

## **Stones of Contradiction:**

### **An Introduction to *Sleep Under Stone***



**Artist's rendering of Homeric Troy**

In the summer of 2002, I went on a writing retreat in Oregon to try to finish a novel, or what I hoped was a novel, which I had started some eight years earlier. It was the story of the fall of Troy, certainly among the oldest and most frequently retold tales in Western literature. Why, any thoughtful reader might ask, revisit such an old story? What relevance does a dusty war-myth have in the contemporary world?

**Troy level VI (Homeric period)excavated by Heinrich Schlieimann**



The short answer is, I don't know. Stories exist in the air all around us, and why we pluck one and not another when we reach up in an idle or desperate moment, I can't say. But the long answer, if you have the time

to explore this with me, is that no matter what we are writing, every poem or story is a lifetime in the making, and this one stretches back a number of years.

My interest in the Trojan War is an old one, inspired partly by a trip to Greece and Crete in May of 1975 when I first saw the archeological sites of the Mycenaean and Minoan cultures. That summer, I also had the chance to work on an Etruscan dig at Artimino, a village outside Florence where I was studying. But even before that, my fascination with the interface between history and mythology probably was kindled by my first reading of Homer's and Virgil's epics and the Oresteian Trilogy when I was in high school. I could not have imagined then that an ill-written English assignment on what Helen symbolized, and an imagined dialogue between Helen and Dido meeting in the underworld (composed in my very limited Latin) would years later provide deep background for a novel. Nor could I have imagined how I would be haunted by the memories of standing in the cool darkness of an Etruscan tomb, walking beneath the Lion Gate of Mycenae, or descending the grand staircase at Knossos. I became one of those people who eat myths for breakfast; I told the tales of King Midas and Theseus and the Minotaur to my children as bedtime stories; we had a cat named Pandora and pet rats Hector and Alexandros.

But in the summer of 2002, the Trojan story I had gone on retreat to finish was not the one told by Homer or Euripedes or Aeschylus or Virgil or Shakespeare or H.D. or Marion Zimmer Bradley. During the eight years I was drafting the novel, I had read or reread these and many other sources, partly as research, and partly to reassure myself that I had something new to say. I knew I wanted to tell the Trojan's story, and I wanted to put the

women of Troy at the center of it. Initially I imagined this to be Cassandra's story, the Trojan priestess cursed with the gift of knowing the future and of never being believed. Her predicament seemed to me to sum up the fate of many women in history who speak truth to power and are dismissed or ignored, like *los Madres de los Desaparecidos* in Argentina and their monthly procession in the Plaza de Mayo, considered mad for believing their sons were the victims of political mass homicide.

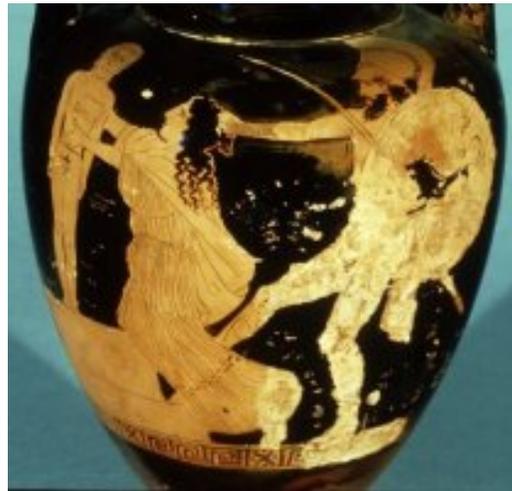
But to be honest, I didn't begin writing the novel for any literary or political reasons. I wrote it because I had questions that I thought only the story could answer for me. And these questions began in 1982, fifteen years before I had any idea of writing a novel. The genesis of these questions lies in a vivid dream consisting of three dramatic scenes. A young woman, a girl, really, holding in her arms a sleeping man, her lover, his dark hair against the pale skin of her breast, while outside her window, a city is burning. This same girl, barefoot, with short-cropped hair, and dressed in a white gown, running alone along the walls of the ruined citadel, searching the beach littered with ships of war, searching for—I couldn't say what—and holding something clutched in her fist. A great-winged bird circling overhead, descending to the beach and beating the waves with her outstretched wings. Who was the woman? Who was the man? What was the meaning of the avenging bird? What city lay smoldering in ruins? And what was the woman holding in her hand?

Maybe because I eat myths for breakfast, I tend to have vivid, sometimes elaborate dreams, but usually I am a character in them, or they are peopled with characters from my

personal history. This dream was like a movie, and as I considered this, I suddenly recognized the scene of the ruined city from the film *Trojan Women*, which I had seen as a high school student, back when I first studied the stories of the fall of Troy. Thinking the girl might be the priestess Cassandra, I turned to my old copies of Edith Hamilton and Thomas Bullfinch, Homer's *Iliad*, even my own high school Latin class translation of the *Aeneid*, trying to understand why this character out of mythology had come to me in a dream. Each version I studied was different, even at times contradictory, but gradually, I began to identify certain pieces of the dream.

