Cultural Constructions of the Uterus in Pre-modern Societies, Past and Present

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The present volume is the result of the workshop "The matrix of the world: cultural constructions of the uterus", which took place in Rome on 21-22 November 2013. The aim of the workshop was to analyse in deep the multiple ways of imaging the female womb, as well as the variety of values attributed to it, in pre-modern and ethnographic societies from a historical perspective, and to see where and how the views of different cultural traditions intersected when dealing with the matrix.

In religious, philosophical, and medical discourses, the uterus has been the focus many authors have used in the construction of cultural-determined ideas of women's bodies, as well as of gender notions of what women were, and what position and roles they played in society. The Hippocratic notion of the "wandering womb", which still inspires streams of scholar literature nowadays, is a good example of how a specific picturing of the uterus can not only determine patterns of medical intervention and body control, but also validate ideas of social position, moral values and personal capacities of women. The strong academic emphasis on specific cultural phenomena such as the "wandering womb", however, has probably overshadowed other ideas, representations, attitudes and thoughts present in ancient and, more generally, pre-modern[1] trends of thought and practice of other groups and areas. This book intends to offer a first approach to the topic.

Starting from a cross-cultural lexicographic survey of the terms for "womb", most languages show a multiplicity of flexible and polysemantic terms to name it that go from the general ("belly") to the specific, often recurring to analogy and metaphor. It is significant that the womb can be named after the words for "woman" and "mother". In Nahuatl, the womb can receive the names "*cihuatl* /the woman/, *cihuayotl* /womanhood/, *nantli* /the mother/, *nanyotl* /motherhood/, *tenantiliztli* /that which carries out the activity of mother of the people/, *tlacatcayotl* /the shaper of human beings /" (see Lupo in this volume). In a similar way, the Greek *mêtra*

[1] We follow the definition of "pre-modern" given by Andreeva, Couto-Ferreira, and Töpfer (2014: 280).

means "mother"; the Latin *matrix* derives from mater "mother"; the Sumero-Akkadian form $\text{šа}_3\text{-tur}_3$ / *šassūru* "womb" also serves to refer to mother-goddesses; while (a)garin, *agarinnu* can equally refer to "crucible", "mother" and "womb".[2] Because of its key function in the processes of generation and reproduction, the womb becomes the mother within and the creative engine of the body; and because the womb is the ultimate sign and prove of womanhood, it is comprehensible it can also be named after the words for "woman" and "the female". Taking this association to the extreme, the assertion that women are wombs can serve to explain misogynistic attitudes that, by reducing women's roles to their reproductive capacities, justify the intervention upon female sexuality, as well as the cultural-medical restrain and control over women's bodies. Note, for example, how marriage and pregnancy are prescribed as cures for hysteria in the Corpus Hippocraticum; or the concept of women as wombs promoted by Aristotle. As Marzia Soardi puts it: "Aristotle motherhood conception is represented in a twofold aspect grounded in the uterine model. On one hand every mother is identified with its organ" (see Soardi in this volume).

Another point of interest regards metaphor, euphemism and symbolic representations of the womb. The uterus has been represented and understood in terms of vases and containers (the horn-shaped womb that brings together the animal and the vase worlds; the *qerehet* vase of ancient Egypt, made by the god Khnoum, where the embryo grows; the imiut or animal skin that operates as an amniotic sac, and where the pieces of Osiris' body are gathered together;[3] the jar, cup and wineskin of the Corpus Hippocraticum;[4] the ostrich eggs and gourds among communities of rural Sudan);[5] of space and architecture (the Central-American temazcalli; the saunas in NW Spain of the Iron Age; the stall and the prison in ancient Mesopotamia);[6] of similarities to animals (the womb described as an animal that moves, in the Corpus Hippocraticum;[7] the frog-womb of South Italian communities);[8] to landscape, agriculture,

[2] Cavigneaux and al-Rawi (1995: 195).
[3] See Spieser (2006), and Spieser in this volume.
[4] Veronique Dasen quotes the terms *angos* "pot, jar"; *arystêr* "cup"; *askos* "swollen wineskin" to refer to the distended womb; *lekythos* "narrow-necked jar"; *sikuai* "cupping instruments" (Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann, 2006: 240).
[5] Boddy (1982: 691).
[6] See, respectively, Lupo, García-Quintela, and Couto-Ferreira in this volume.
[7] King (1998: 222).
[8] Pizza (2012: 241-252).

water courses; to crevices, pits and caves, like the subterranean cavern where the seeds of all the created are kept, a womb that has created all the human groups populating the earth (Lupo, in this volume), and which grants fertility (Håland, in this volume);[9] to mountains (the pregnant womb). This wealth of associations reveals ideas regarding the complex perceived nature of the female body and the womb as a hot organ that bakes and concocts; as a space that swallows the dead; or as a microcosm that reflects and reproduces the structure and functioning of the macrocosm where the physiology of gestation and birth is applied to architecture to convey messages of life, renewal and rebirth.

Particular anatomical and physiological conceptions of women's bodies have an impact in the pathological concepts and therapeutic interventions a historical reality practices. What's more, they also reveal aspects of the qualities, roles, and meaning of women from a social viewpoint. Thus, the dependence (or independence) of women from their wombs recognised by different cultural settings could have an impact in the management and experience of sexuality, healthcare, and social life. For instance, the concept present in classical authors that the vagina was connected to the mouth fuelled medical ideas on menstrual blood being able to be purged also through the mouth or the nostrils. In a similar way, the conception of the womb as a moist organ made possible the formulation of the statement that "when the womb is short of fluid, it becomes too light, and tends to wander around the body in search of moisture".[10] In medieval Japan religious thought, Buddhist elites questioned the possibilities and capacities of women to reach illumination.[11] In dealing with aspects of material culture and the therapeutic use of magical gems to treat diseases of the womb, it becomes clear that uterine maladies are mainly concerned with the control of bodily fluids, whose overabundance or insufficiency may alter the good functioning of the body. Being able to open or close the

[9] See also Hardacre (1983). Hardacre analsyses the ritual of ascending the cave at the Ōmine-san peak practiced by ascetics or *yamabushi* who go to caves "to absorb the maximum spiritual power of the mountain and the deities who dwell there" (Hardacre, 1983: 150). Central aspects of the ritual, such as penetrating in the mountain through openings, climbing and ascending it, as well as its coldness, humidity, darkness, and narrowness, have been interpreted in terms of womb and rebirth imagery.

