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Women's Rights and Women's Rites: Religion at the Historical Root of Gender Stratification

Margaret Gonsoulin

mg7b@virginia.edu

Abstract

This paper argues that our sociological explanations of the historical advent of gender stratification in the Occident has given too much attention to techno-economic causes and too little attention to religious, cultural and ideological causes. Evidence for this claim is taken from archeology, mythology and anthropology for the relevant historical period (4500 and 3000 BC) in Eurasia. I assert that the observed decline of gender equality resulted when techno-economic changes collided with religious and cultural transformations; thus, our theories should expand to include religion, culture and ideology.

Part One

Religion at the Historical Root of Gender Stratification

Introduction

This section combines several up until now separate strands of theorizing on the rise of gender stratification. The focus of this argument is on the historical period in which the technoeconomic base - or “mode of subsistence”, in Lenski’s terminology - of societies on the Eurasian landmass shifted from horticultural to agrarian (between 4500 and 3000BC), which sociological theorists (e.g., Huber, Collins, Blumberg, and Chafetz) studying the historical advent of gender stratification have linked with an overall decline in level of gender equality¹. I am arguing that these theories overemphasize the technological and economic factors associated with the advent of gender inequality and under-stress the importance of culture, ideology and religion; there were great technological advances thousands of years before gender inequality resulted. A closer examination indicates that it took a combination of techno-economic changes, the introduction of new religions, and a variety of cultural shifts before patriarchy prevailed.

Most people accept the current misogynistic and patriarchal nature of the world’s great religions as universal or ever-present truth of religion in general. However, there is a little discussed time, before what most history books consider “the beginning of civilization”², when there was a very different type of religion, a different view of gender and a different relationship between gender and religion³. Archeological evidence

¹ Blumberg is the exception to this. She identifies four paths through horticultural society, including identifying societies that developed patri-centered kinship systems and moderate to high levels gender stratification without or before becoming an agrarian based society. She also identifies agrarian societies that retained a matri-centered kinship system and low levels of gender stratification despite becoming agrarian based societies; these are primarily Southeast Asian irrigated rice societies.

² Most history books begin their discussion of “civilization” with Egypt and Mesopotamia around 3000BC when cuneiform and hieroglyphics began to be used.

³ There are many varied interpretations of archeological evidence from Eurasia’s many Neolithic societies.

indicates that these earlier religious-gender differences were important components of the more egalitarian systems of that time (Gimbutas 1997; Everson 1989; Ferguson 1995; Lerner 1986; Mellart 1967)⁴. Furthermore, archeological evidence also indicates that many of these egalitarian societies reached a much higher level of sophistication and advancement than is commonly recognized (Rudgley 1999). Despite their relatively high level of societal advancement (a quality that sociological theories clearly associate with higher levels of gender stratification⁵), these societies did not appear to be highly stratified by gender or any other demographic attribute.

As of yet the connection between gender and religion remains relatively unexplored by cross-cultural and historical sociologists of gender stratification; it certainly has not been the subject of theoretically informed social science analyses that consider how religion and technological advancement have worked together to shape systems of gender stratification⁶. The major exceptions are Sanday (1981) and Lerner (1986). Sanday (1981) discusses the role of religion in gender stratification cross-culturally, but she does so from an anthropological perspective and mainly focuses on the cosmological elements of the religious system within modern day “simple” societies. Lerner (1986) discusses the advent of gender stratification in Western society, but she does so from a Marxist perspective treating religion as a factor the “legitimizes male ascendancy.” Furthermore, Lerner was writing at a time when most of the archeological findings concerning gender were just beginning to develop. A few scholars of ancient society (e.g., Gimbutas, Stone, Eisler and others) have a direct focus on issues in some way related to both gender and religion. Sociologists have failed to incorporate the findings of archeologists, historians, art historians, mythologists and religious studies scholars their discussions of when, where and how gender stratification began.

⁴ This paper will be focusing on only a few of many varied and intricate archeological perspectives on Neolithic Eurasia to illustrate the points that religion was an important catalyst in the reduction of female status.

⁵ This is true only before the Industrial Revolution at which point gender stratification began to decline at varying rates in various locations.

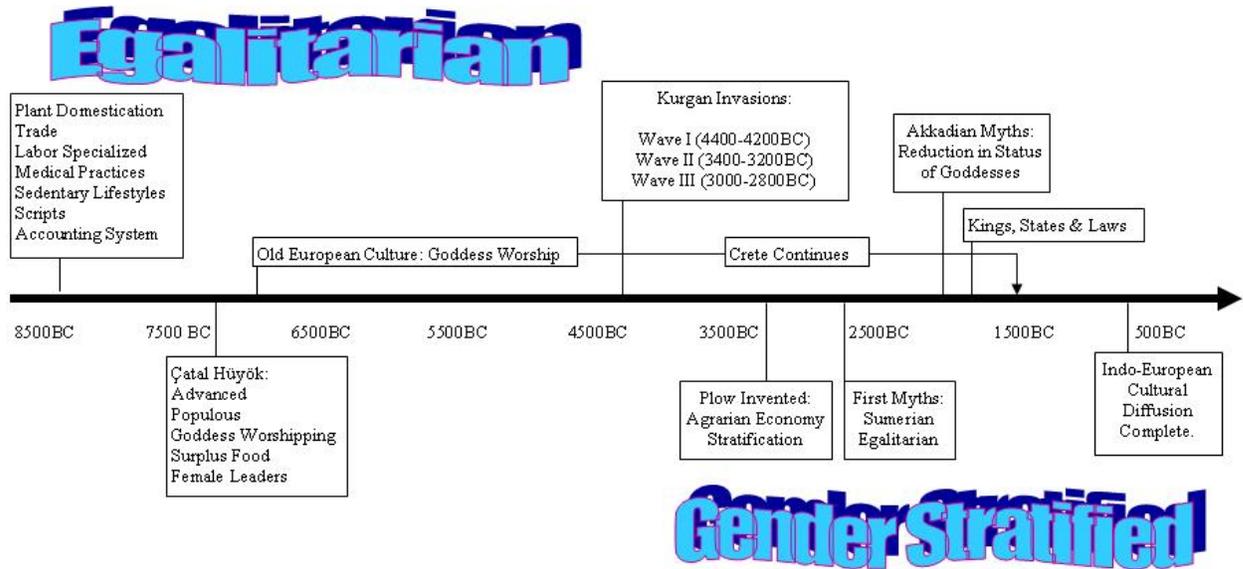
⁶ Chafetz provides the most in depth and direct discussion of the role of religion, ideology and culture in structural systems of gender stratification.

