

Cosmic egg and Pelasgian realm

A distributional study in
Comparative Mythology
Wim van Binsbergen
2011

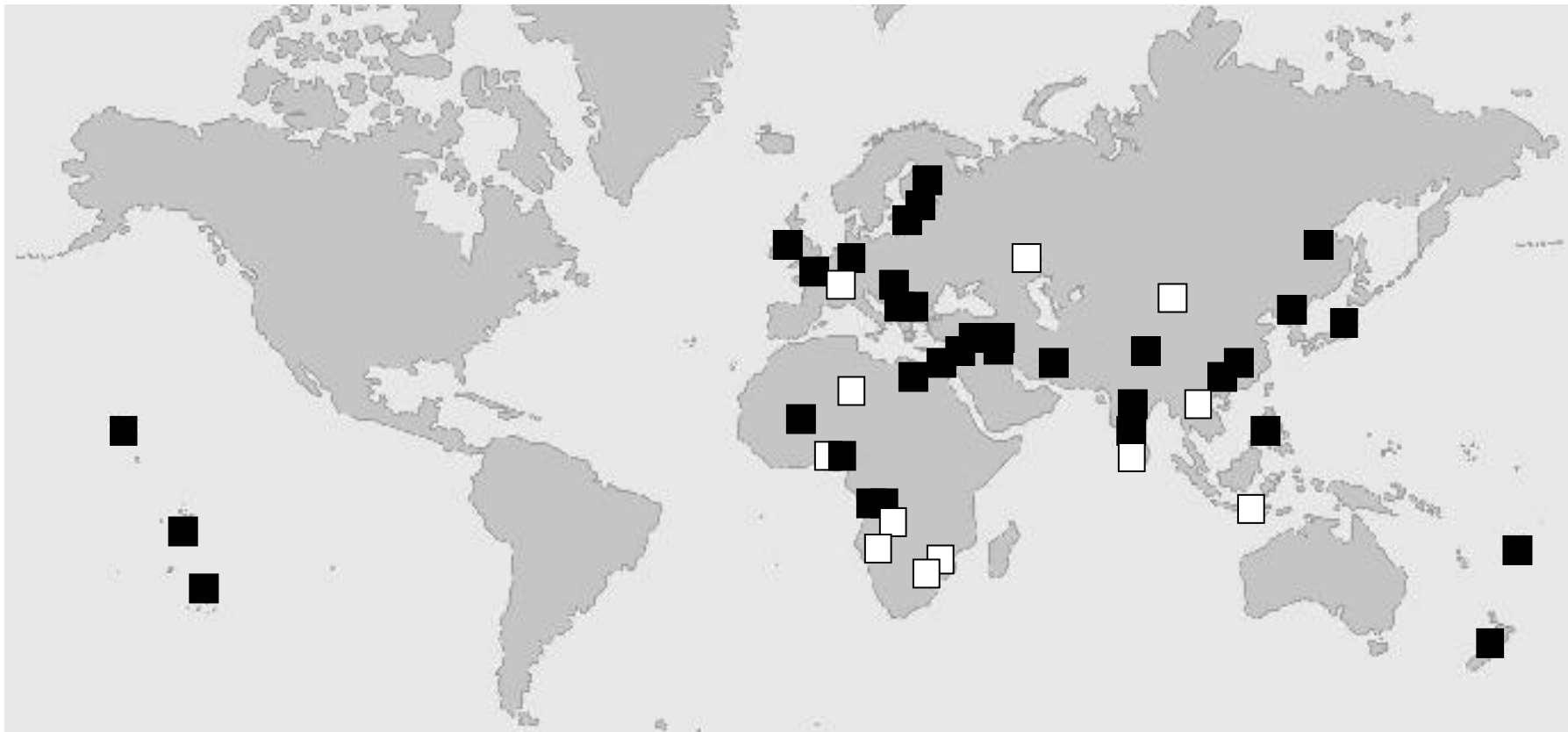
Attestations of the myth of the cosmic egg world-wide

