

## Article

# Images of the Mother Goddess in the Neolithic Sanctuary of Pla de Petracos (Alicante, Spain)—The Sacralization of Agriculture

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**Abstract:** The objective of this work is to iconologically analyze the cave paintings of the Neolithic sanctuary of Pla de Petracos (Alicante, Spain), putting them in relation to the way of life and the religious thought of the society of the time, as well as the connection of these paintings with the Mother Goddess. To do this, firstly, the characters of early Neolithic agricultural and livestock societies, and the religiosity of the Mother Goddess that she professes, are contextualized with abundant academic documentation. The natural and religious scenery of the territory where the images and material goods—cardial ceramics, musical instruments, and ritual objects—excavated in the archeological sites located in the surroundings are described below. Finally, significant examples of ancient cultures related to the sanctuary are offered.

**Keywords:** Mother Goddess religiosity; sanctuary; Pla de Petracos; Neolithic; sun worship

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Starting Hypothesis

This article has as a starting hypothesis that the cave paintings of the early Neolithic sanctuary of Pla de Petracos (Castell de Castells, Alicante, Spain) are linked to the religiosity of the Mother Goddess. In order to confirm this hypothesis, we firstly try to contextualize these images with an abundant academic documentation, detailing the characters of the early Neolithic society, agricultural and cattle raising, and of the religiosity of the Goddess Mother that this one professes. Likewise, we describe the natural and religious scenery of the territory where the paintings and the material goods—cardial ceramics, musical instruments, and ritual objects—excavated in the archeological sites located in the surrounding areas—are found. Finally, numerous significant examples of ancient cultures are offered to support the interpretation of the images in Pla de Petracos.

Second, from a Hermeneutics of the Image, an iconological analysis—using Panofsky’s method—of the paintings is carried out, through which the Neolithic way of life and religious thought as well as its connection with the Mother Goddess are revealed.

### 1.2. Methodology: Hermeneutics and Iconological Analysis

To implement this initial hypothesis, we develop two basic methods: a hermeneutics and an iconological analysis of the paintings of the Pla de Petracos. The “heuristic or interpretative method” comes from the Hermeneutic Philosophy, presented by H.-G. Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, 1960—(Domínguez 1997, p. 98). Its central goal is the interpretation (Ricoeur 2008, p. 39) of the human in its relationship with the world, to provide that relationship with meaning (García Ramírez 2011, p. 38).

From Philosophical Hermeneutics arises the Hermeneutics of Image, first proposed by G. Boehm, in 1978 (Boehm 1978, pp. 444–71). Both share an interest in apprehending the meaning of the

work of art (Domínguez 1997, pp. 94–98), which is an answer to the question of human existence (Gadamer 1997, pp. 20–21). Their interest in particular focuses on social life, insofar as aesthetic and social facts form an inseparable totality (Fernández Galán and Ramírez 2013, p. 51), impregnated with cultural connotations (Amador Bech 1995, p. 10). As a result of this focus, the field of social hermeneutics interprets things in their context (Lince 2009, p. 19 ff; Beltrán Villalba 2016, pp. 3–4). Notably, both forms of hermeneutics try to find, in the end, the deep keys of various text-images, meaning to reveal their inner meaning from the external ideological discourse (Panofsky 2010, p. 11; Danto 1994, p. 144; Mitchell 2009, p. 23; Grondin 2014, pp. 10–11, 43–107).

However, this requires understanding the capacity of an image to project itself outside of its own features and be able to generate a world that, specifically, becomes the objective of the text (Ricoeur 2001, p. 34). It also involves the encounter between the icon and the logos (Gadamer 1996, p. 305; Domínguez 1997, p. 107; Hermosilla Álvarez 2011, p. 22; Mitchell 2009, p. 23; Didi-Huberman 1997, p. 123), since both are part of the same family (Gombrich 1992, p. 30). Furthermore, this forces perception and thought to work together (Arnheim 1998, p. 27).

The hermeneutics of the image are made concrete, in this work, through the analysis of E. Panofsky's "iconological analysis" or "iconography". This art historian, in *Iconology Studies and The Sense of Visual Arts*, states that iconological analysis has three levels of meaning: describing the elements that make up the work, that is, the rational logic of the image or how they relate to each other and the different elements that define the characters, objects, landscapes, actions, gestures, etc.; recognizing symbolic values; and achieving the intrinsic sense of overcoming the conscious will of the artist (Panofsky 1972, p. 15; 2004, pp. 45–48).

However, underneath the rationality of painting its logos—its discourse— can be found, namely, the ideology of the artists who create it. Ideology is considered here as a system of ideas, values, and precepts that organize or legitimize the actions of individuals or groups. Discourse, on the other hand, is the mode of action and social interaction located in social contexts. That is, both discourse and its mental dimensions (its meanings, for example) are inscribed in social situations and structures (Van Dijk 1998, pp. 16–19). Therefore, the paintings of Pla de Petracos, in addition to their specific topic, express their ideology and religious discourse.

In short, the contribution of iconological analysis is summarized in the interaction between three levels of reality: the world (people, the objects that surround them, and the space in which they operate), the painting—composition, color, and imaginary lines (Bouleau 1996)—and the artists' intention. With these three levels, we analyze the paintings of Pla de Petracos.

### 1.3. Objectives and Structure

Based on the initial hypothesis and the methodologies indicated, the work pursues the following objectives:

- (1) Contextualizing the paintings of Pla de Petracos in the Neolithic society and in the religiosity of the Mother Goddess, as well as in the ritual territory in which they are located and in the material goods excavated in the nearby archeological sites.
- (2) Demonstrating—in line with what has been done lately in relation to Palaeolithic Cave Art—that the interpretation of these paintings must be connected, inseparably, with that of the natural ritual environment in which they are located.
- (3) To hermeneutically and iconologically analyze the paintings to check if they reflect the general symbols of the Mediterranean Neolithic religions. That is, the objective is to check if Mother Nature is fertile—a vivifying and circular flow—and if it is associated with the stars, the sun, the seed, the sown field, and the bull. Moreover, it is important to reveal the way in which the human being feels co-participation or co-solidarity with the goddess by building a sanctuary.

Therefore, based on the initial hypothesis, methodology, and objectives proposed, we have structured the article into three main parts: "The social and sacred context of the images of Pla de

Petracos”, “The natural and religious scenography of the sanctuary”, and “The paintings of Pla de Petracos and the symbolism of the Neolithic Mother Goddess”.

These sections, which are preceded by an introduction and followed by a final coda, are in turn divided into a series of sub-sections.

## 2. The Social and Sacred Context of the Images of Pla De Petracos

### 2.1. The Neolithic Society in Alicante (Spain)

In the seventh millennium BC, communities of farmers and shepherds occupied the coasts and islands of the eastern Mediterranean and, one millennium later, arrived in the Iberian Peninsula. However, by settling in this territory, they did not colonize an empty habitat, but rather merged with the pre-existing populations (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, pp. 41–42). This explains why some authors have spoken of cultural duality (Martí Oliver and Cabanilles 1997; Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 42) or of a “dual model” in which groups dedicated to hunting and gathering coexist with others that were dedicated to agro-pastoralism (Castro-Martínez et al. 2006, p. 7).

The excavation of the Cova de l’Or, in Beniarrés, and that of the Sarsa, in Bocairente, Valencia, has made it possible to obtain a stratigraphic sequence that summarizes the evolution of the Neolithic period in Alicante since its beginnings in the sixth millennium BC. Notably, in the ancient Neolithic, the cultivation of cereals, the domestication of animals, the “cardial” (printed) ceramics, and other elements of the material and spiritual culture appeared. Specifically, agricultural work tools—spoons, axes, sickles, grinding objects, and even a counterweight of digging stick—have been found in La Sarsa (García Atiénzar 2003, p. 12) have been dated to this period. Abundant carbonized cereal seeds have also been found (Whittle 1996, p. 302), and their carbon dating demonstrates the knowledge of agriculture that the Neolithic society in the North of the province of Alicante had at this time. For example, various species of wheat and barley have been found, as well as domestic animals such as the predominant sheep, pigs, and to a lesser extent, cows and dogs (Martí Oliver et al. 1980, pp. 184–85).

Likewise, objects of a ritual and symbolic nature have been discovered, such as decorated ceramics, musical instruments, an infinite number of pieces of ornamentation, a large presence of ochre, etc. (García Atiénzar 2003, p. 13).

On the other hand, if the productive and symbolic presence of women was probable at this stage, gradually patriarchal domination, with a more stabilized economy and a more hierarchical society, was implanted (Escoriza Mateu 2002a, 2002b). This allows us to understand the transformations from the sixth to the fourth millennium BC in the Iberian Mediterranean (Castro-Martínez et al. 2006, p. 8) and, particularly, the presence in the lands of Alicante of three styles of rock art: macroschematic, Levantine, and schematic. In general terms, it could be said that the first style—that of the 6th millennium BC—was first developed by an agricultural society in which—as will be seen in this article—imaginary feminine elements prevailed, possibly associated with the religion of the Mother Goddess. Levantine art, on the other hand, exhibits representations of animals and archers (men), male shamans, and narrative scenes of hunting or wars—an example of this can be found in the art of the Cueva de la Vieja (Albacete) (Jordán Montes 2009, p. 68)—which symbolically refers to a hunting society (Castro-Martínez et al. 2006, p. 9). Consequently, this style confirms the male social domination around the 5th millennium BC having implanted a homogeneous thinking which legitimizes hunting as a fundamental activity and which expresses a patriarchal ideology and religiosity (Castro-Martínez et al. 2006, p. 10).

