

# Section 1 – The Foragers

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## What Makes Us Human

### Telling Time

In the tropics, the sun always comes up at around the same time and rises to the same height in the sky. Some parts of the year may be wetter than others, but that matters little if the sea, which remains a constant temperature all year round, continually brings forth food. Days are easily measured by the rising and setting of the sun, which varies little throughout the year. Lacking the obvious measure of longer intervals that the annual changes in declination of the sun afford to temperate-zone dwellers, the most obvious indicator of the passage of time would have been the monthly phases of the moon.

As ever, our natural reaction was to explain the moon's phases in human terms, albeit on a supra-natural scale. We had already invented the Goddess, and the moon's phases became the ages of her life. The new, waxing moon became the Maiden, a young girl. She was full of charm and beauty, the fount of burgeoning fertility, but not yet a mother. The full moon was the Mother, the Goddess at her most resplendent, representing the prime of a woman's life, fully integrated into the sacred sisterhood of mothers. The waning, dying moon became the Crone, the older woman, perhaps no longer fertile, yet full of knowledge and wisdom. There is a three-night period of darkness in each lunar cycle, and this apparent absence of the moon would be associated with death.

The lunar cycle is regenerative. Metaphorically the moon is born, grows to its full splendour, reduces and then disappears. Three days later it regenerates, and the cycle begins again. This would lead to the notions of reincarnation and resurrection that are at the heart of modern religious beliefs. It would become one of the most important concepts in human culture.

Tides also follow a cycle, with the tidal range growing and diminishing. At 'spring' and 'neap' tides the range is greatest and smallest respectively. This cycle is caused by the moon's gravity, and spring tides occur at the full and no moon, with neap tides at the half-moon phases. Our ancestors would have noticed this difference in tidal range, since it affected their access to food; far more of the intertidal zone is accessible at the springs than the neaps. Ancient people may have had no idea of gravity but it would have been clear that, in some profoundly mysterious way, the waxing and waning of the tides were related to the phases of the moon. For the pattern-seeking humans the tides came to represent the cycles of the deity they had identified

with the sea. This correlation would develop into the idea that the Goddess controlled time which, along with that of the regeneration of life, was to become another foundation stone of religion.

The sea was a supra-natural Mother, and her cycle of twenty-eight days showed in the tides and the phases of the moon. The moon and the tides must, therefore, be very special, sacred things. Women also had a cycle in which their fluids came and went, and it too repeated every twenty-eight days.

The first outward sign that a woman has conceived is in the cessation of the menstrual cycle. Without any understanding of biology, ancient women would still have connected these events. This association made menstruation very important; menstrual blood was sacred and more than that, magical: it had the power to make life. Thousands of years later the Greeks still believed that women retained their menstrual blood within their bodies and made life from it. Perhaps the fluid was even used as a medicine, the original 'magic potion'. Women were the first midwives, and they were probably the first healers too, since it is a practice that is still observable in modern shamanistic cultures. Survival, and in particular, survival of the women and children, was the primary aim of the culture. Since mating does not always lead to procreation, and the first months of a pregnancy are not visible, perhaps people did not fully understand the process of reproduction. Alternatively, since the first small signs of pregnancy are noticeable almost immediately to the mother, it is possible that the mothers amongst the close group of women knew, and guarded, this 'women's wisdom'.

For those who were not privy, the ability of women to create life would have seemed mysterious and, apparently, supernatural. Tantalising tales linger in the myth-cycles of many cultures which suggest a belief that conception was due to the north wind, the bite of certain insects, eating particular foods or walking under a full moon. These echoes support the idea that the precise mechanism of conception was knowledge that women kept to themselves.

The passage of time was reckoned in terms of the phases of the moon and the ebb and flow of the tides, the creative cycles of the Goddess. Since women shared these cycles as well as the gift of creating life, motherhood was sacred, menstruation was sacred, and ultimately, to be a woman was sacred. Women were one with the Goddess, the most powerful being the people could conceptualise.