#### AJAX OF LOKRIS

There was a man who lay with Cassandra the night Troy was sacked-- a minor Greek chieftain named Ajax of Lokris, not to be confused with his battle-companion, the towering Telemonian Ajax more celebrated in myth and opera and kitchen cleanser.



Cassandra's Ajax, the "lesser Ajax," came from Lokris, the name given to two different regions in Greece, one on the Gulf of Corinth, west of Athens, and the other on the coast north of Athens, facing the island of Euboeia. Which one this particular Ajax came from isn't entirely clear. But despite the variations between tellings of the myth, in every version I read, Ajax was decidedly *not* Cassandra's lover. In fact, of all the brutal acts the Greeks committed in the slaughter that

ended the ten-year siege, the one universally condemned was young Ajax's rape of Cassandra in the temple of Athena—violating a virgin priestess in the shrine of Troy's protectress. I never questioned the condemnation of this rape, but I was puzzled about why my dream had presented the act so differently. As I searched and researched for answers, the more questions arose.

For instance, what made Ajax's crime more offensive than all the other crimes of war the Greek soldiers committed? The conquering Greeks had done to Troy what any conquering army felt entitled to do: kill the men and take the women as slaves. But the carnage didn't stop there. They also cut off the head of the king on the altar of Zeus, tossed the infant heir of Troy over the walls, dashing out his brains on the rocks below, burned the temples, slit the throat of the queen's daughter over her pleas for mercy, not to mention the infamous dirty tricks and treachery of the Trojan Horse. But this crime of Ajax's struck the Greeks as the most foul of all. In fact, so offensive was this act, the Greeks wanted to kill Ajax right on the spot, but he threw himself on the mercy of Athena, and so was spared. Now, why would this unfeeling man suddenly turn pious? Why would he have asked protection of the goddess just moments after he had defiled her? And most troubling of all, what did it mean that in my dream this man was Cassandra's lover, not a rapist?

Men have committed acts of rape and called it by many other names. Young women even convince themselves that they are supposed to want to be taken, and young men convince themselves that a woman's "no" is meant to urge them to be more forceful and aggressive. As a feminist, I did not want to be complicit in this practice of legitimizing,

even romanticizing the violation of a woman, and for a time this anxiety disturbed me enough to keep me from pursuing that aspect of the story.

#### THE PALLADIUM

Having no answers to quiet my questions or my doubts, I turned my attention to another detail in the dream: what was the mystery object clutched in Cassandra's hand? The most sacred object to the people of Troy was a small bird-shaped or shield-shaped votive statue called the Palladium because it was said to be a gift from the goddess Pallas Athena.

*Palladia* were objects not made by human hands. They fell from heaven, probably small meteorites, which would have seemed to be dropped from the hands of the gods. The Palladium was also called "The Luck of Troy," because the prophecy was that as long as the stone remained within the walls of the citadel, Troy could not fall. The Greek hero Odysseus is credited with sneaking into Troy and stealing the Palladium in an effort to bring the ten-year war to an end, though there are differing accounts of what became of it after that. If the object Cassandra is clutching is this sacred votive figure, then how did it come to be in her possession?

#### THE DAUGHTERS OF LOKRIS

There was yet another mystery I could not untangle in any archeology, history, or mythology: the tradition of the Daughters or Maidens of Lokris. For at least eight hundred years, the people of Lokris, believing Ajax's violation of Cassandra had brought

the goddess Athena's everlasting enmity, sent to Troy each year selected maidens who suffered indignities and even risked death in an attempt to propitiate the goddess for their ancestor's violation and offense. The temple where they served stood outside the walls of *Novum Ilium*, the city the Romans built on the site of the ruined Troy, later inhabited by Persians, Ottomans, Saracen Turks, Christians, and Muslims until it was finally abandoned. The priestesses were not allowed inside the walls, could even be killed if they were caught. In some accounts they are described as having short-cropped hair, bare feet, and simple white robes—exactly the Cassandra figure in my dream. All the references to the Daughters of Lokris are brief and sketchy—little more than a paragraph or a footnote, but this struck me as a story worth understanding, for, while the other crimes of the Trojan War were punished, none were atoned for in this elaborate and ritualistic way.

#### THE STONES OF CONTRADICTION

Joseph Campbell once said when you find something in a story that doesn't make sense, you can be sure an older story has been reversed. Turn over those stones of contradiction and they will reveal the hidden tale. Though I was uncomfortable with the rape/romance reversal, I decided to return to the story embedded in my dream. What if Ajax had actually been Cassandra's lover? Was that probable or even possible?