Location and period	Reference	Remarks
[Dahomey (Benin)]	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
[NW Europe , early modern]	Ashliman 1998-2005	Grimm / Aarne type 302, The Giant Whose Heart Was in an Egg,
[Xhosa (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
[Yaka , Congo]	Devisch 1988	
[Zulu (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004	
[Angola, Sub-Saharan Africa, modern]	Rodrigues de Areia 1985	Egg in divinatory set represented
[Bali, modern]	Brinkgreve 1997	Implied in sacrifice
Buddhism	Newall 1967	
China, Ancient	Christie 1968, ; Cottrell 1989 : 98 ; Willis 1994 : 90 ; Girardot 1976, 1977, 1978; Yu, David C., 1981; Liu 1991; Neville 1985 ; Johnson, David., 1981,	Phan-ku 盤 [cf. Tiamat, Leviathan] out of whose dead and fragmented body the world was formed , still venerated among minorities Miao, Yao and Li
Dogon, Mali	Van der Sluijs 2004; Fernandez 1967; Griaule & Dieterlen 1965; van Beek 1992; Zuesse 1975; Horton 1967;	
Druids, Ancient	Moorehead 1885	
Egypt, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Gardiner 1994; Devitt 2005,	Great Cackler; Thoth hatching; 467: 'In Dyn XIX or before F51 [but 180 degrees rotated] changes into the egg H8 and subsequently X01+H8 becomes a generic det. for goddesses.'; egg especially Hermopolis [= Thoth , Ogdoad, not Nine] ;
Eurasia, Upper Palaeolithic	Rappenglueck 1999; Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Eliade 1976	shamanistische connotaties van Zwaan, Ei, Dioscuren, Leda, Zeus

Fang (Gabon)	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
Finland, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 217; Puhvel 1971,	217: egg; also Finnish mythology: Luonnotar, daughter of the creation god, mated with bird, produced egg; from this egg: heaven, earth, sun, moonb
Greece, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Fontenrose 1980; Minar 1963; Kerenyi, apud Robinson 1948; Pollard 1948; Cornford 1934	Dioscuri, Helena, Hera [fertilised egg from Kronos] ; and from pre-Socratic philosophers onwards
[Hawaii]		The god Paka'a, inventor of the sail? Cf. Cretan Minos
India, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 186 ; Penner 1966; Newall 1967	186: Vinata, mother of Aruna (dawn) lays two eggs, Aruna comes from the broken egg, hence is only half (Luwe
Iran, Ancient	Russell 1993; Zaehner 1940	Mithras, Zervan
[Japan, modern]		This is an uncertain attestation, however, often implied or mentioned in passing in literature on East Asia and Buddhism; also Bon continuity
Korea	Song, Sun-hee., 1974,	
Lithuania	Straiņys & Klimka 1971,	
Mandaeans, Ancient (Southern Iraq)	Kraeling 1933,	
Nanai people, Amur, Eastern Siberia	Sem –n.d.	
[New Zealand]		Uncertain attestation
NW Europe, ME and Early modern	Bacon, Roger., 1969. ; Jung, C.G., 1987: 214, 291 n 25; Zetterberg, J. Peter, 1979,	Philosopher's egg, alchemy
Pangwe (Gabon),	Van der Sluijs 2004;	3

Philippines, modern	Demetrio, Francisco ., 1968, 1969,	
Post-Neolithic great civilisations of the Mediterranean, South and East Asia, and Africa	Loeb 1956, Baumann 1955; von Sicard 1956	
[Sahara, Neolithic fertile]	Lhote, H., 1959: Fig. 47	Strong suggestion of Primordial Egg depicted
Sri Lanka, modern	Feddema, J.P., 1995,	Egg in sacrifice
Syro-Palestine, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 223, 143; West 1994; Magness 2001; Schmidt 1921,	223: Mot (Canaan) lord of death, born from primal egg from Air and Chaos; Baal is invited by Mot, dies in the underworld; Anat brings him back, killing Mot; ogre motif; [perhaps Og, riding the Ark, is a variant of the cosmic egg] ; Enoch text as mediated through Ancient Slavic
Tahiti, Oceania	Cottrell 1989: 164	Taároa
[Thailand]	Heinze 1977	Implied in sacrifice
Tibet, Ancient	Richardson 1968, Snellgrove 19XX	
Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin)	Lowie 1937	

Distribution map



■ mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □)