In order to begin to close this sociological gap, I will synthesize arguments from these other fields to illustrate the importance of religious and cultural shifts on one of the most widely accepted theses in the field of gender stratification: that there was a drastic decline, on average, in gender equality when the techno-economic base of society shifted from horticultural to agrarian around 4500 to 3000 BC (Blumberg 1978, 1984, forthcoming; Chafetz 1980, 1984, 1990; Collins 1971; Collins et al. 1993)⁷. I will also make a more general argument; I assert that the observed decline of gender equality between 5000 and 2000BC resulted from (a) techno-economic changes that collided with religious and cultural transformation and/or (b) the ideology and culture of newly arrived nomadic pastoralists known as Indo-Europeans or Kurgans.

It is important to acknowledge here that there are many intricate and detailed interpretations of each individual level of each archeological dig site that are not acknowledged in this text. Volumes have been filled with all of the debate on each minute detail of Indo-European history. The particular evidence presented in this discussion was chosen because it is the comprehensive argument and it is one of few that intentionally addresses gender. Even if the findings used in this paper are incomplete or even partially incorrect, I believe that the argument being made here (for the importance of religion) is still relevant. In other words, I believe that similar evidence for the importance of religion in systems of gender stratification could be made using other archeological perspectives, evidence and interpretations. Figure One is a pictorial representation of the information synthesized in this paper.

⁷ This is referring to the Eurasian land mass with the exception of Southeast Asia (Blumberg, forthcoming).

Figure One



The Decline of Equality: Our Current Sociological Understanding

In this section, I briefly summarize those aspects of the major cross-cultural and historical sociological theories of gender stratification that propose different underlying factors linking the transition from horticultural to agrarian based societies to an increase in levels of gender stratification in Eurasia (Collins 1971, Chafetz 1980, 1984, 1990; Blumberg 1978, 1984, forthcoming; Huber 1991). Then, I also discuss what each theorist has to say about the relevance of religious, ideological and cultural factors in determining levels of gender stratification.

According to Collins (1971), “the use of force and the market position of men and women” are the essential precursors to the overall decline in women’s status observed as the techno-economic base changed from horticultural to agrarian. While one of the historical categories “simple tribal societies” identified by Collins conflates important differences between foraging and horticultural societies with regard to gender stratification⁸, Collins sees tribal societies as lower in gender

⁸ As Blumberg (1984) points out that this is not always the case. For example, warrior complex horticultural tribes, such as those in the New Guinea highlands and the Yanamamo of the Venezuelan-Brazilian Amazon, have high levels gender inequality.

stratification than agrarian ones. Like other scholars, Collins claims that agrarian (what he calls stratified societies with fortified households) is the most gender stratified period. "Stratified societies with fortified households" are described as follows: they have economic surplus, and each household is its own economic unit with work being performed both inside and outside the home. The male is the head of the household, and he has the unrestrained right to use force. Women are considered property, and stratification is at its peak. Collins makes no explicit references to religious ideology or religious institutions.

Chafetz's theory (1980, 1984, 1990) emphasizes the importance of the gender division of labor; women are at a disadvantage because they must bear most of the burden of childcare and housework. As Chafetz (1984) traces through the historical progression of technological development, she notes that gender differentiation and sexual stratification are highest in agrarian societies because women contribute the least to production and subsistence in this particular techno-economic societal type.

Of all of the sociological theories of gender stratification, Chafetz's theory devotes the most time and gives the most direct attention to the issue of religion's role. Chafetz (1984) argues that "any system of inequality must be legitimized if it is to avoid chronic and serious challenge." General ideology and religious ideology provide this necessary support. In fact, she argues that "gender ideologies are virtually always grounded in religious principles" (Chafetz 1990). In 1984, Chafetz proposed a series of hypotheses about the interactive properties of religion within a structural system of gender stratification. The hypotheses claim that religious ideology is: correlated with degree of gender differentiation, degree of sex stratification, the sex-ratio of the population, frequency of warfare, amount of female contribution to production and subsistence, female control of the means of production and the kinship arrangement of the society. Despite the fact that Chafetz focuses on current world religions and religion as a legitimating ideology rather than a central determining force in gender stratification, her hypotheses and theoretical perspective on the issue are an important beginning.

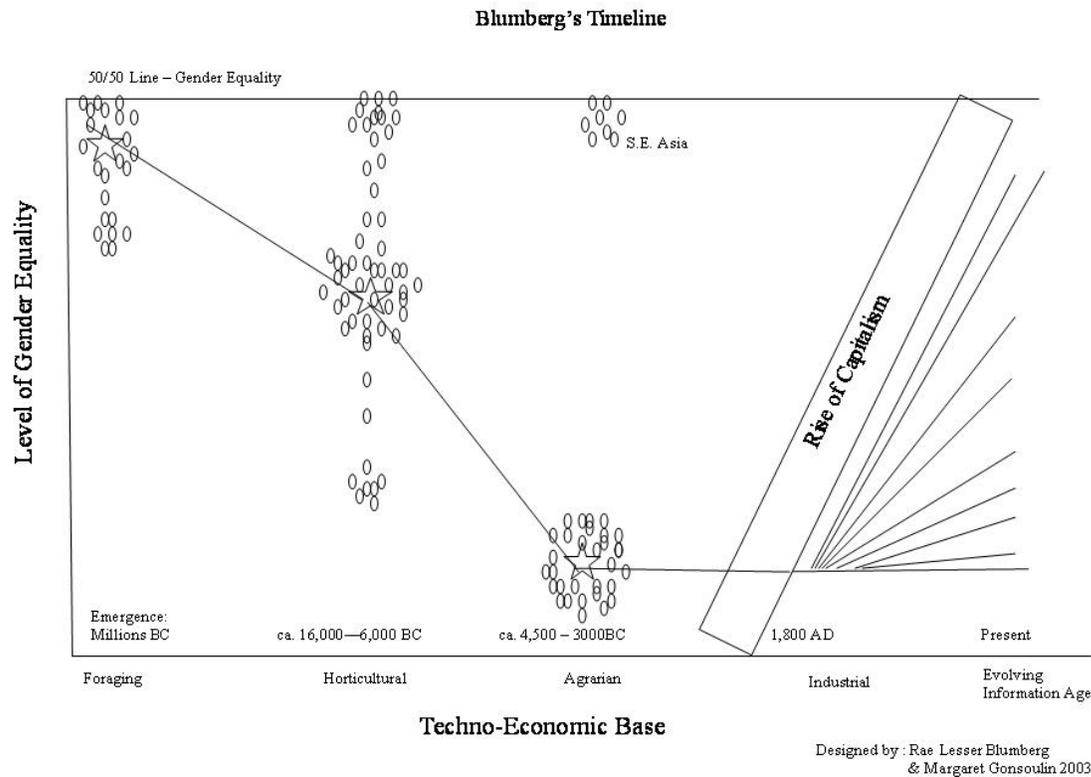
Blumberg's theory(1978, 1984) argues that relative control of economic

They are patrilineal and patrilocal with male dominated property systems. Women are considered inferior in these polygynous societies, and female infanticide has been a traditional practice.

resources by men and women at “nested” levels ranging from macro (the state) to micro (the family) are the most important (although not the only) factor involved in gender stratification. Blumberg acknowledges that economic power alone will not result in equality for women. “Women will not receive full face value for their micro level economic power; rather, it will be reduced in proportion to the level of male dominance of the macro levels” (Blumberg 1998). These *discount factors* “allow us to take socio-cultural systems and ideology into account” (Blumberg 1998). The “main line” of human evolutionary history is broken down into five techno-economic bases: foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial and information. Below is a graphical representation of Blumberg’s analyses of these various stages; refer to Figure One.