[10] Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann (2006: 242).

[11] This was mentioned by Anna Andreeva during the presentation of her paper "Understanding the Uterus in Premodern Japan", presented during the workshop "The matrix of the world: cultural constructions of the uterus" (22 November 2013, Rome).

body according to need, then, is what very often makes possible the restitution of health (see, for instance, Mastrocinque in this volume). The body, as a matter of fact, reproduces the ways and structure of the creation as a whole.

What's more, research on female bodies reveals key elements of men's physiology and social gendered roles as well. Ancient Greek medical texts, for example, show gender constructions were based on the differences attributed to man's and woman's bodies: the female body is wet, spongy, retains moisture, and therefore is "more emotional and less stable"; while the male body is dry, compact, "with a morally strong temper".[12]

In an even more elaborate way, the creative and generative powers of wombs may be appropriated by males (see, for example, the womb of God in the work of Hrabanus Maurus, in Mistry in this volume).[13] The whole process of gestation and pregnancy, which is intrinsically linked with women and with female physiology, serves to explain conversion and life within the precepts of the church, while the womb makes it possible to shape the idea of the church as a mother and the union of believers (mother and sons) through baptism, which is understood in terms of birth. At the same time, the symbolic language of miscarriage and abortion from the womb conveys ideas of heresy. Besides, the unriped or imperfect foetus may help to criticise other religious traditions (such as Judaism): "Ecclesiastical regulations against abortion often, though not always, gendered abortion as a female offence. Consequently, when expulsion from the womb signified alienation from the church, authors had to take care because the woman in question was *mater ecclesia*"; therefore, "most churchmen who wielded *abortivus* imagery carefully cast heretics, sinners and other ecclesiastical outsiders as both product and cause of their mother's abortion" (Mistry in this volume).

Having this in mind, with this volume we intend to transcend Eurocentric models of female body understanding and representation by bringing into the discussion a number of case studies taken from a larger number of cultural and social historical realities (the Mediterranean, the Ancient Near East, Pre-Columbian America, East Asia, Medieval Europe, etc.) that are explored from the methodological perspectives offered by a wide range of disciplines and epistemologies (history, philology, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies). Through the papers selected, we want to pinpoint

[12] Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann (2006: 240).
[13] See also Bynum (1982: esp. pp. 110-169).

and highlight the differences of discourse between medical authors, religious authors, philosophers, practitioners and performers, and communities engaged in every day practices. The papers gathered in this volume address a set of historical questions that bring out the multiple aspects associated with the uterus through the dissection of both learned and popular sources, material evidence, daily practices, iconography, and representation. Some of the contributions explore anatomical and physiological conceptions of women's bodies; of women's bodies in relation to men's bodies; and how these particular ideas on women's bodies influence not only pathological concepts and therapeutic interventions, but also reveal aspects of the qualities, roles, and attributes of women from a social viewpoint, ultimately reflecting upon the appropriation of women's bodies by male-dominated societies. Other papers explore how notions of the womb can be contextualized in larger bodies of medical-physiological knowledge and practice, touching upon the transmission of textual traditions on anatomy, physiology, embryology, and childbirth, as well as on the translation, adaption and rearrangement of concepts, principles and theories in the long run. Other aspects dealt with in the dossier concern the ways of picturing the unseen in both the textual and visual records, namely the different modes of imagining the uterus and of representing what happens in women's insides, and how they may inform specific therapeutic interventions. Last but not least, the contributions explore the symbolic, representational, and metaphoric dimensions of the uterus; the associations between female anatomy and the world of the dead, nature, and fertility; the relationships established between landscape and space; the links between the animal world and the female body; and the entanglements between language, environment, and experience.

The rise of the history of the body as discipline in the 1970s made it possible to illuminate "(…) otherwise effaced and invisible dimensions of the history of religion, politics, gender" (Furth, 2009: 5). Because of its intimate, indissoluble relation to the fact of being a woman; because of its hiddenness within the body and darkness; its communication with the outside world and its accessibility through the vagina; its capacity to contain and give shelter; to engender and procreate; to expulse and give birth to both fully formed and truncated, deformed beings; its potential to go in and out, the womb offers a wealth of possibilities to think the world.

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I

THE IRON AGE SAUNAS OF NW SPAIN AS METAPHORS OF THE UTERUS

MARCO V. GARCÍA QUINTELA

Purpose and Method

We will offer an interpretation of the ideology behind the construction of saunas during the Iron Age in the northwest Iberian Peninsula. The first step consisted of visiting them, studying the written references and proposing a "thick" description (Geertz, 1973: 3-30). This said, as we are dealing with archaeological elements, an effort has been made to break free from the tyranny of texts that has arisen as a result of recent archaeological theory. The aim is to overcome the proposals of a philological archaeology designed to confirm the contents of ancient texts, or to find the material references of these texts by relegating archaeology to a secondary position. Nevertheless, denouncing the excesses of philological archaeology may also lead us to overlook its virtues, such as helping to understand ancient Rome or Athens. As a result, we have used an approach that involves collaboration between independent types of archaeology, philology or history that all seek a mutual understanding. We can illustrate this idea with an example related to our argument: the representation of votive offerings in the form of uteruses in ancient Greece and pre-imperial Rome.

