

*THE GODDESS AND  
THE ALPHABET:  
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN  
WORD AND IMAGE*

by Leonard Shlain  
1983. Princeton UP, xii + 154 pp.

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It is the central thesis of this book that cultures which do not have writing exist in an idyllic pure state of mental, social, gender, and ideological harmony where goddesses reign or co-reign with gods. According to Shlain, the introduction of writing changed all this, leading to left-brain dominance, and therefore analytical, linear, aggressive, patriarchal patterns of thought and behaviour. To wit:

Prior to the Old Testament, there did not exist any society that prevented women from conducting significant sacraments, but the first religion based on a book, and all subsequent Western literate religions, banned women from officiating over important ceremonies. (p. 111)

The perceptions of anyone who learned how to send and receive information by means of regular, sequential, linear rows of abstract symbols were wrenched from a balanced, centrist position toward the dominating, masculine side of the human psyche. (p. 63)

In every society that learned the written word, the female deity lost ground to the male deity ... women lost their hold and fell from grace—economically, politically, and spiritually. (p. 63)  
Placing the pen the the fighting hand  
etches aggression into the written word ...

Patriarchy and misogyny have been the inevitable result. (p. 44)

Shlain also argues that the Israelites waged wars because they worshiped god through words (p. 102), while ancient Egypt is portrayed as a woman's utopia because picture symbols were used and jewelry was forged instead of swords (p.62).

These are sweeping generalizations and controversial claims, but can they be justified? Shlain's arguments and citations will undoubtedly seem seductive to those with no background in archaeology and anthropology. However, it must be readily apparent to even the most naive student of these disciplines that neither Shlain's information nor his reasoning can bear close examination. One wonders if the entire book has not been put together as a spoof of some of the more outlandish claims by popular feminist writers.

A few simple observations would seem to be in order. First of all, it is hardly the case that preliterate societies generally honoured women or that their roles were balanced and harmonious with those of men. Throughout most of New Guinea, the Amazon, Mesoamerica, and Africa, women's roles in tribal illiterate societies are unenviably low—one needs only to be reminded of such practices as infibulation and female circumcision. Furthermore, if patriarchy developed from writing, why were so many preliterate societies patriarchal? Nor is it the case that every society that did adopt writing became patriarchal. The best prehistoric case is probably Minoan Crete where Linear A and B writing systems were used.

Almost all chiefdoms and states (and many tribes) were established by dint of military might, and as such they tended to be dominated by aggressive males and



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their armies. These are the forces that result in patriarchal systems and complex societies. It was the emergence of complex societies that subsequently led to writing as an attempt to deal with the increasing elaboration of sociopolitical systems.

It is also incredulous that anyone could portray Egypt as a non-violent woman's utopia. The position of elite women may have been relatively high, but the power of Egyptian elites was based on military conquests from the start to the finish, as clearly exemplified by the Narmer Palette and the scenes of Rames II leading his armies in invasions of Near Eastern neighbors. Nor did the Egyptians have a monopoly on making jewelry. Virtually every elite in the world—even in the most patriarchal and militaristic states—have underwritten the production of jewelry.

Moreover, Shlain is in a real dilemma trying to explain how such writing systems—confined universally to a very small number of scribes in every society up until the Industrial Revolution—could have had such a pervasive impact on entire communities and large populations. Furthermore, when one considers that progress in women's rights and increased status for women has gone hand in hand with the truly widespread increases in literacy for entire populations

which has occurred since the Industrial Revolution, it is apparent that Shlain's theoretical bucket has so many holes that it will retain nothing of worth. Does he really think that all literate women, past and present, have succumbed to left brain patriarchal, misogynistic aggressiveness?

Perhaps one would not be surprised to find favorable reviews of books like Shlain's *The Goddess and the Alphabet* in popular Pagan magazines, however, it is distressing to see this kind of book taken seriously in a journal like *The Pomegranate* (Issue 16) which has aspirations of scholastic respectability. From the viewpoint of academic archaeology and anthropology, Shlain's book is yet another amateur attempt to interpret the past by someone with no training in the field, but with some reasonable credentials in an unrelated discipline—somewhat like a movie star trying to be president. The result is what might be generously labelled "archaeological science fiction." As such, it belongs on the bookshelf alongside tomes by Erich Von Danniken and Barry Fell, and it hardly warrants serious attention except as an unfortunate example of sociopolitical fantasy.