

Tad Ekam: not female, not male

0. Abstract Contrary to the widely held beliefs that in its origin religion had many gods (polytheism) or a supreme male god or the worship of a female (Mother) Goddess, this paper argues with much evidence that the original state probably was one in which all deities are expressions of a Primal Power, itself unmanifest and being neither male nor female.

Introduction

1. It is generally assumed nowadays that man *homo sapiens* has descended from some ape-like creature, which itself, “evolved” from some even more primitive mammal, by a process of “natural selection” which entailed numberless accidental developments of organs and functions: this is the so-called scientific view (Ruse M. 2003; Gribbin & Chervas 2003; Dawkins 1996; etc), although many scientists have since the 1980s cast strong doubts on this (neo-) Darwinian explanation of the appearance of different species in the earth’s biosphere (Dembski 2004; Behe 1996; Bowler 1992; Denton 1985). It is generally assumed too that human language “evolved” out of animal grunts and bird-twitterings after the vocal machinery and brain structure became sufficiently and fittingly developed (Hawkins and Gell-Menn 1992:21-83). Another widespread assumption is that the worship of the Mother Goddess is a much earlier form of religion; to quote an authority: “The later patriarchal religions and mythologies have accustomed us to look upon the male god as a creator... But the original, overlaid stratum knows of a female creative being” (Newmann 1955, quoted by Klostermaier 2000: 188). In this paper I shall deal only with this last assumption.

The Female Goddess.

2. K. Klostermaier in his chapter on Shaktism, the worship of the female goddess who embodies *śakti*, the supreme creative power, sums up the evidence for this “original, overlaid stratum” as follows:

“Neumann assumes for the whole region of the Mediterranean a universally adopted religion of the Great Mother Goddess around 4000 B.C.E., which was revived about 2000 B.C.E., and spread through the whole of the then known world. In this religion the Great Goddess was worshiped as creator, as Lady of men, beasts and plants, as liberator and as symbol of transcendent spiritual transformation.

The Indus civilization also belonged to that tradition in which the cult of the Great Goddess was prominent. Numerous *terracotta* figurines have been found: images of the Mother Goddess of the same kind that are still worshiped in Indian villages today. Several representations on seals that appear connected with the worship of the Great Goddess also exist. On one of these we see a nude female figure lying upside down with outspread legs, a plant issuing from her womb. On the reverse there is a man with a sickle-shaped knife before a woman who raises her arms in supplication. “Obviously it depicts a human sacrifice to the Earth Goddess.”

The connections between Śāktism, Mohenjo-Daro civilization, and Mediterranean fertility cults seem to be preserved even in the name of the Great Mother: “Umā for her peculiar name, her association with a mountain and her mount, a lion, seems to be originally the same as the Babylonian Ummu or Umma, the Arcadian Ummi, the Dravidian Umma, and the Skythian

Ommo, which are all mother goddesses. The name Durgā seems to be traceable to Truqas, a deity mentioned in the Lydian inscriptions of Asia Minor. There is a common mythology of Great Mother: she was the first being in existence, a Virgin. Spontaneously she conceived a son, who became her consort in divinity. With her son-consort she became the mother of the gods and all life. Therefore we find the Goddess being worshiped both as Virgin and Mother”(2000:188-189).

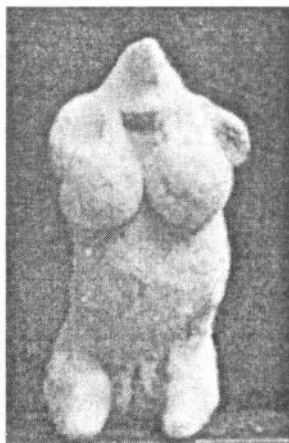
3.- The evidence Klostermaier adduces does indicate that the female, at least in the regions mentioned, anteceded the male divinity skygod, creator-god or whoever. One should also take into account many more studies like the speculative study of R. Graves *The Mother Goddess* (1966), now sadly neglected, or M. Gimbutas' more recent 'Deities and symbols of Old Europe' (1991). Here undoubtedly we must acknowledge the priority of the female genetrix or creatrix or matrix. It is easy to reach this conclusion because the archaeological evidence is indisputable – as shown below with examples from Old Europe, Eastern Mediterranean and Mehrgarh.



Early Minoan Bird-headed female
Heraklion Museum, Crete (in Gimbutas 1991).



Early Minoan Bee-goddess with horns(?) and winged dogs,
Heraklion Museum, Crete (in Gimbutas 1991).



