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SEARCHING FOR THE ROOTS OF ARCHAIC RELIGION

According to a scheme for the interpretation of the history of religion suggested by Karl Jaspers, Mircea Eliade, and several other specialists in *Religionswissenschaft* the prehistoric was followed by the archaic which, in turn, lead to the axial and post-axial stages of development where the so-called higher traditions, at least, are concerned. The prehistoric refers to the typically shamanistic type tribal forms of religion which undoubtedly flourished during the Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic, on the foundations of earlier beginnings. During the late Neolithic and Bronze Ages transition to priestly cults occurred in some areas. Subsequently, from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. to around 300 B.C. what Jaspers calls the "Axial" age occurred with the rise of the great prophets and founders. The higher, institutionalised religions of the major living religions as well as those, like Manichaeism, which have vanished, have flourished during the post-axial which continues.

Using this general scheme, how can we account for the rise of the archaic? This development has not been of quite as much interest to scholars as the Axial and Post-Axial, but it is possibly more significant because it is the point at which religion achieves form and structure. Various aspects of the latter have been altered by the prophets and reformers but, in most respects, their impact has not been as revolutionary as the earlier trust which brought archaic religion out of the shamanistic pattern.

In one sense there is an embarrassment of data. Hundreds of thousands of Mesopotamian clay tablets have survived, vast number of Egyptian inscriptions, at least a few from early India and China, and, according to the investigations of Alexander Marshack, systems of notation preceding the formal invention of writing may be 300,000 years old which takes us back to *Homo erectus* of the

Acheulian Era.¹ Needless to say these prehistoric serpentes, maeanders, notches and dots have not yet been deciphered, although Marshack thinks at least some of them may have been time notations based on lunar periods.² For the archaic, which, in Mesopotamia, can be said to have begun around a millennium prior to the invention of formal writing around 3000 B.C., written records are particularly abundant thanks to the wealth bequeathed to modern archaeologists at sites such as the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, Mari, and from the Lagash of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Egyptian sources for the early dynastic period are not quite so rich, also it is generally agreed that they are both somewhat later than the Western Asian and probably derivative. The early Cretan script, Linear B, was cracked a quarter of a century ago and found to be an archaic form of Greek, but, thus far, has yielded comparatively little data to inform us concerning early Aegean religion. Linear A, the older script, still baffles the archaeologists. Recently, Finnish archaeologists cracked the Indus script, using a computer, but the inscriptions on amulets and other small objects have been too few to offer much information. Finally, there are the sacred scriptures of the oldest of the major living religions: the Vedas, Avestas, Pentateuch, and the older of the Chinese classics, plus the Ugaritic texts, the Homeric literature (which now seems to be of particularly dubious value), and, of course, the wealth of archaic monumental architecture surviving in the Near East especially.

Without wishing to give aid and comfort to Protestant evangelists, the most complete and explicit source for archaic religion seems to be the Pentateuch. Biblical texts, moreover, coincide fairly well with the archaeological evidence though by no means completely. As has been repeated rather tediously for the past century, the Old Testament documents the development of a religion, in Jaspers' terms, from the archaic to the axial. Mesopotamian texts are far more abundant. There are hundreds of cuneiform tablets in the British Museum and elsewhere which record myths, prayers, instructions to priests, and directions for diviners. But there is no way of sorting them out and relating them

1. Alexander Marshack, "Some Implications of the Palaeolithic Symbolic Evidence for the Origin of Language," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 2, June, 1976, p. 278.

2. A. Marshack, *The Roots of Civilization: The Cognitive Beginnings of Man's First Art, Symbol, and Notation* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972).

either to the archaeological evidence or to themselves. Unified synthesis is only possible by taking great liberties with the texts and by making unwarranted assumptions concerning the archaeological discoveries. By 1900 not only Amorite and Akkadian, but also Sumerian could be read and tablets discovered dating back to the fourth millennium B.C.³ Most of the mythological and religious literature, however, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Enuma elish*, comes from the library of Ashurbanipal and is very late, the seventh century B.C. There are earlier Sumerian fragments, but the Nineveh collection remains our chief source. The fact that religious texts were written both in Sumerian, by then, the sacred language, and Akkadian raises questions of authenticity and textual reliability. Perhaps the Sumerian writings used by Assyrian priests were faithful to texts thousands of years old, perhaps not.