Discussion

- My distribution map is based on only a limited knowledge of global comparative mythology; more systematic approaches (e.g. Berezhin n.d.) are likely to yield a more complete pattern and fuller insight
- However, the attestations mapped here are fully referenced, see Table of attestations above
- The distribution shown here has much in common with that of the spiked wheel trap, which I have elsewhere shown to be an 'index fossil' of transcontinental continuities within the 'Pelasgian realm' (van Binsbergen n.d.; For my 'Pelasgian Hypothesis', see van Binsbergen 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011:
 - Considerable incidence in sub-Saharan Africa
 - In evidence in Egypt and Graeco-Roman Antiquity
 - Sporadic in Asia
 - Absent from the New World, Australia and New Guinea
- The distribution of the cosmic egg motif, however, differs from that of the spiked wheel trap in the following respects:
 - Cosmic Egg has attestations in Oceania
 - Half of the African attestations of the Cosmic egg are only partial or implied
 - Attestations of the Cosmic Egg in Uralic and Baltic/IE Scandinavia (Finland, Lithuania), where there are no attestations of the spiked wheel trap
 - Asian attestations of the Cosmic Egg are not in the far interior but rather in coastal regions; this may be due to chance but might also be due to overseas diffusion from outside Asia
 - Asian attestations are largely compatible with a distribution on the wings of the transmission and use of chariot technology, from 2000 BP onward, although a coastal maritime spread also seems to have contributed

The very restricted distribution of the world-egg motif makes it impossible for this motif to be attributed to Pandora's Box (pre-Exodus Africa)

The restricted distribution is even indicative of this motif being relatively young, Neolithic or later (also the central Pacific was only populated a few ka BP, from East Asia –which in this case is the most likely path – or South East Asia)

The African attestations are not indicative of an African origin but, like the spiked wheel trap, mankala, the unilateral mythical figure, and the linguistic macrophylum of Niger-Congo (probably also that of Nilo-Saharan), are indicative of a rapid spread of a recently introduced feature over the culturally receptive African continent, in the context of the Back-into-Africa migration from Central to West Asia

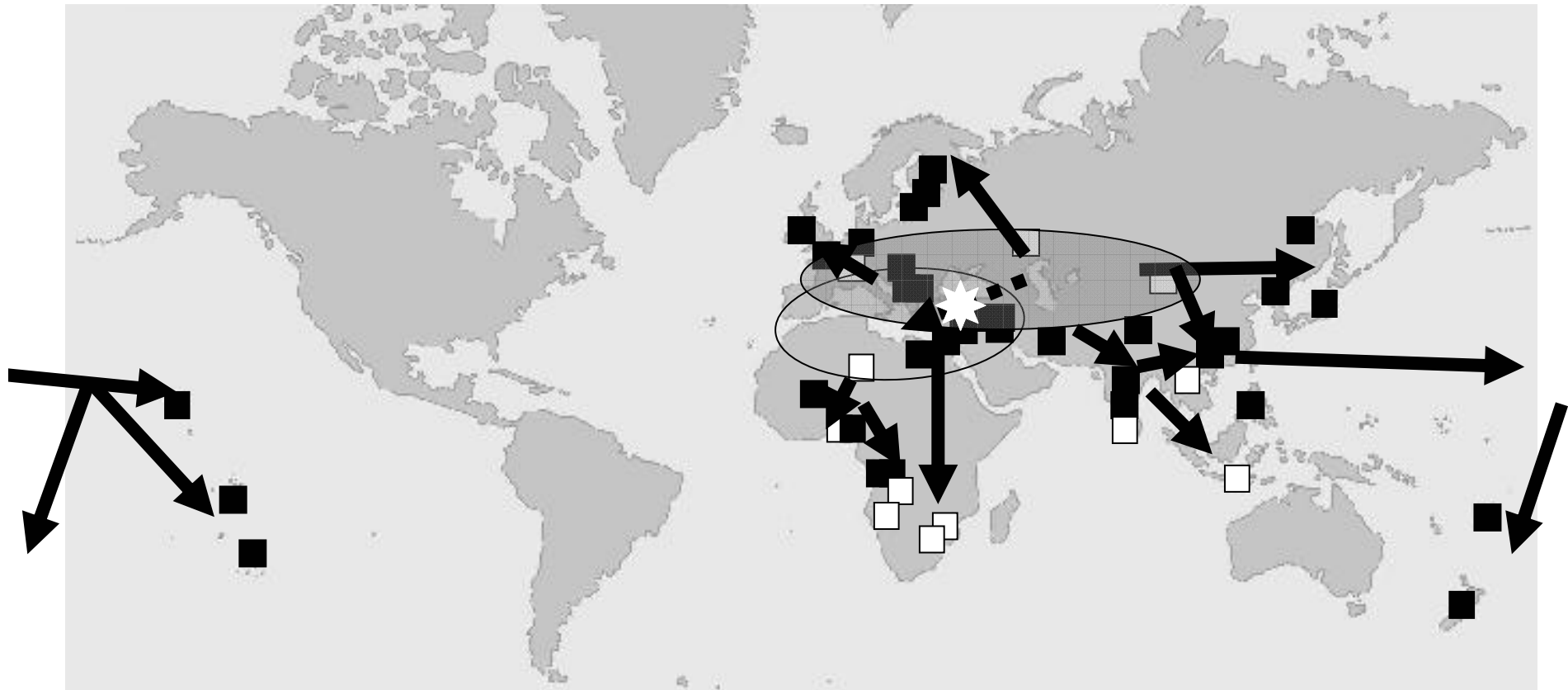
The attestation in Uralic Northern Europe is in line with the fact that the proposed region of origin is associated with the earliest millennia of the Uralic linguistic family; other Uralic traits, though fragmented (e.g. the royal diadem, the skull cult, shamanism, the veneration of white aquatic birds as epiphanies of the Creator Goddess associated with the Primal Waters), can be argued to have percolated throughout the proposed region of origin of the world egg motif, and from there to have sporadically reached the outlying parts of the distribution area shown above

