

READING 1.1: WOMEN IN EGALITARIAN SOCIETIES BEFORE 600 BCE: UNEARTHING FORGOTTEN NARRATIVES

Introduction

The study of ancient civilizations often emphasizes patriarchal structures and male-dominated societies, leaving the roles and contributions of women largely overlooked. However, evidence from various academic articles reveals that there were egalitarian societies before 600 BCE in which women enjoyed significant status, rights, and agency. By delving into archaeological findings, historical texts, and anthropological research, this article seeks to shed light on the roles and



Artist depiction of Catalhöyük. Vassar College, 2017.

prominence of women in pre-600 BCE egalitarian societies. Drawing upon the works of renowned academics in the field, we aim to paint a comprehensive picture of the often underrepresented female narratives from the ancient past.

The Matriarchal Paradigm - A Controversial Perspective

The notion of matriarchy, or a society where women hold the primary positions of power and influence, has been a subject of debate among scholars. In her seminal work, "The Chalice and the Blade," Riane Eisler presents evidence supporting the existence of prehistoric matriarchal societies. Eisler argues that such societies were not inherently violent and hierarchical, but rather based on cooperation and equality between genders (Eisler, 1987). However, critics like Cynthia Eller have questioned the validity of the matriarchal paradigm, suggesting that it risks generalizing and oversimplifying ancient societies (Eller, 2000). While the debate on matriarchy continues, exploring specific egalitarian societies offers insights into the lives of women during this era.

Egalitarianism in Neolithic Societies

Neolithic societies, which emerged around 10,000 BCE, represent an important period of human history when humans transitioned from hunter-gatherer lifestyles to settled agricultural communities. Studies of Neolithic societies, such as the Çatalhöyük in Anatolia, reveal a relatively egalitarian social structure where women played crucial roles. In her research, Ian Hodder highlights that gender roles were not rigidly defined, and women in Çatalhöyük actively participated in economic activities and communal decision-making (Hodder, 2006).



Raddato, Carole. "Seated Woman of Çatalhöyük." *World History Encyclopedia*. 2021. Some historians and archaeologists believe this clay figurine depicts The Mother Goddess giving birth, others believe she is a representation of elder women who had elevated social status in the community.

Gender Roles in Çatalhöyük:

In Çatalhöyük, both men and women engaged in a wide range of activities necessary for the community's survival. Archaeological evidence indicates that women participated in agricultural work, craft production, and communal rituals. Moreover, the absence of elaborate burial differentiations between genders suggests a relatively egalitarian view of life and death (Hodder, 2006).

The Neolithic Goddess:

Another intriguing aspect of Neolithic egalitarian societies is the prominence of female figurines and symbols related to fertility and the earth goddess. The

worship of a mother goddess is evident in many Neolithic cultures, such as the Cycladic civilization in the Aegean and the Vinča culture in Southeast Europe. These representations suggest that women held revered roles related to fertility and life-giving forces (Gimbutas, 1974).

Neolithic Communities and Cooperation:

The relatively small and close-knit communities of Neolithic societies fostered a sense of cooperation and interdependence among individuals. With the transition to settled life, people relied on each other for various tasks, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and construction. This cooperative nature likely facilitated a more egalitarian social structure (Conkey & Spector, 1984).

Burial Practices and Gender Equality:

Burial practices can provide crucial insights into the social status and roles of individuals within a community. In some Neolithic burial sites, men and women were buried with similar grave goods, suggesting a more equitable distribution of wealth and status in death. While social distinctions based on age, skill, and experience existed, evidence from burials in certain Neolithic sites challenges the notion of rigid gender hierarchies (Brück, 1999).

The Indus Valley Civilization - A Gender-Neutral Society?

The Indus Valley Civilization, flourishing between 2600 BCE and 1900 BCE, has long captivated scholars with its urban planning, trade networks, and sophisticated drainage systems. Recent archaeological discoveries, as discussed by Jane McIntosh, suggest that this ancient civilization might have exhibited egalitarian tendencies, where both genders

had access to education and professions (McIntosh, 2008). The iconic "Dancing Girl" figurine is a symbol of women's freedom of expression and their potential agency in this ancient society.

The Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan civilization, thrived in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent from approximately 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE. It was one of the world's earliest urban civilizations, with advanced city planning, a sophisticated system of drainage, and a script that remains undeciphered to this day. While our understanding of the Indus Valley Civilization is still limited due to the undeciphered script and the scarcity of textual records, archaeologists have made significant discoveries that shed light on various aspects of this ancient society, including the roles of women.

Urban Planning and Gender Equality:

One of the intriguing aspects of the Indus Valley Civilization is its well-planned cities, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. The cities were characterized by a grid-like street layout, sophisticated sewage systems, and multi-story buildings, suggesting a centralized authority and careful city planning (Possehl, 2002). Some scholars propose that the efficient organization of these cities might indicate level of gender equality, as it would have required the cooperation and contributions of both men and women.



"Dancing Girl" of Mohenjo-Daro. National Museum, New Delhi, India. c. 2300–1750 BC. The Dancing Girl has captivated audiences for decades because it illustrates a young girl open to the world with a smirk that indicates confidence and freedom.

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The "Dancing Girl" and Female Representation:

One of the most iconic artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization is the bronze figurine known as the "Dancing Girl." This small but remarkable statue depicts a young woman in a dancing pose, her stance exuding confidence and vitality. The statue's lack of overt religious symbolism and its portrayal of a young female figure as an independent subject have led scholars to speculate about the significance of women in the Harappan society (Meadow, 2002). The "Dancing Girl" and other female figurines found at Harappan sites hint at the possibility of women enjoying prominent roles in art and culture.

Pottery and Economic Activities:

Pottery was a crucial craft in the Indus Valley Civilization, and many pottery vessels were used for utilitarian purposes, such as storage and cooking. Studies of pottery distribution patterns have revealed a surprising degree of

standardization, suggesting an organized economic system (Miller, 1985). Women likely played a significant role in pottery production, as they often did in various ancient societies. Understanding the roles of women in economic activities provides insight into their agency and contributions to the civilization's overall prosperity.

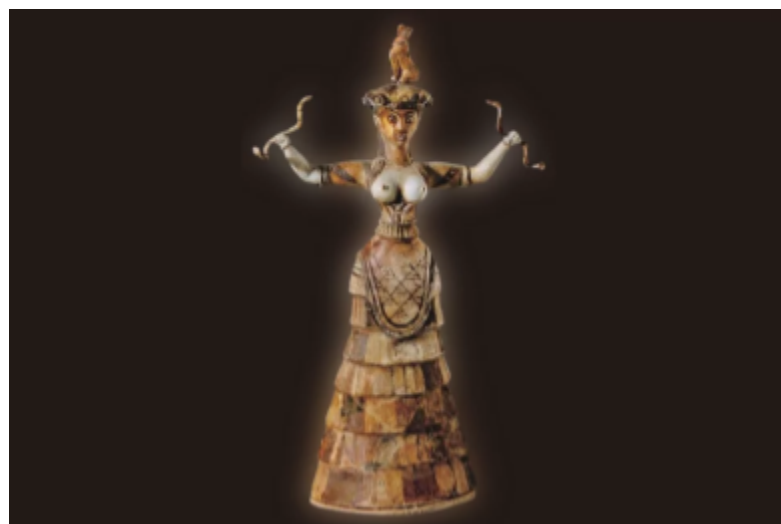
The Question of Gender Roles:

As with most ancient civilizations, deciphering the roles and status of women in the Indus Valley Civilization is challenging due to the lack of written records. Some scholars propose that the absence of grandiose temples and overtly gendered iconography could indicate a more egalitarian social structure (Wright, 2009). However, others caution against making assumptions based solely on material evidence, arguing that gender roles may have been more complex than initially perceived.

Trade and Interaction:

The Indus Valley Civilization had a well-established trade network, reaching regions as far as Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. This extensive trade likely brought the civilization into contact with various cultures, potentially influencing social dynamics and gender roles (Possehl, 2002). Understanding the extent and nature of interactions between the Harappans and neighboring cultures can provide valuable context for interpreting the roles of women in the society.