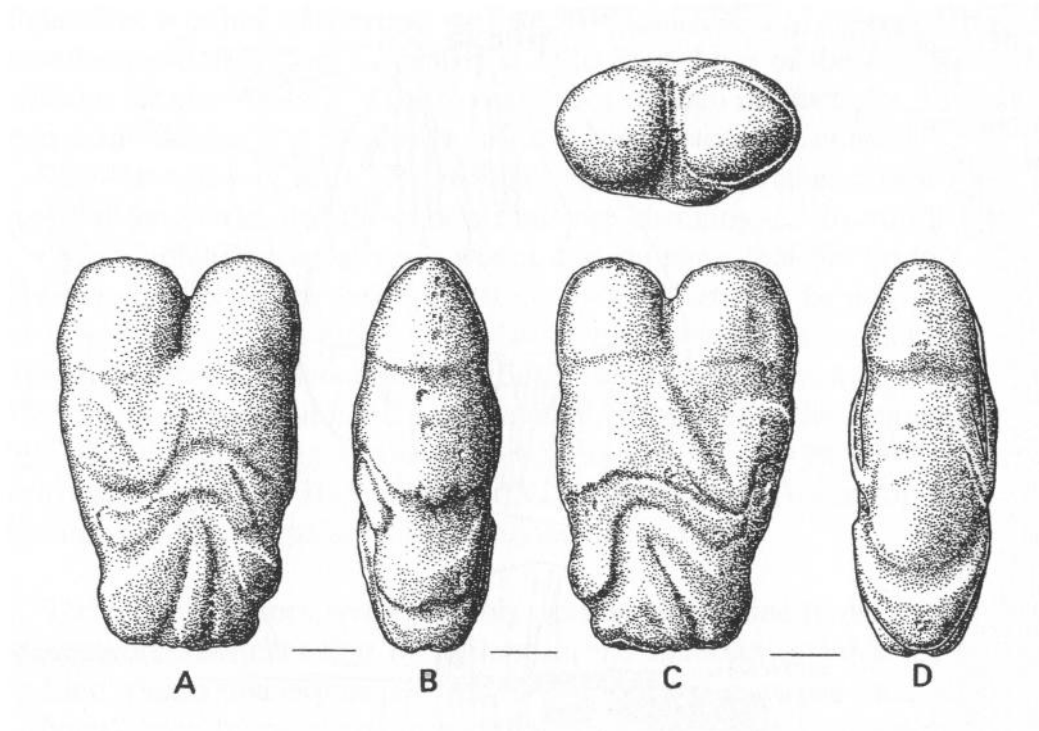
Female figurine from Mnajdra, Malta,
c4000: in Mifsud & Ventura (1991:III).



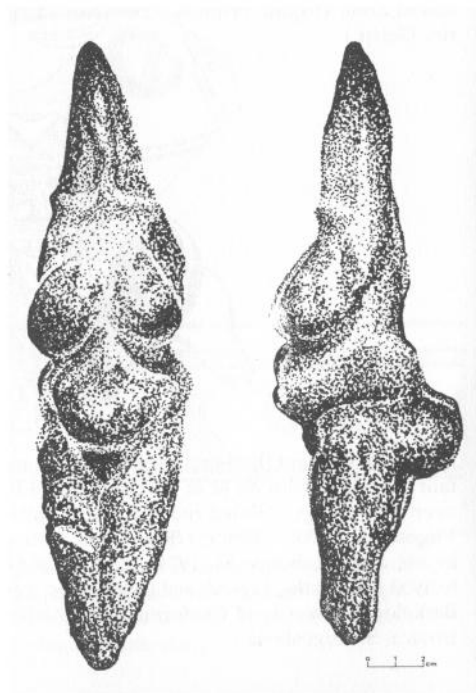
Bird-goddess: Sarajevo Museum;
5th millenium (in Gimbutas 1991).

The Male God .

However, there is some evidence that suggests, if not phallic or Father God worship, at least an awareness of a male presence and masculine force playing some significant role in the world as is shown by the figures below : -



Two figurines in close embrace also suggesting phallic form(s)
(and testicles, from above): in Rudgley 1998.



Female figure suggesting phallus,
Upper Palaeolithic. Pigorini Museum, Rome (in Gimbutas 1991)

Neither male nor female.