Lloyd (1993: 167-193 = 1975) studied the uncertain, late (3rd century BC) and controversial relationship between erudite Greek medicine (expressed through scientific texts) and the anatomical dissection of human beings (and to a lesser extent, animals). The reason alleged by the author (Lloyd, 1993: 188; 1975: 140) is that the absence of a suitable theory regarding what had to be observed would have prevented the carrying out of dissections (cf. Byl, 1997). Archaeology has confirmed this perception, because the anatomical human votive offerings found in Greek health-

giving sanctuaries almost exclusively feature external organs (Van Straten, 1981: 105-151). The most important collection of these offerings is from the sanctuary of the Asklepeion of Corinth, with more than one hundred specimens from between the last quarters of the fifth and fourth centuries (Roebuck, 1951: 128-138; Lang, 1977: 9). Only one of them has been interpreted as being a stomach (Roebuck, 1951: 115, 128, plate 45; Lang, 1977: 29) although, according to Van Straten (1981: 124), it may be a uterus, the only other example of which was found in Kos (Van Straten, 1981: 132); this leads the author to conclude that: "that internal organs are very rare in Greece […], as compared with Italy" (Van Straten, 1981: 150).[1]

Indeed, in Italy there are numerous representations of internal organs, including the uteruses found in sanctuaries associated with health or fertility from virtually all over the peninsula from the end of the fourth century (Comella, 1981). Turfa (1994: 227) provides a description:

> Uterus models, in a variety of types, although clearly highly schematic, do not resemble any animal uterus […] The flat-backed terracotta model is instead oval, with a cylindrical neck sectioned perpendicular to the cervix, often with concentric circles or a cut-out or flattened opening to indicate the lumen. The surface is invariably covered with transverse straight or wavy ridges, apparently to indicate labor contractions, or perhaps just to emphasize the muscular character of the organ […]. Some model uteri contain details which can only have been observed in cases of human surgery or dissection.

This was verified by Baggieri (1998), who used X-Rays to study more than 400 examples, observing that nearly all of them had a small clay sphere (in some cases two spheres), making them the first known representations of life in the womb, and in any event, much earlier than any of the medical descriptions contained in ancient writings.

If such dissimilar situations occur when literary evidence and material remains coexist, then we could believe that the situation is desperate when

[1] This idea can be completed with the representation of uteruses found in magical Egyptian gemstones from the Roman Imperial period (Barb, 1953; Michel, 2004: 334-341; Dasen, 2008; see also the article of Mastrocinque in this volume). The differences seen in the representation with regard to the anatomical votive offerings and mixed cultural context of Egypt, especially in the specific sphere of magic, mean it is difficult to include in the same register these testimonies and those that concern us from clearly public contexts, whether as an expression of the types of religion of the cities, or as erudite medicine.

faced with the absence of the literary evidence. The only means of study possible would be to present the objects that were found in a strictly positivist way. However, the difference between the Greek and Italian situations also shows that there are cultural practices inspired by complex ideas for which we have no written testimonies, such as the representations of uteruses in Italy, while at the same time, a series of anatomical investigations by Greek doctors were not recorded, or only in an elusive way and without leaving any kind of physical evidence (Lloyd, 1993: 167-193 = 1975). In this case, it is valid to propose an argument in which texts and objects are presented together, exploring the sources that apply to each of them. In this way we will be able to understand the biases that led to their embodiment as fragments of a complex puzzle, for which we may never expect to have enough pieces.

What happens in an ancient Celtic cultural context? In many cases, as in much of the Iberian Peninsula, and specifically its northwest corner, we lack any direct testimonies. There are isolated references from ancient authors, and a handful of epigraphic texts that refer to the presence of Celts. Also, certain linguistic references in place names, god names and ancient personal names point towards the presence of types of "Celtic" language. But on the face of it, there is nothing to support the idea that the cultural sphere was in any way similar to that found in mediaeval Welsh or Irish writings, or to that described by ancient writers in other parts of Europe. To overcome this problem, we propose a comparative argument. The aim is to do something similar to the discussion of the votive offerings in the shape of a uterus from Greece and Italy and in relation to the written texts, but on another scale. In other words, the aim is to identify the pieces of a complex puzzle, in which it seems reasonable that our saunas could have formed a part of the puzzle, in the knowledge that we are unaware of any others. Also, instead of focusing on writings on Mediterranean archaeology (and philological archaeology), we will instead use an Indo-European framework of reference in order to situate our imaginary puzzle. Furthermore, our aim is not, as in the case of the Mediterranean example, to support the idea of a direct relationship between written texts and forms, but instead to understand the general lines of a design in which these are only partial aspects, and which we only know in an incomplete form. The general outlines of this design can be presented as follows.

A similar type of embryology to that found in ancient Greece can be seen in the Zoroastrian tradition. However, the eschatology and funerary practices are coherent over time, and also coherent with this embryology: the component elements of the cosmos are divine elements that come

together to produce the human embryo, and are unresponsive to dead bodies. The towers of silence used by the Zoroastrians to treat their dead are physical evidence of this ideology. Then, the elements also appear in the Celtic world, associated with life and death. This said, while the "thick" description of the saunas invites us to consider them as a "concentrator" of the elements, we can suspect that this concept was applied in the construction of the saunas as a metaphor of the uterus, and from a wider perspective, as the perfect antithesis of the towers of silence. We will now go on to explore the details that support this theory.