The figure should be interpreted as follows. The small circles represent (only roughly) the societies included. The clusters represent where the majority of the societies from a particular techno-economic type lie on a continuum of equality. The Y-axis, representing the equality continuum, begins with complete subjugation of women at the bottom to equal rights and full equality for women at the top. The horizontal bar going across the top indicates the line of gender equality; here men and women share resources, power and authority equally. Across the bottom of the diagram, there is a timeline indicating the approximate beginning of each technological shift. Foraging groups collect food and hunt game. Horticultural societies use hoes and digging sticks for shifting cultivation on a relatively small scale. Agrarian peoples make use of the plow for permanent cultivation and larger scale production of food. Beneath the timeline are the names of each technological period. The author recognizes that there are still foraging, horticultural, agrarian societies in existence today. So, the graph should be interpreted as a general timeline for the emergence of these societies. The graph also shows considerable diversity in gender stratification beginning in horticultural societies. Furthermore, in some geographic areas (such as sub-Saharan Africa) much of the land does not have deep enough soil to plow; thus their cultivation systems remained horticultural. In agrarian societies, some Southeast Asian irrigated rice societies maintained a much more gender egalitarian property and kinship system. This is reflected in the figure in the small group of outliers near the “50-50 line” of gender stratification (Blumberg, forthcoming). Lastly, it is also recognized by the author that all of these changes occurred at different points in time from place to place; these dates are just general indicators of the overall trend.

Figure Two



The final theory to be discussed is Joan Huber's (1991). Organization of labor and ecological variables are highlighted. When resources are meager, like among foraging societies, there is a flattened distribution of power and prestige. According to Huber, the plow (the technological creation necessary for agrarianism) was introduced roughly 5000 years ago (most others say 5000 to 6000 years ago) making permanent cultivation and greater surplus possible. Moreover, greater levels of surplus⁹ could be achieved with fewer laborers and fewer labor hours; thus, social stratification intensified. Land and surplus food goods became the major sources of wealth. In advanced agrarian societies men monopolized the use of the plow and control warfare. This "advantaged them [men] over women in the right to distribute valued goods beyond the family" (Huber 1991). Because land no longer had to be abandoned

⁹ Some horticultural societies achieved reliable surpluses and varying degrees of stratification long before this (Nolan and Lenski 1999, p.147).

due to exhaustion¹⁰, the value of land resources during this era dramatically increased. Once land increased in value, inheritance became an important issue. Consequently, monogamy was instituted, and divorce was prohibited. Monogamy and prohibition of divorce are seen as additional sources of gender stratification¹¹.

Economies based on herding also led to social conditions of gender inequality according to Huber. The struggle over water resources seen in herding societies led to an increase in warfare, then to polygyny¹² and an increased demand for high rates of fertility. This is because the number of men lost in battle causes a loss of control over fertility by women, she argues, leading to increased gender stratification. While Huber points out that all three of today's great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) grew out of herding societies, she does not spend any time exploring the effect of their combined impact. Religion and views of marital and sexual norms often go hand-in-hand.

Each theory has a slightly different emphasis. Chafetz focuses on male advantages in the division of labor that allow them to dominate positions of power, Huber more on male control of the distribution of valued goods beyond the family and female reproductive responsibilities, Collins on sexual dominance and Blumberg on relations of production. Despite these variations, the central message is consistent: the observed increase in gender stratification in Eurasia around 3000BC was due to technological and economic changes associated with large scale farming.

¹⁰ With horticultural production techniques, cultivation had to be shifted every one to several years allowing various plots to lie fallow and naturally renew themselves. Agriculture allows permanent cultivation because the plow brings nutrients from deep below the surface each year and animal manure is used as fertilizer. Also, use of the plow helps to control weeds, which tend to become a problem when a horticultural plot is used for too long.

¹¹ However, as Blumberg points out (1978, 1984 and forthcoming) in places where kinship systems were matri-centered as in some Southeast Asian wet-rice communities, agrarian technological advancements failed to result in these sorts of changes. Also, she argues that because wet-rice cultivation is labor intensive, women's labor is less dispensable.

¹² Data indicate that greater female importance in production is a better indicator of general polygyny than frequency of warfare.

The arguments in the following section show that during the period in which the techno-economic base of society was changing from horticultural to agrarian, religious, ideological and cultural forces regarding the use of force against women, the economic empowerment of women, the division of labor between the sexes, female reproductive responsibilities and female sexuality were very actively changing as well. I plan to follow-up on the work of Lerner giving religion a more central place, emphasizing the connection between religion and kinship, and using more recent archeological information; Lerner hypothesized,

this process [of gender stratification] was manifested in changes in kinship organization and economic relations, in the establishment of religious and state bureaucracies, and in the shift in cosmogonies expressing the ascendancy of male god figure (7).

So, while it has been well-established that the decline of women's power and status is associated with transition from horticultural to agrarian¹³, perhaps a more in-depth evaluation of the role of religion, culture and ideology in systems of gender stratification can provide the missing link that will bring the various emphases of Collins, Chafetz, Blumberg and Huber's sociological theories into a more comprehensive whole. Figure Two (above) provides a summary of the arguments that are about to be made.

The Great Decline: How the Elimination of Women's Rites Helped Eliminate Women's Rights

As discussed in a previous section, gender stratification theorists have noted an overall decline in women's position on most of the Eurasian landmass when the techno-economic base of society shifted from horticultural to agrarian, but little has been said about the role of religion or the cultural aspects of this change. In this section, selected literature from various other fields is used not only to show that technological changes significantly predate the observed increase in

¹³ Blumberg, however, argues that a few societies maintained a fairly gender egalitarian system. These are mostly Southeast Asian irrigated rice societies where women can inherit rice land and trade in the market on their own account. To this day, there is considerable local level gender equality in these groups (Blumberg, forthcoming). In the larger project of which this paper is only a part I discuss a subset of these groups that have adopted Islam and continued to maintain matri-centered kinship systems and egalitarian inheritance rules.

gender stratification but also to show that the decline in women's position during these technological transitions was also associated with cultural and religious changes that accompanied the influx of Indo-European peoples. Again, the objective here is to find evidence for the importance of culture and religion not to address all archeological debate concerning the culture of Neolithic people or the interpretations of the arrival of Indo-Europeans in Eurasia.