### 2.2. The Mother Goddess, Religion of the Neolithic Mediterranean Societies

*The Goddess of Life and Death: generating, fusing, and nourishing mother and womb of return of the dead.*

In the Paleolithic era, the oldest female artistic representations unearthed in the modern era were generated, which were circular or pyriform vulves, the symbol of sex (Delporte 1982, pp. 8, 247; Gamble 2001, p. 319). They personify the Mother Goddess or the Great Goddess, the essential divinity

in the first mythological worldview of the world (Campbell 2015, p. 14) and manifest the classical conceptions of women and of the divinity of hunting societies. They constituted the antecedents of later myths, preserved orally at first and later through writing.

Other representative examples are those of the Auriñaco–Gravetian Venuses, small sculptures found in the area from France to Siberia, passing through Italy, the center of Europe, and Russia (Delporte 1982, pp. 29, 218, 311). These paintings were found in the open air, where the families lived (Campbell 1992; Campbell, 2015, pp. 19–20) and also in deep caves, outside the daily inhabited spaces (Delporte 1982, pp. 210, 293–99).

The Goddess of the first farmers was developed in the ancient Neolithic societies, when their main concerns no longer involved the hunting and killing of animals—although these retained an important symbolic value, as the cave paintings of the Spanish Levantine art denote—but instead sowing, harvesting, and domestication. The oldest images of the Great Goddess of agricultural and livestock cultures come from the Middle East and Europe and date to 7000–5000 BC (Campbell 2015, pp. 24–25). In general, these first naked goddess-women express the very origin, the matrix of all future humanity, and the omnipresent sex in wild state (Lessing et al. 1994, p. 33). This is linked to the fact that caves personify the vulva, the womb of Mother Earth, and the entrance or return to the maternal uterus (Gimbutas 1991, p. 233; Gimbutas 1997, p. 47; Husain 2001, pp. 54, 163; Smith 2003, pp. 197, 230–31; Campbell 2015, p. 45). Moreover, these images embody an obese and adipose woman-goddess with an idea of abundant beauty, just at a time when survival depended on food and fertility (Lucie-Smith 1994, pp. 11–12).

Thus, matriarchal symbols began to dominate that era which exteriorized the intimate bond between human beings and Nature. However, during around 10,000 BC, the relationships of humans with this bond had already changed profoundly, as Nature was domesticated and later dominated, which transformed the human being itself culturally, ideologically, and psychologically (Guilaine and Zammit 2002, p. 101).

Among these variations, it stands out that Neolithic humans no longer imitated natural forms but instead started to express abstract concepts. Specifically, the female body was anthropomorphized and deified, featuring the supreme goddess: the Mother-Goddess or Great Goddess of Life, Death, and Regeneration (De Gusi 1993, p. 21). In addition, the link between the human being and the natural environment was established through the “mediation” of the sacred body of the Mother Goddess, which represents the unity and the totality of the cosmos and which combines diverse states of being (Husain 2001, pp. 6–45). In this context, she is a generative flow that goes from the mother to her children, and vice versa. Therefore, there is no rupture of the umbilical cord, since she possesses the will to unite what is separated, to erotically fuse the contrary powers born on the Earth. Consequently, the Mother Goddess supposes the illogical—and dialectical—coexistence of the opposite, and that is why, in the Mother Goddess, there are no divisions, polarizations, hierarchies, genders, competitiveness and conflicts, and even no diversity, although she manifests herself differently while remaining unique. In fact, the tribal societies of the early Neolithic period—that of Pla de Petracos—had an egalitarian social system based on kinship (Atiénzar 2011, pp. 305–10).

On the other hand, she is simultaneously the Mother of humanity, of animals, and of plants (Dunn Mascetti 2008, p. 14). It is not surprising that there the analogy developed between human, animal, and vegetable fertility and their religious rites (Eliade 1989, p. 127), an intimate, mystical bond between humans and deep rhythms (Ries 1997, p. 13), in continuous development, of a nature deified by its cyclic, renewing, and generative potential (Eisenstand 1986, pp. 1–25; Gimbutas 1997, p. 58). In fact, the Great Mother is characterized by the lunar phases—new, full, and waning—that correspond to the life cycles of the matriarch, of the woman—the maiden, the nymph or nubile woman, and the old woman—and to the seasons of the sun spring, summer, and winter. Not in vain, the cult to the sun extended through archaic Europe (Eliade 2005, p. 124) and, as we can see, through Pla de Petracos.

Thus, the divine constitutes the life-giving flow of Mother Nature, while the human being is one of her manifestations (Ries 1997, p. 13). For this reason, the human being collaborates in the



unfolding of natural life by becoming a co-participant and co-consolidator of this renovating potential. Hence, together with the farming or grazing, humans periodically expressed their cooperation with the divinity of Mother Earth in the sanctuary or temple (Sánchez Capdequí 2004, p. 51). This occurred without forgetting that tillage is considered something mechanical, but also a symbol of sexual union oriented towards the hierogamic fertilization of Mother Earth (Eliade 1989, p. 127).

In this context, it is not by chance that the body of the goddess has the form of a woman. In fact, in the Neolithic religion, which—as we know—is based on agriculture and livestock, matriarchal symbols dominate. In these symbols, the Mother Goddess is associated with fertility and fecundity, related, in turn, to women, the source of life (Flynn 2002, p. 25), and the bull horns (Gimbutas 1991, p. 244; Cauvin 1994, p. 44 ff).

The latter is due to the magical power of the animal associated to human generation (Álvarez de Miranda 1962, p. 205; Eliade and Malla 1999, pp. 70–76) and to the fact that the female womb with its fallopian tubes resembles the head of a bull with horns (Gimbutas 1997, p. 54). Likewise, the womb is assimilated to the sun (Bataille 1981, p. 64), and because of its cyclical becoming, to the curvilinear contours of the earth and to the cave (Gimbutas 1991, p. 233 ff; Gimbutas 1997, p. 47), the first city, that of the dead (Mumford 1979, p. 11). Additionally, the terrestrial forces are concentrated in mounds, hills, rocks, and trees, while—in some Neolithic societies—the existence of a Goddess Pregnant of the Vegetation enunciates the idea of a Mother Nature, at the same time separated and united and conceived as a pregnant belly. This is in recognition that the seed is the cause of germination and that the swollen belly is assimilated with the sown field.

No wonder either that the Mother-Goddess, fusing and erotic, represents, simultaneously, peace and war, light and darkness, and death and rebirth (Dunn Mascetti 2008, p. 14), opposing forces that are united by their power. Consequently, a continuity, and not a rupture, was deeply rooted in the agrarian mentality between life and death, mortality and resurrection, and this world and the beyond where souls migrate (Bru Romo 1990, pp. 23–25). Thus, the circular itinerary that goes from birth to death constitutes the manifestation of a nature overflowing with renewable energy that is repeated periodically (Gimbutas 1997, p. 58). This is possible because human temporality runs parallel to the cyclicity of Nature, marked by continuity, and governed by the seasons and the passage of days (Duque 2000, p. 44). On the other hand, this cyclical temporality—similar to what happened in the Paleolithic—refers to the thought of the origin, that is, to “the return to the seed” (Gallego 2003, p. 379), to the memory (Jünger 1998, p. 68), to the periodic return to the past, to the nostalgia for the return, reiterated, and in short, to the primordial mythical time (Eliade 1952, p. 11).

In the end, the Mother Goddess continued to be, in the Neolithic, the cradle and the human tomb, by unfolding two basic functions: she grants life and shelters in death. So, she is the goddess that gives birth, takes the seed, and transforms it into life. But—as the farming and cattle-raising peoples knew—the seed grows, develops, matures, dies, and finally, returns to the land from which it came (Campbell 2015, pp. 73–87).

### 3. The Natural and Religious Scenery of the Sanctuary

#### 3.1. *The Organization of the Profane and Sacred Spaces of the Ancient Neolithic Communities in the Province of Alicante*

At least since 1978, the paintings of Paleolithic Cave Art have been linked to the cave in which they are installed (Leroi-Gourhan 1978), but it is in the 21st century that this is being done in a more systematic way (Groenen 2000, p. 12 ff; Clottes et al. 2001, pp. 35–77 ff). In line, then, with the investigation of Paleolithic art, we consider it necessary to link the paintings of Pla de Petracos with the rocky shelter and the physical environment where they are found. Therefore, first we stop at the meaning of the territory of macroschematic art; then we analyze the careful and coherent natural and religious scenery of Pla de Petracos; finally, we relate the images of the cardiac ceramics and bone musical instruments found in Neolithic archeological sites near the cave paintings because they complement and intensify their religious meaning.

Since the 1980s, the value of the rock where the paintings of the macroschematic art are located has been rescued, as if it were a “scaenae” that serves as support and a significant part of the representation (Crespo Más 2007, p. 21). In addition, we describe the symbolic and religious meaning of the landscapes, “rituals”, “ritual sea”, or “sacred”. In many cases, they are characterized by their impressive surroundings (Bradley 1997, pp. 132–35), without forgetting that Neolithic communities placed their paintings specifically at observation points or along roads and trails, generally on or beyond the limits of fertile land (Bradley 1997, pp. 88–91). In this way, they defined the symbolic “limes” of their territory and, consequently, of their identity (Fairén Jiménez and Doce 2005, pp. 90–92).

In this regard, it should be kept in mind that the Neolithic groups, by appropriating the landscape, transformed neutral spaces into places with social meaning (Auban et al. 2003, p. 56). It is not in vain that they ritually charged some sites more than others and, therefore, the landscape has an unequal ritual depth and identity that it carries, which is fundamental to understanding their territory (Díaz-Andreu 2003, pp. 160–76). Thus, macroschematic groups dissociated domestic and symbolic spaces, the latter being more monumental and more meticulously selected. Furthermore, the communal design of their circular monuments—the environment of Pla de Petracos is, as we shall see—may have served to focus, intensify, integrate, control, and protect the new social identity, so that a deep shared sense of local identification was developed (Skeates 2000). In addition, art, together with the binomial singular caves/burying places, collectively defines and delimits space (Auban et al. 2003, pp. 50–56).