Do we have a portrait of the archaic religion of Assyria at the time of Ashurbanipal (669-626 B.C.)? There are many tablets recording magic formulae, instructions to diviners and exorcists, charms against the *utukku*, *rabisu*, *lilitu*, and *labartu*, demons believed to lurk in dark corners and in the desert. Anxious Assyrians wore amulets engraved with demonic human heads and animal monsters, possibly to ward off evil spirits. There are also stone tablets inscribed with seven magical words seven times, and a few engravings of a *labartu* suckling her young.⁴ From these clues we can infer at least some of the features of a popular religion in which the fear of demons and rites of exorcism played an important role.

The one striking feature of the Assyrian priestly religion was the prominence of Asshur who, in the specifically Assyrian texts, superseded Marduk of Babylon who, in turn, displaced Enlil of Sumer. Since Ashur is the hero god who wages war against *Tiamat*, the salt sea monster, and since many of the texts preserve the older names, it is overwhelmingly probable that Ashur and his cult was a continuation of the earlier ones. The cult was preserved by a guild of dedicated priests at the beginning of the fourth century and vanished around first century B.C.⁵ Oppen-

3. Glyn Daniel, *The First Civilizations: The Archaeology of their Origins* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968) pp. 43f.

4. Sidney Smith, "The Age of Ashurbanipal", ch. iv., in *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. III, "The Assyrian Empire" (Cambridge: The University Press, 1960) pp. 92ff.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-8. Civilization (N.Y. 1967)

heim thinks that the cult of Ashur was royal and priestly, very formal and ceremonious, and that it was imposed upon a complex popular religion with which it had very little connection.⁶

Where Assyrian Religion is concerned everything is confusion. There are vestiges of monumental architecture but it is pure speculation to identify shrines and temples. There are the mythological texts such as the twelve tablets of *Gilgamesh*, the eight of the Creation Epic (*Enuma elish*) and fragments of around seven others.⁷ There are texts relating to the *baru* or seers, astrological texts, and, as mentioned instructions for the performance of rituals. But, as Oppenheim points out "a 'Mesopotamian Religion' should not be written."⁸ As he shows, all previous attempts to discuss Mesopotamian Religion in some sort of systematic and rational manner have failed. There is far too much complexity and confusion plus the insuperable problems of attempting to understand Mesopotamian concepts and attitudes.

There is, however, one outstanding fact. There were the folk cults and popular religions, and there was the royal priestly cult. This two tier system is encountered in all ancient civilisations. Unquestionably there are more than two tiers, all sorts of gradations inbetween, but there is a universal pattern in which comparatively sophisticated and highly organised priestly cults coexist with popular ones, the latter usually familial and local.

Popular religion was probably the surviving prehistoric cults, especially in the agrarian societies where they continued on the Neolithic fertility rites and mythologies which may have been predominantly feminine. According to Marshack, "The notation seems to have been more complex than among modern nomads (Bushman, Australian Aborigine, Eskimo, Indian) and it places early European culture in the centre of a comparatively dynamic, formative, revolutionary role in the relation to later developments."⁹ This interpretation dovetails with the recent announcement by Glyn Daniel and others that the carbon dating of Western European

6. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead*.

7. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET) Relating to the Old Testament*, With Supplement, James Pritchard, ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).

8. Oppenheim, *op. cit.* p. 172.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 458.

megaliths and other evidences indicates an earlier transition from nomadic to agrarian-pastoral cultures than had been previously suspected.¹⁰ Further, it is not impossible that the Neolithic originated in the West and spread east rather than the other way around. Or, as is more likely, there were at least two centers in Eurasia where the transition from Palaeolithic nomadic to Neolithic pastoral-agrarian occurred. The issue is very open. At the least, however, it can be now be said that there was apparently a continuous development in Europe from the Acheulian through the Magdalenian and on through the Mesolithic and into the Neolithic. Although Peter Ucko and other authorities cast grave doubts, it seems probable that at least some of the female figurines were devotional objects, and that an Earth Religion (s), highly diversified and localized, may have predominated in the Mediterranean regions while, following Andre Leroi Gourhan (*La Religion de la Prehistoire*, 1964), also attacked by Ucko, there may have been some sort of cosmological dualism in the symbolism of the cave paintings of Northwestern Europe. Eventually mother goddess cults, notably Malta, appeared and were perhaps disseminated.