First, a few of the many advanced¹⁴ societies that maintained a gender egalitarian system will be discussed to illustrate the fact that techno-economic advancement cannot be the sole impetus for the recorded decline in women's position¹⁵. Second, we consider evidence linking cultural and ideological changes to the influx of new and more stratified groups into Eurasia that are believed to have played a role in the increase in gender stratification between 4400 and 2000 BC. Third, early myths will be discussed to show first hand accounts of how these ancient people perceived the ideological changes that were taking place. Finally, a few geographic areas that were not subjected to the Indo-European culture, which are argued to have remained less patriarchal, will be discussed. They provide additional evidence for the importance of culture, religion and ideology in prompting these historical changes. Each aspect of this argument is meant to further our sociological understanding of cultural influences in general and religion's impact in particular on women's subjugation.

Gender egalitarianism in a time of technological progress

Many of the technological advances that are associated with the beginning of civilization and its corresponding view of women as inferior actually have their roots in egalitarian and peaceful prehistory. In other words, the following advances did not directly or immediately lead to gender inequality: plant domestication, food cultivation, trade, division of labor, religious practices, medicinal practices, sedentary lifestyles,

¹⁴ The term "advanced" is used here to indicate that these societies were settled communities with significant populations that grew their own food, kept surplus food, divided their labor, built religious shrines for communal use and were involved in trade.

¹⁵ Technological changes are probably a necessary but insufficient cause of the noted increase in levels of gender stratification. This is so because these changes existed for a significant length of time before the changes, and in Southeast Asia, similar technological changes have still not resulted in high levels of gender stratification.

accounting systems and scripts. All of these were first developed in the Neolithic¹⁶ or early horticultural period of history before societies became very stratified by status, wealth or gender; this will be expanded upon shortly. In what we would now term *the religious sphere* of social life, there were other signs of both sophistication and egalitarianism; for example, images of female deities and evidence of female religious leaders are found in large and multi-storied Neolithic temples in relatively stable and large settlements throughout Eurasia and North Africa¹⁷. Surplus production is evident from the bins used to store grain and the luxury items produced in these ancient lands. Epilepsy seems to have been treated in the Neolithic times by removing a part of the skull; in fact, several Neolithic techniques for performing these surgeries have been identified (Rudgley 1999). Because this list of Neolithic advancements existed for such a long time before gender stratification increased, it suggests that technological and economic change is not sufficient cause of gender stratification.

Many people argue that true civilization did not begin until the advent of the written word, but this advancement too can be found in the egalitarian societies of the Neolithic period. First, “design motifs on pottery and other artifacts from 4000BC onwards have been shown to be precursors of hieroglyphs” (Rudgley 1999). Second, a system of accounting, consisting of tokens of various shapes and sizes to keep track of the number of each type of livestock owned and plant products produced, hours of labor worked and for temple administration, were used from 8000-4300 BC; it is the direct precursor of cuneiform. The meaning of these tokens was finally deciphered when a cuneiform inscribed egg-shaped envelope (from the second millennium BC) containing a set of tokens inside was found in northern Iraq; the cuneiform writing on the cover of the envelope provided the meaning of these tokens directly. It is hypothesized that the use of both cuneiform marks and tokens became redundant, so the cuneiform markings replaced the token system. Furthermore, three clay tablets dating from Tartaria in Transylvania around 4000BC are engraved with an early system of writing. The symbols on the Tartarian tablets have similarities

¹⁶ Neolithic refers to the period when people began to use ground stone tools, cultivate plants, and keep domestic livestock. Pottery first began to appear during this period.

¹⁷ Female images have also been found in profusion in parts of the New World. For example, virtually all of the pottery figurines found in excavations of Ecuador’s famed Valdivia culture are female (Blumberg 2001).

to those found on both Mesopotamian and Cretan Linear A tablets. Because Old European and Cretan script are primarily found on figurines and religious artifacts, it is assumed that the script was concerned with spiritual rather than utilitarian or economic matters (Rudgley 1999).

Despite these many techno-economic advances, archeological and mythological evidence, as will be explained below, shows that women did not immediately experience a reduction in status or power. Between 7000BC and 3500 BC, women from various parts of the Neolithic Eurasian world held high political, economic and religious positions (Gimbutas, 1997). People appeared to live in peace and harmony; their communities had no fortifications or evidence of stratification or inequality. As will be explained, elevation of both the male and female principles were evident in their artistic and later in their written records as well; “linking rather than ranking appears to have been predominant” (Eisler 1987). This enthusiastic attitude toward fertility, belief in female deities and lack of fear of attack (indicated by the absence of fortification and weapons) has a statistically significant positive correlation with female power and authority cross-culturally (Sanday 1981).

One of the oldest cities in the Near East was Catal Hüyük (6400-5400 BC) located on the Anatolian plateau of modern Turkey. James Mellaart describes the archeological evidence: “Before 6000BC Catal Hüyük was a town, or even a city, of a remarkable and developed kind” (Mellaart 1967). But, because writing did not develop in Catal Hüyük, physical artifacts are the only sources of information from which to derive what life was like for its inhabitants. The following information is also drawn from Mellaart. Approximately six thousand community members are estimated to have lived in Catal Hüyük. Horticultural cultivation was practiced to feed the many members of the community. The town was built like a beehive; all houses were directly connected one-room abodes into which people entered from a ladder on the roof. Each household had a small shrine and several sleeping platforms. The dead were buried underneath the sleeping platforms; it was noted that females are consistently buried under the main or largest sleeping platform. This burial position has been interpreted as an indication that women had some form of authority over or ownership of the household.

Unlike the majority of architectural units, a few units did not contain any of the usual equipment for weaving, spinning, reaping grain or chipping stone. Somewhat richer grave goods were found with the people interred

in these units. Mellaart concluded that these must have been shrines. The art of earliest shrines (6400-6200 B.C.) only depicts animals and bull horns. The walls of later temples also depict women and men dressed in leopard skins dancing around and/or chasing deer and bulls. In a relief sculpture in a temple built around 6200 B.C, a female figure is depicted giving birth. The numerous other female figures are depicted as mothers, weavers, magicians and givers and takers of life for plants, animals and humans. In addition to female divinities, "it is likely that the cult of the Goddess was administered mainly by women" (Mellaart 1967). Gifts rather than sacrifice seemed to be the acceptable way to pay homage. "Gifts of grain, stamp-seals, weapons, and votive figurines" were offered to the deities (Barstow 1978).

