Origin of male and female symbols


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ORIGIN OF MALE AND FEMALE SYMBOLS
(Amended on-line version: Gundestrup and Harappa illustrations added)
http://www.michel-desfayes.org/malefemalesymbols.html

Abstract. It is proposed that the male and female symbols utilized in biology originate from sexual symbols in prehistoric parietal art.

The symbols ♂ and ♀

For over two hundred and fifty years, biologists have used the symbols ♂ for male and ♀ for female without really knowing, or caring, why. Yet, without any great effort of imagination, the male and female symbols adopted to represent the sexes in biological sciences can be traced back to the prehistoric rock engravings of the Mediterranean region representing human sexual parts. LEROI-GOURHAN (1992, p. 146) has already expressed this thought: “One can wonder if the realistic groups of human subjects are not the key to an evolution towards the abstracts signs”.

One would imagine that the first represented engravings would express man’s principal preoccupation: appeasement of hunger. Yet the first expressions of art in Europe appear to be female sexual symbols, stylized vulvae engraved in rock by the Cro-Magnon people (fig. A). With prehistoric man as with today’s humans (witness the graffiti), sex was a predominant preoccupation; this explains the frequency of these representations. The female graphics have been recorded 89 times in France and Spain only (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1992: 173). This author shows clearly (1992: 145-157) that the stylized glyphs represent the female pubic triangle, and the penniform or feather-shaped signs, the male organ. Although some students still refer to the penniform sign as “trees” and the triangular sign as a “bow”, it is generally accepted today that these petroglyphs represent sexual symbols. LEROI-GOURHAN writes (1992: 150) that “the scutiform signs are neither traps nor habitations or blazons, but highly conventional figurations of a female symbol”. See especially WHITE et al. (2012). The triangle is also taken as a symbol for “woman” by M.W. Green (in SENNER, 1989: 46). It is no coincidence that, in the Middle Ages, the ♂ sign has been taken to represent Mars, the viril god, and the ♀ sign to represent Venus, the goddess of feminity, and, respectively, in alchemy to design iron, the hard metal, and copper, the softer alloy.
These signs have also been found on carved ivory as far as Ukraine (Mezin, R. Desna, c. 18'000-15'000 B.C.), on clay seal in central Anatolia (Çatal Hüyük, mid-7th mill. B.C.), on Natufian grooved pebbles in Israel (Mahalla, c. 10,000 B.C.), on the Uruk tablets (3100-2500 B.C.), in Sumerian writing (c. 3000 B.C.). The rock engravings of southern France date from the Aurignacian, 30'000 to 14'000 B.C. More of these prehistoric designs representing vulvae have been found as recently as 1990 in the Paris region (see in particular the internet page http://artrupestre.ifrance.com/artrupestre/). Such signs are still represented on the Final Bronze (900-850) ceramics (PY, 1993: 73) and on the famous cauldron of Gundestrup from Denmark of the first century B.C., representing the procreative symbol of the woman and a newborn (Fig. D4).

The same signs being distributed from western Europe to the Ukraine and the Middle East are evidence that the Palaeolithic peoples were wanderers and had frequent contacts. While studying the prehistoric cave art, André Leroi-Gourhan was one of the first to demonstrate “the extraordinary unity of the figurative art”, the permanence, persistence and continuity of the representations, both in time and space, from Asturia to the Indus River. In view of the recent archeological discoveries, it becomes more evident today that the Mediterranean was not a barrier but served to link peoples as early as 50,000 years ago.

Interesting is the proposition of SCHMANDT-BESSERAT (1996) that tokens were at the origins of writing. It is obvious, however that some of these “tokens” were amulets or necklace beads representing the female sexual organ (photograph p. 19, fig. 4, extreme right; illustrations of “bent coils”, p. 23: 11 (4-12) and p. 146-149; female symbols, p. 75, penniform signs, p. 76. The author herself writes, p. 79: “It is noteworthy that the incised ovoids (p. 141-142 and p. 149) were exceptional in being sometimes kept in envelopes and sometimes perforated in order to be strung”. Lest I be accused of being obsessed in seeing sex symbols in every artifact, I would also think the “bearded animal head” (p. 155, 15:2) is a phallus, as well as the illustration on p. 157, 16:7. Compare also the “herringbones” (p. 144) with the penniform signs in illustrations.