The Indus Valley Civilization remains an enigmatic ancient society, and our understanding of its complexities is continually evolving with new archaeological discoveries and research. While deciphering the roles and status of women in this civilization poses challenges, evidence such as the "Dancing Girl" figurine and women's likely involvement in economic activities and craftsmanship suggests the potential for women's prominence and agency in various spheres of life. As further archaeological investigations and interdisciplinary research continue, we can hope to gain deeper insights into the lives of women and the broader societal structure of this remarkable ancient civilization.



***"Great Goddess"** c.1600 BCE, Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete. Women in Minoan culture had elevated status and were public figures of the ancient civilization. The Great Goddess is one of three snake goddess figurines excavated from the Knossos Palace in Crete. The Great Goddess was the origin of existence and life, she was the lead deity and god of the Minoan people.*

Unearthing Goddess Worship and Matrilineal Traditions

In several pre-600 BCE societies, goddess worship and matrilineal practices held significant cultural and spiritual importance. In her research on ancient Crete, Marija Gimbutas argues that the Minoan civilization celebrated the "Great Goddess" and valued feminine virtues (Gimbutas, 1974).

Similarly, in Dravidian societies of ancient South India, matrilineal kinship systems and goddess-centered rituals shaped gender dynamics (Leslie, 1992). These examples challenge the notion that male-centered religious beliefs were universal in ancient times.

Women in Ancient Mesopotamia - Agency and Authority

The ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, including Sumer, Akkad, and Babylonia, were known for their well-established legal codes and administrative systems. In her research on women in the Neo-Sumerian period, Deborah Spar argues that women enjoyed legal rights, property ownership, and the ability to engage in trade and professions (Spar, 2004). The Enheduanna, a high priestess and poet in the Akkadian Empire, exemplifies the prominence of women in religious and cultural life (Westenholz, 1995).

Mesopotamian Society and Gender Roles:

Mesopotamia, situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq, was one of the earliest cradles of civilization. The region gave rise to several great city-states, such as Sumer, Akkad, and Babylonia, which each had unique social structures. In Mesopotamian society, gender roles were well-defined, but the roles of women were more diverse and complex than often portrayed.

The Status of Women in Sumerian Society:

The Sumerians, who inhabited the southernmost region of Mesopotamia, left behind cuneiform texts that offer insights into the roles of women. Sumerian women, like men, had legal rights and could own and inherit property (Roth, 1997).

They also engaged in various economic activities, trade, irrigation, spiritual worship, weaving, and brewing, which contributed to the household's income and well-being.

They could even own businesses and property, make political decisions for themselves and their household, and initiate divorce. These privileges began to wane during the late-Sumerian period and overtime, as Mesopotamia, Babylon, and Akkadia grew and intermixed, society became more patriarchal and restrictive to the independence of women.



"Disk of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon Mesopotamia, Akkadian, Ur." Akkadian period, ca. 2300 BCE. Cuneiform inscription in Sumerian. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, USA. Enheduanna is known as being one of the world's earliest authors. She dedicated this disk to a temple. The disk depicts and explains a religious ritual.



Amin, Osama Shukir Muhammed. **"Statue of a Sumerian Woman."** *World History Encyclopedia*. 2015. *Fashion and makeup were significant in Mesopotamian culture often depicting the role, status, or intent of the wearer. Production of cloth was a major economic activity in Sumerian society.*

Enheduanna - The High Priestess and Poet:

One of the most remarkable women in ancient Mesopotamia was Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, who lived during the Akkadian period (circa 2300 BCE). Enheduanna was a high priestess of the moon god Nanna in the city of Ur, and she is considered the world's first known author, with her works preserved in cuneiform tablets (Van De Mieroop, 2005). Her status as a prominent religious and literary figure attests to the respect and authority women could attain in ancient Mesopotamia.

Marriage and Legal Protections:

Marriage was an essential institution in Mesopotamian society, but women had certain legal protections concerning marriage and family matters. In the Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest known legal codes, there are provisions related to women's rights in marriage, such as the right to divorce and inherit property (Hammurabi, 1780 BCE). While marriage could be arranged by parents, women had some agency in the process.

