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GODDESS

DR JANINA RAMIREZ ♦ SARAH WALSH

To Dan, Kuba and Kama . . .
And particularly, original goddess of inspiration – my mother, Danusia.

J. R.

To all the magical and unique beings in my life. You bring so much strength, humour, love, understanding, and magic to my world just by being yourselves. And I'm forever grateful for it.

S. W.

First published 2022 by Nosy Crow Ltd
The Crow's Nest, 14 Baden Place,
Crosby Row, London SE1 1YW
www.nosycrow.com

ISBN 978 1 78800 995 9

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Published in collaboration with the British Museum.

Text © Dr Janina Ramirez 2022
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in China.

Papers used by Nosy Crow are made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

135798642

The British Museum

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GODDESS

50 GODDESSES, SPIRITS, SAINTS AND OTHER FEMALE FIGURES WHO HAVE SHAPED BELIEF

DR JANINA RAMIREZ ♦ SARAH WALSH

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INTRODUCTION

"Listen to your inner goddess."
"You look like a goddess in that dress!"
"Beyoncé is a total goddess."

The word *goddess* gets used a lot, often to compliment a woman on her beauty, her strength of character or her individuality. Unlike in the past, when we use the word today it is not necessarily connected to spirituality or belief. Traditionally goddesses reflect every possible human characteristic – some are beautiful, many are strong and all are individual. But the most important thing is that they are not just of this world – they exist almost as timeless beings. They entrance and empower people across time and space and their stories tap into the needs, desires, fears and hopes inside all of us.

Some of the figures in this book are not actually known as goddesses by the people that honour them. So Mami Wata is a spirit, Mary is a saint, Rangda is a demon, Baba Yaga is a witch and Pele is a mountain. It is important to see the differences between these figures and the people that value them, as they reveal the many varied views of individuals, communities and cultures. It's impossible to include all the different belief systems around the world as there are a staggering number of inspirational females bringing hope and help to people all over the globe.

Reading about these figures will not only open your eyes to fascinating stories that are so compelling, exciting and intriguing that humans have been passing them on for hundreds, even thousands, of years. It will also show you the world in all its complexity and beauty. With Popa Medaw you can travel to the fragrant mountains of Myanmar (also known as Burma). Durga takes you to the bustling banks of Indian rivers during heady festivals, while Itzpapalotl transports you to the Aztec temples and dense jungles of Mesoamerica.

You might think a goddess needs to be beautiful, perfect and pure. But the classical image of a partly dressed, 'perfect' female, so common from ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, simply does not fit outside European cultures. And the goddesses in this book are so much more than that. Some are creators, birthing all life and representing a mother's love for her children. Others are leaders, full of wisdom and knowledge, guiding and protecting kings and queens as they rule on earth. Some are terrifying in their bloodthirsty strength, able to dominate the battlefield and destroy their enemies. And others are magical, mystical, mysterious figures who can control time, change fate and spin destiny. Each one can inspire you in different ways.

Perhaps there is a 'goddess' in all of us, because their stories reflect every aspect of what it means to be alive. These female figures show us that we too have the ability to be inspiring and powerful. Sometimes we can be strong, sometimes we can be peaceful, sometimes we can be loving, sometimes we can be vengeful. The women of the past were no different from us today in these basic ways and understanding them can help us to understand ourselves better.

Which one of these inspiring figures speaks to you and why? Ask yourself that as you travel the world through these remarkable stories. In today's world we don't have a single definition of femininity, beauty and the role of women. In these stories even the notions of male and female are fluid, so the endlessly transforming, shape-shifting figures reflect aspects of ourselves. They're not perfect, but they're fascinating. They're not one-dimensional, but complex.

The goddesses, spirits, saints and other female figures in this book have shaped belief over millennia and their stories deserve to be told.

INANNA

Mesopotamian Goddess of Love and War

QUEEN OF CONTRADICTIONS

Inanna was one of the greatest goddesses in ancient Mesopotamia: terrifying, confident, glorious and fickle. As a goddess of both love and war, the chaos of nature and the power of rulers, she was unpredictable. If she chose to love and protect you, you would feel joy and passion. If she disliked you, she could utterly destroy you. Inanna is also known as Ishtar – two names for the same goddess. Inanna was used in Sumeria while Ishtar was used in Assyria and Babylonia, which were ancient civilisations that ruled around modern-day Iraq, Iran and Turkey from roughly 3500 to 1500 BC.

One of the most famous myths about Inanna shows just how easily her moods could change. The tale of the Bull of Heaven begins with the goddess trying to seduce the brave hero Gilgamesh. But Gilgamesh couldn't be charmed, and his rejection sent Inanna into a furious rage. She asked her father Anu, god of the sky, to help her get revenge.

She wanted to use his dangerous bull to attack Gilgamesh and said that if he didn't let her, she would smash the gates of the Underworld to pieces, releasing the dead so they could feed on the living. Anu warned that setting the beast free would bring seven years of famine to the people, but Inanna fiercely insisted she had enough food for everyone. She would not rest until he did as she said.