Thus, even in the Mediterranean basin the female is not uniquely dominant. In what is today Israel, some kilometres south of Bethlehem, a small but very complex and significant figurine was found (early 20th cent) and is now in the British Museum, London. It is made from a calcite cobble and is about 10 cm tall and 4 cm broad. It is obviously a pair in close sexual embrace but from certain angles it suggests a penis, possibly two penises touching and, from above, two testicles. This has been assigned to the Natufian period, i.e. 11th or 10th cent BCE. (For details and references, Rudgley 1998:187-9). See also the female figure suggesting a phallus from the Upper Palaeolithic, now in Rome.



Small stone circles, Komakino Iseki, northern Japan.
Jomon structure: from Hancock 2002, pl 73.

What of early cultures that have no representations of female or male gods, or anything like that? Female and male figures can be easily distinguished in most archaeological remnants in statuary, relief or other iconography. However, there are ancient cultures that have no such obvious tell-tale figures. I have in mind the Jōmon culture in Japan which reaches back to the 11th millennium BC and had only some circular or oval structures, neatly formed out of pebbles and stones. (Rudgley 1998; Hancock 2002). One could of course argue that these forms symbolise the female pudendum while another might argue, just as convincingly, that they represent the male testicle.

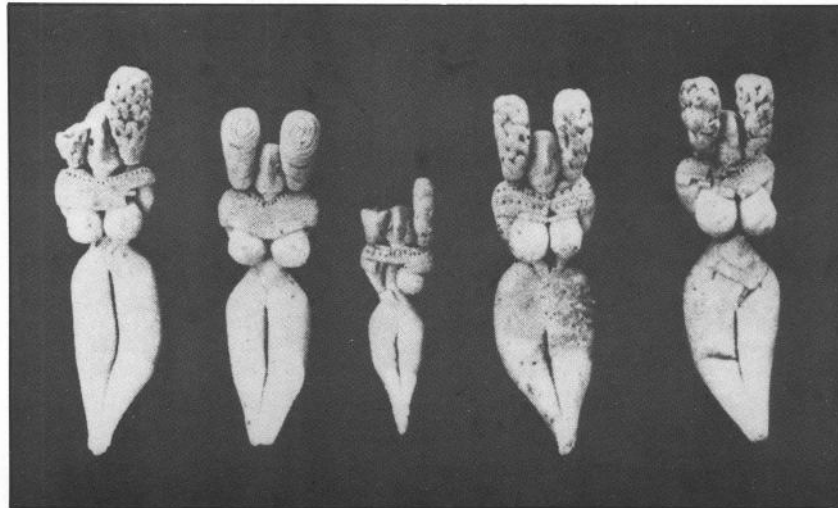
Then, there are the ancient rock painting of Lascaux and Altamira (12000 BC) which, again, show no female or male supreme deity, despite the colourfully rich representation of animals and (less so) humans.

There may be even more difficult cases where there is no representation at all. Because the culture does not express its religious aspirations in concrete imagery but only in poetry and music, in song and dance, and has an ageold oral tradition only. For instance, Plato in his *Republic* delineates an early ideal community of agriculturalists who produce the goods necessary for their frugal needs and for some trade, live peacefully and harmoniously and sing the praises of the gods. Such people would not leave many tokens for archaeologists and anthropologists to erect theories about female or male gods. The Jōmon may have been such a culture, the cultivation of rice

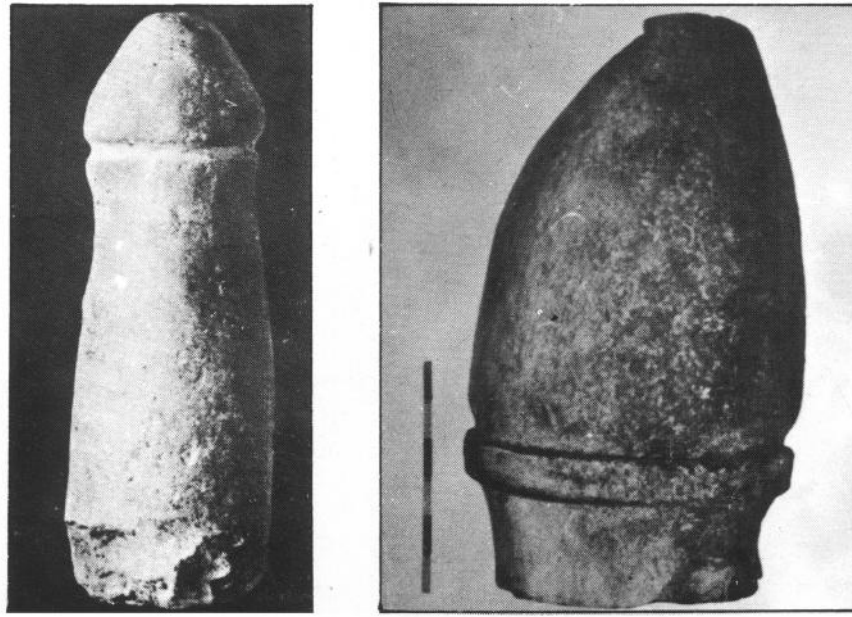
being their main economic concern.

