

# SEX GODDESSES WITH FEET OF CLAY

**BETTANY HUGHES** argues that prehistoric 'earth-mother' figurines are more interesting for what they tell us about the lives of ancient women than for helping us make vague guesses at early religion

**E**VERY PAGAN season the priestesses of Avalon, and their acolytes, meet in Glastonbury to worship their earth-mother, Goddess. As they point out to the uninitiated: 'this is not New Age religion, if you want something New Age go down to the Catholic Church. We've been worshipping our Goddess for 30 000 years.'

They could have a point. Prehistoric female figurines appear in the archaeological record from around 29 000 BC. The Venus of Willendorf is the most famous. With her oval, full breasts, comfortably rotund stomach, wide thighs and faceless head (the surface is incised with a geometric pattern rather than features) she has been taken to represent the apparent power and complete unknowability of the sublime female.

But is that right? Since the early 1900s she has been dubbed 'a mother goddess' and was given, by her excavator Josef Szombathy, the name of the Roman goddess of sexual love. But who is to say she is divine, not human? And does the same apply to the thousands of other female figurines found throughout the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, 95 per cent of which appear to be female? By concentrating our effort on the search for 'the sacred feminine' we could be missing some vital clues to the lives of the women (and men) who made and used such figurines.

This autumn I visited an ongoing excavation at a Copper Age site just inland from Kouklia, near Paphos in West Cyprus. The site, which dates to c3000BC has been interpreted as a prehistoric settlement complex. Led by Professor Peltenberg from Edinburgh University, to date the dig has uncovered many hundreds of human figurines. Again these appear to be predominantly female – most have breasts and vulva – but their silhouette is markedly phallic. The women are all cruciform – with their arms stretched out wide, their knees bent up. As before, these were originally nominated 'earth-mothers': another piece that slots neatly into the theory that human life started with matriarchies and goddess worship, and then progresses to more manly things with the development of technology and the arrival of the king-god Zeus sometime in the Bronze Age.

But Peltenberg and his team are certain that these are the representations not of divine mother figures but rather of real women giving birth [WHY?]. The unique discovery of a terracotta model of a pregnant woman wearing one such figurine



One of the astonishing cruciform figurines from Kouklia

around her neck as a pendant has been fabulously exciting: the original taliswoman; a rare glimpse into the preoccupations (and fashions) of a prehistoric community.

The unusual concentration of images of fecund Copper Age women explains why just down the hill from the excavating site at Kouklia lies the giant sanctuary of Aphrodite [STILL NOT SURE THE LINK IS CLEAR HERE]. Here a female divinity responsible for sexual potency – in her Oriental form, 'Ishtar' – has been worshipped since around 1200BC. Rather than focusing on the goddess herself, one can plunder this site for clues of the ancient visitors who actually came here: Bronze Age, Iron Age and then Classical women who dedicated rich goods in honour of the goddess of

Olore dit velit vulla faccum nisi tat. Veriurer ipsum esequis num ipis nisim aut nulpute mod

love. Some even dedicated themselves, becoming highly regarded temple prostitutes. By studying Aphrodite's dedications we get a sense of what great material standing the women of the day enjoyed.

Ordinary women today have not wanted to forget the alluring power of Aphrodite's stones. Not only were two churches to the Virgin Mary built at the periphery of the classical shrine (Mary shares many attributes with Aphrodite – doves, girdles, a boy-child on whose head to plant sweet kisses) but local mothers still go to lay votive offerings in front of the pagan stones as well as the Christian. The pagan nature of Christian worship here suggests women have been more interested in how Jesus' mother could help them raise a family than in the finer points of Marian theology.

Female figurines, icons of the Virgin, even Glastonbury temples appear to offer access to 'the sacred feminine'. True enough, but for me it's not the spiritual dimension that holds the real appeal; rather that their charisma is a tool to analyse the lives of real historical women in real, temporal time. **H**

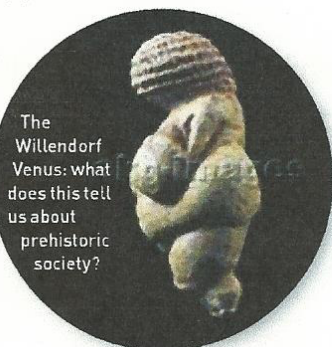
**Bettany Hughes'** latest book *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* is out now in paperback, £8.99 published by Pimlico.

## JOURNEYS

### RADIO



Her Radio 3 programme 'The Sisters of Aphrodite' will be broadcast at 9.30pm on Christmas Eve.



The Willendorf Venus: what does this tell us about prehistoric society?