I knew from my research that in the Greek tradition, there were certain acts that were strictly taboo in the temple: shedding blood, childbirth, and sex. I also knew that the Trojans, while the enemies of the Greeks, were also a Hellenic people. Ask a Greek, and he or she will tell you that the Trojan War was a civil war, a struggle between rival Greek

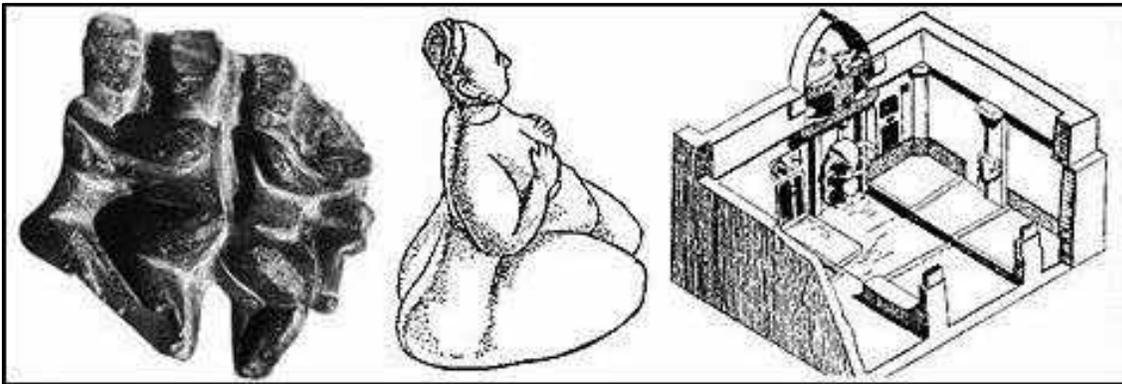
kingdoms for control of the strategic straits of the Dardanelles at the entrance to the Black Sea. Troy may lie within the boundaries of modern-day Turkey, but the Greeks claim its history as their own. Trojan and Greek traditions, religion, and language have common roots, they called their gods and goddesses by the same Olympian names, and very likely they would have shared the taboo against sex in sacred places.

But I also knew that the Greek tribes were Indo-Europeans, and when they invaded, they displaced the indigenous people of the Greek mainland and modern day Turkey. The warrior-based civilization they established rested uneasily on traditions much older and perhaps more deeply ingrained in the patterns and behavior of those they had conquered. I decided that if I was going to turn over those stones of contradiction, I would need to go deeper than the Greek traditions familiar to me from my classical studies; I needed to understand the culture and religion of Old Europe, particularly of Anatolia, the ancient name of the region where Troy was located.

Fortunately, by the time I was asking these questions, I had the benefit of being able to consult fifteen years of feminist scholarship on the Goddess Cultures of pre-Bronze Age Europe. Riane Eisler, Barbara Walker, Merlin Stone and others provided rich sources of information. Particularly helpful was the work of the Lithuanian-born anthropologist Marija Gimbutas who published two ground-breaking books: *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* and *The Language of the Goddess*. Reading these works taught me to recognize goddess symbols from the Old and New Stone Age and to appreciate the sophistication and complexity of the matristic, or mother-centered culture that preceded the arrival of the Bronze Age warriors. I was also lucky enough to find right at my own Santa Rosa Junior

College an ethnic dance teacher, Joan Marler, who had studied with Gimbutas, and who spent some time explaining to me how suppressed traditions, particularly those of women, are often encoded and preserved in dance steps, weaving patterns, and decorative ornamentation: minor “women’s arts” that slip below the radar of those in power.

#### CATAL HUYUK

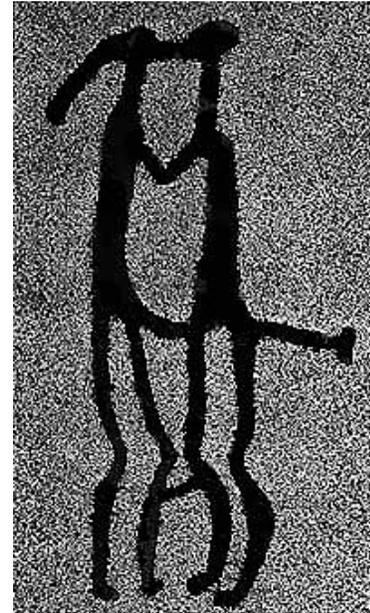


Images of the *hieros gamos*, the Mother, and the central room of the temple at Cayal Huyuk

And so with the help of these scholars, I turned over the first of the contradiction-stones. Marija Gimbutas’s portrait of the goddess-centered culture in Asia Minor is based in part on the archeological evidence found at Catal Huyuk in central Turkey, among the oldest human cities, dating back to 7000 BCE. Remember that the Hellenic Greeks and Trojans both considered sex in the temple a forbidden act, along with shedding blood and childbirth? Well, the wall paintings and statues found in the ancient temples of Catal Huyuk are dominated by recurring images of exactly those three taboos: death, sex, and childbirth. Apparently, as Joseph Campbell had predicted, what had once been sacred in

the ancient tradition had been reversed as taboo in the Bronze-Age cultures of the Trojans and the Greeks.

#### THE SACRED MARRIAGE



In the early 1980's, I had read Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, which gave me a new way of thinking about symbols deeply engrained in Western religion, literature, and art. Then in the 1990's, Eisler published *Sacred Pleasures*, which went even more extensively into the "sacrament" of the pre-Bronze Age world: the *heiros gamos*, or sacred marriage. According to Eisler, the *heiros gamos* involved the coupling of the priestess and her consort, and is depicted in the art found in temples, caves, labyrinths from prehistoric times and in the sacred writings of the earliest civilizations throughout the Middle East. It survived in mainland Greece in the Eleusinian mysteries celebrated to honor the earth goddess Demeter. Eisler's subtitle for her book is "Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love," and it was her insights into the

transformation of sacred marriage in a “dominator world,” the relationship between sexuality and the politics of power that helped me to understand how and why the reversal of sacred and taboo had occurred, and what an unhappy and lasting legacy that reversal has worked in Western culture.