Ninkasi - Goddess of Beer and Brewing:

The Sumerians had a pantheon of gods and goddesses, and Ninkasi was the goddess of beer and brewing. Beer production was an essential economic activity in Mesopotamia, and many brewers were women (Stika, 2009). The role of Ninkasi and women in brewing highlights the significance of women in the economic life of the civilization.

Religious Roles and Temple Priestesses:

Mesopotamian religion involved various temples dedicated to different deities, and temple life was a significant aspect of society. Women served as priestesses in these temples, playing crucial roles in religious rituals and ceremonies (Stol, 2000). The position of temple priestess carried social respect and authority.

Inanna/Ishtar - The Goddess of Love and War:

Inanna, known as Ishtar in later periods, was a prominent goddess in Mesopotamian mythology. She represented both love and war and was revered throughout the region. The hymns and myths dedicated to Inanna reflect her powerful and multifaceted character, emphasizing the acknowledgment of strong, assertive female deities.

The study of women in ancient Mesopotamia challenges the traditional view of women being solely relegated to domestic roles. While gender roles were present, women in this ancient civilization enjoyed legal rights, participated in various economic activities, and held positions of authority in religious and cultural spheres. Prominent figures like Enheduanna, Ninkasi, and Inanna demonstrate the recognition of women's contributions and agency in Mesopotamian society. By exploring the roles and status of women in this ancient civilization, we gain a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the ancient world and recognize the diversity of women's experiences throughout history.

Women in the Early Hebrew Society

The early Hebrew society, as depicted in the Old Testament, has been a subject of historical and biblical studies. While patriarchal elements are evident, some scholars, such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky, point to traces of earlier egalitarian practices, such as the worship of female deities like Asherah (Frymer-Kensky, 2000). Furthermore, female leaders like Deborah, mentioned in the Book of Judges, suggest women's roles extended beyond domestic spheres.



Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Asherah." Encyclopedia Britannica, June 16, 2023. A mysterious figure in mythology especially for the monotheistic Judaism religion. Asherah took on many names and relationships to the various Semitic people of the ancient world. Eventually, Asherah will be dissolved by Yahweh (God) and take on more of a feminine symbolic role in the Hebrew tradition.

Gender Roles in Early Hebrew Society:

Early Hebrew society, as portrayed in the Old Testament, was deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions. Like many ancient civilizations, it adhered to distinct gender roles that assigned specific responsibilities to men and women. Men were typically responsible for public affairs, religious leadership, and decision-making, while women were primarily associated with domestic roles and child-rearing.

The Concept of Asherah:

One fascinating aspect of early Hebrew society is the presence of the goddess Asherah. Archaeological evidence from ancient inscriptions and figurines suggests that Asherah was a prominent deity in early Israelite religion, associated with fertility, motherhood, and the nurturing aspects of life (Day, 2002). Some scholars believe that Asherah worship may have coexisted with Yahwistic worship, offering women a spiritual connection and identity in this ancient society.

Deborah - A Female Judge and Prophetess:

The Book of Judges introduces us to Deborah, a prominent figure in early Hebrew society. Deborah was not only a prophetess but also a judge who provided wise counsel and made decisions for her people (Judges 4:4-5). Her leadership and authority exemplify the potential agency and influence that women could hold in early Hebrew communities.

Women in Domestic and Economic Roles:

In early Hebrew society, women were primarily responsible for household tasks, including cooking, weaving, and child-rearing. They played crucial roles in maintaining the family's well-being and providing sustenance. Additionally, women contributed to the economic prosperity of their households through crafts and agricultural activities (Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky, 2004).

Ritual and Spiritual Roles:

While men held more prominent religious positions, such as priests and prophets, women also played essential roles in religious rituals. Women participated in communal and domestic religious ceremonies, such as festivals and sacrifices, contributing to the spiritual life of their communities (Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky, 2004).

