

## OUR LADY OF THE MAMMOTHS

by Joseph Campbell

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Now whereas in the mural paintings of the paleolithic caves animal forms preponderate, the chief subject of interest among the sculptured remains of the same period was the human female; and whereas the comparatively rare figures of men appearing among the painted animals are masked or otherwise modified in such a way as to suggest mythological beings and magical enterprises, the female figurines, carved in bone, stone, or mammoth ivory, are nude, and simply standing. Many are extremely obese and of these some are radically stylized in a remarkably “modern” manner to give dramatic—and, no doubt, symbolically intended—emphasis to the great loins, the pubic triangle, and the nourishing breasts. In contrast to the male forms in the paintings, they are never masked or otherwise modified to suggest animals ... But since several have been found set up in shrines, it is now certain that they were the objects of a cult. Without exception, they lack feet, for they were stuck in the ground upright; a few have been discovered actually *in situ*. And so we can say that in the Paleolithic period, just as in the much later age of the early agricultural societies of the Near East, the female body was experienced in its own character as a focus of divine force, and a system of rites was dedicated to its mystery ... (p. 313)

There can be no doubt that in the very earliest ages of human history the magical force and wonder of the female was no less a marvel than the universe itself; and this gave to woman a prodigious power, which it has been one of the chief concerns of the masculine part of the population to break, control,

and employ to its own ends. It is, in fact, most remarkable how many primitive hunting races have the legend of a still more primitive age than their own, in which the women were the sole possessors of the magical art ... (p. 315)

The female figurines are the earliest examples of the “graven image” that we possess, and were, apparently, the first objects of worship of the species *Homo sapiens* ... (p. 325)

An important discovery was made in 1930 in the Dnieper region ... It consisted of an accumulation of mammoth skulls arranged in the form of a circle, and among them a number of tusks, some plaques of mammoth ivory scratched with geometrical patterns suggesting the forms of dwellings, others with the figures of fish and symbolic signs, and finally a Venus statuette, which, even without its lost head, was about six inches tall: Our Lady of the Mammoths, actually *in situ* ... (p. 327)

I think it most remarkable that we detect in her surroundings a constellation of motifs that remained closely associated with the goddess in the later epoch of the Neolithic and on into the periods of the high civilizations: the meander (as a reference to the labyrinth), the bird (in the dove-cotes of the temples of Aphrodite), the fish (in the fish ponds of the same temples), the sitting animals, and the phallus. Who, furthermore, reading of the figure amid the mammoth skulls, does not think of Artemis as the huntress, the lady of the wild things; or of the Hindu protectress of the home and goddess of good fortune, Lakshmi, in her manifestation as Lakshmi of the Elephants (*gaja-lakshmi*), where she is shown sitting on the circular corolla of a lotus, flanked by two mighty elephants that are pouring water upon her, either directly from their trunks or from water jars that they have lifted above her head? ... (p. 328)

We are clearly in a Paleolithic province where the serpent, labyrinth, and rebirth themes already constitute a symbolic constellation, joined to the imagery of the sunbird and the shaman flight, with the goddess in her classic role of protectress of the hearth, mother of man’s second birth, and lady of

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the wild things and of the food supply. She is here a patroness of the hunt, just as among planters she is the patroness of fields and crops ...

... what is surely clear is that a firm continuum has been established from Lake Baikal to the Pyrenees of a mythology of the mammoth-hunters in which the paramount image was the naked goddess. (p. 331)



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