I began now to consider that the image from my dream of Ajax coupling with Cassandra in the temple was indeed possible, and that rather than this being a violation and a rape, as the Greek myths depicted, it may have represented something even more threatening—the *heiros gamos* or sacred pleasures of the early matristic cultures.

#### THE FALL OF TROY AND THE END OF THE WORLD

I had built my story around a premise that the fall of Troy was the end of the world—or at least the end of one specific world: the Bronze Age warrior civilizations of both Troy and Greece. For not only was Troy razed and its heroes dead or exiled at the end of that war, but within a generation most of the Greek kingdoms lay in ruins as well—Mycenae, Pylos, Ithaca—no one knows for sure why. Historians point to accounts at this time throughout the eastern Mediterranean of marauding “Sea Peoples,” which tells us *who* wiped out the Greek world, but not *why* the Greek civilization was so vulnerable that not even their great Cyclopien fortresses could hold against these mysterious, unnamed invaders.

At this point in the journey of the novel, we leave the *terra firma* of history, fact, and research, and stir the waters of intuition and metaphor, for metaphor is one way to approach a mystery, or at least what poets like me resort to when the rational mind can go no further.

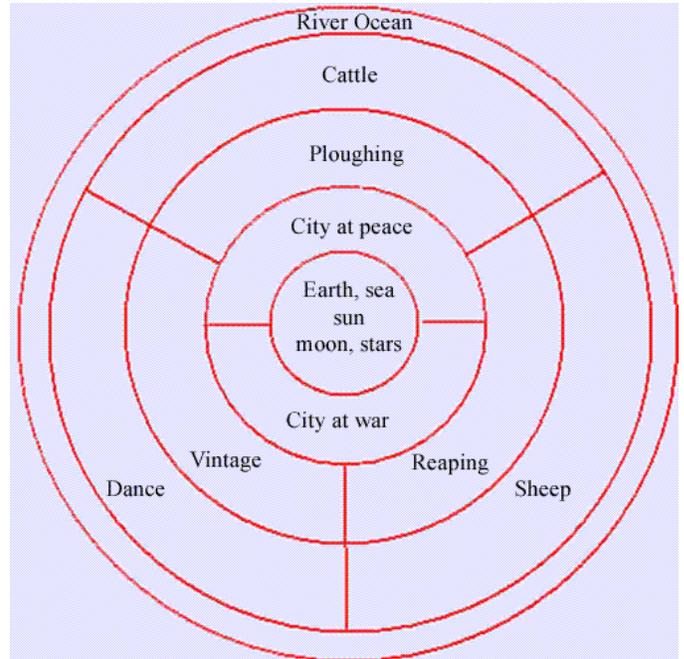
#### FAULTLINES

I was born in San Francisco, a city built on the precarious spot where the Pacific Plate meets the North American Plate, producing dramatic earthquakes. And I know from my study of archeology that when a city is built on an earthquake fault, the sudden rupture of that fault can create a vulnerable state in which the civilization falls prey to its enemies. Historians believe that the Minoan city of Knossos was destroyed by the Mycenaeans in just this way. They also speculate that the many layers of Troy represent successive invasions preceded or accompanied by violent earthquakes. In her novel *Firebrand*, Marion Zimmer Bradley represents the fall of Troy as an event precipitated by cataclysmic earthquake. My own approach has been less literal.

I think that cities and civilizations can be destroyed not only by geological faultlines, but also by metaphoric faultlines, just as individuals can be crippled by psychological rifts buried deep in the layers of their personal histories. In Freudian and Jungian theory, what is denied in the personality and repressed in the unconscious inevitably finds a way to undermine and sabotage the conscious mind. In extreme cases, there is a psychotic break. The Bronze Age warrior societies of Troy and Greece rested uneasily on the suppressed

traditions of the Old European culture they had conquered, and a culture so divided, so at odds with itself, is, I believe, vulnerable to collapse.

### THE CITY OF WAR AND THE CITY OF PEACE



In Homer's *Iliad*, he provides a picture of the Bronze-Age culture in which he suggests just this kind of schism. This appears in book XVIII when the poet takes a break from the catalogues of ships and battle scenes to indulge in an interlude of fancy—his description of the magical shield of Achilles.

Except for Homeric scholars and fans of the ancient epic, this moment in the *Iliad* is forgotten or overlooked. Sometimes it is viewed as serving certain specific epic

functions, such as incorporating the myths of creation. Indeed, that is what the shield's images depict, each phase of creation inhabiting its own circle in the vast concentric rings of living, moving images. When we arrive at the human sphere, Homer describes two cities: The City of War, pictured in the ritual of animal sacrifice; and the City of Peace, pictured dancing.