On the other hand, there is a link between cave art and certain visual and auditory topographical characteristics, that is, that both the audibility and the visibility of the territory were of interest (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, pp. 176–82).

Indeed, in terms of visibility, prominent features of this landscape, such as lakes, rivers, rocks, mountains, their orientation, etc., could symbolize a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred (Hedges 1993). In this respect, rock art takes on an irreplaceable role (Sognnes 1994, pp. 30, 43), since it is the one that transforms the territory from natural to ritual. Furthermore, it “marks” an area as a social (De Balbín Behrmann et al. 2017, p. 115) and religious space, as well as a symbolic “entrance” to a place (Bradley 1997, pp. 123–24). Note, too, that the painted outdoor rocks assume great value in the meaning of the ritualization of the landscape and the paintings themselves (Hedges 1993; Bradley 1997, p. 213), while allowing for their visibility (De Balbín Behrmann et al. 2017, p. 116). Thus, in all rock art, the sites are visible from the adjacent landscape. In this context, we now know that visual perception at close range was important throughout the Neolithic period and that macroschematic artists selected sites that look both south and west (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, pp. 191–205).

In relation to the audibility of the territory, tests have been made to evaluate the echoes and reverberation in the Valltorta Valley and in the areas of Famorca and Malafí, including Pla de Petracos, Sorellets, Covalta, el Barranc de l’Infern, and La Sarga (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, pp. 186–87). This contrasts with the tests carried out in the valleys without rock art where, although the acoustic values were good, they were not as good as in the areas with paintings. In general, they reveal that the schematic and macroschematic sites have better acoustic qualities than those of Levantine art. As for the macroschematic ones, when the artists first approached a landscape, although they were interested in those shelters that presented good acoustic phenomena at a short range, they also gave little importance to a wider audibility. Thus—as the tests carried out next to the rock with paints have shown—they were never more than 300 m away from a measurement point. The importance of the acoustic choice of space to locate the rock paintings is also evident in the sound effects of the rocks that sound like a bell when struck (Díaz-Andreu 2003, pp. 160–205).

Of all the acoustic phenomena present in rock art, several of them, such as echoes, resonance, and reverberation, were connected to the transmission, reflection, refraction, interference, diffraction, absorption, and dispersion of sound. The echo and reverberation stand out in Pla de Petracos, where the relationship between the acoustics and the shelter is noted. It is defined by the accumulation of sound within a closed or semi-closed space as a result of repeated sound waves that are reflected on all its surfaces (Rossing 2007, pp. 16, 394; Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, p. 183).

### 3.2. “Cardial” Ceramics, Archeological Material Remains and the Religiosity of the Mother Goddess

In the macroschematic territory, several archeological sites have been excavated where material elements have been found, such as “cardial” ceramics or musical instruments made of bone, which provide a wealth of information about the sacral meaning of the territory and the cave paintings of Pla de Petracos.

The printed figures of the Neolithic “cardial” ceramics, for example, destined to contain the ochre for the cave paintings (Crespo Más 2007, p. 19), present thematic similarities with these. This is demonstrated by the pieces found in Valencia, in the Cova de l’Or, in the Cova de la Sarsa (García Borja and López-Montalvo 2011; Martí Oliver and Hernandez Perez 1988, pp. 51–85), in Les Cendres and in the Abric de la Falguera, which have also made it possible to locate the chronology of Pla de Petracos and complement its religious significance. Thus, the oldest “cardial” pottery discovered dates from 5600 BC and we know it was used until 5200 BC, that is, for 400 years. From that moment on, the style gradually became known as the Epicardial style (García Atiénzar 2010, pp. 44–45).

These ceramic decorations, which are called “cardial” decorations because they are printed with the shell of the bivalve *Cardium*, are a characteristic element of the early Neolithic period from the Tyrrhenian to the Atlantic coast. Furthermore, they reveal—together with the ritual territory already analyzed and the paintings of Pla de Petracos, as will be examined in the following section—the graphic keys to the new religious ideas, ceremonies, and rituals, as well as the group identity of the occupying agricultural communities. True, the macroschematic cave art and the decorations of “cardial” ceramic share the same religious symbols and images, as well as their new divinities (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, pp. 42, 63–64).

Regarding the meaning of the “cardial” decorations, in 1969 Escalón de Pontoon interpreted them as a complementary fusing that linked to the symbolism of fertility something that, as we have seen, is characteristic of the Mother Goddess. In addition, this author considered that the geometric decorations made with zigzag lines and the triangles represented signs of water, fire, and the feminine (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 42). The *Cardium* used for the decorations contributes to this, since it embodies the female vulva (Soler Díaz and García 2020, p. 223).

In particular, these ceramic images exhibit various types of frontal representations of the human figure with raised arms and hands, which we identify with divinity and which are the so-called “orantes” (praying figure). The same is true of the anthropomorphic motifs in X and Y, with triangular or rounded heads—also present in the paintings—which are sometimes finished off by an impression of the apex of the *Cardium* (Martí Oliver et al. 1980, p. 186; Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 64).

The ceramics of the Sarsa Cave, from the Prehistoric Museum of Valencia, and the important piece of the Cova de l’Or, from the Archeological Museum of Alcoi—Figure 1, also have triangular decorations; this last one also exhibits a female figure with a triangular head and vulva (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 56). The triangle constitutes the geometric emblem of reproduction (Siret et al. 1995, p. 24) and is one of the several abstract symbols that reproduce the female vulva (Guilaine 1994, p. 376) and that accompany the Pregnant Goddess in all of the Mediterranean (Gimbutas 1997, pp. 42, 47).

Similarly, the ceramics of the Sarsa Cave in the Museum of Prehistory in Valencia which refer to pregnancy show a star shape and could represent the bent legs of anthropomorphs (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 56).

These ceramics, therefore, allow us to defend that the symbolic universe that they recreate is linked to the religiosity of the Mother Goddess and that—as I indicate in the following section—the praying of Pla de Petracos, in reality, is feminine and is in the position of birth.



**Figure 1.** Prayer glass. 5th–4th millennium BC Cova de l’Or. Museum of Alcoi.

Next to the triangle, the circle is also evident in the decoration of the “cardial” ceramics, as can be seen, for example, in the concentric circular motifs that surround the decorative forms of a piece of the Cova de l’. There is also an anthropomorphic figure with a head and a triangular vulva—this is Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Printed “cardial” cup from the Cova de l’Or. Photography: Museu de Prehistòria de València.

These circles may be connected to the sun, as shown by the soliform figures on some ceramics, such as the fragment in the Museum of Prehistory in Valencia—this is shown as Figure 3

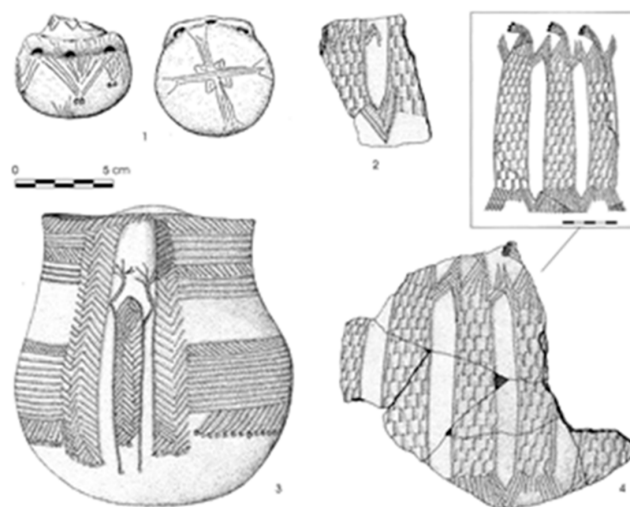


(Hernández Pérez et al. 1988, pp. 292–93) In another ceramic appears a diagram with the circle and the triangle that is in its interior, indicative of the “femininity” of the sun.



**Figure 3.** “Cardial” printed steliform. Cova de l’Or. Photography: Museum of Prehistory of Valencia.

Also significant is the fragment of a ceramic in which some anthropomorphs seem to perform a dance or march in a procession within Figure 4, 2 (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, pp. 43, 64; Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 52). Also, in other two, some characters are shown that seem to transit accordingly. In one of them (Figure 4, 2), two anthropomorphs are partially observed, as well as their legs and an arm. The other fragment (Figure 4, 4) exhibits five incomplete human figures with their bodies formed by a wide vertical bar that extends into a triangular head. The figures are joined by their raised arms and open legs. From the top of these heads emerges a series of lines topped by impressions of the apex of the *Cardium* which are probably tufts—of bird feathers?—and which run to the left. These characters are, therefore, singular, which corroborates their full-length dress, a striking headdress, and their hands raised and linked, which evoke, with conviction, the existence of a common rhythm, of a music, perhaps of a kind of harmony.



**Figure 4.** “Cardial” ceramics with anthropomorphic motifs. Source: (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 64).



Therefore, these last images present a ritual dance. The feathers of the dancers converge with the small figure of a bird decorated by “cardial” impressions of a ceramic and with the syringes made with the ulnae of the birds of prey found in the Cova de l’Or (Figure 5). In fact, most of the bone pipes in this cave correspond to the ancient Neolithic “cardial”, but percussion instruments have also been found next to it, which shows that the dance would be accompanied, in the macroschematic territory, by the sounds of flutes, syringes, whistles, and drums (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, pp. 43, 60–65).



**Figure 5.** Entire musical tubes of the Cova de l’Or, Fountain. Source: (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 58).

### 3.3. Elements of the Natural and Religious Scenery of Pla de Petracos

The territory of Pla de Petracos is composed of a series of scenographic elements that are coherently interrelated with each other, with the “cardial” ceramics and the cave paintings.

