Mama Anarchija

On the Feminine Origins of Freedom

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2007

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> "Dominion is a relatively late invention in history and is typically linked with the rise of patriarchy."
>
> — Heide Göttner-Abendroth

Let's be honest—what comes to mind when you hear the word "Stone Age"? Perhaps Fred Flintstone, half-naked in a bearskin, dragging his Wilma by the hair into a cave, or clubbing bison? A cliché, no doubt—but a deeply rooted one. "Stone Age" has become synonymous with primitiveness and scarcity, brutality, and a harsh struggle for survival. Culture, technology, prosperity, even refined manners—these are probably the last things we would associate with the Neolithic. An era when, around 11,000 BCE, people were still painting cave walls in the Pyrenees, and which only around 9,700 BCE saw the end of the Ice Age—yet by 10,200 BCE, had already produced the oldest known Stone Age city: Hallan Çemi.

The Stone Age—about 6,000 years long—was when the "Neolithic Revolution" brought humans not just sedentism, agriculture, and animal domestication, but also highly developed and profoundly humane social systems. A time that was the complete opposite of Fred Flintstone's brutal comic world. It was only toward the end of this period, between 4000 and 3000 BCE, that another system slowly emerged—one shaped by dominion, exploitation, and suppression. The new "bearers of culture" were interested in power; they used metalworking to make weapons and writing to codify laws, property, and punishment. Thus began what we now call the modern state.

But can all this really still matter to us in the computer age? After all, "Stone Age communism" is a synonym for dumb, brutal backwardness—and "Stone Age anarchism"? That sounds downright laughable. Still, even if the usual clever critics accuse us of wanting to drag humanity "back to the Stone Age," we should dare to look at that distant, unknown time with an open mind. Because it is not only instructive, but also inspiring for anyone exploring utopian visions of society.

Of course, no one wants to return to the Neolithic, and certainly not slap ideological labels onto Stone Age people. They weren't communists, feminists, and they didn't called themselves anarchists. But: they organized life very differently from us, very anarchic—and apparently did quite well.

Were Stone Age people wiser than we are?

When U.S. General Westmoreland, during the height of the Vietnam War, threatened to bomb the Viet Cong "back into the Stone Age," everyone understood what he meant. What wasn't known then—and still sounds paradoxical today—is that, had he actually succeeded, he might've done humanity a favor. Because it was precisely in that long-maligned era that thriving societies existed—societies that knew neither war nor hunger, no rich or poor, no clergy or kings. Societies organized far more sensibly than modern nation-states, offering their people security and a good life for millennia.

These Neolithic civilizations weren't vast "empires," but manageable societies in which hierarchy, as we understand it, was essentially unknown: no ruling caste stood above the rest, no generals gave orders, no queens dictated the fate of the community, no chiefs demanded tribute, no high priests instilled fear and dependency. Instead, people organized themselves in networks of mutual aid and equality, which extended beyond tribal boundaries.

And the simple reason? In these societies, it was women who set the tone—and they did so in gentler, more humane, and more effective ways than patriarchal societies ever managed. The authoritarian male-dominated world that still controls us today only replaced this earlier, successful model—a system called matriarchy—relatively recently.

Matriarchy – A Principle of Life

Women shaped the fundamental consensus of communal life—but without actually ruling.

From their values emerged a kind of "social grammar" that didn't need to be enforced through violence because it was universally accepted and naturally structured daily life. And it was exactly these values that made the difference.

At the heart of this female-centered ethics were not domination, oppression, or violence, but life itself.

The woman was seen as the giver of all life and at the same time its protector. The entire mythology of matriarchal societies—documented among other things in more than 30,000 goddess figurines from over 3,000 archaeological sites worldwide—centered on this one essential theme: birth, the protection of life and its foundations, and the natural end within the inevitable cycle of death and regeneration.

The young goddess appeared as a protector of forests and wildlife; the mature woman as the bearer and sustainer of the life she had given; the old woman as the goddess of death. These mystical images reflected nature in all its aspects: from gentle to fearsome. But none of these goddesses represented a punishing, hierarchical "religion"—they embodied the "creative principle". And this principle was generative, leaving no room for arbitrary destruction.

However, there was certainly space for the specifically masculine: the spontaneous and life-stimulating aspects—symbolized by the son, the man, or (positively!) the animal. So, in matriarchal societies, "man" was by no means excluded, but included: he was part of the overarching social principle—the preservation of all life.

The practical application of such a principle in real life aligned almost naturally with a culture of settlement, agriculture, and highly developed craftsmanship.

Matriarchal societies were egalitarian, peaceful, and remarkably productive for their time.

They provided Stone Age people with an exceptionally beneficial era that lasted many thousands of years—and archaeologists have found no evidence of war or famine during this time.