It is an ancient dance Homer describes, one practiced in Anatolia of ancient times, in Delos, Crete, and the other Mediterranean islands which were the last hold-out of Old Europe. It is sometimes called the Crane Dance, the bee-dance, the labyrinth dance, and its visual symbols are both the seven circuit Cretan labyrinth and the Greek Key or meander motif. Its ritual function was to mark beginnings and endings, such as the founding of a city or the celebration of a funeral. Images of the labyrinth sometimes include couples making love in the center of the design. It seems thus to have been a dance associated with the three sacred acts depicted in the temples of Catal Huyuk, the acts later forbidden in the temples of the Hellenic Greeks.

Some readers interpret this dialectical image of the two human cities as Homer's way of identifying the Greeks with the City of War and the Trojans with the City of Peace—not unreasonable, for there are many good arguments to support this. First, since Homer himself came from an island in Asian Minor, his sympathies may have been with the Trojans, whom he might have wanted to depict as more peaceful. Moreover, the culture of Troy was closely linked with the Minoan civilization of Crete, and the labyrinth dance depicted on Achilles' magical shield was a seminal aspect of the Minoan culture,

religion, and art. Another link between Troy and the Homer's dancing "City of Peace" is that the labyrinth dance or game, and the labyrinthine designs associated with them, are frequently called Troy Towns or The Game of Troy (*Lusus Troiae* in Latin). For instance, Virgil, the Roman poet whose epic, *The Aeneid*, picks up where Homer left off, includes a description of just such a dance performed as part of the funeral games for the Trojan hero Aeneas's father. Aeneas, for those who aren't current with their Latin epics, was a Dardanian prince, "a son of Troy," who fled the night of the sack of the city, eventually finding his way to Italy, and is thus considered the founder of Rome. It becomes tempting to see the City of Peace as an emblem of the city of Troy. Even the most recent Hollywood version of the *Iliad* with Brad Pitt and Peter O'Toole simplifies the epic conflict as a clash between the Greeks, who want to make war, and the Trojans, who would rather make love.

But I don't think the contrast is that simple, and I certainly don't think Homer was interested in simplifying anything. In my mind, the City of War and the City of Peace represent different ways of organizing society, and both possibilities existed in the world of Homer's *Iliad*. At least they co-existed on the magical shield. The "real world" of the battlefield is another matter. Except for a few brief and tender moments in the epic when the human sentiment penetrates the hard shell of the warrior's code of honor, the dancing City of Peace remains a dream, perhaps a memory: it has no place in the war camps of the Greeks nor the citadel of the Trojans.

I have come to think the fanciful description of the City of War and the City of Peace was a visual representation of the irreconcilable spiritual fissure, or faultline, at the core of both the Trojan and the Greek civilizations: the suppression of the matristic culture and its primary sacrament, the practice of the *hieros gamos*. I realize I am making of Homer a very subversive and enlightened poet, embedding a critique of the Bronze Age warrior world within the very epic that immortalizes it. But I don't presume to interpret Homer's intentions, only to present my own interpretation the two cities depicted on Achilles' shield and how these images helped me to reconcile the two versions of Ajax and Cassandra: the violent rape of the myths, and the pleasurable act of love in my dream.

If you will take the intuitive leap with me and accept the image of the labyrinth-dancing City of Peace as a reference to the old, matristic culture, this would explain why the coupling of Ajax and Cassandra, the resurfacing of that sacred sacrament in the midst of the Greeks' moment of triumph, would have been so threatening, so disturbing, as to be immediately denied, reversed, and portrayed as an act of violation. The patriarchal culture of Greece would have had good reason to want to snuff out any reference to religious practices that undermined their political and social dominance. The same process, I think, lies behind the story of Oedipus, which portrays the ancient matristic practice of the goddess-queen and her son-lover as so vile, so hideous, that Oedipus is compelled to pluck out his own eyes and send himself into exile rather than pollute his city and doom his family.

And those mysterious Daughters of Lokris? As there was almost no research available to tell me I was wrong, I let the intuitive, story-telling mind take over here, too. I imagined that Ajax of Lokris was not struck down by a thunderbolt on his return home, but was spared because, with Cassandra, he honored the old sacrament of life, even in the midst of death and carnage. I imagined that the pilgrimage of the Daughters of Lokris to the city of Troy and their appearance, clothing, and rituals were part of the “mystikos”: mysteries guarded by silence. I imagined that the Daughters of Lokris, for 800 years, offered themselves as priestesses to commemorate the *heiros gamos* of Cassandra and her lover-consort on the night Troy was sacked, and to honor in secret the power of the Goddess.

#### THE GODDESS

And just who was this Goddess? I seem to have danced like a fairy around this central maypole, but I assure you, in the years I was researching and writing the novel, I dwelled long and laboriously in pursuit of the Goddess’s identity. The truth is, she has many names, depending on where in the ancient world you care to poke. In Anatolia, where Troy is located, she was called Cybele or Kubaba, the mountain-mother. In Egypt she was known as Isis. In fact, remember the Trojan-Roman hero Aeneas I mentioned earlier as carrying on the tradition of the sacred dance known as The Game of Troy? His father’s name, Anchisis, means “With Isis,” or “Consort of Isis.” In Roman tradition, he was a priest of Aphrodite, and Aeneas is said to be the goddess’s son. Thus we can add Aphrodite to the list of the Goddess’s names. In Sumeria her name was Ashtarte and

Innana or Nana. On the Ionian islands and the Cyclades, she was called Eurynome. The Hellenic Greeks called her Athena, Artemis, or Hestia in her maiden aspect, Gaia, Ge or Demeter in her mother aspect, and Hecate or Hecabe in her crone aspect. Maiden-Mother-Crone, the old trinity whom the inscrutable Robert Graves called simply “The White Goddess” in his book linking her to the goddess Cardea of Celtic tradition.