Among these components, the E-W orientation stands out. If the rocky shelter of the paintings is arranged towards the East, the opposite slope makes it towards the west, so that the prayer “looks” directly at the sunset. The sun, in the Northern winter solstice, the 21st of December, descends on the striking peak of the Benicadell mountain and the promontories of the Mariola mountain range (Soler Díaz and García 2020). They form a concavity that—from our point of view—resembles the “raised arms” of the praying one and that is just in front of it. Moreover, the prayer raises its arms—and its head, as we can see—towards the star, as if she were directing its prayers to it and waiting, perhaps, for the vital regeneration that this solstice entails. This is evidenced by the nearby Cueva del Parpalló, Valencia, which rendered a cult to this idea (Esteban and Aura 2001, p. 8; Urbano et al. 2020, p. 156).

Furthermore, for the specific alignment of the territory of Pla de Petracos, which is visually enclosed in a circle—as we will see below—the prayer and the paintings that give off rays denote the importance that the religion of the macroschematic society attributes to astronomy (Urbano et al. 2020) and, particularly, to the astral cult (Soler Díaz and Jiménez 1999, p. 228; Garrido-Ramos 2014, p. 157).

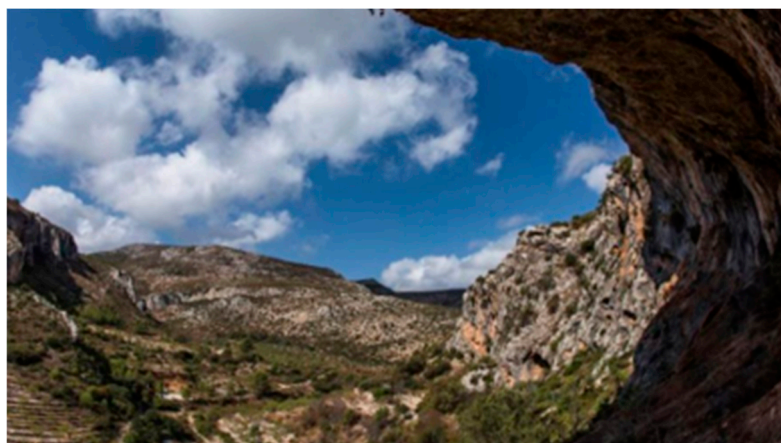
In this regard, it should be remembered that some of the most important Mediterranean temples and sanctuaries are also oriented towards the East (Wildung 1998, p. 95; Humphrey and Vitebsky 2002, p. 14; Rodríguez-Ariza et al. 2008, p. 171; Martin 1980; Blair and Bloom 1999, pp. 277, 280; Lledó I Herrero 1999, p. 15).

The rocky shelter where the paintings are located constitutes a natural amphitheater with a semicircular shape (Figure 6), something that also happens in other macroschematic shelters such as La Sarga, Alcoy, Alicante, the Barranc de l’Infern, and Vall de Laguar

(Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 54). However, in our opinion, Pla de Petracos develops a more coherent and complete natural scenography than the other two, insofar as its rocky shelter and the surrounding mountains form a circle visible from the paintings (Figure 7). To underline this circularity, on the slopes opposite the shelter, there are two “menhirs”<sup>1</sup> or long stones set vertically on the ground, as territorial markers that declare the integration of that slope into the whole of the ritualized territory.



**Figure 6.** Semi-circular shape of Pla de Petracos’ rocky shelter. Photography: Jorge Molina Lamothe. Source: (Soler Díaz and García 2020).



**Figure 7.** A circular territory can be seen from the prayer. Photo: Miguel Lorenzo.

Significantly, the niches (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 54) or natural “tondos” in whose interior the paintings are also circular, with the exception of the one housing the praying woman, which is triangular. In any case, both circles and triangles—as we have seen—are geometrical forms preferred by the Mother Goddess, since they symbolically fuse the woman’s sexual organs and curves with the mountains.

This same analogy occurs with the cave located on the left margin of the paintings, since just above it, the line of the mountain where it is located has a pronounced concavity (Figure 8). In addition—as can be seen—in one of the paintings, three figures are observed inside a cave. As I already pointed out in the section dedicated to the religions of Neolithic societies, the Pregnant Goddess of Vegetation associates her womb with the caves, and it is likely that this is the meaning of the real cave of Pla de Petracos’ rocky shelter and the one that appears in the painting. Moreover, this idea is reinforced if we consider that the triangle above the head of one of the figures represents the female vulva.

<sup>1</sup> I obtained this information from Mr. Rafael Martínez Valle, Director of the Museu de la Valltorta (Castellón, Spain).



**Figure 8.** Above the shelter cave, the line of the mountain is concave. Photo of the author.

At the foot of the niche where the main scene is exhibited, there is a large stone ([Soler Díaz and García 2020](#), p. 70; [Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003](#), p. 54) arranged vertically [Figure 9](#), supported between the floor and the wall and facing east and the prayer area ([Figure 10](#)), as if that stone were an intermediary between the earth and the sky and between the person or group who gathered there to develop their rites and the praying one. In this context, it is likely that, on this stone, the priest or priestess would raise his arms, like the praying one, and would direct them toward the sun, undoubtedly a benefactor of the growth of crops.

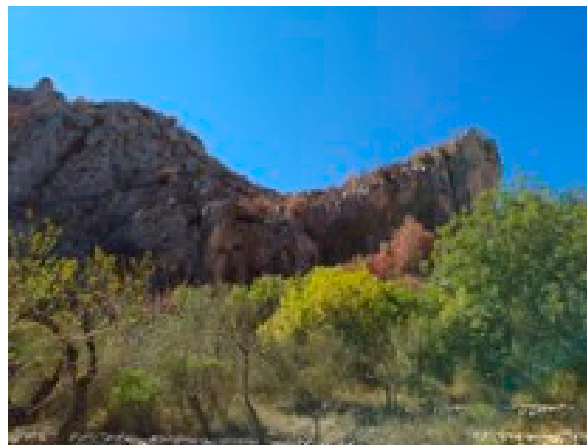


**Figure 9.** Under the prayer, there is a stone for the rituals. The photo is taken by the author.



**Figure 10.** The stone for the rituals is oriented, precisely, towards her. The photo is taken by the author.

On the slope opposite to the shelter and that circularly closes the territory, there is a concave shape similar to that of the cave that breaks the general mountain horizontality and that—from our perspective— resembles the “raised arms” of the prayer (Figure 11). Right in its center, the sun descends, particularly in the winter solstice (Soler Díaz and García 2020) (Figure 12). Besides, at her feet and on the ground, there is another great flat and horizontal<sup>2</sup> stone (Figure 13) in the direction of the prayer’s painting (Figure 14). Therefore, it is possible that here a priest or priestess executed some of the parts of the social ritual.

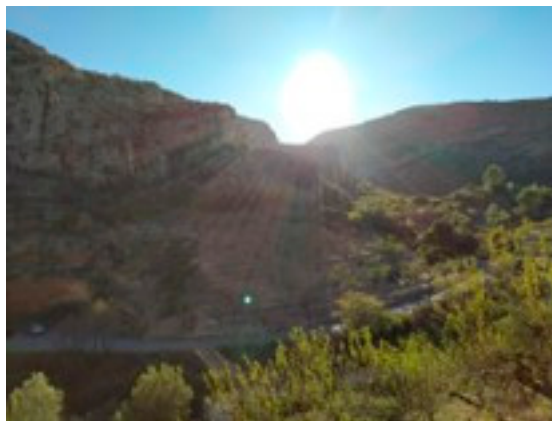


**Figure 11.** Concave shape, with “raised arms” on the side of the mountain in front of the shelter. The photo is taken by the author.

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<sup>2</sup> The age of this stone is yet to be confirmed, archaeologically speaking.





**Figure 12.** Sunset over this concavity during the winter solstice. The photo is taken by the author.



**Figure 13.** Beneath the slope in front of the praying area, there is a stone probably for ritual. The photo is taken by the author.



**Figure 14.** The stone “contemplates” the shelter with the paintings. The photo is taken by the author.



Bordering the roads leading to the ritual territory of Pla de Petracos is the course of a river that is now dry (Figure 15), whose level is currently higher due to the dragging of the water. Where the sign of Pla de Petracos is located, in a place where the paintings can be seen at no more than 300 m high, there is a special acoustic that produces the reverberation and echoes of the voices (Figure 16). Hence, it is possible that, in this very place, another moment of the ritual was exercised and that, from the paths that lead to this point, the participants danced to the sound of the flutes and drums. This is corroborated by the fact that, in this circular space, despite meticulous attempts<sup>3</sup>, no archeological presence or other human activity has been detected. This underlines that this is not a living or agricultural production space, but rather a sacred and ritual space.



**Figure 15.** The river that borders the arrival roads and the paintings place. The photo is taken by the author.



**Figure 16.** From the river the paintings are visible. The photo is taken by the author.

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<sup>3</sup> I obtained this information from Jorge Soler Diaz, Director of Exhibitions of the MARQ (Archaeological Museum of Alicante).

### 3.4. *A Sanctuary Where Social Rites Take Place and an Astronomical Observatory, a Marker of Solar Time, through Which Life and Death Pass*

As a whole, the natural and religious scenery described and interpreted allows us to consider Pla de Petracos as a ritual social territory linked to agriculture and livestock, as a sanctuary with an astronomical orientation where the Mother Goddess and her consort the Sun are worshipped. But this question can be further deepened.