Within this culture, the woman remained the active agent of history—as creator and central figure. These societies were thus matrifocal and matrilinear—the mother stood at the center of society, and inheritance followed the maternal line.

But the concept of domination, as we understand it today, did not fit the "creative foundational principle" of matriarchy—nor did violence, privileged classes, or private land ownership. These ideas were simply unknown—and had they been proposed, they likely would have been rejected as profoundly foolish.

It was clear: collective cohesion in a solidarity-based community was the best way to ensure both the physical preservation of life and material survival.

But Why Do We Still Call These Forms of Life "Matriarchal", When That Implies "Rule by Mothers"?

Quite simply, because we don't have a better word for it. We lack the vocabulary to describe something we no longer know.

The pioneering cultural historian Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887) coined the somewhat clumsy term "mother right" (Mutterrecht) for the exciting and surprising insights he gradually unearthed. This was later (somewhat inaccurately) translated into English as matriarchy, but the term nevertheless became widely accepted.

However, the word may not be entirely inappropriate. Matriarchal researcher Heide Göttner-Abendroth points out that the Greek root arché in the word matriarchy does not just mean "rule", but also "origin" and even "womb":

> "In the beginning was the mother, the female principle. And that gets to the heart of it."

In any case, women in those societies didn't rule over men the way men later ruled over women. Instead, they developed common standards for human life.

Gender differences were certainly recognized and appreciated, but not from the perspective of dominance—not about who should stand above whom. That way of thinking only came about within the reality of patriarchy, and that's why it feels so important to us today.

Naomi Hamilton, the archaeologist responsible for examining the graves at the Neolithic site Çatalhöyük, eventually came to the conclusion that Neolithic people had no concept of a "social gender" distinct from biological sex, and thus didn't perceive woman and man as social opposites.

For that very reason, it's inappropriate to project today's modern gender discourse—shaped by our patriarchal industrial society—onto a Stone Age tribal culture from the 6th millennium BCE.

And Yet—What Matters Are the Facts

So are we to believe that humans, whom we often imagine as dim-witted primitives teetering on the edge of starvation, actually created—eight to ten thousand years ago—a society of equality, prosperity, and peace?

A society built on values we long for today, yet one we can't seem to achieve despite all our technology, intelligence, and economic power?

—Yes, that's exactly what the evidence suggests.

But how can we know all this with such certainty? After all, the wise women of the Neolithic didn't exactly leave behind a neatly organized archive of their deeds and accomplishments…

Can you really extract such detailed knowledge from a heap of rubble and ashes, from bones and remnants of walls?

Yes, we can.

And how this has become possible—thanks to modern scientific and technical methods—is without a doubt one of the most fascinating chapters in the adventure of prehistorical research.

Archaeological Detective Work: The Case of Çatalhöyük

In the highlands of southern Anatolia, a striking mound called Çatalhöyük attracted the attention of British archaeologist James Mellaart in 1958. He soon began excavations that, with interruptions, continue to this day. What specialists uncovered here was like a revelation: twelve superimposed layers of a Stone Age city, continuously inhabited from 7,300 to 6,100 BCE, could be read like an open book.

This site, which at times housed up to 10,000 people—an enormous number for that era—was never destroyed or plundered. Though archaeologists have made significant discoveries elsewhere in Anatolia, including cities even thousands of years older—where they've found things like the arrival of the first sheep herds or the import of seeds from unknown locations—nowhere else were the conditions for findings as favorable or the artifacts as revealing as in Çatalhöyük.

For example, a fire had sterilized and carbonized organic material up to a depth of one meter, preserving things almost never found at comparable sites. Thanks to this, we now know the weaving patterns of fabrics, as well as the types of clothing, furs, and leather goods. We know what the people ate, what their woven food baskets and sleeping mats looked like.

From bones, grave goods, and the murals found in almost every home, researchers have reconstructed much about daily life and the economy: age at death, sex, number of births, illnesses, injuries, even child mortality and life expectancy. Trace elements in teeth and collagen analysis of bones tell us about diet in the final years of life; wear patterns on skeletons reveal types of work performed or even how intensively the people of Çatalhöyük danced.

The findings are staggering: child mortality during the Stone Age in Çatalhöyük was 30% lower than in the much more "advanced" Bronze Age 3,000 years later. While Bronze Age elders reached 55–60 years, people here lived to be 60 to 70. The average age was 32 years—not impressive by today's standards, but for the time, exceptionally high. Let's not forget: this average wasn't achieved again in Europe's working classes until 1750. A serf in 18th-century Germany had a shorter life expectancy than a Stone Age person from 9,000 years ago.