Description of the Saunas

A total of 26 Iron Age saunas are known, in very different states of preservation (fig. 1). During the 1930s and 1940s, these types of buildings were identified without any clear definition of their function, thanks to excavation work carried out in Briteiros, Coaña and Pendia. More and more examples gradually appeared, and by the 1950s they were identified (with some caution) as being saunas, an idea that was firmly accepted from the 1970s onwards (Silva, 2007; Villa, 2012; García and Santos, 2015). Recent archaeological publications and presentations have emphasised the importance of studying these structures, and the need to reconsider their spatial distribution (Fernández *et al.*, 2014, Blanco *et al.*, 2015). I will present the buildings, highlighting the differences found between the northern Cantabrian region, and the southern Duero-Miño region.

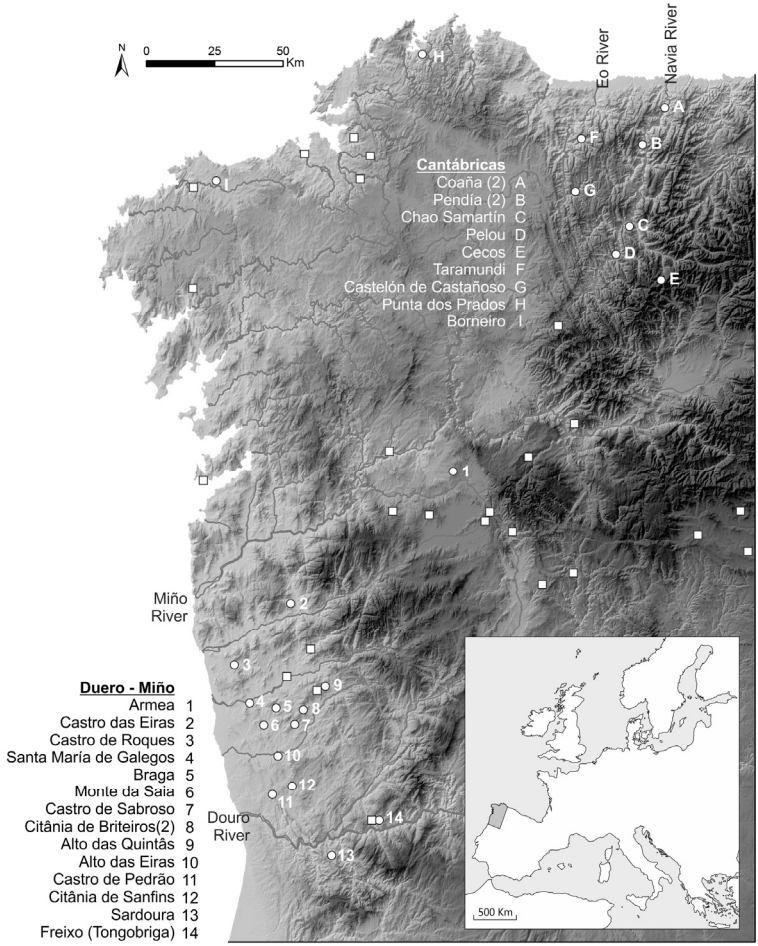

Figure 1: Distribution of the saunas. The circles indicate the locations of the saunas, while the squares show toponyms ending in –briga, indicative of pre-Roman Celtic languages.

The saunas are located on the periphery of hill forts in two different ways. In the Cantabrian region, they form a part of the habitat, close to a monumental door and a large building used for communal and ritual purposes (Villa, 2012: 97-98). In the Duero-Miño region they are set apart from the inhabited area, meaning they are only found by chance (Briteiros, Braga) or as a result of demolition work (Sardoura, Alto de Quintãs). They

form a part of the large hill forts typically found in the north of Portugal and south of Galicia (with the exception of Braga, as it lacks any apparent relationship with contemporary habitats). They also reveal a unique dialectic between the sauna, which is buried in a low position, and communal structures on the high points of the settlements (Armea and Outeiro dos Pendóns, the name of the acropolis; Briteiros and the "Council House"; Monte Padrão and a structure similar to the "Council House" of Briteiros), although without such a direct relationship as that seen in the southern saunas.

Figure 2: Views of the saunas. Northern: A. Coaña; B. Punta dos Prados (where the notches can be seen into which a stone was inserted, as in the saunas shown in figures 3E and 3F. Southern: C. Santa María de Galegos, seen from the fireplace, showing the circular chimney; D. Briteiros, with the entrance in the foreground, containing the water cistern; E. Alto das Eiras, with the remnants of the area used as the hearth in the foreground. Steam rooms: F. Briterios, made of large granite slabs; G. Castelón de Castañoso during excavation work, built using stone blocks, with the hearth in the background, showing an added column that was removed after restoration work, beneath which a cistern to hold water was found.

The buildings have a longitudinal ground plan with an entrance at one end, and the hearth at the other (fig. 2). In the north, the buildings have three rooms: an atrium, steam room, and hearth. Water was brought from nearby springs and poured into stone cisterns (Punta dos Prados, Coaña) or pits (Pendia 1, Castelón de Castañoso) located between the steam room and the hearth. This layout was altered during the final period of use, making an opening through which firewood could be added to the fire from outside. In the Duero-Miño region, the structures are buried, at least partly, and have four rooms (an atrium, "ante-room", steam room, and hearth), and water was channelled into the atrium from springs, which is why they are at a lower level in relation to the inhabited areas.

Figure 3: Pedras formosas. Southern: A. Braga (without decoration), B. Alto das Eiras (profusely decorated), C. Sanfins (only the entrance), D. Briteiros (covered with simple decorations). Northern: E. Borneiro, placed in its correct position following its discovery; F. Castelón de Castañoso, discovered in a fragmented but complete state during excavation work.