Graves is a particularly challenging research source. I spent a couple of years trying to make my way through his book and taking down what I hoped would be useful notes in my journal about the many faces of The White Goddess. Here is one such notation:

Raiser	New Moon	White Goddess of birth and growth
Reaper	Full Moon	Red Goddess of love and battle
Winnower	Old Moon	Black Goddess of death and divination

The notes were cryptic and fascinating to me, and eventually gave me a way to structure the three sections of my novel. But when I returned to Homer’s *Iliad*, I realized that this ancient Goddess isn’t mentioned. The reigning goddesses in their Hellenic forms are Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, the three who vied for the golden apple and the title of “the fairest” in the judgment of Paris, which set the war-wheels in motion.

Primary among these is Athena, the protectress of Troy. She is called Tritogenia, “born of Triton,” god of the sea. This Athena is also the daughter of the earth, having sprung from her mother in the form of the tree, a fountain, or a river. Her symbol is the bird; her sacred object is the bird-shaped Palladium; she is associated with the owl and with serpents who are her consorts, and frequently assumes the form of a heron or crane. Most

often Homer calls her “grey-eyed Athena.” By Homer’s time, 800 BCE, Athena’s genealogy had shifted to reflect the patriarchal times, looking less like the White Goddess of Old Europe, and more like the Edith Hamilton mythology text goddess. She was now sprung, not from the sea or the earth, but from the head of her father Zeus, and had become the goddess of wisdom and war. But if you look closely at the statues and vase paintings of Athena, even from this time, you’ll see still see the tree, the serpents, and the owl that tie her to her older heritage.



There is also part of Athena’s story that struck me as another contradiction-stone. Athena is the devoted protectress of Troy *and* of the Greek king Odysseus, whom she helps to destroy Troy. No wonder the war went on for ten years, despite the Trojans and the Greek’s best efforts to make peace, cut their losses, and go home to their farms and wives.

Another goddess puzzle: there is one goddess of the Hellenic pantheon notably absent in the Trojan World, and not much honored in the temples of the Bronze-Age Greeks, either: Aphrodite. Yet Aphrodite is quite an important player in the Trojan story, being the goddess awarded the golden apple. And Paris is her protégé to whom she gives Helen as a reward for his devotion to her. Aphrodite’s origins are not Greek. She comes out of Middle Eastern or Sumerian traditions. She is known as the goddess of love, but is also identified with Ashtarte, Isis, Innana, and Cybele. She goes down deep in pre-history, as

deep as Athena. But while Athena gets the grand temple on the top of Troy's citadel, there is nowhere in Troy a temple to Aphrodite. That seems strange for a city which hosted one of the greatest love stories of all time. Metaphorically, Troy was a city that had not made a place for *eros* to be honored, and by *eros* it was destroyed.

## HELEN AND PARIS

By now any reader would be wondering, wasn't the war about Helen? That most beautiful of women who sneaked off (or was raped, depending on your preference) with the Trojan playboy Paris and caused the entire Greek army to set off to fetch her back? "The face that launched a thousand ships," in Marlowe's famous words. How does the story of Helen fit in with the story of Cassandra and Ajax and the notion of an offended goddess shrugging her mythic shoulders and bringing down the civilizations of Troy and Greece?



This is the story I have tried to unfold in the novel *Sleep Under Stone*. In the vision I have of Paris and Helen, they are more substantial than the good-looking, but vacuous characters of art and film. Helen is a complex woman who struggles first to recognize, then to live with her own divine attributes as a "vessel of Aphrodite." And Paris?

Detail from a painting by Jacques-Louis David, 1788

My characterization of him strays from the familiar image of the cowardly dandy and seducer of women. He is certainly a skilled lover who prefers the bedchamber to the battlefield, but I ask my readers to see him in a very different light.

In most paintings and sculptures of Paris, he is shown wearing a red cap, rather like a foolscap—that is, shaped like a Hershey’s kiss. When I looked this up, I learned that it was traditionally worn by the priests of Cybele. When he goes out on the battlefield, Homer tells us he is wearing a leopard fur cape, a gift from the pharaoh of Egypt. When I looked this up, I learned that the leopard fur was traditionally worn in Egypt by the priests of Isis.

Paris is described in Homer as a master at the bow and arrow, which characterizes the companion-consorts of Artemis. And we know from his choice of Aphrodite as the fairest of the goddesses, that he was much beloved of her, too. Homer speaks of Paris as “girl-eyed,” effeminate, and skilled in bed, apparently qualities that were not considered contradictory by the standards of the day. Paris was raised, not in Troy, but in the ancient woods of Mt. Ida, the home of the Goddess, and raised by bears, one of the names for the priestesses who served the Goddess on the mountain. His first wife was a nymph of Mt. Ida named Oenone (pronounced Wenona.) The people of Anatolia had a habit of placing a “w” sound before initial vowels. For example, *Ilios*, the traditional name for Troy, is written on ancient maps as “Willios.” Oenone may, then, have been a corruption of Innana, the Lady of the Mountain, whose son-lover Dmunzi in many ways parallels Paris. The son-lover consort relationship of Cybele and Attis matches the same pattern.

