

Section 4 – The Sacred Marriage

Cultural Significance of the Sacred Marriage

The moment we gave the Goddess a consort to help explain the changing seasons and cycle of the year, we had begun to spin a new strand into the thread of our cultural development. The Great Rite persisted in the stories of the ancients, handed down through oral traditions. Once we settled and invented writing, the stories were recorded, and we know that this particular ritual remained central to later cultures for millennia. In fact, as we shall see, its echoes still affect us today.

In the early, shamanic rite, it is likely that once the shaman conceived and everyone knew time would go on, the key participants returned to life as usual. When we settled and began to grow crops, the annual harvest worked its way into the stories and, unfortunately for the consort, his role became sacrificial. Gradually, as we began to build towns and the role of men became more central, the sacrifice became symbolic.

Whether the young men who served as consorts to the shaman/High Priestess were killed or castrated or their place taken by bulls, the balance of power in the relationship between the representative of the Goddess and her consort remained the same. The woman had all the power; her consort was a callow youth who would be killed or emasculated at the end of his year.

Even in the temple ritual, in early Sumerian mythology the Goddess' consort was not the great sky-god who would later be invented in order to control the Goddess, but a simple shepherd lad who would sexually serve the mighty Inanna, the Queen of Heaven.

Is it conceivable that such an arrangement could have continued to exist under the later, male-dominated warrior culture?

By the time we established cities, the shaman/Goddess had become a cadre of priestesses who retained huge power and influence. However, as the early cities developed they changed. Walls and great buildings were erected and, alongside this, the Great Rite became the Sacred Marriage. This ritual was an elaborate spectacle, highly orchestrated and conducted in a palatial temple. Its cultural significance was different from that of the earlier version. Instead of affirming the sexual independence of the Goddess and women, through their ability to choose partners as and when they liked, the Sacred Marriage would bind individual women to a specific male, for life. The reasons for this will become clear.