

# Section 2 – Moving Inland

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## Life After Death

Although humans may have arrived at these concepts even earlier, the mythological record shows that, in the temperate zone, we established human life as a cycle. Like the seasons of the solar year, death would be followed by rebirth. But bodies visibly decayed after death and did not come back to life. For a cyclical conception of human life to have any meaning, there would have to be a part of us that did not corrupt.

We already had a model for this. We had given, first to the sea and then to the Earth, an immortal, all-powerful animating spirit, the Great Mother Goddess, who could survive death and be born anew. This rebirth could be observed whenever the new moon appeared, or when the sun began to rise after the winter solstice. If the Goddess had both physical and metaphysical forms, then would not humans? And if the Goddess could survive death, could not we? Very early on, we developed the idea of the human consciousness being separate from the physical body, the idea of a soul or spirit, and related this to the notion of a return to life.

At the same time, we began to identify the place of death as being under the ground, which would lead to the concept of the Underworld. Burials, probably initially performed to avoid the spread of odour and disease and to keep animals from disturbing the bodies, became commonplace and were ceremonialised.

In the earliest mythological conceptions of the Underworld, it is ruled by the Goddess. Her control of death is as important an aspect as that of Mother. The Goddess gives life but, crucially, she takes it back. Just as the corruptible part of us is placed inside the Earth, which is the physical manifestation of the Goddess, so our souls are taken back inside her metaphysical manifestation to await the time when we may be reborn. Our souls, in this concept, become part of the Goddess' soul, just as our bodies become part of the Earth.

Burial symbolised a return to the Mother's womb. All over the world we have evidence of tomb burials which are clear metaphors for this. In prehistoric Scotland, for example, lived the Beaker People, who buried their dead almost in the foetal position, in pots or potlike tombs.<sup>1</sup> The motif of the pot signifies the womb, and so these people placed their dead into the womb of the Goddess, the Earth, to await rebirth.

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<sup>1</sup> The witches' cauldron, a large, bowl-shaped cooking pot is a practical tool for the (transformative) processing of herbs and other ingredients, but it is also a metaphor for a woman's womb. In Egypt, the hieroglyphs for 'pot' and 'womb' were the same.

Today, this cyclical conception of life-death-rebirth remains the core belief of billions of people. It is widespread across Africa, Asia, the Americas and elsewhere. It is only where the Abrahamic death-cults, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, along with their splinter groups like the Mormons and Baha'i, have been implanted, that a linear understanding is accepted.<sup>52</sup> Even there, a little investigation shows that the linear beliefs are overlaid on deeper, older, cyclical conceptions. In the Philippines, for example, which is a strongly Christian nation, the belief that the spirits of the dead are close by and watching over the living is widespread and profound. Since it is not at all the Christian understanding, this belief must come from the earlier religion.

Some people, especially those brought up within cultures influenced by the death-cults, believe that the Goddess was only concerned with motherhood, nurture and childbirth, but this is a mistake. These are only a part of her role. The other side of the Goddess is death, darkness, and decay. She is the Underworld, the dark void before and after life. We come from this when we are born and return to it when we die. Unfortunately, the failure to understand that the Goddess is both Light and Dark has led many to false conclusions about the nature of the Goddess and goddess theology.<sup>2</sup>

The Goddess is primal, because it is from her that all life proceeds, including that of the other deities. She alone has the gift of life – and of death. Most pre-Abrahamic cultures saw death, as well as birth, as a woman: she was Ereshkigal in Sumer, Kali in India, the Morrigan in her crone aspect to the Celts and Hel to the Scandinavians.

The Goddess can become angry and then she can be terrible, as when an earthquake thunders, bringing boulders crashing down or a volcano erupts, spewing fire and destruction. The Goddess is all that women ever have been, and these are not all sweet and pretty things. Women, like men, have tempers. They can be jealous, they can be judgemental, they can tease and torment mercilessly and they can even be violent. Why would a deity made in their image not have these qualities too?

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<sup>2</sup> Theology is a neologism generally understood as a discourse that reflects on Goddess (thea) in contrast to God (theo).