A clay mould of Inanna, Iraq, 2000–1750 BC

Anu reluctantly gave in and released the fearsome bull on to the people. It destroyed everything in its path, killing 100 men with just one fuming breath. The heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu battled to destroy it – one grabbed the creature by the tail, the other drove a sword through its throat. Eventually, they managed to kill the bull and save the day, but the gods decided that one of the young heroes must die as punishment for slaying the mythical beast. Enkidu was chosen, leaving Gilgamesh to mourn for his friend for the rest of his life. So, through Gilgamesh's suffering, Inanna finally got her revenge.

THE GATES OF HELL

In one of the world's oldest poems, the goddess goes to the kingdom of her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead. When Inanna arrived at the Underworld, dressed in beautiful gowns as Queen of Heaven, her sister was so enraged she ordered all seven of the gates to be locked against her. To get through each gate Inanna had to remove one piece of her royal clothing. She eventually arrived at her sister's court humiliated, naked and powerless. Ereshkigal then killed Inanna and hung her body on a hook for all to see.

But, before visiting her sister, Inanna had made a cunning plan for her escape. She told a loyal servant to seek help from her father, who then sent his own servants to save her. It wasn't going to be easy. Ereshkigal demanded that Inanna find another person to take her place in the Underworld. When she returned to the land of the living, Inanna discovered the whole world believed she was dead. Everyone was upset, apart from one man – her own husband, Dumuzi, god of shepherds. Instead of mourning her, she discovered him sat on a grand throne in the finest clothes. In another fit of rage, Inanna threw him into the Underworld, transforming him into a snake, meaning she was free to return as Queen of Heaven.

SHAPING BELIEF

We know about Inanna from the myths that survive in clay tablets – some of the earliest writing ever discovered. She is goddess of rain, storms and the planet Venus, and is usually shown as a young beautiful woman, often riding a lion into battle. She's an independent, powerful, opinionated, strong-willed woman who does what she likes and is full of contradictions: sometimes kind, but sometimes vengeful, cruel and selfish.

An inscribed clay tablet, Iraq, 883–859 BC

ATHENA

Goddess of Wisdom and Guardian of Greece

A BIZARRE BIRTH

Athena is the Greek goddess of wisdom, warfare and weaving. She was also the protector of the ancient city named in her honour, Athens. She's usually shown fully armed and carrying weapons, with her sacred symbols – the wise owl and the sharp-eyed snake.

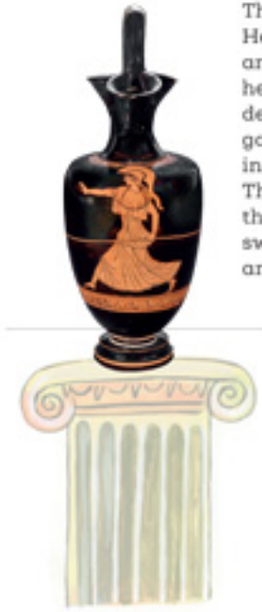
Her father, Zeus, was king of the gods. But Athena's mother, Metis, was also powerful and cunning and was once described as "wiser than all gods and mortal men". Zeus had heard a worrying rumour that any children he had with his first wife Metis would be incredibly wise, but they would also challenge his great power.

To get rid of this danger, he simply swallowed his pregnant wife. Zeus thought no more of Metis until some time later he began to feel the most terrible headaches.

Unable to suffer the pain any longer, he ordered Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths, to crack open his head with an axe. Out sprang Athena from Zeus's skull – fully grown, dressed in armour and ready for battle.

WARRIOR WOMAN

Athena loved helping heroes and in one of the most famous stories of all, she helped Hercules in his 12 labours. Hercules was Athena's half-brother who had been driven mad by Zeus's wife, Hera. One day, feeling very confused and angry, Hercules killed his wife and children. Afterwards, he was wracked with guilt and begged forgiveness from the wise oracle of Delphi. As punishment, she told him to serve King Eurystheus for 12 years and complete the challenging tasks he set.



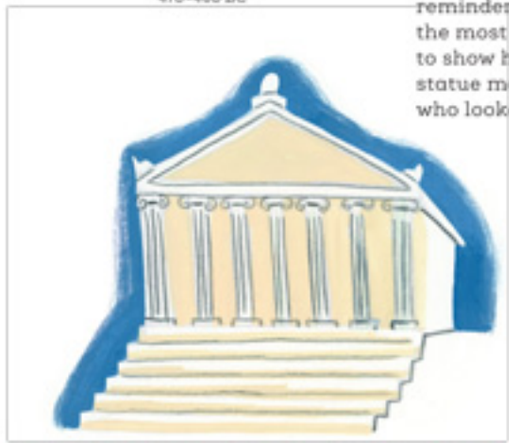
A wine jug with Athena painted on its body. Greece, 470–460 BC

The labours were so difficult they seemed almost impossible. Hercules had to slay fearsome beasts, like the Nemean Lion and the Cretan Bull. But, bravely, he kept going and Athena helped out whenever she could. When Hercules was told to defeat a monstrous flock of man-eating birds, Athena gave him a sacred rattle. The loud noise scared the birds into the air so the hero could shoot them down with his arrows. Then he had to capture the fearsome three-headed dog Cerberus that guarded the Underworld. Again Athena came to the rescue. She gave Hercules some sweet honey cakes and when he fed them to the dog it fell straight to sleep and could be caught more easily.

