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Ancient Mother Goddesses and Fertility Cults

The concept of “Mother Goddess” has a long scholarly history beginning at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century with J. J. Bachofen (1973 [1861]) and continuing into the twentieth with R. Briffault (1927) and E. O. James (1959). Closely associated with this concept is that of the “fertility cult.” Many feminists, especially during the Second Wave, found the possibility that pre-history had been ruled by a mother goddess very exciting, for it suggested that women had once wielded power, even supremacy, indeed that there may have been a period when humans lived in a matriarchy. The fact that the scholars promoting these concepts were almost all male should have been a warning to us, but the ideas were both timely and seductive. However, it is now clear that these concepts—the Mother Goddess, fertility cults, and, indeed, matriarchy itself—are patriarchal myths dependent on patriarchal dichotomies such as body/mind. To say so does not deny that many ancient goddesses known to history were mothers and part of what may be called “fertility cults.” Yet they were also highly complex entities with wide-ranging domains and powers. The goddesses of pre-history were probably similar.

In explaining goddesses in ancient images and myths, the usual scholarly tendency, at least until recently, has been to label them “mother” or “fertility” goddesses and thereby to confine them to “fertility cults,” a form of religious devotion normally devalued in the scholarly literature. Many, though by no means all, of these goddesses were indeed mothers and also were often concerned with fertility. However, in classing them primarily as mother or fertility goddesses, interpreters obscure the varied nature of their authority.¹

In even a cursory examination of such images and myths of the female divine from the ancient world, we can see that ancient goddesses such as Egyptian Isis, who was unquestionably a mother, exhibited enormous range

and complexity in their characters, powers, and areas of responsibility. At the same time, they could be mothers and involved with fertility.

What I plan to do here is, first, to examine the origins of the concept “mother goddess.” Then I will present short analyses of visual and written material about ancient eastern Mediterranean goddesses: Mesopotamian Inanna-Ishtar, Canaanite Anat, Canaanite and Israelite Asherah, Greek Demeter, and Greek Hera. All of them have been categorized as mother or fertility goddess or both. Finally, I will briefly consider a selection of pre-historic female figurines that interpreters have seen as representing motherhood and fertility in the form of a universal Great Mother or Mother Earth.

Three major problems, as well as two often unexamined assumptions, have a tendency to mislead both scholars and non-scholars in their attempts to rediscover and explain ancient goddesses.

First, goddesses from historical times were integral to male-dominated, polytheistic cultures that worshipped both male and female deities. Goddesses were definitely not the only or even principal deities in such cultures, nor can we speak of “goddess religions” or “goddess cultures” as having existed in ancient times (Tringham and Conkey, 1998: 37; Westenholz, 1998: 63; Frymer-Kensky, 1992: vii). This fact necessitates our keeping in mind the probability of male bias in the original presentation of these goddesses.

Second, most of the written evidence about ancient goddesses comes from elite religious sources and usually applies to the official religion of a state, but not to that of ordinary folk, though there is normally some overlap (Bowker, 1997: 350). Scholars classify these as two kinds of religion: official or elite, comprising state and temple worship, and folk or popular, the cultic practices of the common people. Typically, women’s spiritual devotions fall into the latter category. Though popular religion has left very little documentary evidence, archaeology can detect it in the form of cult places and cult objects (Holladay, 1987: 268-269). Many of the latter are female figurines. Scholars are wont to dismiss popular practices as a corrupted form of religion (Toorn, 1998: 88), despite the fact that it was the way in which the majority of people worshipped. Normally, scholars put fertility-cult practices into the category of popular religion.

Third, scholars have tended to concentrate on texts almost to the exclusion of the enormous amount of visual material now available:

Anyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself. Such a person will certainly not be able to describe the nature of the religious symbols by which such a culture oriented itself. (Keel and Uelinger, 1998: xi)

Before coming to any conclusion about the nature of a goddess in a mythic text, interpreters need to examine and try to interpret any related visual

material. A concomitant problem is the careless way in which some scholars and many non-scholarly writers on goddesses use visual material. For instance, not all ancient images of females represent goddesses, not all images of fat females depict pregnancy or motherhood, and not all images of naked females are evidence of fertility cults.