Ruth and the Concept of Hesed:

The story of Ruth, found in the Book of Ruth, portrays the loyalty and kindness (*hesed*) between women and their ability to challenge societal norms. Ruth, a Moabite widow, exemplifies the virtues of loyalty and devotion as she chooses to stay with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, rather than returning to her homeland (Ruth 1:16-17). The narrative of Ruth reflects the significance of female relationships and the value placed on acts of loving-kindness.

Challenges and Constraints:

While early Hebrew society acknowledged the contributions of women, it was still bound by traditional patriarchy. Women's legal rights were often tied to their marital status, and they had limited access to education and public life. The emphasis on male genealogy and inheritance laws reinforced the dominance of male lineage (Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky, 2004).

The early Hebrew society, as depicted in the Old Testament, presents a nuanced portrait of women's roles and contributions. While patriarchy and gender distinctions were prevalent, there were instances of women holding influential positions, engaging in religious activities, and displaying acts of loyalty and kindness. The coexistence of Yahwistic worship and Asherah veneration highlights the complexities of early Hebrew religious practices, and the stories of Deborah and Ruth emphasize the agency and resilience of women in this ancient society. By examining the

narratives of women in early Hebrew society, we gain insights into the diverse roles and identities that shaped the cultural and spiritual life of the ancient Israelites.

Indigenous North American Societies - Power in Balance

Before European colonization, indigenous societies in North America demonstrated a wide range of social structures and gender roles. Among the Iroquois Confederacy, a matrilineal and matrilineal society, women played crucial roles in decision-making and property inheritance (Johansen, 1999). Similarly, among the Hopi, Navajo, and other tribes, women held respected positions as healers, spiritual leaders, and artisans (Adams, 1997).

Diversity of Indigenous North American Societies:

Indigenous North American societies were incredibly diverse, comprising numerous tribes and cultural groups, each with its unique customs, languages, and social structures. While it is essential to avoid generalizations, certain commonalities emerge when examining the roles of women across these societies.

Matrilineal and Matrilineal Traditions:

Many Indigenous North American societies practiced matrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems. Matrilineal means that descent and inheritance were traced through the mother's line, while matrilineal means that upon marriage, the husband typically lived with or near the wife's family (Johansen, 1999). This arrangement often afforded women significant influence within their extended families and communities.

Clan and Tribal Governance:

In matrilineal societies, clans played a central role in governance and community organization. Clan leadership, often passed down through the female line, was a crucial aspect of maintaining social order and resolving disputes. The clan mothers or female elders held considerable authority and respect, guiding decision-making processes (Johansen, 1999).



***“Navajo Woman and her Daughters,”**
Nizhoni Ranch Gallery, 2023. Navajo society was organized into “hogans” or extended family units led by one elder woman. Women owned the property their families lived on, their children, and all jewelry and blankets of the family unit. Men only owned what was given to them by the matriarch of their hogan which could be dissolved into a new hogan after marriage.*

Women as Spiritual Leaders:

Spiritual practices were an integral part of Indigenous North American societies, and women often held important roles as spiritual leaders, healers, and shamans. Their spiritual connection to the land and their communities played a vital role in maintaining balance and harmony within the tribe (Adams, 1997).

Economic Contributions:

In many Indigenous North American societies, women made substantial economic contributions to their communities. They were skilled in various crafts, such as pottery, weaving, and beadwork, which were essential for both subsistence and trade (Adams, 1997). Women were responsible for gathering medicinal plants and food resources, and their knowledge of herbal medicine was highly valued.



An Native American woman warrior with tattoos and spears. Drawn by John White to illustrate John Raleigh's expedition to Virginia and Florida, 1585-1890. Arapahoe, Comanche, and Cayenne tribes were all known to have women who fought in battle to protect their tribes. Colonized historical narratives often leave these woman warriors out of historical writings because

Council of Grandmothers:

The Council of Grandmothers, a respected group of elder women, played a significant role in decision-making and conflict resolution in some Indigenous communities. These wise women held the collective knowledge of their people and provided guidance to leaders and the community at large (Johansen, 1999).

Warrior Women:

Contrary to stereotypes, some Indigenous North American societies had women warriors who defended their communities in times of conflict. These warrior women were skilled in combat and played crucial roles in protecting their people and territory (Adams, 1997).