Inside the sauna, access to the steam room is monumentalised (fig. 3). In both cases there are a number of monoliths, which due to the profuse decoration on the first examples discovered in the Duero-Miño region, were given the Portuguese name of *pedras formosas* (= "beautiful stones"). As they marked the entrance to the steam room, they were never exposed to daylight, something that is quite striking if we consider that these monoliths are some of the most outstanding artistic representations of this culture. Their equivalents in the Cantabrian saunas have only been recently identified: the same team (from the company Terraarqueos) identified the *pedras formosas* from the saunas of Castelón de Castañoso and Borneiro (López, 2009). They consist of a large, relatively shapeless monolithic slab, with a carving in the shape of an arch on their lower section. They are located at the entrance to the steam room, inserted into stone grooves on the sides of the opening (already known in Coaña and Punta dos Prados) in the same way as a guillotine blade. We are therefore seeing two ways of highlighting the uniqueness of accessing the steam rooms: one can only enter by dragging oneself along on one's back (fig. 4).

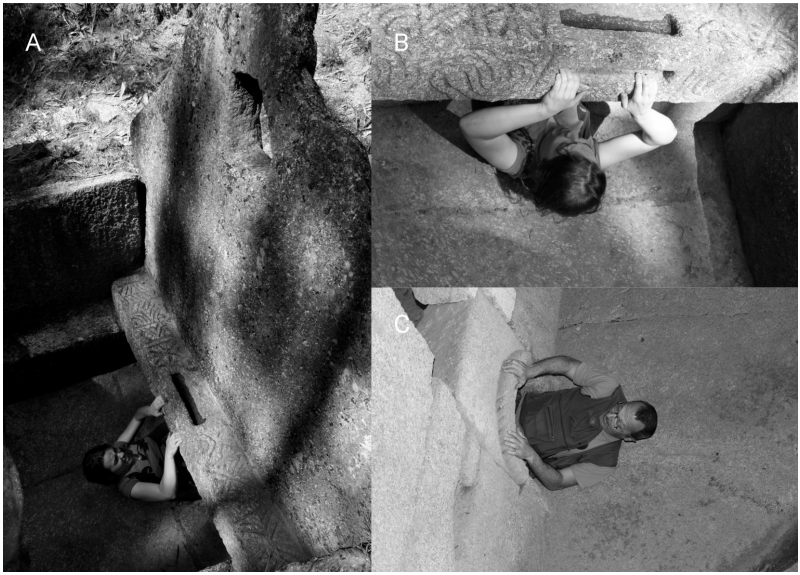

Figure 4: Exiting the steam room. A and B. Two views of the operation in the sauna of Santa María de Galegos (note the undecorated pedra although with a profusely decorated stone beam at a tangent to the opening) and C. from the sauna of Freixo (Tongobriga), showing the corded decoration around the opening, as in figure 3C.

The presence of astral motifs in the decoration of the *pedras* found in the Miño-Duero region justified undertaking an archaeo-astronomic study, which revealed differences between the two groups. Out of the ten saunas that were studied in the Cantabrian region, three had solstitial orientations (the two that are superimposed in Coaña and the one in Taramundi), and no other pattern has been detected. However, four of the eleven saunas that were studied in the Duero-Miño region are oriented towards the main southern lunastice, and another three towards dates that are compatible with the Celtic start of season festivals (García *et al.*, 2014).

The Cantabrian saunas are made of schist blocks, although large slabs are also used on the floors (Castelón de Castañoso, Chao Samartín, Pendia 1, Taramundi) while in the Duero-Miño region, the main material used is granite. These construction methods are not a result of any technical imperative. In both regions, stone blocks are the most usual construction method, with larger slabs only used for lintels and thresholds. However, while stone blocks are the main system used in the northern saunas (with the exception of the *pedras formosas* and the floor slabs), in the southern saunas, large granite blocks differentiate the saunas from other structures.

Current consensus about their function has focused on debates regarding their chronology. Arguments between Romanists and Indigenists were resolved in favour of the latter thanks to the work of A. Villa (2012), which was based on C14 dating, and whose results were recently corroborated (Fernández *et al.*, 2014). However, we lack any similar information for the southern saunas, although because of arguments raised in other locations discussed in this text, we also believe that the Indigenist option should prevail. In turn, the suggestions regarding their social use are reduced to two. In a high-impact study, Almagro and Álvarez (1993) proposed that they were associated with warrior initiation rites. More recently, A. Villa (2012) suggested interpreting them as sanctuaries. Based on these ideas, we will attempt to demonstrate the sexual/embryological symbolism that is implicit in the physical structure of the saunas, through two observations.

Firstly, in constructing the sauna in Braga, a phallic Bronze Age idol was re-used, while in the sauna of Freixo/Tongobriga, a serpent shape is carved into the axis of the entrance to the steam room (fig. 5). Secondly, the way of exiting the steam room is clearly a metaphor of giving birth. The narrow opening between the *pedras formosas* only allows a person to cross through them on their back, with their head facing forward, and placing their hands into the grooves carved on both sides of the *pedra* for this

purpose (fig. 4). Also, users of the steam room would have been naked and covered in a mixture of steam and sweat, and would have slid out of the steam room on the water caused by condensation that was channelled to the outside. In the case of the most widely published saunas, it can be seen that the floor level slopes down from the steam room towards the outside, in order to remove the water caused by condensation. Therefore, the steam room should be considered as a physical metaphor of the uterus, where the process of gestation was recreated through a combination of fire and water, culminating with a birth.

Figure 5: Phallic symbols in the saunas. A and B. Braga, showing a phallic Bronze Age idol that was re-used in the entrance to the sauna; C and D. Freixo (Tongobriga), with a snake-like motif carved into the floor, perpendicular to the entrance leading into the steam room, highlighted with water.