Excavations in La Sarsa and the Cova de l'Or have shown that these enclaves served as a meeting place and social aggregation (Atiénzar 2011, pp. 305–10), as did Pla de Petracos. Above all, this was because they were intra- or inter-tribal meeting places (Fairén Jiménez and Doce 2005, pp. 89–97), where important ritual ceremonies were held for the Neolithic community. This in turn was because those who lived and worked in distant places and practiced their rituals related to agriculture moved there (Hernández Pérez and Oliver 2000; Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 64). Indeed, Pla de Petracos is a sacred enclosure contrasted with and complemented by the social and productive space of daily life. Thus, it is quite probable that social groups approached the enclosure from their villages and fields, bordering the river that, significantly, meander—as will be seen in the following section—as well as the images of the vegetables and the open arms of the painted anthropomorphs. It should not be forgotten that rivers are fundamental in ancient religions, both as a place of flow, of the passage of time, and as access to the beyond in rites of passage; they are the limit to be crossed in order to guide the world of the dead (Moreau 1992, pp. 216–20).

In Pla de Petracos, the river, in addition to enabling communication between the different macroschematic territories, is in the middle of three different spaces for the rite, as if it were its intermediary: above the shelter, on the large stone; below, next to the river; and, on the opposite side, on the other stone located on the ground. The location of the great stone below the scene of the prayer may lead us to think this, for there could be one or more persons with a prominent role in the rite, given the main importance of the sacred figure. In this context, the shelters VIII, VII, V, and IV do not have perspectives, but are almost always frontal representations (Garrido-Ramos 2014, p. 156)—like those of the “cardial” ceramics—for the observation of the participants in the rite. Next to the river, where there are exceptional acoustics—with echo included—that do not exist in the other parts of the sanctuary and where the paintings can be seen, it is probable that another group of people was also concentrated, contemplating what was being done up there and playing musical instruments or dancing. In the opposite enclosure, on the large horizontal stone, another practitioner likely ritualized while looking at the paintings.

In all these moments of the rite, visibility and audibility are especially important, which reveals to us the role that the senses play in the Neolithic religiosity of the Mother Goddess.

The sun is also very present in the natural circular and religious macroschematic scenography. Thus, the two large stones located to the east and west would represent two signs, two temporary markers of the route that the sun makes every day from its birth to its setting. This is complemented by the sun's rays in the paintings, the East-West territorial orientation, and the raising of the hands of the prayer towards the West. In addition, the sun is related to the rites of the change of seasons and the agricultural cycles unfolded in the winter solstice. Therefore, the circular conformation of the space of Pla de Petracos is considered to be an exceptional “astronomical observatory” (Crespo Más 2007, p. 29). It also appears as if it was a reflection of the celestial vault and the constellations, being useful to orient oneself with respect to the cardinal points and to measure the night time and the annual seasonal cycle (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 155).

It is not without reason that the circle, a geometric figure that is both symbolic and magical<sup>4</sup> in the religiosity of ancient and “primitive” peoples (Rykwert 1985, p. 215), is the sign of the sky and indicates their activity and cyclical movements (Chevalier and Gheerbrau 1991, p. 300). Thus, its form appears associated with the observation of the solar circle (Gubern 1992, pp. 92–93) from which it obtains the circular, renewable character of life. In this sense, the circularity of the territory constitutes—according to Socrates of *Phaedon* (García Gual et al. 1986, p. 55)—the most adequate figure to incarnate the “solar” circulation of life and death; namely, the transit of the vital cycle, in so far as both are the same thing: “human life is a circle”—Alcmeón de Crotona (Eggers Lan and Española 1981, p. 254).

Furthermore, this geometric figure translates the matriarchal thinking of society very well, especially when it is manifested in the housing and the Neolithic urban forms—the house, the silo, the oven, the ceramic—(Mumford 1979, p. 24). Likewise, it transcribes the conception of the religion of the Pregnant Goddess of Vegetation, who associates her matrix with the caves and the curvilinear contours of the earth.

Finally, the circularity of the territory would be an indicator of the cosmic and social unity of the Neolithic community. Hence, there is a profound interrelationship between material culture and the human mind and feeling, and between daily activities and ceremonial manifestations, myths, and beliefs (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 63). Equally, the imaginary spaces of the ceramic decorations, the cave paintings, the religious conceptions, and the ritual territory are inseparably connected with the everyday spaces (Figure 17). This allows us to infer that those who lived in the Cova de l’Or or the Cova de les Cendres (Teulada-Moraira, Alicante) buried their dead in the Cova de la Sarsa or visited the painted shelters in Pla de Petracos and the Sarga. Thus, these shelters can claim their character of “sanctuaries” through their macroschematic rock art (Auban et al. 2003). Additionally, some vessels can be considered as objects related to worship, which, consequently, can be understood as a stable form of religious life (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, p. 43), parallel to the economic one.

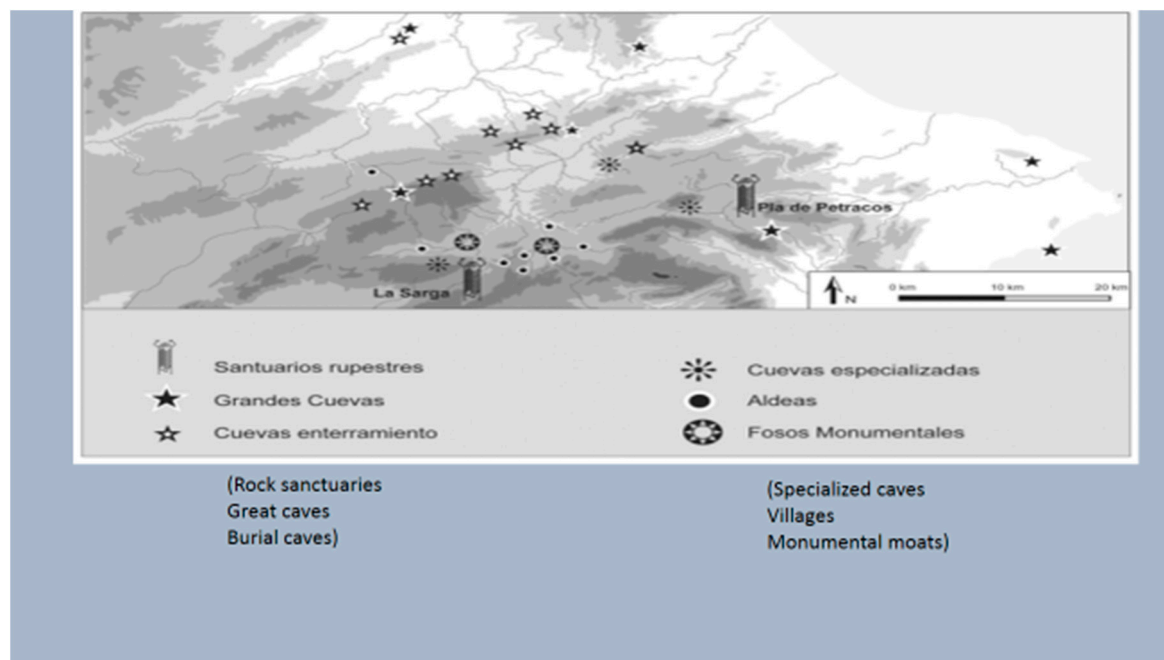


Figure 17. The connection of the macroschematic territory. Source: (Auban et al. 2003, p. 50).

<sup>4</sup> We find the circle, among others, in the Mesopotamian houses, in the Mycenaean burials, in the couple of gods Hestia-Hermes of the archaic Greece, in the *tholos* and in the Greek temples, in the Greek theater, in the Roman Pantheon, in the Aachen Oratory, in the work of the architects G. B. Alberti and Leonardo, in the ideal Renaissance cities, in the Chinese mandala, in the burials of the Iberian necropolis of Tútugi, Granada, etc.

In summary, we argue that the natural circular scenography of Pla de Petracos is appropriate to embody both the passage from life to death and the “pregnant belly” that represents Mother Nature. The latter fertilizes, at the same time, nature and human beings, being these co-participants and co-solidaries of Mother Nature, which is evidenced by the use of all the space and the sacralization of a part of it.

#### 4. The Paintings of Pla De Petracos and the Symbolism of the Neolithic Mother Goddess

##### 4.1. The Macroschematic Art and Paintings of Pla de Petracos

The discovery of macroschematic rock art took place in the late 1970s (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, p. 183). It is a style that has only been found in a limited area of the northern mountains of the province of Alicante (Figure 18) (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994, p. 9 and following; Hernández Pérez 2009, p. 68), specifically in 10 sites (Hernández Pérez 2014). In fact, it does not occur anywhere else in the world, although there could be a common root between it and the so-called “Linienbandkeramik” (LBK) or Old Neolithic Basins of Germany (Garrido-Ramos 2014, p. 153). Furthermore, its stylistics and symbolism contrast sharply with “Levantine art”, which is spread over a wide area of the Mediterranean coast and, with “Schematic art”, which is scattered over most of the Iberian Peninsula, southern France and Italy (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2017, p. 183). Finally, it is quite probable that it is the product of a farming town that came from the East and that settled in the current province of Alicante around the 6th millennium B.C., in what is known as the Ancient Neolithic period or early period, as “cardial” pottery has shown—as seen in the previous section.



**Figure 18.** Macroschematic art in the province of Alicante. Source: (Hernández Pérez 2016, p. 483).

In the macroschematic paintings and in the ritual space in which they are framed, the religious world is central, and its theme is mythological (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 155) and linked to the Mother Goddess. In this respect, art is perhaps the best available means of understanding the religious world of these early agricultural societies. This is not an obstacle, since it may also have served as a territorial marker differentiating one community from other ones (Martí Oliver et al. 2001, pp. 42, 63–64) or as a social reproducer of a groups’ ideology (Castro-Martínez et al. 2006, p. 8).