Two main assumptions are rife in goddess studies: first, the tendency to interpret all ancient goddesses as aspects of a single great goddess, “the Many in the One, the One in the Many” (Stuckey, 1998: 141-143; Eller, 1993: 132-135). Large numbers of non-scholars hold this view, though scholars are by no means immune to it. This position may be the result of their looking at both ancient and modern polytheistic traditions through monotheistic lenses (Stuckey, 1998: 151; Westenholz, 1998: 63). Ancient goddesses were very different one from the other, while still occasionally overlapping in functions and powers and even, at certain times and in some places, blending into one another. The second assumption is what I have called elsewhere the “myth of the fertility cult,” one of the topics of this paper.

Both scholars and non-scholars seem satisfied to describe most ancient goddesses as fertility and mother goddesses, the implication being that all goddesses fit into the category “Great Mother” (Westenholz 1998:64; Day 1992:181). They assume all goddesses represent earth or are firmly fixed in nature and, often, that they preside over sexually-based fertility cults (Hackett, 1989: 650). Indeed, the “designation ‘fertility goddess’ ... has allowed predominantly male scholars to dismiss ... the role of goddesses in ancient religions” (Fontaine, 1999: 163-164). Close examination of the evidence, however, shows that ancient goddesses were complicated entities with powers, realms, and functions just as often pertaining to culture as they are to nature (Goodison and Morris, 1998: 16, 18). Further, though many ancient goddesses functioned as channels of fertility, actual responsibility for fertility, certainly in male-dominated cultures, lay with male deities (Hackett 1989:68).

The concepts of “mother goddess” and “fertility cult” have a long history tracing at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, and, significantly, their principal exponents were male, a fact that should cause suspicion. In 1861, in his myth-based work *Das Mutterrecht* (“Mother Right”) (1973 [1861]), Johann Jakob Bachofen proposed that all societal development passed through stages characterised by their increasing approach to moral perfection. A Venus-like goddess represented the first stage, one of promiscuity and immorality. Matriarchy, the second stage, was the realm of an earth mother, one of whose primary concerns was fertility. For Bachofen, patriarchy was the third and highest stage of societal evolution and the closest to moral perfection (80-81, 98, and throughout).

The “Great Goddess,” also a fertile earth mother, was a central concept of Sir James Frazer’s extremely influential work *The Golden Bough*, which appeared in twelve volumes from 1890 to 1915 (Frazer, 1960 [1927]: 435 and throughout), and she was also the focus of Robert Briffault’s 1927 three-

volume study *The Mothers*.

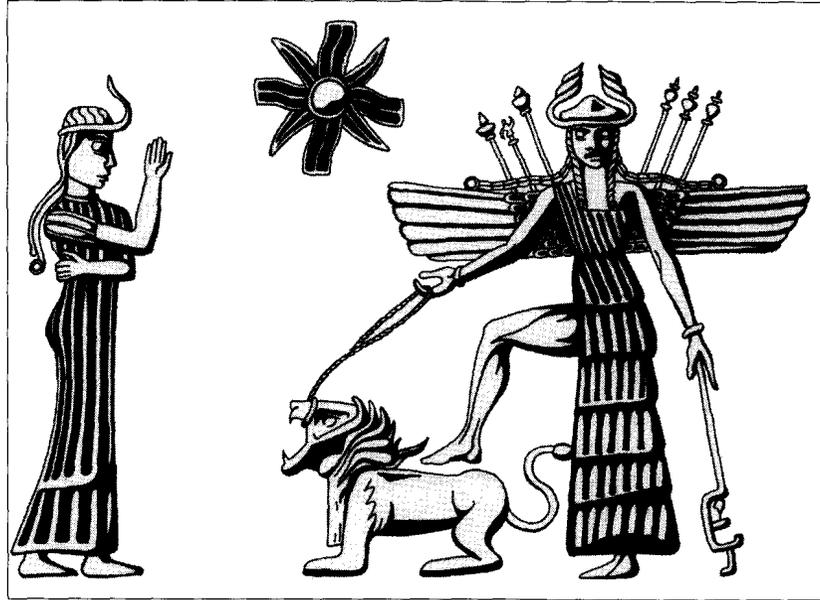
Turning to psychology, we note that Carl Gustav Jung posited as intrinsic to the human psyche a dualistic “Great Mother” archetype made up of a good, nurturing mother and terrible, devouring mother (Jung, 1964: 94-95; 1968 [1935]: 102). Jung’s disciple Erich Neumann (1970 [1955]) devoted a major book to the topic. Joseph Campbell, also a Jungian, perpetuated the mother-goddess archetype in his writings on myth, especially in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949 (Campbell, 1964: 113 and throughout), and *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (1965: Chap. I, 9ff. and throughout).