As in the case of the Italian uteruses we referred to previously, here we can see the archaeological footprint of an embryological idea without any literary references. Also, the representation is of a high quality, because as Turfa pointed out, the neck of the uterus is very well defined, as occurs in these saunas, with narrow openings carved into the monumental *pedras formosas* and because in the case of the less-decorated *pedras formosas*, the opening is precisely the area that is highlighted.

Also, the saunas serve to concentrate the elements. Fire and water are basic in order to produce steam, although the importance of air is evident, as the structure functions as a chimney that draws the air required for combustion from outside towards the furnace at the back, also making it possible to adjust the intensity of the fire and the temperature in the steam room. Finally, the earth also plays a pertinent role, especially in the underground structures of the south, but also as a stone structure in all of the cases, as none of the technical requirements for the saunas to function correctly require this material.

So far we have discussed the results of a detailed observation of the saunas and their physical structure. To justify this interpretation and give it a greater cultural and ideological depth, we will have to examine aspects of the Indo-European tradition regarding the role of the elements in the composition of the world, and in relation to embryological and/or eschatological theories.

The Elements of the Zoroastrian Tradition: From Embryology to Eschatology

Here our starting point is based on the writings of B. Lincoln on Zoroastrian texts. He begins by translating and commenting on a Zoroastrian text (*Zâdspram* 30.14-19) as an expression of an ideology that associates embryology and social speculation (Lincoln, 1988a). The text refers to the four fluids that comprise the organism, their location in the organs of the body, and their classification according to the coordinates of wet/dry and hot/cold. These fluids run through the body and are concentrated in the head, from where they continue to the spine and are finally expelled as semen, leading to the birth of another human being. Lincoln (1988b) also studied a Pahlavi text (*Indian Bundahišn* 16.1-6) with embryological ideas, highlighting the different role played by men and women in the process of conception, caused by the conjunction of opposing elements, leading to the birth of male or female children

depending on different balances. The final passage classifies the elements as being male (sky, metal, wind and fire) or female (water, earth, plants and fish). It is also relevant that five of these elements symbolise the Aməša Spənta, divinities that highlight aspects of the supreme god, Ahura Mazda (Kellens, 2006: 132-139).

Subsequently, Lincoln (2001) explored the similarities between Greek and Iranian thought with regard to these matters. Lincoln provided a series of texts, suggesting that their similarities could be a result of an Indo-European legacy. However, he ended by referring to the difficulties underlying these narratives, and the existence of similar concepts in non-Indo-European cultures. The series ends with an article in which Lincoln and Herrenschmidt (2004) explore the key dualistic aspects of Iranian cosmogony and cosmology. The issues dealt with in this series are included as an example of the homology between the micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos in Iranian tradition.

These studies are overshadowed by the problem regarding the genetic relationship between Iranian concepts and Greek thought. This topic is of interest to us, because its explanation depends on it being considered as an Indo-European legacy. We have already evaluated the changeable opinion of Lincoln, but Gignoux (2001) provided a number of Syrian texts that served as a bridge between the Greek and Zoroastrian texts, further indicating that the transfer of embryological ideas from one culture to another could be explained as a result of the radical rejection by the Zoroastrian culture of contact with dead bodies, which means that their knowledge or ideas about this matter could not have been autochthonous. However, although these embryological ideas came about as a result of contact with the Greek culture, in Zoroastrianism there was an ancient, autonomous belief regarding the relationship between the body and world, with eschatological features. This eschatology would have served as the foundations upon which the Greek influence took root. We will now go on to explore a number of aspects of this eschatology.

Zoroastrian eschatology includes cosmological aspects and a complex expression of the nature of the humans, their material and spiritual components, and the relationship between these elements in life and after death (Kellens, 1995; Pirart, 2012). Here we will focus on the principles dealing with how to treat the dead in order to avoid contaminating the world, and how these ideas took shape in the ‘towers of silence’ or *dakhmas* (Karaka, 1884: 199-213; Modi, 1922: 70-73, 245-252).

Zoroastrian tradition includes several funeral rituals (Boyce, 1982: 54-55, 210-11), although the tombs of Cyrus in Pasargadae and those of the Achaemenid kings in Nasq-i-Rustam reveal the intention to avoid contaminating the earth with the body. Different types of coffins are known from successive periods that were also intended to prevent any type of contact between the body and the earth. It is likely that the use of the towers of silence to dispose of bodies came about as a result of contact with Islam. In any event, it was from the moment when this contact occurred that their use is known, until their disappearance in the present day.

The *dakhmas* are built to avoid contaminating the elements (fire, earth and water –Aməša Spənta) with the *Druj Nasu* or "the Creature of the Lie", called "Corpse-Matter", one of the most horrific offences. Greek ethnographic sources refer to how the Persians rejected bringing fire into contact with dead bodies, and that cremation carried the death penalty (Herodotus III, 16.2-3; Strabo XV, 3.14); the *Vendidad*[2] states that these types of crimes are unpardonable (Farg. I.13, 17) and suggests, as Strabo mentions, that the guilty party should be put to death (Farg. VIII.74). Fargard III only contains details of how to avoid contaminating the earth with bodies, an idea that is also extended to include water (Farg. VII.25). Other aspects of the towers of silence are designed to prevent the elements becoming contaminated in any way. They must be located "on the highest peaks, where you know there are always scavenger dogs and scavenger birds" (Farg. VI.45) and far away from inhabited areas. Steps must also be taken to prevent these animals from bringing the stripped bones into contact with water and trees (Farg. VI.46-47). The Zoroastrians raised structures that were beyond the reach of dogs, foxes and wolves, where rain water could not stagnate, "avoiding contact between the body and the earth, and where it would be clothed with the light of the sky, and retaining the sun" (Farg. VI.50-51). All of these factors make the towers of silence the most pernicious places that can be imagined (Farg. VII.viii. 56).