The more I read, the clearer it seemed to me that Paris was a character closely linked with the older traditions and the sacred *heiros gamos*, in fact a priest-consort of the ancient Mountain Mother.

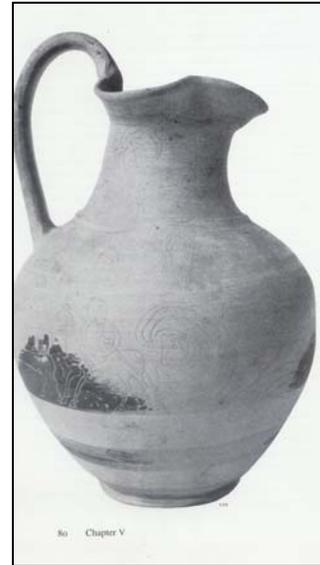
For those readers who know Paris as the ultimate playboy, the idea of priesthood may seem far-fetched. Especially if one considers that the priest-consorts of the Goddess, once they had fulfilled their ritual role, were ritually dismembered or castrated (sometimes euphemistically described as “crippled”). But one can imagine how well-trained they would have been in pleasing a woman, since their primary role as consort was to give the priestess sexual satisfaction. What I’m proposing is that Paris was not only a priest-consort of the Goddess, but a eunuch. Perhaps this would account for why in most of the stories, Helen and Paris had no children even after nine years as lovers. My research into the harem culture of the Middle East has also revealed that eunuchs were sometimes employed to serve the sexual pleasure of the wives or queens without their husbands having to worry about illegitimate children. The idea of a eunuch-lover seems strange, even ridiculous to a modern Western reader raised in the tradition of heterosexual romance, and yet 40 years ago, Germain Greer in *The Female Eunuch* claimed that for women the ideal lover is a man without a penis.

And so, as I retreated to the Oregon rainforest, I set to work trying to complete a novel that was filled with so many heresies, unorthodox interpretations, point of view shifts, and contradiction-stones, not to mention a catalogue of foreign names and multiple identities, that even I lost my nerve. I came away from the woods with 250 pages

written, and at least as many doubts, balanced only by a gut-level faith in a dream which was now twenty years old.