Both male and female.

4. The early Vedic civilization is most probably another such case. Following his sources, Klostermaier mentions several terracotta figurines of the Mother Goddess found in the Indus and Sarasvati civilization. But this particular culture, remarkable for its long peaceful duration from c 3000 (early Harappan) to c 1900 BCE (mature and late) is only one phase of the much longer Vedic civilization that flourished in that region (what is today N.W India and Pakistan) and continued to develop even until late historical times having moved eastward to the Gangetic plains. Moreover, the material evidence does not indicate an exclusively Mother Goddess worship: some seals present a male god and some finds are plainly phallic representations suggesting, as in many areas today, *linga* worship – like the two examples below:



Female figurines (Mehrgarh): from Lal 1997 (Pl XXIIA).



Phallic representations (stone *lingas*: Harappa, Mohenjodaro): from Lal 1997 (Pl L: C&D).

As I have shown in several recent studies (Kazanas 2007a, 2005, 2002), this is the material expression of the older Vedic culture that is encapsulated in the hymns of the *R̥gveda* and seems to converge with the post-Rigvedic literature of the *Brāhmaṇa* and *Sūtra* texts. While the Indus-Sarasvati Culture had literacy, nevertheless no written documents containing the Vedic literature have been found. The earliest secure writing is the Ashoka Rock Inscriptions of the 3rd cent BCE. The early Vedic culture was non-material (in comparison with the Harappan one) and the *R̥gveda*, its bulk having been composed in the early fourth millennium, as well as much of its subsequent literature, was transmitted orally until well into historical times.

What was the religion of the *R̥gveda*? Here archaeology can tell us nothing. For no objects suggestive of religious significance and, certainly, no representations of a female or male supreme deity have been found in that region from the fourth millennium and before. (Some few claim that RV 4.24.10 “Who will buy this my Indra” refers to a statuette or icon of Indra. But no word for “statuette” or “icon” is used and no figure of a male god holding anything remotely resembling a *vajra* ‘bolt’ has been found in relief, seals or statuary even in very late Harappan sites. So the phrase may refer to a transfer of favour.) Yet, the *RV* abounds in gods and goddesses. But in this document, probably the earliest in the cultural history of mankind, we see an unusual situation.

Polytheism.

5. The *RV* has about 1000 hymns praising various gods. The names of several of them appear in other Indo-European cultures. Let us examine some examples (for more details, Kazanas 2006):

The Firegod *Agni* appears in Hittite as *Agnis* and in Slavic as *Ogen* (and variants) while the word ‘fire’ is in Latin *ignis* and Lithuanian *ugnis*.

The Skygod *Dyaus* appears in Hittite as *D-Siu-s*, in Greek as *Zeus*, Latin *Ju[s]-piter* and Germanic *Tiwaz*.

The Storm- and Rain-god *Parjanya* appears in Slavic as *Perunŭ*, Baltic *Perkunas* (and variants) and Germanic *Fjorgyn*.

The Sungod *Sūrya* appears in Greek as *Hēlios*, Latin *Sol* and Baltic *Saule*.

The Dawn-goddess *Uṣas* appears in Greek as *Ēōs*, Latin *Au[s]rora* and Germanic *Eos-tre* (and variants).

The female deities are few in the RV. Apart from *Uṣas* we meet *Aditi* ‘the Unbounded One’, a kind of Mother Goddess, *Rātrī* benevolent goddess of night, *Sarasvatī*, a river goddess who has also a celestial form and *Ṛṥhivī*, Earth-goddess. There are several others but they are mere names – *Bṛhaddivā*, *Indrāṇī* etc. All the important gods are male. Apart from those mentioned above, there is *Indra*, the warrior god *par excellence*; *Varuṇa* another sky-god who is also connected with waters and promulgates the ethical code; *Soma*, both moon-god and the drink that induced ecstasy; *Aryaman* of contracts; *Pūṣan*, another aspect of the sun etc, etc. Nonetheless a very important goddess is *Vāc* ‘Speech’ (RV 10.125): she declares her attributes in the first person as mother of the gods, giver of wealth, queen, immanent in all beings, an all-pervading power and encompassing all creation.