Modern scholars of religion and archaeology have also contributed to the dissemination of belief in the existence of a once universal mother goddess. In 1959, historian of religion E.O. James published a detailed examination of the concept in *The Cult of the Mother Goddess* and, in his history of religious ideas, Mircea Eliade called the goddess “Mother Earth” (1981 [1978]: 40). Further, James Mellaart, excavator of the Neolithic town Çatal Hüyük (1967: 180), was not the only archaeologist who “eagerly embraced” the idea of mother goddess to explain the huge number of female figurines appearing in digs (Motz, 1997: 185).

In recent years, however, most scholars have come to regard “the Mother Goddess interpretation ... with increasing scepticism” (Burkert, 1985: 12) and have realised that, as Andrew Fleming argued in 1969, the “Great Mother” goddess is a myth (Goodison and Morris, 1998, throughout). What is more, along with matriarchy, it is a myth that males created and, until recently, it was primarily men who promulgated it.

A brief discussion of some prominent goddesses of the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean will demonstrate that a few are not mothers at all, and some are mothers almost incidentally. A few might fit the category “mother goddess,” but even they have other important areas of responsibility. A large number of ancient goddesses are integral to the fertility and prosperity of their land, but usually only in conjunction with one or more male deities. Sometimes they received worship as part of a fertility ritual, though the focus of the rite was normally their male consort.² However, if there is any evidence of their being sexually active, the tendency of many scholars is to put them into the category of fertility goddess.

Inanna-Ishtar “... was the most important female deity in Mesopotamia in all periods” (Bienkowski and Millard, 2000: 156), and her origins go back deep into pre-history. From around 3000 BCE, the beginning of history in Sumeria, Inanna wielded immense power, but in a male-dominated pantheon. Her labelling as a fertility goddess has tended to obscure her complex nature. Alone or jointly with a male god, she controlled a number of elements, both natural and cultural, that were important to Sumerian society, among them, storms and rains, the harvest storehouse, warfare, morning and evening stars, and sexual love, including prostitution (Jacobsen, 1976 :135-139). She also



Triumphant Inanna-Ishtar, winged, with foot on her lion, her eight-pointed star symbol above her, being worshipped by a lesser goddess. Black-stone cylinder seal, Akkadian, ca. 2334-2154 BCE. (S. Beaulieu, after Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 92).

controlled the *me*, “the gifts [or attributes] of civilization” (Williams-Forte, 1983: 176). In addition, Inanna was central to maintaining the fertility and prosperity of the land, and, in connection with its maintenance, she conferred the right of sovereignty on Mesopotamian monarchs (Stuckey, 2001: 94-95; Frymer-Kensky, 1992: 27). Kingship was one of the *me* (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 16).

Although Inanna fulfilled a number of female roles, such as “sister, daughter, sweetheart, bride, and widow,” she was never a wife or, as far as we know, a nurturing mother (Stuckey, 2001: 90). A few ancient texts refer to certain kings as Inanna’s “sons” (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 70-71, 161 note 31), but, to date, there is little evidence that Inanna mothered them though she may have given birth to them (Lapinkivi, 2004: 125). Rather the references may be examples of the use by ancient peoples of kinship terms to describe close relationships between deities or between deities and humans, especially royal ones (Coogan, 1978: 56).

Inanna’s Babylonian counterpart Ishtar began quite early to assimilate many of Inanna’s characteristic, until, finally, Ishtar supplanted Inanna. By no means as complex a goddess as Inanna, Ishtar was in charge, primarily, of warfare and of sexual love (Bienkowski and Millard, 2000: 156).