There is little indication of any sort of "central authority at Catal Hüyük, no plaza or palace, no large grain bin or major shrine" (Barstow 1978). However, as Lerner (1986) points out, although evidence for matrilineality and Goddess worship is strong "nothing in Mellaart's evidence proves shared authority" (33). Despite the lack of evidence for social stratification overall, there was division of labor in this early horticultural society (Mellaart 1975). The specialized nature of the pottery, woven fabrics, tools and weapons (most likely for hunting) indicate that there must have been trained workers whose job it was to manufacture these products. Furthermore, since many of the raw materials used to make these products were not indigenous to the area, the people of Catal Hüyük must have been involved in trade. Their timber and obsidian came from the Taurus Mountain area, and their shells came from the Mediterranean.

Some theories of Goddess-centered or egalitarian societies assume that early people worshipped female deities and lacked gender stratification because they believed that women were solely and miraculously responsible for reproduction. However, various statues indicate that the people of Catal Hüyük, one of the oldest Neolithic communities, understood the relationship between sexual intercourse and reproduction. Mellaart (1967) noted that even if the male role "is strictly subordinate to hers [the woman's role], the man's role in life appears to be fully realized. A small stone plaque shows a couple in embrace on the left and the mother with child, the offspring of the union on the right." Therefore, it was not a lack of knowledge of the male role in reproduction that led to high status positions for women.

In the area referred to as Old Europe, there are more examples of

technological advancement without the denigration of women in the political, religious or economic realm. Old Europe referred to an area of Southeastern Europe extending from southern Italy east to the Black Sea and from the Dneister River in the Ukraine south to Crete including the western edge of Turkey (Anatolia). “Old Europeans had towns with a considerable concentration of population, temples several stories high, a sacred script, spacious houses of four or five rooms, professional ceramicists, weavers, copper and gold metallurgists, and other artisans producing a range of sophisticated goods” (Rudgley 1999). Of the over thirty thousand figurines (assumed to be religious) found in Old Europe (7000-3500 BC), “female statues predominated at a rate of 20 to 1” (Ferguson 1995).

Many of these older cultures of Old Europe, the Near East and Egypt came to an end between 4400 and 2800 BC. Their people, towns and cultures disappeared, and new more patriarchal and more stratified ones appeared. One strand of archeological theorizing by Gimbutas and supporters presents compelling evidence that these changes were precipitated by the influx of Indo-Europeans (also known as Kurgans or steppe people) who came in three waves: Wave I (4400-4200BC), Wave II (3400-3200 BC) and Wave III (3000-2800 BC) (Gimbutas 1992; Sochacki 1988). This theory is criticized for being overly general in its treatment of the various Old European cultures and religions; in particular, it is accused of treating all of Old Europe as peaceful and all Goddesses and religions as excessively singular (Nelson, 1997). Discussion of this theory will resume later in the text. Because it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each Old European culture in detail, I would like to present only one more example of an advanced society that lacked high levels of gender stratification.

I will focus on the longest lasting and one of the most studied Old Europeans societies of the group, Crete. In Minoan Crete, a community of approximately 18,000 members, “Old European culture” survived several millennia longer than on the Greek mainland; it wasn’t until the final stage of Kurgan expansion (2500-2000BC) that Crete¹⁸ even began to show signs of change and increased stratification. The more egalitarian and older Minoan culture continued to exist until around

¹⁸ This was during the early Minoan and beginning Middle Minoan phase of Cretan culture.

1500BC (Gimbutas 1997).

Since Cretan Linear A¹⁹ (the older of the two writing systems from Crete) has not been deciphered, most of what is known about Minoan Crete comes from their art and architecture rather than written record. The art, language and architecture of Crete indicate that it was one of the most advanced egalitarian societies ever discovered. In frescoes depicting Cretan culture, women were not devalued or underrepresented. Men and women are shown mixing freely. Both sexes took part in all of the festivals, ritual bull games, chariot races and athletic events according to the paintings. Some frescoes depict priestesses or Goddesses (high status women) seated on thrones receiving gifts. Conversely, no Minoan art depicts men as priests, kings or Gods; artistic representations of men usually show them as “cup-bearers, pages, musicians, harvesters, craftsmen and sailors” (Gimbutas 1989). Laws inscribed on the walls of the temple of Gortyna and the writings of Strabo in the first millennium BC indicate that marriage remained matrilineal and that women retained property and divorce rights until the historic period.

Evidence linking the end of Old European culture on Crete with Indo-European (or Kurgan) arrival is described by Gimbutas. The nature of burials changed dramatically in ways that were specific to Indo-European culture. The way that graves were prepared (in a hut or tent-like manner with mats on the bottom, and ashes and ochre on the bodies which were positioned in a particular way) was an exact match with Indo-European burials. Furthermore, Gimbutas (1997) notes that there are “striking similarities of daggers and other cultural elements in the Danube area, Italy, Sardinia, Crete, and the East Mediterranean coast suggest[ing] navigation or sea raids carried out by the Indo-European warriors during the course of the first and middle half of the third millennium BC.”

The Patriarchal Newcomers

A series of dislocations, disruptions and changes are seen in Old Europe, the Near East and Egypt between 4400 and 2800 BC. “A pattern of disruption, invasion, and natural catastrophes of the Neolithic cultures of the Near East [was found by Mellaart]. The areas of Old Europe, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, and India were marked by dislocation of

¹⁹ It is unknown whether Linear A predates Indo-European influence or not.

peoples, disappearance of towns, and destruction of shrines to the mother Goddess” (Ferguson 1995). Gimbutas (1997) and supporters present compelling evidence that these changes were precipitated by the influx of new cultural groups known as Kurgans or Indo-Europeans. It is argued that the new culture and religions of the Indo-Europeans were an important building block of the newer more stratified societies that followed. As will be discussed later, mythological evidence shows additional evidence of these cultural changes, and the small geographic pockets that failed to be affected by Indo-Europeans remained more egalitarian than their Indo-Europeanized neighbors.

The three waves of Kurgan or Indo-European invasions began long after these egalitarian societies had established themselves. The struggle for supremacy took place on ideological as well as political, economic and military grounds. Around 3500BC, metals began to be used less often for jewelry and tools and more often for defensive and offensive weapons. Graves began to show signs of stratification; some graves were provided with fewer and others with many more grave goods. Remains of animal and human sacrifices appear more frequently. Using Eisler’s terminology, the *partnership model* of Goddess peoples was eventually replaced by the *dominator model* of the patriarchal invaders²⁰. Or, using White’s (1999) ideas, the early socio-political development in the Old Europe and the Near East seemed to follow a more heterarchical model²¹.

As the Indo-Europeans gained influence and agrarian technology diffused across Eurasia (both between 4400BC and 2800 BC)²², gradual but radical changes in government, habitation, architecture and art occurred. Gimbutas (1982), Stone (1976) and Eisler (1987) each studied

²⁰ The *partnership* model of society is characterized by an egalitarian ideology, a non-hierarchical structure and a relatively equal distribution of wealth and status. *Dominator* societies are highly stratified, hierarchal, aggressive, patriarchal and warlike in nature. We can trace some of the ideological and cultural shifts in early writing which coincidentally became more widely used during this tumultuous time.