What interests us here is the consecration ceremony used for the towers of silence. These are known as *tana* after the name of the cord that is stretched out on the ground to define the layout of the building. The cord is used to make a type of embroidery on the ground, supported by 301 nails laid out in a precise shape (Modi, 1922: 245-247). Beforehand, five *baj* prayers are said in honour of the divinities associated with the soul and

[2] I have used Darmesteter (1880).

with the elements (including Mazda and Amәša Spәnta) whose permission is requested in order to divide off a part of the land: "though it is wrong to contaminate the ground with the bodies of the dead, we beseech Thee [Ahura Mazda] to permit us to occupy this enclosed piece of ground (Spendarmad), and no more, for laying the bodies of departed souls" (Karaka, 1884: 202-203). A more precise testimony is offered by Anquetil-Duperron (1771: 589) who explains that the aim is to "suspend" the structure in the air:

> Après avoir enfoncé tous ces clous, on entoure trois fois les quatre grands d'un cordon de cent fils d'or ou de coton, en disant le Vadj Sérosch. Ces fils marquent que le plancher du Dakhmé, que le bâtiment entier est, pour ainsi dire, suspendu et ne touche pas à la terre.

Returning to the Zoroastrian argument, the embryological texts from Iran explain the conditions under which life is produced as a result of elements coming together in the uterus, although these arguments may not be genuine. However, the eschatology and funerary rituals that take shape in the towers of silence disassociate the elements from death and the body. The ideology is coherent, although the embryological aspect has Greek influences. In order to continue with our argument, we need to seek out comparable ideas in the Celtic tradition.

Sterckx (2005) provides the text that serves as the starting point, as he explains the physiological concepts that underlie the practices of the Celts that consisted of cutting off the heads of enemy warriors and the breasts of women prisoners. However, he does not discuss the composition of the human organism based on the elements. The topic exists, but it is difficult to analyse, as in the same way as the Iranian texts we have presented, there is debate as to whether it has been contaminated by external, Christian traditions. Therefore, it is necessary to seek further support to this argument.

The Elements in Celtic Traditions: Embryology, Eschatology and Sociology

Firstly we will consider traditions regarding the so-called "Adam Octipartite", found in apocryphal Christian texts written in Latin and vernacular languages in mediaeval Europe from the Balkans to Ireland. Grimm (1883: 559-571) identified the theme, and Stokes (1862: xl-xli.) introduced Irish literature into the debate. The text he published is divided into three parts; the first refers to Adam as having been created from eight

components of the universe; the second refers to the element used to make each part of his body:

> The part of the earth, this is the man's body; the part of the sea, this is the man's blood; the part of the sun, his face and his countenance: [the part of the clouds….]; the part of the wind, the man's breath; the part of the stones, his bones; the part of the Holy Ghost, his soul; the part that was made of the Light of the World, this is his piety.

The third includes a characterollogy. Stokes (1870-1872: 261-262) published on his own account a French manuscript from the fifteenth century, "which reads like a literal translation of the Irish myth. Both are probably versions of one original to me unknown". In the same line, Förster (1921) published another Latin text from the thirteenth or fourteenth century with a virtually identical content, of which there are other versions[3] and which, in turn, must be distinguished from the four-part Adam that is occasionally referred to (Stokes, 1862: xl-xli; Macalister, 1938: 203). For this reason, it seems abusive the way in which Lincoln (1991: 182) uses the text published by Stokes as a Celtic reflection of the creation theory of the world based on an initial sacrifice.

A different proposal is the version of Adam comprised of three elements, presented in a poem from the *Book of Conquests of Ireland*. The parts of Adam's body arise from different parts of the East (verses 6 and 7), while verse 9 indicates the three elements that formed his body:

9. There were Three Persons who formed his fair body
   after he arose alive;
   sweat from water, it was with his good will,
   heat of fire, breath of air.

   Triar ro chruthaig a chorp cāin
   īar n-ērge dō n-a bethaid,
   allus d'usce [WATER], ba dia deōin,
   tess tened [FIRE], tinfed āeoir [AIR] (Macalister, 1938: 174-177).

The earth is missing, and so the Biblical motive of Adam having been made of clay. However, the fire and water coincide with the upper and

[3] I have been able to consult Wright (1887: vol. 1, 159, vol. 2, 535-536); Morfill and Charles (1896: 39-40); and the studies by Förster (1907-1908), Tristram (1975), and Murdoch (2009). Lajoye (2013) highlights the confluences between the apocryphal Christian tradition, and the Indo-European myth of the creation of the world from a primordial giant.

lower parts, and the air with the middle part of the Celtic cosmology[4]. In summary, this poses a problem in relation to the sources, which I will deal with by exploring the interplay of elements in other contexts, with the aim of discovering whether these correspond to a Christian or pagan logic.

To start with, we can see that the elements are presented as guarantors of the oath in a wide variety of texts, albeit without a stable identity or number. The longest list appears in the description of the assembly of Carmun in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* (Gwynn, 1913: 10-11). A standard formula is something like: "the sea, the wind, the sun, the ether, and the firmament", (*muir / gaeth / grian / eoitheoir / firmaimint*) (Stokes, 1894: 31-33). Other formulas that have been reduced to two elements appear in the annals (Todd, 1848: 141, xxix; Dinneen, 1908: 241), perhaps as a shorthand expression of a known litany whose details varied.