Anat and Asherah were two of the great goddesses of the ancient Levant, modern Syria, Lebanon, and Israel (Stuckey, 2002). Like Inanna and Ishtar, they also functioned as members of male-dominated pantheons. Like Inanna

and Ishtar, they have both been classed as fertility goddesses and, in Asherah's case, also as a mother goddess.

In the mythic poems from ancient Ugarit on the Syrian coast,³ the young Anat, an aggressive warrior, delights in wading in the blood of those slain in battle and, like Hindu Kali, hangs severed heads and hands on her person (Coogan, 1978: 90-91). Anat's usual epithet "Virgin or Maiden" does not denote a sexually chaste woman, but rather one who has not yet borne a child (Day, 1991: 145). So Anat is never presented as a mother in the texts, although she does have an almost maternal side, particularly towards her half-brother and perhaps lover Baal: "Like the heart of a cow for her calf, / like the heart of a ewe for her lamb, / so was Anat's heart for Baal" (Coogan, 1978: 111). From their interpretation of a damaged tablet, some scholars argue that Anat was indeed sexually active, and so they class the violent goddess as a fertility deity (Coogan, 1978: 108).

The only female activity that we might class as mothering comes from an Ugaritic poem which refers to both Anat and Asherah as "the two wet nurses of the gods [and princes]" (Coogan, 1978: 66). The fact that princes suckle at the breasts of the two goddesses does not necessarily mean that either was a mother goddess. The gesture of suckling refers rather to their close connection with royalty (Walls, 1992: 154). As does the goddess Isis in Egypt, perhaps the Canaanite goddesses take princes to their breast to validate them as heirs.

Asherah was the most important of the Canaanite goddesses, and, of all the Canaanite goddesses, she was the most likely to have been a mother goddess, since the Ugaritic poems often describe her as "the Mother of the Gods" (Coogan, 1978: 97).

However, being a mother was by no means her only, or even most



Goddess suckling princes. Ugarit. Ivory bas-relief, 1550-1200 BCE. (S. Beaulieu after Pope 1977: Plate XI). Early archaeologists at Ugarit found a few exquisite ivory furniture panels, on one of which a goddess suckles two young males, possibly royal heirs. Anat is the only goddess described in the Ugarit poems as flying anywhere. This beautiful winged deity is probably Anat.

important function. Asherah was a divine mediator (Coogan, 1978: 99-101). She was also trusted advisor to El and, in that role, a power broker and potential king maker (Coogan, 1978: 111). As Elat, *the* goddess, she was probably female counterpart of the supreme god El. She was certainly the highest-ranking Canaanite goddess and next only to El in authority.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Asherah was an important Canaanite goddess in Israel and Judah. What the Bible does not say openly is that, for a couple of centuries, she might actually have been consort of Israelite god Yahweh (Hadley, 2000; Toorn, 1998: 88-89; Olyan, 1988). In addition, there is little doubt that, in the energetic popular religion of the time, people worshipped at least one and probably more goddesses. The Book of Jeremiah (7:17-18 and 44:15-19) describes cult activities devoted to “the Queen of Heaven,” who clearly had some relationship to fertility and prosperity and who might have been Asherah.

Further evidence of this vigorous popular worship comes from the so-called “pillar” figures that first appeared in the area in the eighth century BCE and continued into the seventh century BCE (Kletter, 1996: 40-41). With naked torso and “pillar” or skirt covering the lower body, these figures have large breasts which they support with their hands. Excavations in Judah have produced so many of them that some consider them as “a characteristic expression of Judahite piety” (Keel and Uelinger, 1998: 327). According to a number of interpreters, the “pillar” figurines depict Asherah (Kletter, 1996: 81; Holladay, 1987: 278). None so far published depicts a pregnant woman, nor does any hold a child.

When we turn from the Levant to Greece, our thoughts immediately go to the great goddess Demeter, who was the archetypal mother goddess. Indeed, especially in the iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries (Foley, 1994: figs.1-7; Gadon, 1989:160, 162, 163) and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Foley, 1994: 1-27), her main role was as devoted mother of a beloved daughter. Demeter’s roots go back into the pre-history of Greece (Voyatzis, 1998: 142), as does her principal Greek shrine at Eleusis, the site of the great mystery religion centred on Demeter and her daughter Persephone (Voyatzis, 1998:,146).