²¹ Heterarchical socio-political development is characterized by localization of culture, communal craft specialization rather than centralized development, achieved status (rather than or in addition to ascribed status) and a lack of violence and warfare.

²² As has been discussed by Blumberg (1978, 1984), agrarian technologies also developed in Southeast Asia but gender stratification did not.

the transition from egalitarian cultures to patriarchal ones in the Middle East, Western and Eastern Europe and Northern Africa. Diverse groups of nomadic patriarchal invaders arrived in the Far East and Old Europe starting about 4500BC. These newcomers arrived in the Near East around 2400BC.

The various groups of Kurgans or Indo-Europeans invaders arrived in bands. “Kurgan is archeological blanket term for the seminomadic pastoralists from the south Russia steppelands” (Gimbutas 1997). As Gimbutas explains, four major Kurgan groups entered east-central Europe. Kurgan I people originated in the Volga forest steppe. Kurgan II people are traced back to northern Moldavia where they integrated with the previously Old European Cucuteni people to form the Srednij Stog II culture. Kurgan III people developed in the north Pontic area, which is north of the Black Sea. Finally, Kurgan IV (Yamna) people were from the Volga steppe.

The similar cultural and ideological systems of these Kurgan bands were spread to eastern and central Europe in waves. Arrival of the Kurgan I and Kurgan II (Srednij Stog II culture) peoples in Romania, Bulgaria and east Hungary between 4400-4200 BC is marked by dramatic changes in culture. Suddenly, single pit graves were found; burial goods were much more extravagant for a select group of male members. Cheek pieces and depictions of bridle equipment indicated that the horse was domesticated. Agricultural villages were replaced by fortified hilltop settlements (indicating a need for protection). Daggers, points and arrows began to be produced on larger scales and in different styles. Also, “Sun and horse symbolism appeared” (Gimbutas 1997). Zanotti (1982) provides evidence to support the first wave of expansion by tracking the movements of refugees through the distribution of gold pendants associated with the refugees (in southeastern Europe) during the late fifth millennium BC. Before the probable Kurgan invasions in this area, a high concentration of pendants was found in a small geographic area. After the first wave of invasions, pendants were more widely and sparsely dispersed, indicating movement of these Old Europeans out of their homelands.

Kurgan II (Srednij Stog II culture) and Kurgan III groups arrived in the second wave of Indo-European migration into Anatolia, NE Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Poland, and E. Germany between 3400-3200BC. “This period was synchronous with the transformation in central Europe from agricultural [referring to horticultural] to

pastoral/agrarian economy, from a society matricentric and matrilineal to a patriarchal one accomplished by the first and second infiltration into east Europe of peoples from north of the Black Sea” (Gimbutas 1997). New elements such as the horse, warrior gods and battle weapons, hard metal weapons and tools (including the axe and the plow) as well as hierarchical social structure became common here.

Hundreds of Kurgan IV (Yamna Pit-Grave Culture) style burials were found in the graves dating 3000-2800 BC in Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, East Austria, Bohemia and Hungary. This marked the third wave of invasions. While seventy-five percent of the graves were totally lacking in burial goods, others were extremely rich. Many weapons and luxury items were included in richer graves. All of central and northern Europe had converted to the new cultural configurations of the Kurgans by the close of this third wave.

In order to consolidate their economic and political power, Indo-Europeans would also have to totally destroy the social structure and culture of the older societies; religious, economic and political systems were inextricably tied. The overwhelming tendency toward egalitarianism and community needed to be undone. If we accept that indigenous religious systems were based on these *partnership* ideals and that women’s sexual freedom, political and economic power were also linked to these ideals, an increase in stratification would require totalizing changes. If this system were not destroyed, the invaders would have had a much more difficult time securing exclusive rights to power and prestige. Consequently, as the leadership and the property system changed so did the religion and the relationship between the sexes. Due to continued contact with Indo-European invaders, the political, economic and spiritual authority of women was decimated by the 15th century BC. Another way to track these ideological, cultural and religious shifts is by examining early myths.

Written records indicate changes in gender ideology and religious belief

The first decipherable written communication (cuneiform and hieroglyphics) was recorded during this transitional time. Cuneiform in Sumer and hieroglyphics in Egypt were fully developed by 3000BC. By this time, the third wave of Indo-European invasions was already underway, and agrarian society (a very low point for women) had already begun, as the plow diffused on an east-west axis through most of the

Eurasian land mass and North Africa (Diamond 1998). Although writing began in the centuries before 3000 B.C., the first myths were written around 2600BC²³. These mythological texts show that Goddesses had been largely marginalized by about 2000 B.C, a mere six centuries later. The actual decline in female status *began* well before any of these texts were recorded (Lerner 1986, 141), but it is theorized that because there is a certain amount of cultural lag inherent in mythology in general, these texts simultaneously allude to a past where women held significant political, economic and religious positions and illustrate the decline of gender equality.

The cuneiform texts of ancient Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) were actually written in two different languages. The earliest ones are written in Sumerian (which is neither a Semitic nor an Indo-European language), and the later texts are in Akkadian (a Semitic language). These shifts in language were a consequence of shifts in power through the following historical periods. The first dynasty of Ur began about 2600 BC; this is the first Sumerian period²⁴. The Akkadian or Sargonic period was between 2300 and 2100 B.C. The Ur III or Neo-Sumerian period ranged from 2100 until 2000; the people of this period no longer spoke Sumerian. Finally, the early Old-Babylonian period lasted from 2000 until 1800 B.C; it was during this period that West Semites (from Syria, Lebanon and Israel) migrated to Mesopotamia. With each period came socioeconomic and ideological changes that further undermined the position of women.

Texts written in Sumerian are the most egalitarian. As King Sargon of

²³ “The oldest Sumerian cuneiform writing could not render normal prose but was merely telegraphic shorthand, whose vocabulary was restricted to names, numerals, units of measure, words for objects counted, and a few adjectives. ...[The earliest Sumerian texts] are emotionless accounts of palace and temple bureaucrats” (Diamond, 1998: 234). Once they progressed to phonetic writing, abstract ideas could be expressed; then, we begin to see myths and propaganda.

²⁴ Royal graves from 2350 BC in the Sumerian city of Ur show evidence of women ruling in their own right. Rulers (not their spouses) are buried with a cast of servants; two of the royal burials were for Queens (Lerner 1986, 60). But, at the same period in Lagash, edicts distributed by the commoner who had become the new ruler Urukina (male) indicate that women’s power had been reduced within his lifetime but incredible levels of social mobility were still possible (Lerner 1986, 61-65).

