

The Elements and the Great Mother Goddess

Signs of antiquity's four elements appeared in either triangular or circular form, arranged in order of their supposed density or refinement. Heaviest of the four was earth, which sinks to the bottom when mingled with water in a vessel. Conversely, air in water bubbles upward, while fire rises upward in air and is therefore the "lightest" element. Sometimes the Greeks postulated a fifth element lighter and brighter than fire, existing only in the heavens. It was called ether, the star-stuff of which the heavenly beings were made. This "ethereal" fifth element became the mystic *quinta essential* of medieval alchemy.

The real origin of the elements lay somewhere in the Neolithic Age, when people discovered that there are only four possible ways to dispose of their dead (other than cannibalism): burial, cremation, sinking in waters, or exposure to carrion birds of the air. All four of these funerary practices were known to the ancients, who envisioned death as a reversal of birth: a return to the Mother who brought forth all life in the world.

For this reason, some of the oldest images of the primordial Mother Goddess are closely connected with the idea of the elements. The four elemental symbols are found in the four hands of India's pre-Vedic Great Mother Kali, who invented the sounds of the Sanskrit letters and from these created the primal mantras that brought the universe into being. These sounds were classified as La, earth; Va, water, Ya, air; and Ra, fire. Uniting them all was the Goddess's own spirit, Ma, meaning both "Mother" and "intelligence." In the *Mahanirvana-tantra*, the same Goddess is addressed as Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, as well as Life-in-this-World, Knowledge-itself, and Supreme Divinity. She mingled the four elements to create life from flesh (earth), blood (water), breath (air), and fire (vital heat). This theory persisted all the

way into medieval European medicine with its insistence on mixtures of the four “elemental humors” of the body.

Stoic philosophers had a similar notion of personified Nature as the Mother Goddess who created life from the four elements. She was the “origin of everything and the guardian of mysteries.” The stoic writer Manilius said the Goddess organized heterogeneous parts- air, earth, fire, floating water- into a unity and ordered them to feed one another so that harmony would rule all these discordant principles and the world might endure.”

Male authorities seized the two elements considered higher, or more refined, declaring that fire and air were “male” and superior, while water and earth were “female” and therefore unspiritual, heavy, cold, passive, and muddy. However, occult tradition maintained that “only Earth and Water bring forth a living soul.” In India it was said that mantras with largely fiery or airy letter-sounds were “cruel,” while mantras with largely watery or earthy letter-sounds were “kind.”

The Woman’s Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects, P6-7, Barbara Walker,