Though the name Demeter does not appear in the earliest of Greek writings,⁴ an unnamed “Grain Mistress” does occur there, and this goddess may be Demeter or ancestral to her (Burkert 1985:44). In a few early cults, the goddess had a close connection with nature (Voyatzis 1998:142,143), and, in them, wearing a horse’s head (Motz 1997:126), she was associated with the sea god Poseidon, not with Zeus, as she was in myths centred on Eleusis.

The usual explanations of Demeter’s name point out that *meter* is the Greek word for “mother,” but are unclear what *de* means (Motz, 1997: 125; Burkert, 1985: 159, 411 note 3). Nonetheless, it is certain from her name and from her myths that Demeter was a mother goddess with close connections to the earth, but not actually the earth (Burkert, 1985: 159). Her “power and favour” centred on grain, and human food was called “the groats of Demeter.”



Enthroned Demeter holding staff and stalks of wheat and Persephone with torches. Greece. Marble. Fifth Century BCE. (S. Beaulieu, after Gadon, 1989: 162).

She was one of two deities to whom people prayed when seeding the fields, and, as her harvest festival made clear, it was she “who fill[ed] the barn” with ripe grain (Burkert, 1985: 159). As Demeter Chthonia “she of the earth,” she also had close connections with the underworld, and Athenians referred to the dead as *demetreioi*, “Demeter’s people” (Motz, 1997: 131).

Demeter’s various titles point up her diverse powers. A number of them relate to her role as grain goddess: Karpophoros “bringer of fruit,” Eualosia “filler of the threshing barn,” Himalia “she who sates with abundance of food,” and Megalartos “she of the large loaf” (Motz, 1997: 129). As Melaina, wearing a horse head and mane, she was mistress of animals, particularly horses. As Kalligenia “bringer of beautiful offspring,” Paidophile or Paidoteknos “cherisher

of children,” and Kourotrophos “nurturer of children,” she was a women’s goddess (Motz, 1997: 129,143). All these epithets relate her to the natural, but she was also a culture bearer. As Demeter Thesmophoria “law bringer,” to whom the Athenians devoted an important women-only festival, she was celebrated as cultural innovator. Demeter endowed humans with agriculture and settled existence, marriage, and, above all, the Eleusinian Mysteries (Motz, 1997: 132-133,138).

At Eleusis, the yearly celebration of the Mysteries, rites of initiation and salvation, honoured Demeter and her daughter Kore “Maiden,” also named Persephone. So closely associated were mother and daughter that they usually are mirror images in visual material. The Greeks often referred to them as “the Two Goddesses, or even the *Demeteres*” (Burkert, 1985: 159). This identification may be a hint that originally Demeter herself was the disappearing and returning deity, goddess of the cycle of life.

Queen of the gods Hera, spouse of Zeus and female archetype of royal power, might seem an odd choice for inclusion here, for she was not known in ancient times for her motherly characteristics. However, her union with Zeus, which Homer describes so beautifully (*Iliad* 14.153-353), was celebrated in many parts of Greece with rituals, possibly to promote fertility (Burkert, 1985: 108-109). In the male-dominated Olympian pantheon, Hera’s primary concern was indeed marriage, and her presence was invoked at weddings (Burkert, 1989: 132-133). In this respect, her epithets include Nympheuomene, “she led as bride,” and Teleia, “the one fulfilled [in marriage]” (Motz, 1997: 145). Despite her involvement in marriage, motherhood was not one of Hera’s attributes, though she was sometimes worshipped as Eilytheia, “the birth helper” (Motz, 1997: 145; Burkert, 1989: 170-171). “Never is Hera invoked as mother, and never is she represented as a mother with child.” It seems that, in marriage to the ruler of a male-dominated pantheon, “[Hera’s] womanhood [was] confined to her relationship to her husband” (Burkert, 1989: 133), a sobering comparison to feisty Demeter, an unmarried mother.

