁹

In addition to tales of cows with divine properties, there are Irish goddesses who have links to cows. Davidson writes of a hunting goddess, Flidias, who owned a cow called Maol, and, in another case, describes Mórrigan, an Irish battle goddess assuming the form of a cow and followed by a herd of fifty cows.⁶⁰ Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger notes that people in most parts of Ireland refer to the Milky Way as the "path of the white cow," and by doing so they too are establishing the cow as an animal or goddess like Hathor and Ishtar who is of the heavenly realm of milky stars; likewise the goddesses Lakshmi and Kamadhenu emerged

⁵⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁹ Jung thought of archetypes as basic constituents to the human psyche shared cross-culturally as universal expressions of a cumulative memory or a collective unconscious, which embodies certain archetypal memories inherent in all human minds. Equally, these could be ideas that were shared through human interaction and travel, forgotten in some places, remembered in others.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 37.

from a milky sea to reside henceforth in the earthly realm as potent and magical forces.⁶¹

This survey approach to writing about cows and the divine feminine was chosen to demonstrate how the connections among cows, women, creative forces and notions of the sacred cross temporal, geographical and cultural locales. The idea of the cow as light or life giver is even expressed in Japan where, according to George Scott the sun “was represented seated upon a cow (the earth).”⁶² Cows seem to linger in ur-memory as beings associated with the starry cosmos, the milky heavens, with oceans and the creative forces of the earth. They are imagined as divine, invested with supernatural powers and connected to goddesses, the moon and creation. Based on legends and pictorial remains stemming from the Paleolithic to contemporary times and spanning from eastern India to northern Africa and northern Europe, it is clear that cows assumed prominent cosmological roles and that the idea of the cow as a sacred being is not unique to India, but was also fostered by other cultures and societies. Cows are linked to women, saints and goddesses in Ireland; the ur-mother in Norway; royalty in Egypt; shamanistic rites in Catalhöyük; temples, religious and domestic rituals in India as well as to the wish-fulfilling goddess, Kamadhenu, and the goddess of prosperity, Sri-Lakshmi, in Hindu traditions. Traversing time and memory, cows associated with the divine feminine appear to have been symbols of the sacred in many different cultures.

⁶¹ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980), 241.

⁶² George Ryley Scott, *Phallic Worship* (London: Luxor Press Ltd., 1966), 139 quoting E. Kaempfer, *The History of Japan* (London, 1728).