Akkad²⁵ united southern Mesopotamia in 2350 BC, “his daughter Enheduanna, the En priestess of Ur, composed beautiful and extensive hymns in Sumerian” (Frymer-Kensky 1992). Each Sumerian city-state had a Goddess or a God that provided for it and protected over it; each family and each individual citizen had the same (Lerner 1986). Men and women both gained a personal sense of meaning and well-being from the worship of Gods and Goddesses that freely shared or divided their power. Royal women, like sacred women, occupied many important social positions. “In Sumerian times, royal women wielded considerable power, both in the court and in the larger political and economic system” (Frymer-Kensky 1992). In fact, one of the primary ways that princesses continued to accrue prestige and honor was through their roles as priestesses (Lerner 1986, 68).

Archeological and mythological evidence make it clear that Goddesses took many forms and filled many important societal roles. “These portrayals of Goddesses are the cultural projections of the whole society and reflect what that culture believed that women are and should be” (Frymer-Kensky 1992). In Mesopotamian legend, the queen of heaven, Nana, gave birth to heaven and earth; then, she produced pairs of men and women simultaneously. Sumerian tablets made record of the Goddess Nanshe of Lagash, giver of law, justice and mercy. Various other Goddesses were associated with the growing of grain, with vegetation in general, with harvesting of wool, with the making of pottery and with weaving.

Dream interpretation, healing arts, writing, teaching, accounting and surveying were also under the domain of the various Goddesses. At various times in various places, Goddesses were known as the creator, the developer of horticulture, the powerful political leader, the wise counselor, the prophetess and later the courageous warrior. Titles of the Goddesses included: Queen of Heaven, Lady of the High Place, Lady of the Universe, Sovereign of Heaven and Her Holiness. Additionally, there were many symbols associated with the Goddesses: serpents, doves, cows and double-axes. In other words, Goddesses were seen as civilizing

²⁵ Lerner (1986) points out that King Sargon was Semitic and even made Akkadian the official language of the land, but his daughter chose to continue writing in Sumerian. It was customary at the point in Mesopotamian history to name one’s daughter to the position of high priestess as Sargon did.

forces of humanity.

Kinship structures and sexual norms were also discussed in these ancient myths. “The relationship of mother to her child is completely separate from any relationship that the child might have to its father” (Frymer-Kensky 1992). This particular kinship arrangement seemed to be a function of matri-centered marital arrangements. Matrilineal descent was common practice. In stories, children’s homes were described as their mother’s home, and bridal gifts were presented to the bride’s mother.

These earliest myths also illustrated a lack of concern with a woman’s chastity or pre-marital virginity. When the God Enlil slept with and impregnated a young girl without formally asking her mother for the girl’s hand in marriage, Enlil, *not the girl*, was declared unclean and banished from the city into the Netherworld. So, a woman’s virginity and a child’s paternity (as seen in this and in other stories) were not considered moral issues. Virginity and monogamy were not mandatory until after the third wave of Indo-European incursions (Stone 1976; Eisler 1987).

Archeological evidence indicates that governmental structure during the Neolithic period made no distinction between religious, political and economic authority; religious, economic and administrative activities were all carried out in the temples/shrines or homes. This interpretation is consistent with Sahlins’ (1976) view of nature of social institutions in modern tribal groups. Male and female dyads were not necessary for female leaders to assume their position. Females held significant positions in these governments, but no one had absolute authority (Eisler 1987). Authority, it would seem, consisted more of coordination and cooperation than it does in present systems. Assemblies of elders were invited to share their wisdom with the leaders of these ancient communities.

In Mesopotamia, Akkadian myths (2100-2000BC), written in a Semitic language, began to represent the members of the pantheon in more gender differentiated ways (Eisler 1987; Stone 1976; Frymer-Kensky 1992). Gods began to be more exclusively associated with the heavens and its heavenly bodies and Goddesses more exclusively with the earth and its underworld. Sex, reproduction and fertility slowly became the *only* domain of the Goddess. Goddesses were increasingly portrayed as mothers, sisters, wives and lovers of the Gods rather than important deities in their own right. Their divine domain was reduced to what

became historically considered *female matters* such as reproduction, weaving and food preparation. Goddesses now had to be “given” or “granted” powers by Gods. After about 1200 BC, most Goddesses were only shown in relation to some God.

In addition, Gods increasingly took over roles that once belonged to Goddesses (Lerner 1986; Eisler 1987; Stone 1976; Frymer-Kensky 1992). Ninurra, Goddess of potmaking, was transformed into a male God. Exorcism and incantation, once under the Goddess Ningirim, became associated with the God Enki. Damu, the female healer, became a son rather than a daughter of Gula. Finally, even reproduction and fertility were taken away from the Goddesses. The first known example of a male creator appeared when Enki was able to create a child without a female. Despite the fact that Enki’s infant did not develop correctly because it had no womb to nourish it, one can see the usefulness of the Goddess beginning to fade. Enlil creates a dragon by drawing its image in the sky with his finger. In another example, the God Marduk is said to have destroyed the Goddess Tiamat and used her remains to create heaven and earth.

It seems unlikely that ideology alone is enough to generate a new cultural trajectory. Myths and other early writings infer that the Indo-Europeans married female leaders in a society that still reckoned descent matrilineally thus establishing political legitimacy. Frymer-Kensky explains how the changes in the nature of authority and kingship are alluded to in the titles used by rulers. Kingly titles also changed in such a way as to illuminate the greater and greater power held by male heirs to the throne. During the pre-Sargonic period in Mesopotamia, before 2500 BC, all royal inscriptions included a statement about how royals were nourished by the mother Goddess. Between 2500 and 2200 B.C., the Sargonic kings of united Sumer took the title of God directly. See Lerner (1986) for a detailed description of the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal succession as she explains how early Mesopotamian leaders merged divine and secular power.

Another method used by kings to increase their legitimacy was entry into a sacred marriage with the Goddess (Frymer-Kensky 1992; Eisler 1987; Stone 1976). Depicted on vases that date back as far as 4000 B.C, the meaning or significance of the sacred marriage may have been altered over the years; it may have once held more benefit for females. Myths tell us that it was “not until the Goddess had mated with the young God and his death and rebirth had taken place, could the annual cycle of seasons

begin” (Lerner 1986, 150). From other written records of Mesopotamia, the earthly version of the ritual took place at the beginning of the New Year when the king joined sexually with the earthly representative of the Goddess Inanna. This ritual allowed the king to get one step closer to being a deity. “Desire and sexuality created a bridge between the king and the Goddess, but the result is power” (Frymer-Kensky 1992). The divine marriage ensured divine protection for the people and assured the king’s claim to the throne.