In another story, fearless Athena went up against the sea god Poseidon in a competition. Each god had to give the city of Athens the best gift they could and King Cecrops would choose the winner. Poseidon struck his trident into the ground and water sprang up, giving the Athenians access to the sea and trade. But it was too salty to drink. Athena's gift was the very first olive tree in Greece. It provided wood, oil and food. King Cecrops decided that this was the better gift and Athena was declared the guardian goddess. She is sometimes shown with an olive tree, her precious gift to the Greek people and a symbol of peace.

SHAPING BELIEF

The temple built to honour Athena on the hilltop Acropolis in Athens is a reminder of her influence. The Parthenon sculptures from there are some of the most well-known treasures of the ancient world and they are thought to show how the goddess was worshipped long ago. Originally, an enormous statue made from gold and ivory stood inside the temple and the priestesses who looked after it were some of the most important people in the city.



Every year, the Athenians honoured their courageous goddess with games and processions. The sacred statue would be dressed in a new gown, called a peplos, which the people of the city would spend months weaving with devotion. Today Athena remains an inspiring goddess. She represents calm wisdom, but she was also a ruthless warrior. She could be a very powerful enemy, but an even braver and more resourceful friend.

MAMI WATA

African Water Spirit and Bringer of Riches

SHAPE-SHIFTER

Mami Wata is a water spirit, whose West African roots may go back many hundreds, or even thousands, of years. She is now worshipped throughout Africa and African communities around the world. Over the last few centuries, her stories have been combined with European legends of mermaids as, like them, she is most at home in the sea.

So what does Mami Wata look like? Well, in fact, she has no single appearance and looks different to everyone who sees her. She is a spiritual force that belongs to the water, often shown as part human and part fish, but she can magically change her shape too – sometimes she appears fully human and sometimes she transforms into a man.

As a woman, she is dazzlingly beautiful, with large brilliant eyes and long flowing hair. Her beauty attracts both men and women and what she wants above all is complete devotion. Once you follow her, you may be trapped forever.

One story tells how Mami Wata catches people at sea and takes them to a paradise, either underwater or in the spirit realm. Here she insists they stay faithful and worship no others. If she allows them to return to the human world, they must continue to honour Mami Wata – and only Mami Wata. Then they will become more attractive, richer and healthier than ever before. But if they dare to betray her, they will soon fall ill and die. Her moods can change quickly – from generous, creative and kind to cruel and jealous.

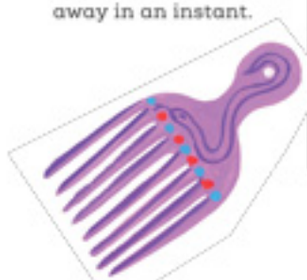
MIRRORS AND MOTIFS

Mami Wata transforms to the needs of those around her. She brings different things to different people and her stories are as varied as those that honour her. If you want a child, she can help. If you want gold, turn to her. If you want to be adored, she is there for those that honour her.

A wooden carving of Mami Wata

Her most important symbol is the mirror. Through a mirror's shiny surface, the water spirits and those that worship them can connect directly and journey between realms and through time. Mirrors are a meeting point between water and land, past and future, the world above the ocean and Mami Wata's world below it.

Mami Wata is often shown with a huge python wrapped round her. The snake is a symbol of her power and connection to nature. As a water spirit who moves up rivers and through the sea, she is a source of life. Her waters also connect people as Mami Wata controls the highways of riches, bringing trade, travel, goods and wealth. But, like the ocean, she can be unpredictable. What she gives she can also take away in an instant.



SHAPING BELIEF

People honour Mami Wata by giving her expensive gifts or offerings, and holding ceremonies with intense music, guitar playing and dancing that can send people into a trance. This dream-like state allows followers to communicate with Mami Wata and ask for her protection. Out of respect, some communities in Africa avoid fishing or going to the beach on certain days as they believe this gives some peace to the water spirit's home.

When people were forcibly enslaved as part of the transatlantic slave trade, Mami Wata protected them. She is now worshipped throughout the Americas in different ways, such as the Yemanja festival in Brazil that celebrates the sea and Mami Wata as a water spirit. She is a powerful woman, bringing help to those that need it and rewarding those that give her their devotion.