

Indo-European Origins of the “Mother Earth” goddess in Slavic Mythology

Sayyed Towfiq Hosseini¹  | Zeinab Sadeghi Sahlabad² 

1. Assistant Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: t.hosseini@alzahra.ac.ir

2. Corresponding Author, Associate Professor, Department of Russian Language, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: z.sadeghi@alzahra.ac.ir

Introduction

The “Mother Earth” motif in Slavic myth and ritual is the subject of this study, which contends that it is a reflection of a profound and enduring Indo-European heritage, rather than an exclusively local or late development. In East and West Slavic traditions, the Earth is depicted as a personified, sacral being who provides life, safeguards agriculture and communities, receives the deceased, and ensures the cyclical renewal of the cosmos, rather than as an impersonal natural element. Based on this, the paper investigates the extent to which the Slavic evidence can be traced back to a Proto-Indo-European earth-goddess cult by integrating linguistic, mythological, ritual, and archaeological data. The East Slavic figure of “Mother Moist Earth” and her semantic and ritual parallels with other Indo-European earth goddesses, including D^héǵhōm, Gaia, Demeter, Prithvi, and Aramati, are the focus of this study. The objective is to reconstruct shared archaic patterns of fertility, death, renewal, and sacred oath-taking that connect Slavic traditions to a broader Indo-European religious koine.

Methodology

The study employs a comparative and descriptive approach that is suitable for historical-religious and mythological analyses. Initially, a collection of Slavic sources is compiled, which includes folk prayers and charms, calendar rituals, laments, and heroic epics. These sources invoke the Earth as “mother,” “moist,” “fertile,” or as a witness to oaths and a receiver of the deceased. In East Slavic regions, these texts are analyzed in conjunction with ethnographic reports on agrarian traditions, rain-making ceremonies, and women’s nocturnal ploughing rituals. Secondly, the Slavic material is compared to a broader Indo-European context through the examination of key mythological texts, including Vedic hymns to the Earth and Sky, Greek narratives about Gaia and Demeter, Roman festivals such as Parentalia and ceremonies dedicated to Tellus, Germanic evidence for Nerthus, and Iranian traditions concerning Aramati and later reconfigurations in Zoroastrian literature. The shared patterns of meaning surrounding fertility, mortality, renewal, and sacred oath-taking are examined in these myths and rituals. Third, the study employs historical-linguistic methods to investigate the Indo-European root D^héǵhōm/*d^hǵhōm ‘earth’ and

its reflexes in various daughter languages (e.g. Slavic *zem-*, Vedic *kṣam-*, Greek *gē/gaia*, Albanian *dhe*), with a particular emphasis on their use in theonyms and epithets of earth goddesses. This etymological stratum is regarded as a distinct line of evidence that has the potential to either confirm or refute the parallels that have been suggested by myth and ritual. Finally, in consideration of Marija Gimbutas's and subsequent scholars' interpretations of a Neolithic earth-goddess complex, archaeological data—particularly Neolithic female figurines, “Venus” statues, and cult assemblages associated with early agrarian sites in Europe and the Near East—are examined. The study employs formal and contextual similarities to reconstruct structural continuities between prehistoric and later Indo-European images of Mother Earth, while remaining cautious about direct one-to-one identifications.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that East Slavic “Mother Moist Earth” and related figures occupy a nodal position within a network of beliefs about life, death, and cosmic order. In agrarian practice, the Earth is referred to as a living, female organism. It is believed that she “sleeps” under winter snow, “becomes pregnant” in the spring, and “gives birth” to crops and human well-being. During specific periods of the calendar, the act of cutting or cultivating the soil is deemed particularly hazardous, as it is perceived as causing harm to the goddess’s body. This logic is reflected in the prohibitions and ritual etiquette that govern the processes of sowing, harvesting, and burial. Simultaneously, the Earth serves as the ultimate repository for the deceased and as a transitional zone between the living and the progenitors. The persistent practice of scattering a handful of homeland soil into the graves of those interred abroad and formulaic curses that desire that an individual “not be received by Mother Earth” suggest a profound connection between earth, death, and belonging. In certain narratives, figures such as Baba Yaga and disease personifications are depicted as distorted or demonized survivors of an earlier earth-goddess who was associated with the underworld, serpents, and nocturnal birds. The core characteristics of “Mother Moist Earth” are closely comparable to those of Indo-European earth deities, including Gaia, Demeter, Prithvi, Aramati, and Nerthus, as revealed by comparative analysis. In these traditions, the Earth is also depicted as the broad, all-bearing mother who nourishes all beings, receives the deceased, and is united with a sky-father deity in a primordial sacred marriage. The semantic field of “broad,” “all-bearing,” and “much-nourishing” is present in ritual language across Greek, Vedic, and Old Norse sources, and it is supported by the shared root *D^héǵhōm*.

Moreover, seasonal rites and symbolic complexes exhibit convergences: the fertility of the soil and the cyclical phases of the moon are associated with cows and bovine imagery; the threshold between life and death is marked by serpents and chthonic birds; and symbolic actions are performed, most notably, by women, using ploughs, sickles, and other agricultural tools. Nocturnal ploughing rituals, in which women create a furrow around fields or settlements to ward off disease or invoke rain, can be interpreted as the continuation of an older pattern of sacred union between the feminine human community and the earth-goddess.

The concept of a tripartite or even fourfold structure is substantiated by archaeological and iconographic comparisons with Neolithic figurines. This structure is characterized by earth goddesses who are life-giving, destructive, and regenerative, complementing a male vegetation

or wine deity. This configuration is in alignment with the later Indo-European myths of death and rebirth, seasonal disappearance and return, and the annual renewal of the world through New Year rites and festivals of the deceased.

Conclusion

The results corroborate the hypothesis that the Slavic “Mother Earth” motif is not a strictly local or isolated development, but rather a regional articulation and continuation of a Proto-Indo-European and even pre-Indo-European earth-goddess tradition. Mother Earth is perceived as a religious interpretation of a cosmic worldview that incorporates the social role of women, agricultural experience, and cyclical destruction and renewal into a singular, enduring archetype. The study demonstrates that this archetype interconnects prehistoric and historical strata and preserves a profound cultural memory of the sacred, fertile, and chthonic Earth by placing the Slavic material within a broader Indo-European framework and grounded it in prehistoric evidence.

Conflict of Interest

The authors affirm that there is no conflict of interest in the research or the publication of this article.