The roles open to women, like the roles of the Goddesses, were shrinking. Women’s usefulness began to be defined from a male perspective. Mesopotamian law codes (e.g., law codes from Ur III around 2100BC and from Hammurabi’s Code around 1700BC), for the first time in history, indicate that the virginity, chastity and faithfulness of wives were legally mandated. Delivering girls to marriage “safely” seems to have become an issue in the myths. The proper wife is known for her weaving abilities and her faithfulness; she has no public role. Eventually, human females, like Goddesses, were also stripped of their reproductive role (Eisler 1987, 81). By the time of Aristotle, the belief that men deposit fully developed tiny humans into females had become so deeply entrenched that they were believed to be scientific fact (Elshtain 1981).

In the land of Canaan, there were two very distinct cultures. The Promised Land was not entirely free for the taking; many polytheistic people of long-lived cultures already inhabited the land. Scholars agree that many Biblical passages of the Old Testament were intentionally written to undermine these older traditions. Yahweh’s jealousy of the Goddess prompted him to call for the destruction of all “her” symbols and images as well as all of “her” sacred groves and temples²⁶. Biblical records show that Yahweh’s followers took this message very literally; it explains how, in over sixty different cities, entire communities were slaughtered and plundered (Stone 1976, 185).

So, in ancient writings spanning from Sumerian myths to law codes of Mesopotamia to the Hebrew Bible, we see a cultural, religious and

²⁶ In Hosea 2:11-12, it says “I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts. And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, whereof she hath said, These [are] my rewards that my lovers have given me: and I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them.”

ideological shift toward greater gender stratification. When combined, archeological evidence and mythological testimonials present several non-technological, non-economic precursors to and possible precipitators of the observed increase in gender stratification that occurred between 4,500 BC and 3,000 BC. Furthermore, we know that many of the technological changes occurred thousands of years before societies showed clear signs of gender inequality.

The last remnants of the old gender egalitarian cultures

Despite the current dominance of Indo-European culture in most of Europe and the Near East, a few isolated areas managed to maintain isolation from Indo-European influence into modern times. These non-Indo-European groups have also been described as having higher levels of gender equality. “After a 5000 year long dominance by Indo-Europeans over most of Europe, we have non-Indo-Europeanized – probably aboriginal – languages which survive to the present day: Laponic, Basque, Etruscan, Iberian, Pictish, Scian, and other substrates which have now disappeared” (Makkay 1992, 200). In more remote areas where little or no trace of Indo-European contact was identified, it is theorized that aspects of Old European culture remained intact. The modern Basque culture is a good example. Basque has progressed (technologically and economically) along with the rest of Spain and simultaneously has maintained its indigenous culture.

The Basque culture represents a rarity in Europe; it is one of the few places that Old European culture remained at least partially intact until modern times. The Basque language is the only western European language that effectively avoided Indo-European influence. Here, “the religion of the Goddess, the usage of the lunar calendar, matrilineal laws of inheritance, and agricultural work performed by women continued into the early 20th century” (Gimbutas 1989). Law codes acknowledge women’s rights to inherit, judge and arbitrate; nowhere in these codes are women treated differently than men.

Everson (1989) looks to the Basque culture for insight into the interpretation of Old European Goddess religions. In general, the dialectic of formation, destruction and regeneration resulting from the cyclical agricultural economy seems to be central to their thinking. Mari is the chief spirit in Basque country; her pantheon is mostly female. Her husband, Sugaar or Sugoi, is symbolized by the snake. He visits Mari every Friday to comb her hair. Many shapes and symbols are associated

with Mari: a crow, a vulture, a horse, a human female, a flaming tree and more. In Basque mythology, the bird symbolizes birth, water birds indicate fate, and birds of prey denote death. Moral codes condemn “lies, thievery, pride and boasting, the non-fulfillment of one’s given word, and the failure to give help to others” (Everson 1989). Mari is most commonly said to live underground or in caves. She can create natural disasters. The connection between things, rather than the difference between things, is emphasized.

The Basque represent an advanced non-Indo-European people that have maintained a relatively low level of gender inequality. Taken together, we now know that: advancements associated with increased gender stratification significantly predated that stratification, signs of increased stratification accompanied the arrival of new people known as Indo-Europeans and people who avoided these new-comers and their cultural influence tended to maintain lower levels of stratification.

Conclusion: Combining the Sociological Theories with Archeology, History and Mythology

In conclusion, the historical low point in women’s empowerment and status attainment was not solely a function of techno-economic changes associated with the shift from horticultural to agrarian based economies. Religious and ideological shifts accompanying invasion by hierarchical, patriarchal and aggressive groups were also important elements of female disempowerment. Where these cultural tides failed to be introduced, women fared much better. I think that it is safe to conclude that cultural and ideological systems at least magnified the effect that structural and techno-economic changes (occurring between 4400 and 2800 BC) had on women’s lives.

Many of the technological changes that are associated with increases in gender stratification were in place for a long time without any clear signs of gender stratification. Furthermore, it was not until the arrival of new cultural and religious elements that we begin to see a clearly established system of gender stratification.

It is still important to note that both these cultural changes and the entrenchment of large scale agrarian based food production took place over some critical 1,800 years.

As we see today, religion and cultural systems of meaning continue to be the stronghold of gender traditionalism even where technological,

economic and political spheres are more open to gender equality. So, as in the mythology of early Sumer, religious and cultural ideologies lag behind techno-economic preconditions for gender stratification while simultaneously being an important component for determining the exact level of gender stratification. In the next section, it will be shown that many of these same technological and economic changes occurred in an ideological and cultural context that leans heavily toward egalitarianism, and women continue to maintain a relatively high status even after the adoption of Hinduism then Islam, colonialism, entry into the world market and the nationalist movement.

In other words, I am suggesting that the replacement of an entire social system cannot occur without religious, cultural, ideological, political, technological and economic shifts. These sectors of social life are not also as closely linked as they are in Neolithic society nor are they given equal weight in various societies at various times (Sahlins, 1976). Thus, I propose that the impact of religion will be a function of its centrality in defining social life and its level of congruence with the current “actual gender arrangements” (in other words, its level of congruence with the society’s kinship system).

Below is a graphical representation of how the two strands of theorizing come together to create the “great increase” in level of gender stratification. Listed along the timeline are the technological advances and cultural transitions that I theorize jointly played a role in the decline of women’s status. The diffusion of plow technology, like the technological advancements of the Neolithic, took time to spread across the Eurasian landmass²⁷.

Technological, ideological and social forces collided slowly over thousands of years to create the overall increase in gender stratification that has been identified by sociological theorists. Religion, ideology and culture were important catalysts of the changes that occurred in the level of women’s sexual freedom, economic empowerment and place in the division of labor. Therefore, religion should not be marginalized in future cross-cultural sociological discussions of gender stratification.

²⁷ First evidence for the existence of the plow comes from Mesopotamian cylinder seals and Egyptian paintings dating a little before 3000BC. The plow diffused slowly through Europe and its impact on stratification came to fruition over time.

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