The Western development seems to have halted at the Neolithic and the old thesis of Childe, *lux ex orientalis*, still has some validity, with serious modification, during the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age. The archaeological evidence still indicates that not only the extensive use of metals but also, more significantly, the rise of the city state occurred first in Western Asia.

The emergence of archaic religion coincides with the appearance of the city. I incline to the view that political considerations were of paramount importance in the formation of the priestly state in the riverine valleys. This is, of course, the old story and well supported by both archaeological evidence and the oldest texts. What remains unexplained, is the sharp transition from the primitive agrarian village to the urban community, a sharpness shown in sites such as Eridu where successions of small communities, built one on top of the other, seem to have been suddenly superseded by a city with an impressive temple complex and monumental architecture during the fifth millennium B.C., just before the beginning of the historical era.

10. Even Hadingham. "Circles and Standing Stones" (New York: Walker & Company, 1975), also recent articles by Glyn Daniel in *Antiquities*.

This transition has a vital bearing on the evolution of religion, the transition from the prehistoric to the archaic. A highly complex and dynamic series of political, economic, social, ideological, and psychological changes seem to have occurred within a relatively short time. Judged by the evidence presented by the historical texts, such as the Nineveh tablets, the collections from Mari, Lagash, Ras Shamrah and elsewhere the invariable pattern, religiously speaking, was a formal royal-priestly cult, somewhat like Imperial Shinto or the Roman civic religion, superimposed by the ruling elite but largely confined to the elite itself. The textual evidence suggests that the older, more primitive religions continued to flourish among the populace generally. These folk religions were varied, some being fertility cults, others cults of demonic exorcism, and, in all, the feminine principle seems to have predominated. The higher polytheisms of the priestly ruling class were predominantly masculine, power projections perhaps, though much else was involved. It is significant that the textual data from all Near Eastern sources strongly suggests that these priestly cults were confined to very small aristocratic minorities. Among the higher religions of the Axial period, Zoroastrianism is a case in point. The religion was always confined to the priestly-warrior ruling class, a reason why it was quickly swept away, save for the Gabars, by the more democratic Muslims. It is interesting to note that in other areas, Polynesia, for example, priestly aristocracies such as the Arioi of Raiatea imposed their cult of Oro first on the people of that island and then extended it throughout the Society Archipelago from their power centre at Opoa with its inter-island temple of Taputapuatea. Among the Maoris a priestly aristocracy created a monotheistic cult which did not, however, extend very far beyond their own group. There is abundant evidence for priestly aristocratic religions among the Chinese of Shang Dynasty times, the Japanese of Yamato, among the Mayans and Incas in the New World, and among both the Indus people and the Aryas in India. It also seems probable that the texts which were gathered into the Old Testament recorded the rituals, laws, ethical codes, theologies, and prophecies of the archaic-axial Yahwist cult of the Priestly-prophetic elite with the Hebrew-Jewish kings often leaning toward syncretism with the popular folk religion of Baal worship etc. At a later time, the Pseudepygryphal and Apocalyptic literature appeared and both of these collections seem to have been strongly represented of the popular folk religions.

Viewed in this way, the transitions from prehistoric to archaic, to axial are seen as developments affecting dominant elites and, for the most part, confined to them. The populace everywhere seems to have continued to practice highly localised traditional folk religions which, emerged out of the prehistoric, underwent developmental change, but in differing ways than the religions of the elite. Since the elite constitute the literate classes our information about archaic and axial religion comes mainly from the ruling minorities and quite evidently records but little about the popular religions. Here and there, in the Old Testament, for example, there is mention of *Lilith*, *Azazel*, and other folk demons. There is also mention of fertility rites, magic, necromancy, and, of course, the classic struggle against Baal worship, the latter having attained to the status of an archaic religion in Palestine at the time of the prophets of the Axial Era. The older, archaic religion perhaps survived in the Pseudepygrypha by which time, however, the older deities were transformed into demons and the concept of a diabolic hierarchy, foreign to the Old Testament rose. Christianity, originally a popular religion, drew heavily on the apocalyptic popular religion of the Pseudepygrypha, a probable reason for its hostile reception by the elitist Pharisees and Saducees.

By way of summary my conclusion is that the transition from the older popular and originally prehistoric forms of religion to the archaic (and later to the axial) occurred with the rise of dominant elites. The ruling class, in each situation, had its own cult which, for the most part was not disseminated. The populace continued in the old ways with all sorts of hybrid and syncretic relationships occurring between them.