Thus here we have glorious polytheism.

That One: neither male nor female.

6. However, there are many statements in the hymns that all these divinities are expressions of a supreme Power, a Godhead or Absolute, that is otherwise unnamed and undescribed. And in this, the Vedic Tradition differs from all the other cultures that we know. Taking cosmogonic myths from Iran, Greece, Rome and North Europe, some scholars rightly state that in these Traditions the creation arises from two primordial elements, “the action of heat on water”; then they go further and generalize – not rightly – that this process reflects “a multi-layered dualism that pervades Indo-European myth and religion”. (Stone 1997, ch 5; also Puhvel 1989: 277). These scholars would have been right if they had written “some of **later** Indo-European religions”; because the early one, as seen in the RV, is quite different. In the creation hymn 10.129 (or *nāsadīya sūkta* as it is known in the native tradition from the hymn’s first hemistich) all creation arose out of That One *tad-ekam*, alone, that “breathed without air of its own power” (*ānid avātām svadhāyā tād ekam*). Only in the third stānza appear *Salilām* ‘fluxuating energy’ (usually but wrongly translated as ‘water’) and *tāpas* ‘force of transformation/materialization’ (usually and wrongly given as ‘heat’) within *tāmas* ‘darkness’, within *tucchyām* ‘void’. Then comes the self-begotten one-existence *ābhu-* which evolves and becomes the creation. In stanza 4 rises *kāma* which entwines and pervades *adhi-sam-ā-vṛt-* that “becoming” and later still creative forces and the gods. Here at least, it is a Primal Unity that is the source of all manifestations: neither female nor male.

All deities are expressions of that supreme First Cause. This is stated explicitly in several hymns, both early and late. RV 1.164.6 and 10.114.5 say clearly that the wise poets speak of it, although One, in many ways and forms giving it the names of various divinities like *Agni*, *Yama*, *Indra* etc as in 164.6 cd: – *ekam sād viprā bahudhā vadanti: agnīm yamām mātariśvānam-ahuḥ*. RV 8.58.2 says again: *ekam vā idām ví babhūva sārvaṃ* ‘It being One has variously (vi) become this All [and Everything]’. The idea that all gods are manifestations of the One is reinforced by the acknowledgement that the gods are gods by virtue of a single godhood or god-power of which they partake: this is made clear in the refrain of hymn 3.55: *mahād devānām asuratvām ekam* ‘Single is the great god-power (or ‘lord-power’ *asuratva*) of the gods’. Consider also 3.54.8cd: – *ējad dhruvām patyate víśvam-ekam cārat patatī víṣuṇaṃ víjātām* – ‘moving yet still, the One

(*ekam* neuter) governs the whole-as-unity, (what moves and what stands firm,) what walks and flies, all this manifest disparate (*vi*) multiplicity’.

Thus knowledge of the One is present in the family collections of hymns, the older books of the RV.

Utilizing different material in the RV, K. Werner made the same point back in 1989 (see also Kazanas 2002).

The One in different cultures.

7. It may be thought that only the RV speaks of a Primal Unity, unmanifest and undescribed. However a careful reading of the Pyramid Texts, the oldest religious writings in Egypt (see Faulkner 1969), reveals that there also the multiplicity of deities, male and female, comes from a primordial Unity called *Atum*, ‘the Complete One’ or *Nun* ‘the primal substance’ (usually given as ‘water’) and J. Bottéro, one of the foremost authorities on early Mesopotamian culture, pointed out that polytheism there may well have derived from a primordial Unity, unnamed (Bottéro 2001:74). Thus the RV and the early Vedic culture is not alone in acknowledging the genderless First Cause of everything.