The stylized symbols ♂ and ♀ were first used in botanical science by Linné in his Species Plantarum (1753) written between 1746 and 1752. Linné copied them from the Pharmacopoea Leovardensis (1687, 2nd ed., 1698).

Illustrations shall try to show here the derivation of these signs from the realistic engravings dating thousands of years to today’s symbols for male and female.

Vulva engraving from Castanet shelter (Castel Merle, Dordogne) 37'000 years old (WHITE et al., 2012)
The first expressions of art in Europe are female sexual symbols engraved in rock by the Cro-Magnon people.

Figures A show the transition from a realistic representation of women’s bodies (Angles-sur-l’Anglin, West of Poitiers) to the symbol ♂. 1. Female group from Angles-sur-l’Anglin, west of Poitiers (France). 2. Altamira (Spain). 3. Fond-de-Gaume (France). 4, 4a. La Mouthe (France).


Figure D (above) 1. Engraved stone from Knossos with representations of both sexes, mostly in pairs. 2. Gold amulet from Minet el-Beida (Ugarit Kingdom 1400-1300 B.C.) representing a woman, a stylized vulva, and a male symbol.

Figure D 3. (next pages) The most common symbols from Harappa (Indus Valley, c. 3000 B.C.). To my knowledge, this is the first time these signs are interpreted as male and female symbols. These signs are recurrent various forms on several seals and inscriptions. Note the similarity of these signs with those on the woman torso from Vinča, Balkans, 6000-4000 BC. (These comments and illustrations did not appear in my original article).
Harappa coupled signs, the fish-like sign being the male symbol (see figure B, above), while the triangle is the equivalent of figures A (above), especially 4a.
Harappa coupled male and female symbols (male symbols penetrating or inside the female symbols)
Woman torso from Vinča, Balkans, 6000-4000 BC. Compare with Harappa signs (preceding page)
Figure D4. Detail from the Gundestrup cauldron showing the procreative symbol of the woman and a newborn: a woman holding a child being born (this illustration did not appear in my original article). Note the similarity of the female symbol to that of the Ugarit gold amulet (fig. D2, above).
The letter Q

Not all letters of our alphabet have had their origin clearly explained. It has been demonstrated that the origin of the letter A is the inverted stylized representation of a cattle’s head. The name for “cattle” is alpu in Akkadian, aleph in Hebrew, whence the Greek name alpha for this letter. Likewise the letter B represented a house, in Hebrew and Aramaic bêt, as in Bethlehem, a term adopted by the Greeks as bêta for this letter. Whether all alphabet symbols were pictographic is not known. According to SCHMANDT-BESSERAT (1992), some letters were non-iconic logograms. I have found no explanation for the origin of the letter Q but I believe a pictorial connection can be established to ancient alphabets, and eventually to the parietal engravings, through a similar transition from which arose the symbols for male and female. The letter Q may have derived from the pictogram representing the vulva, as shown in fig. G. The archaic Greek digamma and the letter F may have derived similarly from a male penniform pictogram (e.g. those in LUMLEY et al., 1976: 140-141). See Fig. G.
Evolution of the letter Q

Fig. E shows the evolution of the original Akkadian pictogram for "woman" (Labat sign No. 554 = mi "woman") to the cuneiform sign (from KRAMER).

Fig. F shows the evolution of the original Akkadian pictogram for "man" to the cuneiform sign. (l): recent Assyrian (from KRAMER). These drawings are only a few of the many that are found in parietal art. Not shown are other explicitly female graphics representing the vulva.

References and sources of illustrations