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## GODDESS IMAGERY IN GREEK FOLK COSTUME

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The seeds of this research were sown in a textile exhibition entitled "Goddesses and Their Offspring: 19th and 20th Century Eastern European Embroideries" at the Roberson Center for the Arts in Binghamton, N.Y. in 1986. Similarities between the imagery of Eastern European textiles and the embroideries in Greek folk costume prompted this study. It was part of a larger field research project on Boeotian folk costumes sponsored by Earthwatch in the summer of 1988.

A "hot topic" of discussion among feminists of all disciplines is the image of the prehistoric goddess and the ensuing implications for all women everywhere. I refer you to the books The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth, and When God Was a Woman.

The most ancient religion was that of the Great Goddess, known as Isis, Astarte and Ishtar, who was worshipped not only for fertility, but as the wise creator, the source of universal order. This theory of primal matriarchy is visualized in prehistoric artifacts in which the female form predominates. In time, goddess worship was suppressed by patriarchal groups. The Venus of Willendorf with her pendulous breasts and pregnancy-swollen belly is one example; other prehistoric statues of goddesses appear small breasted or flat chested with a flat abdomen. These Neolithic figures are often naked with large buttocks and hips. These seemingly non-pregnant goddesses are pregnant in an unusual way -- the buttocks are often hollow, sometimes containing seeds or egg-shaped pellets. The faces are often mask-like which lends a more than human dimension to the figures. Goddess images dating back to approximately 1500 B.C. were found in Tiryns in the Peloponnese, with hands upraised as if in prayer. These and other such images are evidence of widespread goddess worship throughout the Mediterranean.

Similar goddess motifs are seen in the embroideries of Eastern Europe, the Ukraine, and Russia as remnants of a former system of belief in the Great Goddess. In a Neolithic figurine one sees a "daughter" perched atop the goddess's head. The same images



appear in embroideries, possibly symbolizing not only fertility and sexuality, but the birth of thought and ideas. The goddess is associated with animal images as well, especially the horse and the bird. Her small upper body is attached to an enormous skirt which sometimes becomes a pair of horses -- the rough equivalent of the exaggerated hips and buttocks of prehistoric goddesses. Natalie Moyle supports the ideas that the bird image, like the goddess, has multiple meanings, symbolizing life of the spirit, and also physical life and fertility, while the horse may be a soul symbol or soul bearer. The mermaid motif is also seen in these embroideries. She is a water being, but also a creature associated with trees and crop fertility and a prolific producer of babies.

The embroideries found on 19th century Greek women's folk dress are equally fascinating. Anthropomorphic figures appear on embroidered chemises in Boeotia as well as other regions of Greece, notably Argolida-Corinthia in the Peloponnese, and Attica. Field interviews with elderly women who remembered wearing the costumes revealed that the goddess motifs were called by idiomatic names, such as "dancing dolls", rather than by names referring to ancient goddess worship. However, previous writers on the subject have made references to these symbols as being "magical", "giving tactile form to dreams and fantasies" and belonging to an earlier time when the Greeks worshipped trees and held them sacred (Polychroniadis).

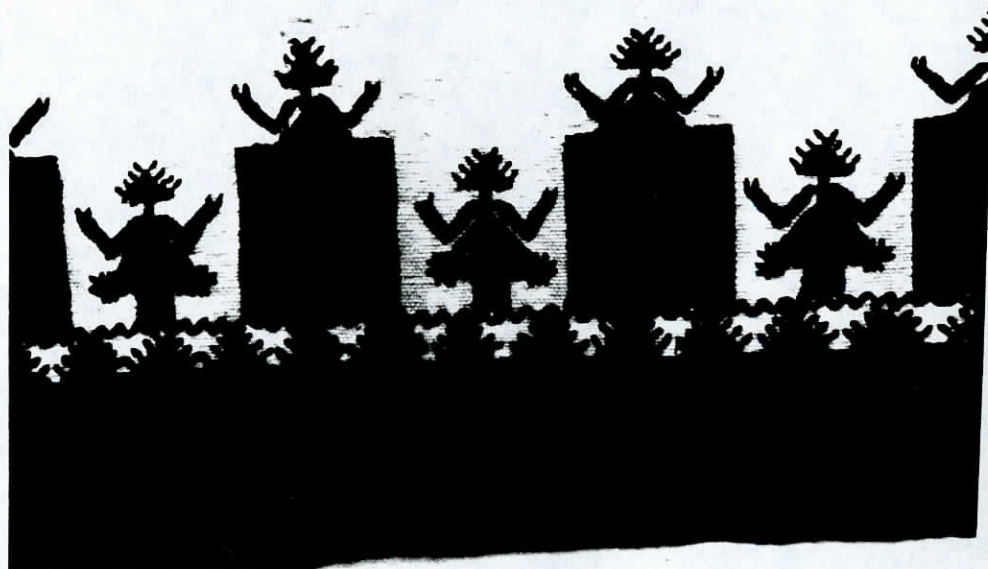
Another image of importance is the "omphalos", a large round shaped object found buried at Delphi. The ancient Greeks believed that the oracle at Delphi symbolized the center of the earth. This shape reminds one of a burial mound, and legend says that it hid the remains of the god Dionysos or the serpent Pytho and was buried near the primitive oracle of the mother, Gaia. This shape has also been referred to as a beehive by some scholars.

It is a great leap from 1400 B.C. to the 19th century, one which some textile historians may think is too big to make. But one cannot deny that anthropomorphic and "beehive" shaped motifs appear in the highly stylized embroideries of women's folk costumes from mainland Greece. A chemise from Attica has embroidered "beehive" shapes and anthropomorphic figures. A sleeveless white coat has repeated "beehive" shapes in dark blue and black. In the Peloponnese, all the components of female costume display stylized goddess imagery -- the chemise, the overbodice, the coat, the apron,

and the headscarf. The problem we are wrestling with is convincingly making the connection between 19th century goddess images and pre-historic worship of the great goddess.

The women who wore these costumes belonged to a minority ethnic group, known as the "Arvanites" in Greek. These people migrated to mainland Greece from Albania in the 14th century. Both the form of their garments and the placement of the embellishment on the costumes is Byzantine in nature, but the motifs themselves are harder to trace back to their origins. The survival of such ancient traditions in 19th century Greek costume may be explained by 400 years of Turkish occupation which isolated mainland Greeks from what was happening around them.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no linguistic evidence to connect the images on the costumes to ancient goddess worship. Our tentative conclusion is that although the image of the goddess survived, the meaning behind the symbol was lost long ago.



Detail, embroidered chemise hem. 19th century, Boeotia, Greece. Museum of Greek Folk Art (#3685).



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