Nonetheless, it is likely that Hera was an important deity in pre-historic times, perhaps even a pre-patriarchal ruling deity in her own right. By the time of Homer’s portrayal of her as a jealous and nagging wife, Hera seems to have undergone a loss of status, even though her cult was still highly esteemed. Her temples were some of the earliest known and the most important, the one at Olympia having been in existence long before that of Zeus (Burkert, 1989: 131). Indeed, it is before the temple of Hera that priestesses lit—and still light—the Olympic torch every four years. At Olympia every four years, women gathered in a festival for Hera, at which young women ran foot races in her honour (Motz, 1997: 145).

In mythic accounts of the birth of the gods, Hera comes into being before her brother Zeus, a fact that indicates “her unique equality of birth” (Burkert, 1989: 132). It is not surprising, then, that her name occurs in the oldest Greek tablets (Voyatzis, 1998: 145). What is surprising is that she should be so

circumscribed by her wifely role.

When we turn from male-dominated historic societies to those of pre-historic times, do we find any mother goddesses? Certainly Stone Age pre-history has provided us with many images of females. From the Late Stone Age (ca.35,000 – 15,000 BCE) come a variety of images of naked, standing females both carved as figurines and occasionally etched on cave walls; in addition, a few images of males were painted and also etched on cave walls (Tringham and Conkey, 1998: fig.1; Marshack, 1991: chap. XIII; Gadon, 1989: chap.1, figs.3-5,9,10). These earliest female figurines from Europe were often fat and had pendulous breasts, but they were not all obese (Marshack, 1991: 300, fig.173 a,b). The usual explanation of these “Stone Age Venuses” was that they were fertility “fetishes” (Gadon, 1989: 8), magical objects to ensure birth. For the most part, however, they do not seem to be pregnant, although they are almost all naked, one of the reasons, I assume, why nineteenth-century scholars dubbed them “Venuses.”

Further, although they bear no clear markers of divinity, it seems to me that they were images of goddesses, probably local deities, rather a universal goddess. It is of course possible that they were mother goddesses, though no image from the Late Stone Age shows a female giving birth or holding a child. As a result, one scholar has argued that they are more likely to stand for womanhood than motherhood. Another has asked whether motherhood would have meant the same 20,000 years ago as it does today (Tringham and Conkey, 1998: 25).

In the New Stone Age or Neolithic, the period of the discovery of farming, this situation changes dramatically.⁵ Many Neolithic female figures are fat, they sometimes hold a child or seem pregnant, and from this period scenes of birth also occur (Gimbutas, 1991: 224; Gadon, 1989: chaps. 3, 4). In addition, an appreciable number of Neolithic figurines are male, probably deities as well (Gimbutas, 1991: 249-251). Sometimes they come in couples. These facts, among others, lead me to conclude that it was in the Neolithic that male dominance began. What is more, to extrapolate from the new concern with mothering and birthing that the artefacts show, goddesses were venerated more and more for their biological functions.

To generalise from a very early deity like Inanna, goddesses probably retained much of their power as their societies became male dominated. Starting from a position of considerable strength in early male-dominated Sumeria, Inanna slowly lost power and suffered increasing diminishment, until she finally disappeared all together assimilated by Ishtar, personal goddess of belligerent empire-builders of patriarchal Babylon (Stuckey, 2000).

It is, then, to the era of the first farmers, I think, that we can trace the origins of both male dominance and goddesses who were primarily mothers. Given that western society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shown scant respect for the earth and for mothers, the male-promoted concepts of an earth-related mother goddess and of a fertility cult appear to have served to

complete the demotion of these goddesses and the spirituality of which they were the focus.

¹My points of view are those of religious studies, with emphasis on comparative religion and comparative mythology, and of women's studies.

²Sumerian Inanna's bridegroom Dumuzi is the central figure in the best known Mesopotamian fertility cult; Ishtar's lover is Tammuz, also the focus of such a cult.

³The poems date from the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1550–1200 BCE.

⁴Found on Crete and the Mainland, the Linear B tablets, dating to the fourteenth century BCE, preserve an early form of Greek (Burkert, 1985: 16).

⁵The Neolithic—it is a stage of human development which began in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean around 8500 BCE and gradually spread to Europe reaching the northern tip of Scotland around 3000 BCE. Hence, the dating of this stage will vary depending on locale. Farming was developed independently in Asia and the Americas.

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