But How Can We Know They Lived Without Hierarchies, in Equality and Social Harmony?

Can bones and ashes really tell us about men and women, peace, and freedom?

Admittedly, such insights don't lie openly in the rubble. And even modern archaeology took decades to piece together a coherent picture from puzzling finds and seemingly absurd facts—a picture that defied conventional assumptions, yet clearly showed that Neolithic life was not primitive, but socially and ethically advanced. Coming to this realization wasn't easy.

Even Mellaart—an enlightened archaeologist, but a child of his time—couldn't imagine that the prosperity he unearthed was communal. He assumed the site must have been the "priestly quarter". Only decades later, when it became clear that all of Çatalhöyük looked the same—with no temples, elite buildings, priests, or altars—did scholars realize: they had uncovered the remains of a classless society.

Even in 2003, Mellaart's colleague Ian Hodder followed the trail of several mysterious concentric patterns, hoping to find the long-lost temples or monumental structures—and instead found the city's central garbage dump.

Once it was accepted that Çatalhöyük represented a completely different kind of society, one free from power and dominance, everything suddenly fell into place—a coherent mosaic.

A Society Without a State, with Prosperity for All

Çatalhöyük was a wealthy community without a government, where equality was the core social principle. The city had basically one type of house, but repeated over 1,500 times: functional, spacious, and socially inclusive, like the homes of the rich elsewhere. Each person had 10–12 square meters of living space, and each house included workshops, storage, and a spiritual area—where the dead were buried. Spirituality wasn't reserved for a priestly elite but was an individual act.

These "living houses" hosted much of the social life on their rooftops, and the equality principle was so thorough that unused rooms were sealed off and reopened only when needed—for instance, when a child grew old enough to need a private space. Each house was also a production site, every person worked according to their ability, and no one owned means of production beyond their personal use. All homes contained stored seeds, and skeletal wear suggests everyone worked hard—and celebrated wildly.

What was completely absent were signs of diseases of affluence, which are common in ruling classes of exploitative societies.

But don't imagine this egalitarian city as drab or uniform, like socialist block housing. Life in Çatalhöyük was colorful, diverse, and joyful. According to serious social science estimates, people had about half of their waking hours available for leisure—more than we do in our so-called leisure society.

People gathered frequently, helped each other, created expressive art, and loved to dance: Nearly half the population showed anatomical changes in the femur that could only come from excessive dancing. Remains of such a Stone Age party were even excavated. According to chemist Bernhard Brosius, they show that "the rooftop celebrations of the city left nothing to be desired."

Equality Without Erasing Difference

Equality here did not mean suppressing differences or diminishing exceptional individuals. It meant no privileges at the expense of the community. People weren't made equal—they were treated equally. As archaeologist Naomi Hamilton puts it:

> "Differences do not mean structural inequality.
>
> Respected age, earned recognition, and social influence based on knowledge or experience do not contradict egalitarian values."

In fact, many touching individual stories uncovered by archaeologists reveal deep individual appreciation, regardless of social status:

- A 17-year-old girl who became disabled from a broken femur received an extraordinarily elaborate burial.

- A hunter gored by an aurochs was lovingly cared for until he died of infection—his family was then cared for by the community.
- A mother and child who died together were sprinkled with red ochre to ensure their rebirth.

Some structures have even been interpreted by medical experts as early hospitals, reflecting a level of institutionalized care that Europe didn't see until Bismarck's welfare laws—and certainly not what we'd expect from "Stone Age people".

What Wasn't Found Tells the Most

The most revealing clues to their social ethics come from what wasn't found in Çatalhöyük:

- No depictions of aggression, conflict, combat, abuse, or torture—motifs that are otherwise classic in ancient art.
- No imagery of justice systems, punishment, human or animal sacrifice, skull deformations, or ritual mutilations, all common elsewhere.
- No signs of violent death caused by other humans in any of the skeletons.
- No evidence of theft or possessions with trade value.
- No weapons of war found in any of the twelve layers.

This strongly suggests a repression-free, fear-free society.

And Yes—In Over 1,200 Years, They Never Went to War

Indeed, there's no trace that this human community was ever involved in war—in over twelve centuries of existence.

Çatalhöyük as an Example

Çatalhöyük is just one example and serves here as a representative of early matriarchal culture, primarily because it is so thoroughly documented. But matriarchy was neither limited to Anatolia nor to the Stone Age. Much evidence suggests that the social systems found here were generally characteristic of matriarchy—since female-centered societies have been documented on all five continents.

Nor did they all end with the Bronze Age, and they were by no means always replaced by patriarchy. In fact, matriarchal societies still exist today—almost everywhere in the world except Europe, and some have populations in the millions.

Learning from the Stone Age?

