

## WATER SYMBOLISM

D.L. MARRIN  
Hanalei, Hawaii

Since the beginning of recorded history, water has held a special place in the spiritual and physical lives of people who represent a wide range of cultures and civilizations. While rituals, languages, and beliefs among ancient cultures differed greatly, water was routinely used to symbolize a myriad of places and events in both the observable and unobservable realms.

### MESOPOTAMIA

The first generally recognized written history comes from the Sumerians, who inhabited the Mesopotamian region more than 5000 years ago. In the Sumerian pantheon, heaven, earth, air, and water were personified by gods. *Enki*, the primary water god, represented wisdom and evolved from a great underworld ocean that also gave rise to heaven.<sup>1</sup> The underworld was sometimes referred to as a river and apparently existed beneath the surface of the Earth as a freshwater (not saline) body of water. Enki (later known as *Ea* by the Babylonians) ruled over this watery underworld and symbolized the primordial waters, which were associated with the “chaos” that existed before creation. Myths from around the world recognize that creation was preceded by an original state of chaos, which defined a state of formlessness and was often identified as a watery abyss or primordial sea.<sup>2</sup> Such a sea apparently reflected the fact that ancient people recognized creation as the emergence of form from formlessness.

### EGYPT

The Egyptians, similar to the Sumerians and Babylonians, believed that the heavens and Earth (including all the inhabitants of earth) were created from the primordial or celestial waters. *Ra*, the great Egyptian sun god, was intimately involved in the process of creating the manifested world as his Sun disk appeared above the waters to signal the beginning of time.<sup>3</sup> *Ra* made his symbolic journey over the water in a boat because the Sun was made of fire and, therefore, could not have risen out of the waters of chaos on its own. According to the Egyptian pantheon, everything is created from the waters of chaos by a being that, similar to God in the

Bible’s Book of Genesis, appears above or within the primordial waters. The primordial waters or seas often symbolized the formless chaos and undifferentiated matter of the underworld waters that comprised the cosmos before its division into realms. Hence, the heavens, earth, and all life emerged from the waters.

### CHINA

The Chinese was one of only a few cultures that did not associate the primordial chaos with water in the form of a sea. Instead, the ancient Chinese apparently portrayed the chaos as a misty vapor that embodied the cosmic energy governing space, time, and matter.<sup>4</sup> The formless misty vapor, from which the duality of *Yin* and *Yang* were born, gave rise to all earthly life forms. Some historians believe that the ancient Chinese people divided even the spirit world into a Ministry of Waters, whereby seawater is overseen by four dragon-kings representing the cardinal directions and freshwater is ruled by four dragon-kings representing each of the major rivers of China.

### OCEANIA

The ancient Maori culture of New Zealand referred to water as *wai*, which also means remembrance or the recollection of something that has been. In the Maori culture, water symbolizes the memory of all that has ever been and will be.<sup>5</sup> Like so many ancient and indigenous cultures, the Maori consider water’s memory to serve as the spark of life and to be intimately associated with the process of creation. How water is able to retain or access memory is not a component of ancient or indigenous myths; however, the almost universal insight that such memory is constrained neither by space nor time is one that has stirred considerable controversy in the modern world.

### GREECE

Born from the primordial chaos (water) was the Greek goddess *Gaia*, who represents the manifested world and the first pantheistic being to inhabit our planet after it was formed. *Gaia* (as the earth mother) and *Uranus* (as the sky) gave birth to *Oceanus*, who is generally considered to be the Greek personification of water. The god known as *Oceanus* is, of course, at the root of our English word “ocean,” where most of the water on Earth is contained. The ancient

Greeks believed that water not only was everywhere but also constituted everything, such that all things manifest in this world represented transformations of water.

In addition to their pantheistic characters, the ancient Greeks were one of the first cultures to begin incorporating their intuitive or mythical views of water into a more philosophical and, from a modern perspective, comprehensible format. While such early philosophies often echoed the message of ancient myths, they began to explain water's relationship to other aspects of the physical world. While losing little of its mystique as a symbol of the primordial chaos, water was associated with geometries, numbers, vibrations, and physical structures.

### ELEMENTS AND ENERGIES

A sixth century B.C. philosopher named Thales hypothesized that water was the primary substance of all being, out of which everything is created and to which everything returns.<sup>6</sup> He was perhaps the first to recognize water's unusual physical properties and its apparent universality, both as a solvent and as a so-called creational medium. During the fifth century B.C., a Hermetic philosopher named Empedocles expanded on Thales' notion by proposing that all matter in the universe was composed of differing combinations of four original substances and two moving forces. Empedocles referred to these four substances as the *elements* of fire, air, water, and earth, and he identified love and strife as the *moving forces*. The moving forces essentially energized the combining or dissociating of elements, such that matter could not be created without love nor uncreated (destroyed) without its opposite moving force of strife.

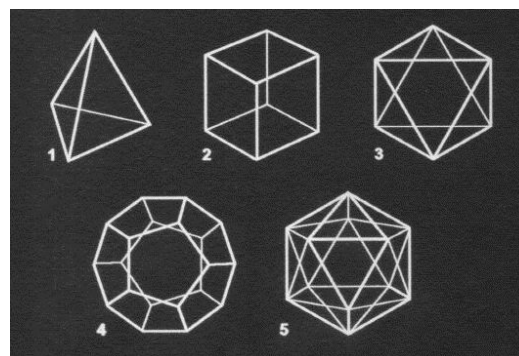
In addition to the four elements, there is a fifth substance that, according to Greek philosopher Plato, was essential to creating the universe.<sup>7</sup> This mysterious fifth substance was referred to as *aether*, a word coined by the Greeks to identify the substance filling all space beyond the Earth. Similar to the four Elements, aether is an integral component of most ancient beliefs, where it is generally associated with a life energy or vital force. The ancient Hindus also recognized the four elements and aether, or *akasha*, as fundamental components of the natural world.