Specifically, these sanctuaries contain images located in open-air rock shelters that represent the same ideas and cultural tradition as those that appear inside the Palaeolithic caves (De Balbín Behrmann et al. 2017, p. 115), although they obviously differ both stylistically and



thematically. In this context, macroschematic art is defined by its large, schematic motifs up to one meter in height, which represent—like in “cardial” ceramics—anthropomorphs with raised arms, usually arranged precisely in the center of the wall of the rocky shelter that houses them. To these are added serpentine figures made with parallel, short lines, sometimes surrounded by points, as well as other circular and triangular geometric motifs, figures similar to fingers and bars, and unidentifiable geometric forms (Hernández Pérez and Contestans 1982, pp. 64–69).

The paintings of Pla de Petracos belong to the macroschematic art and their uniqueness is found in their agricultural and sacred content, with praying people, as opposed to the hunting and gathering theme of the Levantine art. In addition, the specific territorial location and the interrelationship between the paintings and its geography, has led many authors consider that Pla de Petracos is a “sanctuary”. The truth is that the value of the site is considerable, to the extent that it is common to find in the press information about it as one of the most important archeological sites in Spain. In addition, in 1988, UNESCO declared all the art locations of the Spanish Mediterranean area of cave painting—including, therefore, macroschematic art and Pla de Petracos—to be World Heritage sites, as the art “provides an exceptional picture of human life in a seminal period of human cultural evolution”.

The paintings found in these locations are distributed, fundamentally, in four of the eight shelters which are found there (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994, p. 9). Next, after contextualizing the Neolithic society, the religion of the Mother Goddess, and the ritual territory of the sanctuary, we move on to interpret, through iconological analysis, the meaning of these topics.

#### 4.2. Mother Nature Is Fertile

In our opinion, the paintings in this sanctuary symbolize that

Mother Nature is fertile because most of the figures and the main ones can be identified as women; because they may be in a birthing position or have a pregnant belly; this can also be determined because the triangle and the female vulva are present and because they are painted with red, a symbol of regeneration (Figure 19). Also—as you can see later—the seed, the fields, and the bull also have an obvious relationship with fertility.

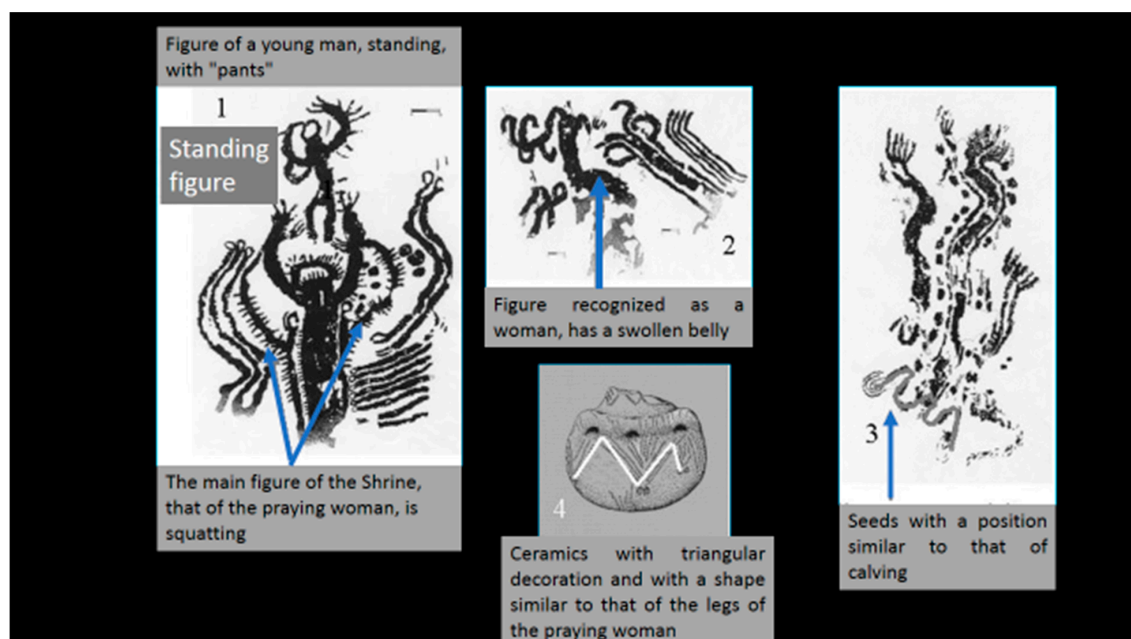


Figure 19. Pictures illustrating childbirth.

Of the five anthropomorphic figures that appear in the four shelters, one has been accepted as a woman: the one in shelter VIII, because of her “conventionalism in trunk, waist, hips and skirts,



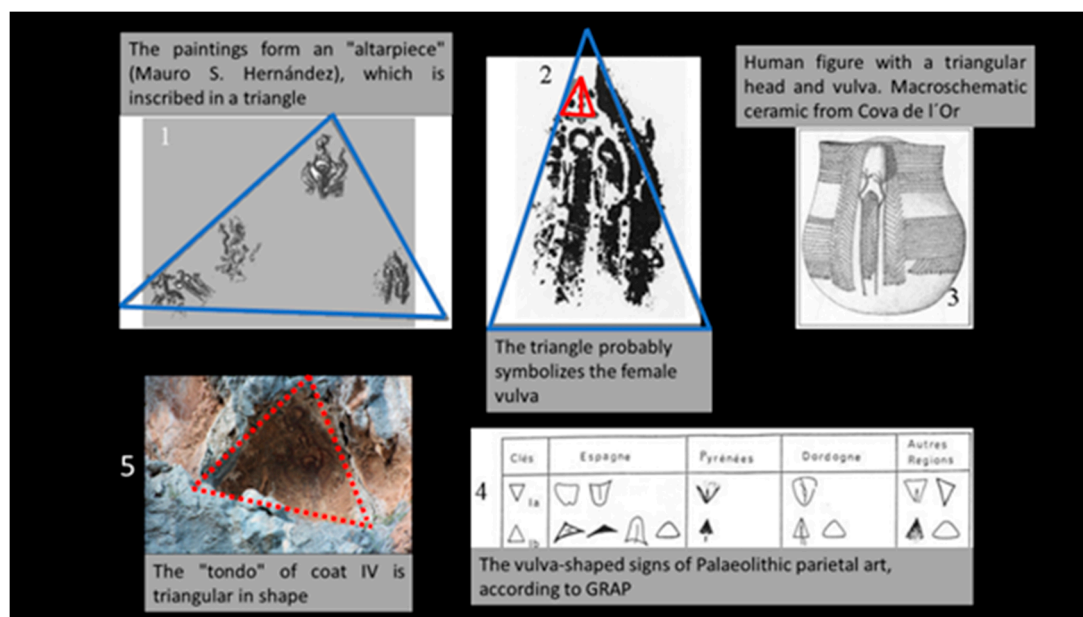
similar to the women of Levantine Art” (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994, p. 82). Of the remaining four, at least as far as we know, their sex has not been specified conclusively or is in doubt. However, the two figures in shelter IV, located to the East (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 161), wear long dresses or tunics similar to those we have described above. This does not happen in the figure of shelter V (Figure 20), which is standing with “trousers” and is therefore probably masculine.



**Figure 20.** Shelter V. The praying woman in the triangular “tondo”. This photo was taken by the author.

This standing posture contrasts, in our view significantly, with that shown by the figure of the V shelter (Figure 20) located underneath, since the latter lifts the legs up, as if it were a woman in the birthing position (Figure 19, 1). This interpretation is based on what has been said about the agricultural societies of matriarchal imagination, the symbolism of the paintings, and the natural scenery of the Pla de Petracos and the global comprehension that we propose exists for this sanctuary. This figure, which is the main one given its central location, which is the largest and highest (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 157) and which is associated with the great stone we have already referred to, could indeed be “the praying one” who requests fertility (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, pp. 47, 57; Hernández Pérez et al. 1994, p. 54). However, it is not a male prayer, but rather a female who, in herself, embodies the idea of fertility and who also represents the sanctuary as a whole, its paintings, and the natural scenery that accompanies them.

The female figure of the shelter VIII, located to the west of the whole set (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 159), is not standing, but arched, has a bulge towards the middle of the body and, on its right side, shows a swelling in the belly (Figure 21, 2). In shelter VII, the snake shape underneath seems to open in a similar way as legs are in childbirth. This squatting position, typical of childbirth, is also found in the Sarga (Alcoy, Spain), in shelter I, Panel I, a painting of the Levantine type with a human figure “squatting” (Hernández Pérez et al. 1988, p. 130). We also have the many valuable European and Mediterranean examples of women in the position of labor or with a swollen belly (Gimbutas 1991, p. 233; Whittle 1996, p. 65; Catálogo de la exposición 2004).



**Figure 21.** Evidence that the triangle is a symbol of the female vulva.

If the Sanctuary of Pla de Petracos exhibits an idea of fertility through the majority and main manifestation of women and through their position in labor or with a swollen belly, it also does so through the important presence of the triangle (Figure 21, a geometric symbol of reproduction, as I already indicated. Thus, the images of this sanctuary were organized to form a kind of "altarpiece" (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, pp. 54–55), although—from our perspective—the images drew triangles as a "secret plot" of the painter who made them (Figure 21,1). In addition, the natural "tondo" in which the main scene is inscribed, that of the prayer, has a triangular shape (Figure 21, 5), while the rest of the tondos are circular. As has been rightly pointed out (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994, p. 51), above one of the figures of shelter IV (Figure 21, 2), there seem to be nine points that form another triangle, which is evidenced by the drawing of some imaginary lines on it. However, this same scheme designs something more than a triangle—a female vulva—(Figure 21, 2) which is there to express the fundamental notion of fertility held by the society that built the Sanctuary of Pla de Petracos.