So, up to this chapter, we've spent over 150 pages grappling with utopias and social models, forming complex analogies, making use of sophisticated arguments, calling on behavioral science, psychology, neurobiology, and sociology to make the case, and appealing to common sense—all just to make the idea of a non-hierarchical, egalitarian society seem plausible and maybe a little less absurd.

An idea that to most people still seems as "unnatural" as it is unrealistic: a nice thought, perhaps—but clearly just another piece of utopian fantasy…

But what if we had to recognize that this vision isn't so unnatural after all—and not utopian either? What if it was, in fact, a kind of "normal state"—in which humanity lived far longer and far better than in the relatively short era of patriarchal, hierarchical, and exploitative statism?

That would certainly be something worth thinking about.

As Heide Göttner-Abendroth puts it:

> "It's important to realize that many things we take for granted today—simply because we're used to them—were not at all primary or natural in the history of human development.
>
> And whether they are the best just because they're the latest is a completely different question."

In truth, we still know far too little about early social structures to be smugly triumphant about any modern "-ism"—including feminism and anarchism.

The people of Çatalhöyük and elsewhere didn't live as they did to confirm our ideologies, and why they lived this way—we still don't really know. The academic debate over this topic has only just begun.

For instance, opinions differ greatly—often depending on ideological background—about where matriarchy came from and why it disappeared. Some argue it was the original form of human organization, always present until 5,000–6,000 years ago, when it was violently replaced by patriarchy. Others insist that male dominance and oppression existed earlier, and that matriarchal-egalitarian societies only briefly and locally prevailed over male-driven systems of exploitation.

Supporters of a more class-struggle-oriented view even present a compelling archaeological case for a social revolution in the Neolithic city of Çayönü, involving the storming of temples, the expulsion of elites, the demolition of slums, and the construction of social housing. They date this "first social revolution in human history" to "some day over 9,200 years ago."

Yet even such compelling narratives raise more questions than they answer:

- How did people transition from violent liberation to peaceful society?
- Why didn't new classes emerge?
- Why didn't a greedy neighbor simply conquer the rich city?
- When, where, and how did women suddenly gain power?

- And most crucially: Were these egalitarian communities connected with one another—or were they isolated islands in an otherwise hierarchical world?

It would be unfair to expect a relatively young interdisciplinary field like matriarchal studies—which has only existed for a few decades—to already provide clear answers to all this.

Far more important, in my view, is that future interpretations of archaeological evidence proceed without ideological blinkers or fear of controversial insights.

A great example of this open approach is the creative, undogmatic online platform Mama-Anarchija.net, founded by journalist and commune member Jochen Schilk, which explores matriarchal studies and anarchism in a remarkably inclusive forum—and from which I've borrowed the title for this chapter.

If such an ideology-free reappropriation of this exciting topic were to succeed, it could lead to a mutual enrichment of two of humanity's great traditions of freedom: the ancient matriarchy and the modern libertarian discourse. Such an encounter could release tremendous social-transformative energy.

A hopeful sign: a growing part of matriarchal studies has moved beyond archaeology and ethnology, and is now beginning to develop and advocate for a modern matriarchal culture—relevant to our lives today.

And the cornerstones of this proposed culture?

—Not taken from Kropotkin, mind you—

But: solidarity and freedom from domination.

As stated: we still don't know why there were domination-free societies for thousands of years.

But we do know that they existed.

And that is a fact— A fact that can still give us courage today:

Courage to believe in utopia.

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Chapter 20 of https://openlibrary.org/books/OL18615202M/Freiheit_pur
Translated into English by Michael Schreiber Literature: Heide Göttner-Abendroth: The Matriarchy (5 volumes), Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne 1989–2000, Kohlhammer, approx. 1000 pages, illustrated. / Same author: Matriarchies as Societies Free of Domination – see Chapter 22! / Same author (ed.): Society in Balance, Documentation of the 1st World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, Stuttgart 2006, Kohlhammer, 311 pages, illustrated. Marija Gimbutas: The Language of the Goddess, Frankfurt a.M. 1995, Zweitausendeins, 416 pages, illustrated. / Same author: The Civilization of the Goddess, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, Zweitausendeins, 560 pages, illustrated. / Same author: Wall Paintings of Çatal Hüyük, The Review of Archeology 1990, pages 1–5. James Mellaart: Çatal Hüyük – City from the Stone Age, Bergisch Gladbach 1967, Lübbe, 295 pages, illustrated. Bernhard Brosius: From Cayönü to Çatal Hüyük, Munich 2004, 22 pages, illustrated (reprinted in Inprekorr No. 400/401, Cologne 2005). Also see: www.mama-anarchija.net www.urkommunismus.de