This litany appears consistently in texts that deal with sovereignty, as the elements guarantee the legitimacy of a lineage (O'Donovan, 1842: 2-5; MacNeill, 1908: 131 translation, 31 text; Dinneen, 1908: 241; Stokes, 1890: xxxvii-xxxviii; Craigie, 1899: 339; Todd, 1848: 127, xxix - 141, xxix). Warriors also invoke them once they accept their defeat, thereby legitimising the victor (Macalister, 1908: 145; O'Duffy, 1901: 18). The participants of the assembly of Carmun refer to the elements as a guarantee that they will not lie, which implies accepting the social status quo and peace under the authority of the legitimate king who presides the meeting: swearing by the elements guarantees the social order. The meaning of the formula is something along the lines of "the natural order guarantees that in all social relationships, each person occupies the position that corresponds to them based on their institutional legitimacy, dynastic legitimacy, or by force."[5] The tale of Loegaire, son of Niall, allows us to explore this in greater detail.

The numerous versions of this tale are a sign of its value as a standard text. It also summarises the two main topics in question, because King Loegaire recognises a defeat by swearing by the elements, although he breaks his

[4] We only know the general features and a few disjointed parts of the Celtic cosmology (Delamarre, 1999; Mac Mathúna, 1999; Fomin *et al*., 2010; Sayers, 2013; Lajoye, 2016; Borsje *et al*., 2014).

[5] Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h (1986: 135-138) juxtapose testimonies of swearing oaths on the elements with the Irish expression: *tongu do dia toingeas mo thuath* ("I swear by the god that my clan swears"). The testimonies that have been examined would suggest that each formula had a specific function.

oath, as a result of which the elements (*dúle*) bring about his death. This is his tale.

King Loegaire set out on an expedition against the men of Leinster, in order to require them to pay the *boroma* (a tribute that refers to heads of cattle). But after being defeated at the battle of Ath-Dara, he accepted his defeat by invoking the elements as guarantees that he would never again return to claim the *boroma*. After a while he forgot his promise and returned to Leinster with his army. This was when the elements killed him between two hills, called Ireland and Scotland.

I have examined eight versions of this story. Six are included amongst the annals, which situates these events at around the middle of the fifth century (O'Donovan, 1856: 143, 145; Hennessy, 1866: 25, 27; Hennessy, 1887: 19, 21; MacCarthy, 1892: 397; Murphy, 1896: 71; Dinneen, 1908: 3.39). Another two are contained in the longer literary texts: "The Boroma" (O'Grady, 1892: I 369, II 407; Stokes, 1892: 54), and "Irish miscellanies: The Conversion of Loegaire's and his Death" (Plummer, 1883-1885: 165 cf. 171; Stokes, 1887: 562-567). The following texts, which explain the action of the elements, stand out from amongst this series.

1. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* describes how the earth engulfed Loegaire between the hills of Ireland and Scotland where the battle took place (Murphy, 1896: 71).
2. According to Keating, a bolt of lightning caused his death (Dinneen, 1908: 3.39). This way of dying is symmetrical and inverse to the action of the bolt of lightning that impregnated the daughter of Daolgas (O'Kearney, 1855: 135).
3. The *Boroma* states that "the earth engulfs him, the sun burns him, he has no wind (air)" (*talam da slucud / grian da loscud / gæth do dula uad*)" (Stokes, 1892: 52-53).

Therefore, the *Boroma* includes the three types of death that are the least described but which are corroborated (as part of the system) by the *Annals* (devoured by the earth) and by Keating (bolt of lightning variant), while according to "*The Conversion*…" Loegaire was not sailing to avoid an omen that announced his death between "Ireland and Scotland," when they were the names of two hills. These ways of being killed by the elements have two counterparts.

The first is the triple cosmic order seen in Irish pagan cosmology (cf. *supra* n. 4), which is confirmed by a number of classic texts. In the first case, the classic text is contained in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (known in English as *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* or *The Táin*):

> 'A little too loud is that cry,' said Conchobor, 'for the sky is above us, the earth beneath us and the sea all around us, but unless the sky with its showers of stars fall upon the surface of the earth or unless the ground burst open in an earthquake, or unless the fish-abounding, blue-bordered sea come over the surface of existence, I shall bring back every cow to its byre and enclosure, every woman to her own abode and dwelling, after victory in battle and combat and contest.' (Translation C. O'Rahilly)

Turning to ancient testimonies, Aristotle states that: "someone would be mad or insensitive to pain if he should fear nothing, neither earthquake nor floods, as people claim about the Celts" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III.7.7, 1115b 27-28). Strabo includes a passage from Ptolomy Lagos, who describes a meeting between King Alexander and a group of Celts, in which he affirms that what the Celts feared the most was that the sky would fall on their heads (Strabo, VII, 3.8). These testimonies mention the three "Irish" parts of the world (sea, land and sky, which also evokes air, wind, etc.), also referring to their stability. Equally interesting is a passage from Strabo, at the end of his discussion of the Gaulish druids:

> Both these and the others [bards and vates cited at the beginning of the section] assert that the soul and the world (τὰς ψυχὰς καὶ τὸν κόσμον) are indestructible, but that sometime (ποτε) fire and water (καὶ πῦρ καὶ ὕδωρ) will prevail. (Strabo, IV, 4.4).

This is a complex passage to analyse, as its phraseology seems to be Stoic (Ju, 2009). However, we cannot rule out the reference to authentic druidic concepts, as Strabo's source was Posidonius, a Stoic philosopher and ethnographer in the south of Gaul. If we understand the passage correctly, it defines a homology between the micro-cosmos (souls) and macro-cosmos (cosmos), and that both are oriented towards a shared eschatology, a consequence of their shared immortality, as a result of which the world as a whole is incorporated into two basic, opposing elements: fire and water. This passage allows us to understand how the elements operate in the dual sphere of the body and the cosmos, and to return to the text regarding the creation of Adam from three elements: "sweat from water, it was with his good will, heat of fire, breath of air". The following table shows how the elements are presented.