"Power in Balance" in Indigenous North American societies refers to a social structure where power and influence were distributed in a way that recognized the complementary roles of men and women. Women's roles as spiritual leaders, clan mothers, economic contributors, and decision-makers exemplify their agency and significance within their communities. While the specific roles and status of women varied among tribes, the concept of "Power in Balance" underscores the importance of women's contributions to the

well-being and survival of Indigenous North American societies. Recognizing and celebrating the roles of women in these societies enriches our understanding of their diverse cultures and traditions.

The Decline of Egalitarianism:

As Neolithic societies grew larger and more complex, they began to face challenges related to resource management and external threats. The establishment of farming communities created the need to protect, produce, and maintain resources. Over time, some communities experienced social stratification and the emergence of elites in order to look over the management of these resources and to control the increase in population. As job specialization occurred, men took on these roles because women were still tied to the role of childrearing. Bearing children forced women to be tied to domestication of the home, barring them from participating in the development of job specialization and political positions. Traditional egalitarian roles in artisanship, spirituality, and cooking that women and men normally shared, became obsolete and unneeded in a socially stratified world; there were now people who specialized in these roles and they were almost always men. As men dominated the work force *and* the political decisions, there was no room for women to create independence outside of the home or family leading to a society constructed and developed by the men who held roles beyond the nuclear family. This began the creation of patriarchal societies. This transition is evident in sites like the Ubaid period in Mesopotamia, where social differentiation became more pronounced (Algaze, 2001). The factors contributing to this shift from egalitarianism to hierarchical systems are complex and multifaceted.

Egalitarianism in Neolithic societies offers valuable insights into the early stages of human social development. The transition from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture fostered cooperation and a more equitable distribution of resources. Women played active roles in various aspects of community life, reflecting a relatively fluid and egalitarian gender dynamic. The prominence of goddess worship and female figurines further emphasizes the significance of women in the Neolithic worldview. While social structures eventually evolved, the study of Neolithic egalitarianism serves as a reminder of the diversity and complexity of human societies throughout history.

Conclusion

The evidence gleaned from academic articles and research indicates that the pre-600 BCE world was not entirely dominated by patriarchy; rather, several societies exhibited egalitarian tendencies where women enjoyed varying degrees of status, rights, and influence. These narratives challenge conventional historical accounts and underscore the importance of exploring diverse perspectives to reconstruct a more comprehensive picture of the ancient past. By acknowledging the roles and contributions of women in these societies, we can better appreciate the complexity and diversity of human civilization before recorded history. As new archaeological discoveries and research methods emerge, further exploration of women's history in pre-600 BCE societies promises to unveil more hidden stories and insights into our shared human heritage.

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Reflection Questions:

1. What was the Neolithic Revolution, and why was it a significant turning point in human history?
2. What is meant by "egalitarianism" in the context of Neolithic societies? How did it differ from later, more hierarchical civilizations?
3. Describe the archaeological site of Çatalhöyük and the evidence that suggests it was an egalitarian society. How did women contribute to various aspects of community life in Çatalhöyük?
4. What role did goddess worship play in Neolithic societies? Why do you think the worship of female deities was significant during this period?

5. In what ways did cooperative practices contribute to the relatively egalitarian social structure of Neolithic communities?
6. Reflect on the significance of burial practices in understanding social status and gender roles in Neolithic societies. How were men and women buried, and what does this tell us about their roles in the community?
7. Why do you think some Neolithic societies transitioned from egalitarianism to more hierarchical systems over time?
8. Compare and contrast the roles of women in Neolithic societies with those in later civilizations. What factors may have contributed to the changes in women's roles over time?
9. Imagine yourself living in a Neolithic community. How might your life be different from that of individuals in more hierarchical societies?
10. How does the study of women in Neolithic societies challenge traditional narratives about ancient history? Why is it important to explore and highlight the roles of women in early human civilizations?
11. Consider how the Neolithic era's gender dynamics might influence your understanding of gender roles and expectations in modern society. Do you see any parallels or differences?
12. If you were an archaeologist, which aspects of Neolithic society would you want to explore further to gain a deeper understanding of women's roles and contributions?