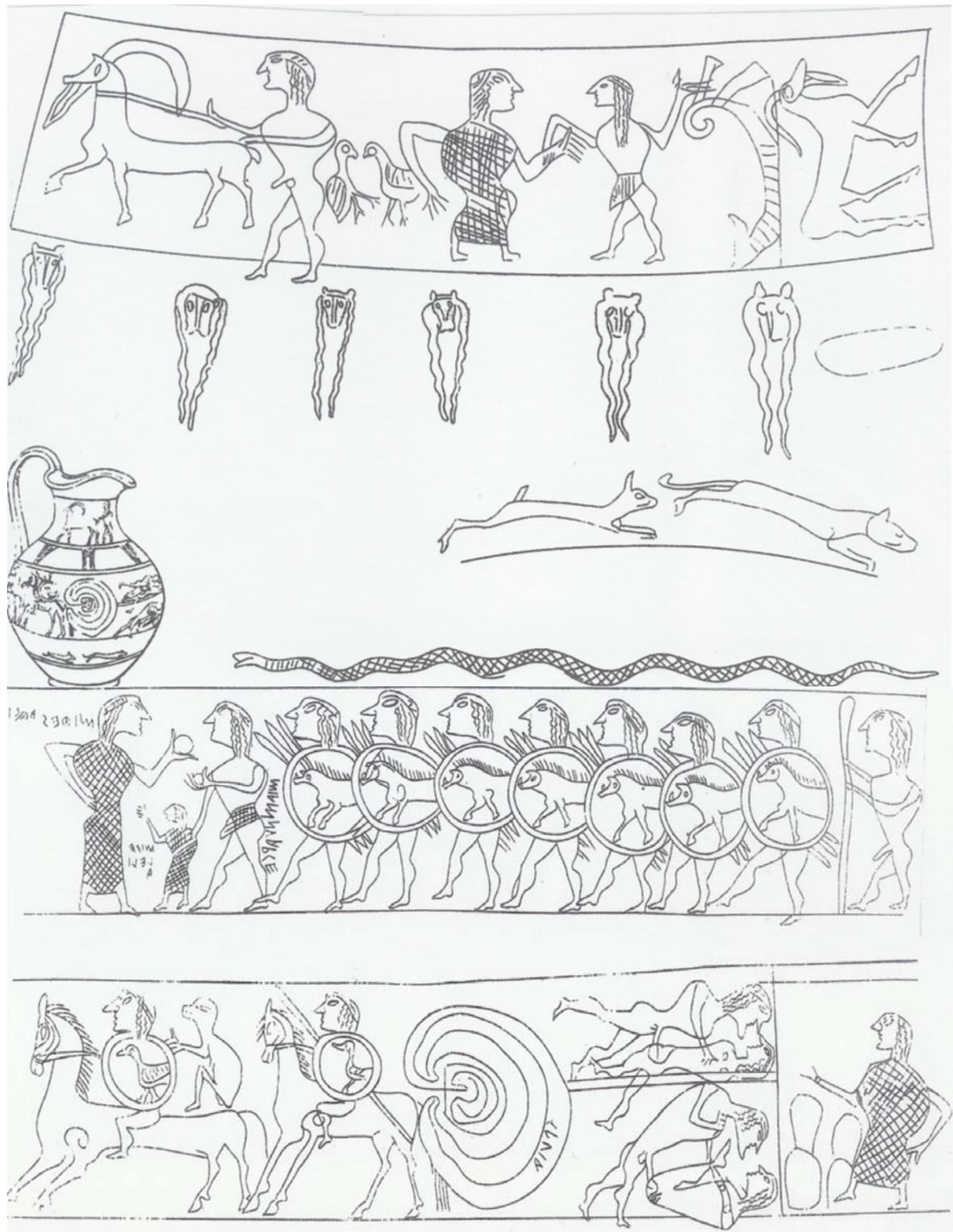
#### THE ETRUSCAN OENOCHÉ

The day I packed up my manuscript and left the writing retreat, I drove to Eugene where I was scheduled to give a poetry reading in the evening. Because I arrived early, I parked the car and wandered into a few shops to pass the time. One of these was a new and used bookstore, and as soon as I stepped across the threshold, my eye was caught by a huge volume called *Through the Labyrinth*. That would have been handy to have while I was on retreat, I thought, and opened the cover to have a look.



The first page I turned to was a chapter called “*Lusus Troiae: The Game of Troy*,” and the picture on that page was from a photograph of a wine pitcher or “oenochoe” (pronounced wenokee) found in northern Italy in the winter of 1877-78 in an Etruscan tomb near present-day Cerveteri. It dates from ca. 620 BCE, was produced in Etruria, but modeled on an earlier Corinthian design. Though the paint has faded, the images etched on the vessel seemed to depict the story of the Trojan war, beginning with the Judgment of Paris, the flight of Helen, and culminating in the scene of two couples making love beside a seven-circuit labyrinth, while soldiers on horseback ride into battle.

Details from the Oenochoe of Cerveteri from *Through the Labyrinth*, by Hermann Kern



I had a startling and immediate recognition of the final scene from my novel, especially the *heiros gamos* of pleasurable love and its mythic reversal as rape. And as if to confirm all this, in the last and seventh circuit was etched the word “Truia” –Troy.

Scholars argue and debate just what the images on the *oenochoe* refer to. One thinks it is a personal reference to a lovers’ triangle. Another thinks the vase tells the story of the hero Theseus’ Cretan adventure and the copulating couples is a reference to the holy marriage between Theseus and Ariadne following the labyrinth adventure. However, such debates may be missing the point. This is *decorative* art, and the language of decoration is pattern. It’s not the story we are being asked to see, especially since the round shape of the wine pitcher means the events can be read in either direction. We’re being invited to see the pattern, the common labyrinthine thread, so to speak, that ties the stories of Theseus and Ariadne, Paris and Helen, and, if dreams can be trusted, Ajax and Cassandra. And what better place to “hide,” and thus preserve these ancient, sacred traditions than in something ordinary enough to be overlooked.

In her essay “A Matter of Trust,” the novelist Ursula LeGuin (who is the founding president of the writing retreat I have been speaking of) says this about her experience with intuition and leaps of faith:

I have to trust the story to know where it’s going, and after I’ve written it I have to trust myself to find out where it or I got off track and how to get it all going in one direction in one piece. And only after all that—usually long after—will I fully

know and be able to say what, in fact, the story was about and why it had to go the way it went. Any work of art has its reasons which reason does not wholly understand. (*The Wave in the Mind*, 228)

So, after three years, I had another opportunity to spend two weeks of uninterrupted writing time at the retreat in Oregon, and another chance to return to the abandoned fragments of my novel, “to get it all going in one direction in one piece.” This time I took with me only my manuscript and the labyrinth book with its images from the ancient wine pitcher. I tried my best to tell the story encoded there, there and in a dream from so many years ago. What you will find in these pages is not fact, not history, not even mythology, but simply one version of a very old pattern.

I have grown very fond of the small Etruscan wine pitcher which stands no more than 10 inches high. I think of it as a writing partner with whom I share a secret across the gulf of 2,500 years. I have incorporated it into the novel in the epilogue, imagining its Corinthian prototype came from the bordering region of Lokris, and that its use as a ceremonial wine pitcher is tied to my unlikely hero Ajax and those mysterious Daughters of Lokris.

Sometimes it happens that cryptic mysteries are preserved over millennia in stories passed along in folk tales, in patterns on the doors or floors of churches, in children’s games, and in humble objects like this clay wine pitcher. Look closely, and you will notice, as I did that afternoon in Mike’s New and Used Books, that each image etched in the clay has its place in this story, indeed, had a place even before I ever saw them.