The triangular decorations are also evident as a symbol of the female vulva in "cardial" ceramics (Figures 1 and 21, 3), but the common presence of signs in the form of the vulva in French-Spanish parietal art has also been systematized (GRAP—(Groupe de Reflexión sur L'Art Pariétal Paléolithique) 1993, p. 228) (Figure 21, 4). There are also female figures throughout the Neolithic Mediterranean Art that highlight a triangle as the shape of the vulva (Siret et al. 1995, p. 57; Cauvin 1994, pp. 47–48).

Finally, it is likely that the color red, which is used in the paintings found in Pla de Petracos, represents an idea of regeneration linked to fertility, was also found in various other Mediterranean Neolithic societies (Gimbutas 1997, p. 53).

#### 4.3. Mother Nature Is a Vivifying Flow, Has a Cyclic, Circular Rhythm, and Is Associated with the Stars and the Sun

The paintings of Pla de Petracos, especially those in shelters V, VII, and VIII, do not denote statism, but, on the contrary, indicate a rhythmic movement, a dynamism expressed through the contouring of the figures and the zigzagging and nervous lines. This incessant explosion of movement characterizes both the anthropomorphic figures and the geometric motifs, and perhaps expresses the vivifying flow that is Mother Nature. This vitality is also present in Paleolithic Parietal Art, which stimulates animation and movement. It does so through dynamic or animated attitudes or with the illusion of movement, which is reinforced with oil lamps or through its decomposition by the juxtaposition of successive images (Groenen 2000, p. 89).

This vivifying flow also has a cyclical, circular rhythm, which is evidenced by the dominant presence of the circle in the Sanctuary of Pla de Petracos. Thus, the anthropomorphs have been drawn in a schematic way using circular lines for the heads and the filiform and serpentine, for the bodies, and for the extremities. This occurs in the prayer image (Figure 22, 1), whose head and extremities were drawn as circles. This geometric form was also repeated in the figure above, in her head and in the object she carries on her left arm—which we refer to later—and in the heads of the two figures in shelter IV. In the geometric motifs, the circular forms also stand out, as can be seen in shelter V (Figure 20) with the serpentine shapes that accompany the anthropomorphic figures, since one or both ends were finished off by adding a circle. Finally, the decorations of the “cardial” ceramics also used circles (Figure 22, 2 and 3).

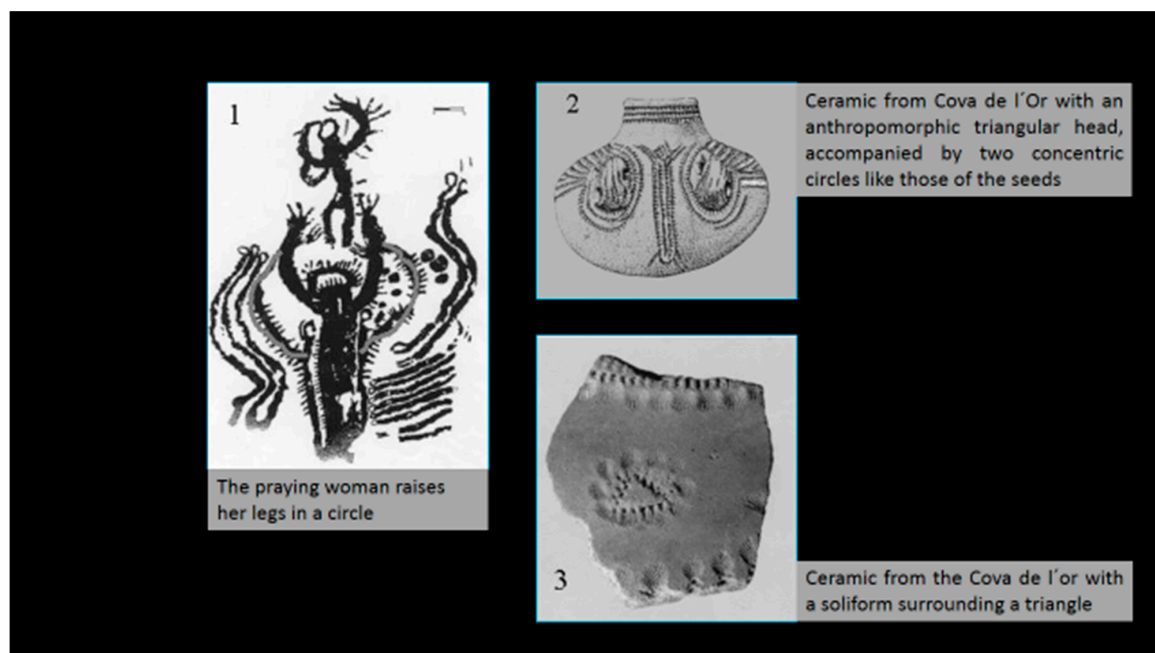


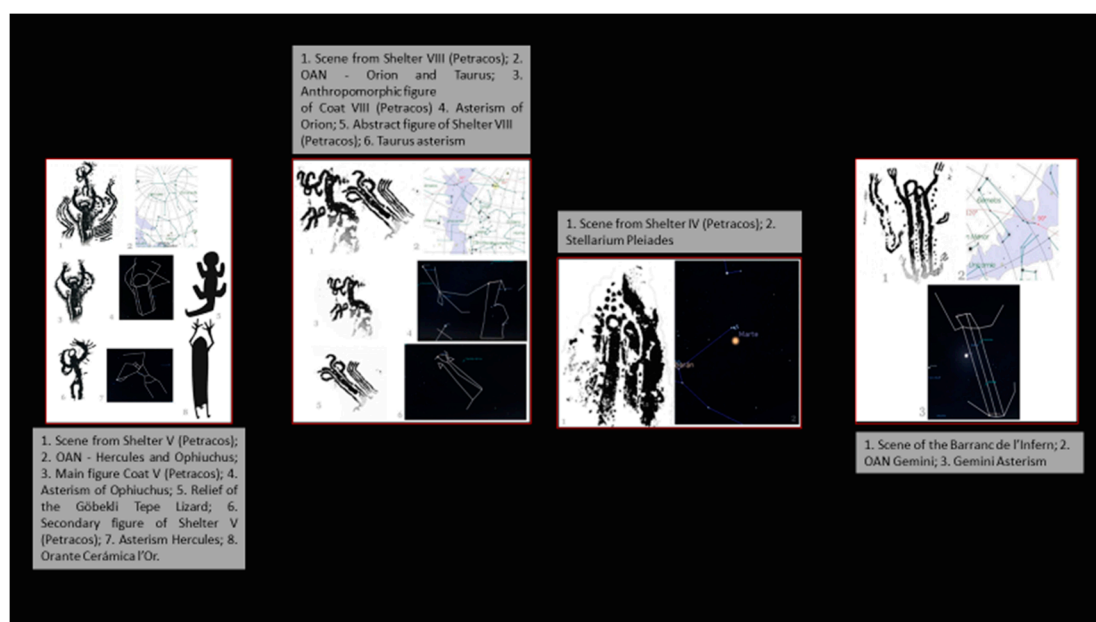
Figure 22. The circle and the sun in 3.

In shelter VII (Figure 23), the circle can be observed in some concentric rings that initiate one of the snake-shapes, while in the others, the “head” has a circular design. Finally, in shelter VIII, the circle is manifested in the object that the headless woman holds in her hand, as well as in the two figures that she has at her side. It is important to remember that a whole series of oval or circular points also appear in shelter IV, V, and VII, where the main figure praying has a circular head and raises his legs to form a circle and that—as I have already mentioned—the very scenography of the rocky shelter and its surroundings is also circular.



**Figure 23.** Concentric rings and serpentine rhythm in the images from shelter VII. This photo was taken by the author.

In this context, the use of circles and the consequent circular rhythm is associated with astronomical observation and the cult of the sun. The former, as scholars of Archeoastronomy have discovered (Figure 24), is evidenced by the very forms of the paintings, which are reminiscent of those of the star constellations: Hercules and Ophiuchus, in the shelter V; Orion and Taurus, in shelter VIII; and Stellarium Pleiades, in shelter IV. In the latter, the nine points which form a triangle and crown the central image with a circular head, simulate the Pleiades cluster and, above them, Mars as well.



**Figure 24.** The paintings of Pla de Petracos and the constellations. Fountain: (Urbano et al. 2020, pp. 159–63).

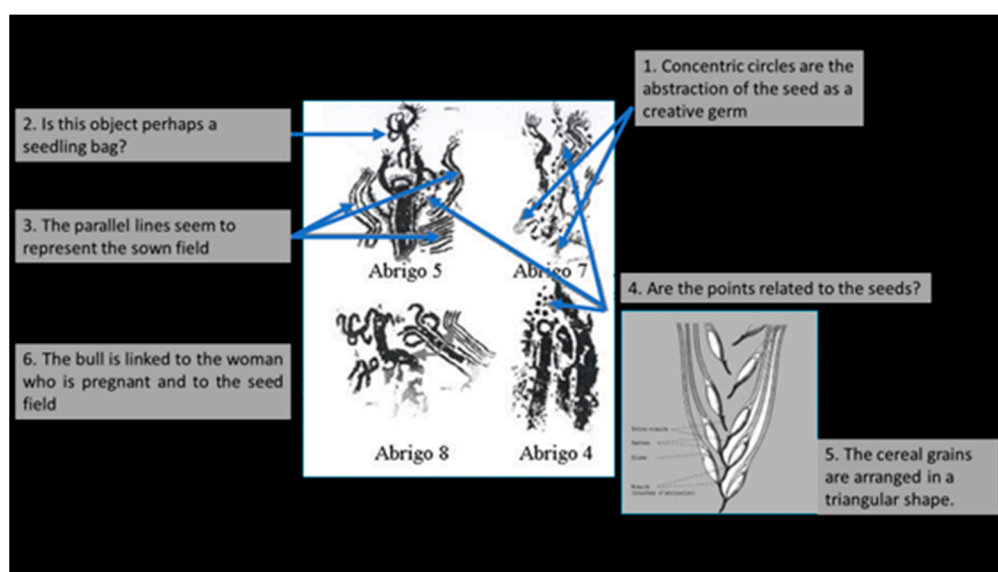
Besides the soliforms of the ceramics, in the paintings, the heads and arms of the anthropomorphs and the seeds give off some “sun rays” (Soler Díaz and Jiménez 1999, p. 223). This occurs, in particular, in the legs of the prayer, where these rays are abundantly concentrated; moreover, her head is precisely oriented in line with the sun (Urbano et al. 2020, p. 157). In fact, the gesture of this “priestess” or



“Mother Goddess” (Crespo Más 2007, p. 25) of the fertility linked to the agricultural activities of the Neolithic, would possibly indicate her attitude of praying to the sky and asking for rain to fertilize the land (Hernández and Martí 1999, p. 261). In this context, shelter IV where the prayer art is found would represent an agricultural ritual related to the changing of the season (Crespo Más 2007, p. 29) that takes place during the winter solstice. Likewise, it has been interpreted (Crespo Más 2007, p. 29) that the ritual territory would be associated with the constellation of Orion or the Pleiades, indicators of the passage from one season to another— whether dry or rainy—(Lévi-Strauss 2002a, pp. 216–37; 2002b, pp. 200–25).