The extensions of the distribution into the Altaic language realm (the Nanai of extreme eastern Siberia; Japan) are in line with an eastbound diffusion from a Central to West Asian region – the steppe area is a fairly continuous culture regions with relatively easy and rapid communication east-west and v.v.

The Pangu 盤 myth is alleged to be conceived by Taoist monks around the beginning of the Common Era, and, being relatively recent, can have accommodated influences from the above diffusion streams. If this were the case, there would be no reason to assume that the Pangu myth belonged to the original heritage of Sino-Tibetan speakers in East Asia. However, the Pangu myth is to this day cherished by the Miao, Li and Yao minorities of South China, who incidentally are also associated with the Nu Wa 媧 as a mythological flood heroine. For both mythemes there are strong suggestions of a Central to West Asian connection.

Mithraic and Orphic cults in Antiquity, and their Iranian predecessors and sources, can be considered to have challenged the world-egg motif that had emerged, presumably in Neolithic times, in West to Central Asia, and that also in more diffuse form (by demic diffusion) were spreading West (into West Asia, Egypt, and both sides of the Mediterranean) as part of the extension of the 'proto-Pelasgian' realm.

From distribution map to tentative historical reconstruction (1)



■ mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □)

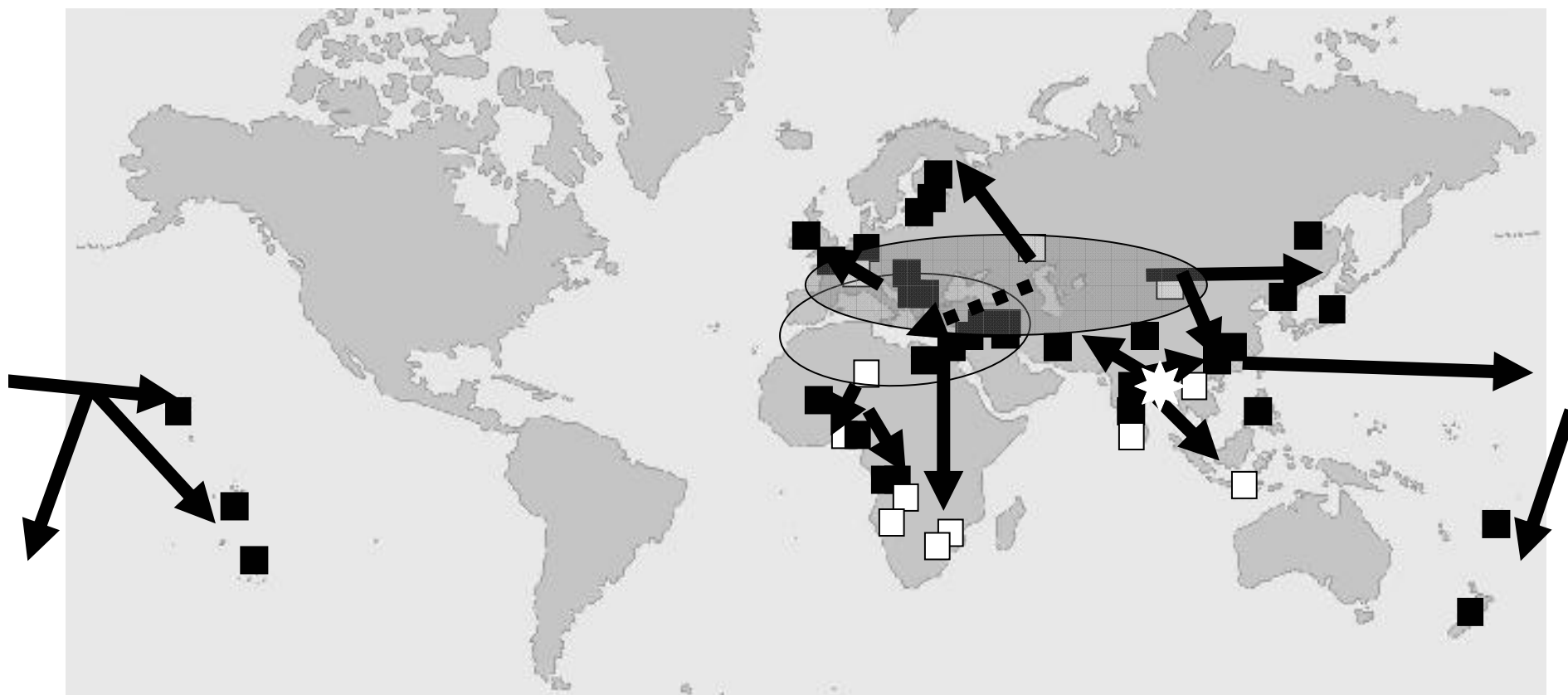
proposed region of origin (*), Eurasian Neolithic 'proto-Pelasgian realm' (A); the latter's subsequent transformation constitutes the Bronze Age 'Pelasgian realm' (B)

→ proposed spread from Late Bronze Age onward

An alternative model: Sunda