### THE PLATONIC SOLIDS

The four elements and aether were symbolized by three-dimensional geometries known as the

Platonic solids (see Figure 1). These angular solids were believed to connect the etheric and worldly realms to the primordial waters of chaos (usually represented by a sphere). The solid that most often symbolizes water is the icosahedron, which represents the creative principle connecting the etheric and worldly realms. The reciprocal geometric relationship between the icosahedron (representing water) and the dodecahedron (representing aether) symbolized the intimate relationship between the two. Because matter or the material world (represented by a cube) was supposedly manifested from the aether via the water, it follows that the icosahedron and dodecahedron are mathematically related to the cube according to the golden ratio (as  $\phi$  and  $1/\phi$ , respectively). The golden ratio ( $\phi = 1.618\dots$ ) was believed by some ancient cultures to represent the mathematical code underlying the creation of the manifested world.

**FIGURE 1.** The five regular Platonic solids include: [1] the tetrahedron symbolizing fire, [2] the cube symbolizing earth, [3] the octahedron symbolizing air, [4] the dodecahedron symbolizing aether, and [5] the icosahedron symbolizing water.



### BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

Water is frequently referenced in the Bible under a variety of contexts that are designed to communicate very different kinds of messages. Biblical scholars believe that the significance of water was heightened in a desert region (i.e., the Holy Land) where water was scarce and drought was a constant threat to life. Beyond water's more practical considerations, the Bible portrays the spiritual aspects of water under several commonly recognized labels.<sup>8</sup>

- *Cosmic water* describes a primordial force that only God can govern. The cosmic sea

symbolizes the undifferentiated realm from which God created heaven and Earth.

- *Living water* symbolizes a source of life and a gift from God. Living water was considered to be distinct from ordinary water and symbolized the properties of wisdom and knowledge.
- *Ceremonial water* symbolizes both the cleansing process and the passage between life and death. Ceremonial water is portrayed as an agent for either removing or dissolving impurities.

If the biblical account of creation is consistent with that of other ancient accounts, heaven and earth are manifested from the symbolic, rather than literal, waters of which God is one. In this context, cosmic water is analogous to the waters of chaos rather than to literal water present in interstellar space (i.e., the modern scientific reference to cosmic water). Living water appears to be a designation for a special type of literal water, such that there is a recognizable difference between living and ordinary water. Living water is very rare and not only satisfies one's thirst, but also imparts life to the world. Most of the water used for religious ceremonies is just ordinary water that is blessed by an appropriate religious figure.

#### ART AND NATURE

If one studies water in its natural state, it is difficult not to notice the variety of *flow forms* (e.g., whirlpools, eddies, ripples) that constantly appear and disappear. Many ancient cultures placed considerable import on these motions and believed that they held great powers for both creation and destruction. While Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci is best known for his paintings and sculptures, he was also a great student of water and its flow forms. He apparently believed that the vortical motion of fluids (particularly water) was a key to understanding and utilizing the power of the universe. Two of the twentieth century's most renowned students of water flow forms were the European naturalists Theodor Schwenk and Viktor Schauberg, who essentially expanded on ancient understandings and symbolisms.

According to Schauberg, water is the Earth's blood and essence of the *first substance*, whose boundaries and banks are the capillaries that guide it and in which it circulates.<sup>9</sup> His view of

water is similar to ancient perceptions inasmuch as water serves as the primordial substance of the universe and the fundamental component of an organism's circulatory system and the global hydrologic cycle. Schwenk hypothesized that water's relationship to time was inherent in its rhythmical movement, which spanned cycles that ranged from seconds to years.<sup>10</sup> He referred to different wave patterns and flow forms within a body of water as possessing distinct frequencies, overtones, and resonances—not unlike a musical instrument. Others have referred to this rhythm as “water's song,” which often symbolizes the sound-shapes or music contained within the ripples and waves of water bodies.

#### POSTMODERN METAPHORS

The term “living water” is used today as a label or symbol for various aqueous concoctions in which ordinary water is treated with a combination of electrolytes, crystals, metals, colloids, and polymers, or exposed to various fields. The objective is to produce an optimal fluid that supports biological processes and, hence, retards both aging and disease. While the exact mechanisms underlying a wide range of health claims have yet to be elucidated, the modern practice of *water structuring* is based on the ancient understanding that water is able to retain or access a type of information that is colloquially referred to as “memory.”

Perhaps the most recent water-related metaphor is that of *virtual water*, which was originally used to describe and, in some instances, quantify the influence of policy decisions on water resources in arid regions.<sup>11</sup> Virtual water is a term used primarily in international trade for estimating the amount of water that is implicitly exchanged in goods and services (e.g., a ton of wheat requires 1000 tons of water) and the net gain for nations that import such goods and services. Although no actual water is traded during such transactions, the virtual water metaphor illustrates the extent to which real water is currently perceived as an economic commodity and routinely transported across geographic boundaries.

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