#### 4.4. Mother Nature Is Associated with the Seed, the Sown Field, and the Bull

The aforementioned evidence indicates why the appearance of the seed and the sown field has a special singularity in Pla de Petracos (Figure 25). In fact, archaeologists have accepted that the two concentric circles that appear in the shelter VII personify “the abstraction of the vegetation with the seed as a creative germ” (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 57) (Figure 19, 3). The world of the seed and the sown field is also present in other paintings found in this sanctuary. An example of this can be found in the fluid circular and serpentine shape of the geometric motifs that, perhaps, reveal the idea of the growth of the plant from the germinal seed. This is expressed very well and precisely in the geometric motif that forms the seeds of shelter VII and that draws a form similar to that of the praying woman with her legs open in the birth position (Figure 19, 3).



**Figure 25.** Pla de Petracos appears to associate Mother Nature with the seed, the sown field, and the bull.

In the same way, the object that the anthropomorph in shelter V (Figure 25) carries in his left hand perhaps symbolizes a seed bag. In this context, the smaller size of this figure with “trousers” and its location above the one of the praying women could express that he is young (Crespo Más 2007, p. 21) and seems to come out of the big figure, from her open legs. Furthermore being sheltered between the big figure’s raised arms could suggest that the praying woman is sheltering a mortal human being or a “son” (Jordán Montes 2009, p. 65), who is carrying “the bread under his arm”<sup>5</sup>. Also she seems to pray to bring prosperity to the crops and to the humans raises a major question: are we witnessing a symbolic multiplication of the sacred power of the biggest, main, and central character? The total

<sup>5</sup> The municipal archaeologist of Alicante, Pablo Rosser Limiñana, also defends this idea.



scene is 180 cm in length, which underlines the sacredness of it and has led to it being considered as a hierophanic space (Jordán Montes 2009, p. 65). In any case, all of this is linked to the idea of fertility which I have been referring to in this article.

On the other hand, could the parallel lines found in Figure 25 of shelter V—the third line to the left of the prayer and the second and eighth ones to her right—and VIII shelter—the four parallel lines on the right—represent the sown fields? Also, could the numerous points in shelters IV, V and VII also be associated with the seeds? These types of lines and points are commonly found, at least, in societies that believe in the Pregnant Goddess of Vegetation (Gimbutas 1991, p. 237 ff), and in Paleolithic parietal art, whose red dots are connected to the animals (Clottes et al. 2001, p. 45). If this correlation is correct, then the points of shelter IV that have a triangular shape (Figure 25) of a vulva would express, as in the set of images of shelter V, the inseparable unity between the seed and the female vulva, as well as between the fertility of nature and that of human beings (Figure 21). This was confirmed by the schematic drawing of the cereal (Cauvin 1994, p. 75), whose grains are arranged in a triangular shape (Figure 25).

As we had indicated at the beginning of this work, in the Neolithic Mediterranean religions, Mother Nature is associated with the bull and its horns because of their magical power to assist with human birth and because they resemble the shape of the female womb with fallopian tubes. In this context, we agree with the interpretations that argue that the figure of in shelter VIII (Figure 26) looks like the head of a bull seen from the front (Hernández Pérez and Velasco 2003, p. 57; Soler Díaz and Jiménez 1999, p. 228). In this context, to support this position, it is enough to analyze the figures that this animal is associated with (Figure 25). To the left of this animal, there is a headless woman with a swollen belly, who “looks” directly and significantly at the bull and who is holding an object that also resembles this animal or its horns; to her right, there are the four parallel bars that—as I had said—could represent a cultivated field.



**Figure 26.** Shelter VIII. The head of a bull and its antlers. This photo was taken by the author.

If this explanation is correct, then the association between the fecundity of human life and that of nature would once again become evident. This is also exemplified by the bull's heads found in Europe, Anatolia, the Near East, and practically all of the Mediterranean (Gimbutas 1997, p. 54; Cauvin 1994, pp. 52, 122, 239).

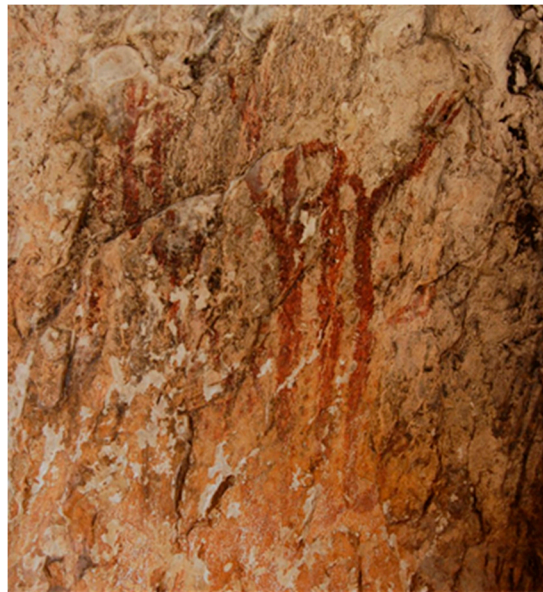
#### 4.5. *The Mother Goddess or the Cosmic Unity between Humans and Nature*

This art provides a manifestation of a desire for unity, incarnated in the Mother Goddess, between the human being and the cosmos, the sky and the earth, the diverse natural and artificial spaces, humans and Nature, men and women, and life and death. As has been proven, all of this is manifested in Pla de Petracos through the circularity of its territory, the described rituals, the significant connection of the paintings with the space of the rock and the surrounding mountains, the cave, the river, the paths, and the “harmonic” music. The three characters that are together and are considered to be a “family” (Soler Díaz and Jiménez 1999, p. 228) inside the cave of the shelter IV (Figure 27) would symbolize this yearning for fusion, complemented with the intergenerational solidarity expressed by the younger character—the “son”—located above the praying one—the “mother”.



**Figure 27.** Shelter IV. Three images together, a “family”, inside a cave. This photo was taken by the author.

In the Barranc de l’Infern (Set IV, shelter 11, Panel 5.1) there are some curious male and female figures (Figure 28) that are paired and are about 80 cm high, which indicate the hierophonic character of the scene and a desire for unity. Both figures carry circular heads, are apparently embraced by each other and raise—as if they were praying—their only and common pair of arms with thick fingers. In addition, their common legs are arched upwards—as in Pla de Petracos. Since they have only one trunk, only one pair of arms and legs, and share the same ritual gesture of raising their hands, we can deduce that they are a germinated androgynous being, radiating their power and cosmic fecundity (Jordán Montes 2009, p. 64). In addition, it is noteworthy that this being could aspire to be an androgynous figure to the mutual and total reintegration of opposite values as a way to reach a union with the bisexual divinity and the perfection that is inherent to it (Eliade 1984, p. 131). Not in vain, the primordial divinity of the Mother is perfect and autonomous and, as such, contains in her bosom both masculine and feminine conditions.



**Figure 28.** The androgyny of the Barranc de l’infern.

## 5. Final Coda

In this article, first of all, we have contextualized the images of Pla de Petracos in the early Neolithic agricultural and livestock society, in the religiosity of the Mother Goddess that it professes, in the natural and religious scenography of the territory that composes the sanctuary, in the material goods—mainly the “cardial” ceramics and the musical instruments, but also in the ritual objects—that were excavated in the archeological sites located in the surroundings, and in other examples, mainly from ancient European and Mediterranean cultures. Secondly, after this contextualization of the paintings, we proceeded to analyze them iconologically, which offered us suggestive information regarding their painters’ way of life and the religious thought that these paintings reveal.

For this reason, Pla de Petracos exhibits a coherent articulation between the natural and religious scenography and the paintings that are arranged there. Specifically, as we believe we have demonstrated in a thorough and analytical way, Pla de Petracos constitutes an important sanctuary dedicated to the Neolithic Mother Goddess. Moreover, it is oriented astronomically towards certain constellations, thereby providing a guide in the dark night for human souls and divine paths. In this sanctuary, the sun takes on particular importance, which, with a feminized face, becomes the guarantor of the energetic power of life and the fertility of plants, animals, and humans.

For all these reasons, we argue that this singular sanctuary, despite having similarities with others installed in the Mediterranean world, is one of the richest and most interesting from the Neolithic period. This is because of the careful and detailed images found there which it reveal to us the symbolic, religious, and matriarchal thought of a Neolithic society. Indeed, Pla de Petracos constitutes a significant example of the way in which the early Neolithic worshipped the Mother Goddess, whose echoes and reverberations still resound today in contemporary societies.

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