Another common assumption is that the Judaic religion in the *Old Testament* (or *Pentateuch*) presents for the first time monotheism. This assumption is wrong on three counts. First, the Hebrews emerge into historical times c 12th cent BCE. At best, their *Old Testament* cannot be older than c 1800 when its first book, *Genesis*, was perhaps composed, borrowing much material from the Mesopotamian culture (the primordial waters, man’s creation out of clay, the flood etc). Second, the god Jehovah/Yahveh appears, upon a close inspection, to be only a superior god among many others, a kind of *primus inter pares*; throughout the *Old Testament* god used the plural “we” as if there are many gods; the name *Elohim*, usually translated as ‘god’, is in fact plural ‘gods’; the Jews worshipped many other gods at times and principally Baal; psalm 81 or 82 states that “God stands in the assembly of gods and in their midst he will judge the gods”. Third, Yahveh is not an impartial, universal spirit but very partisan and favourable towards the Jews; a jealous and vindictive deity who constantly interferes in the affairs of mankind and punishes people because of sins committed by their distant forefathers. Thus, when all these considerations are taken into account, it is difficult to regard the Judaic Yahveh as the prototype of monotheism. A fourth point is that as the Indians of the Mature Harappan culture had established trade-centres in Mesopotamia c 2300 (McEvelley 2002; Lal 1997) and as the Jews were in Ur c 1900 (although this date is in dispute: Dunstan 1998), it is possible if not probable that they adopted their kind of monotheism from the Indians themselves there. The hints in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures and much more so, the clear statements in the early Vedic tradition have a prior claim to monotheism in its truer form of a transcendental, universal Absolute.

But, of course, this non-material Oneness that is beyond the senses is not so easy to worship. How can we worship something that is Unmanifest and without a finite, conceivable form?... For this reason most probably the Primal Unity slipped away into the dimmest background of ancient religion while different deities, male and female, came to the foreground and captured the attention and devotion of the large majority of the peoples. Later came monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam. In Judaism and Islam it is the one God, Yahveh and Allah respectively, that demands the attention of the faithful. But in Christianity, it is also other powers, the Son, Christ, the Holy Virgin, angels and saints that claim the people’s devotion.

8. Can we say that the genderless Unity preceded the concept of the Mother Goddess? Strictly speaking, the material representations of the female Creatrix coming as they do from the fifth millennium precede a document like the RV, which is of the fourth millennium, or the religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt which cannot be much before 3000BCE – at least as we know their most ancient forms. (At the same time we must take into account the archaeological evidence in artefacts strongly suggestive of the male force, as shown in some of the figures – artefacts which are as old as, if not older than, the female figures.) On the other hand, the One Absolute, infinite and indescribable, could not possibly be represented in a material form that would be recognized by us. In India there were representations of many deities (Viṣṇu, Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, Lakṣmī, etc) but not of the Absolute Brahman. Leaving aside Egypt and Mesopotamia, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Vedic oral tradition goes back many millennia before the fourth. Nor can we dismiss entirely the concept of the cyclical recurrence of events, the periodic emergence and dissolution of the creation, in large units of time called *yuga*, as found in the Vedic tradition. In this view of creation, mankind starts in the perfection and unity of the *Kṛta-yuga* (or *Sat-yuga*) ‘the Age of Truth and Goodness’; then they slip into the *Tretā-yuga* where *dharma* ‘righteousness’ or ‘virtue’ diminishes by a quarter and division enters into the scene, but there is still much piety and knowledge; from this they pass into the *Dvāpara* where *dharma* diminishes by a further quarter and people are no longer governed by reason but by uncontrolled feeling; finally they drop into the *Kali-yuga* where *dharma* is only at one fourth of its force and people are governed by their appetites, envies and attachments. Their language, too, which began as a unitary mighty instrument of creativity and communication devolves gradually into many different tongues where words are divorced from concepts, things and actions: e.g. the sounds making up the word “abbot” or “zoo” do not suggest at all the form and function (i.e. the meaning) of these material phenomena.

Thus it is possible, however remote it may seem to us today (and utterly unacceptable to a grossly materialist mindset), that some people preserved with their oral tradition the knowledge of a Primordial Unity, neither male nor female, from which both male and female devolved. This implies, of course, that all religions or philosophical systems appearing in historical times or in the archaeological material records are devolutes or fragmented, incomplete memories of that all inclusive and coherent doctrine where the many are derivatives of the One. Even a monotheistic religion like that of the Hebrew people probably derived from such a unitary doctrine and its system (Kazanas 2005, 2007). In historical times, of course, we find much evidence of cross-influences between the various religions and such interactions may well have occurred even in pre-historic times as people migrated or traded. That the many devolved from the One is quite the opposite of what historians of religion and anthropologists teach, publishing as they do the notion that ancient or “primitive” religion began with polytheism and animism before developing into monotheism and/or a higher ethical code. But the evidence of the Mesopotamian early religious writings, as Bottéro pointed out, the Egyptian Pyramid Texts and especially the *Rgveda*, direct us to this conclusion, that in earliest times the many gods and goddesses were expressions of the One, neither male nor female.

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