- Although the proposed historical reconstruction appears to me the most plausible, and tallies with that of scores of other supposedly Pelasgian traits (cf. van Binsbergen 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), it is only fair to indicate an alternative interpretation, in terms of Oppenheimer's (1998) Sunda hypothesis – situating the origin of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg in South East Asia, and assuming it to have spread, not only north and east into East Asia and Oceania, but also west, on the wings of the postulated Sunda maritime expansion in the course of the first half of the Holocene. Oppenheimer claims that the core mythologies of the Ancient Near East including the Bible thus have a prehistoric Sunda origin. I have elsewhere argued why especially in regard of myths this is very implausible (van Binsbergen c.s. 2008b), although as a general hypothesis of transcontinental influence Oppenheimer's model has considerable heuristic value especially for the study of Africa.
- In earlier formulations of my Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010a; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) – an attempt to systematically identify humankind's oldest common heritage of mythology before the Out-of-Africa Exodus (c. 80-60 ka BP) and to account for its subsequent development until historical times – I still equated the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg with that of the Lightning Bird and included both in Pandora's Box; a more detailed re-analysis now has convinced me that the Cosmic Egg is of a much more recent idea which rather belongs to the Pelasgian complex – probably originally so, but perhaps (Oppenheimer 1998; but cf. van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) as a result of cultural expansion from Early Holocene South East Asia having penetrated the Pelasgian realm.

From distribution map to tentative historical reconstruction (2) Sunda model



■ mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □)

proposed region of origin (★), subsequent diffusion into the Eurasian Neolithic 'proto-Pelasgian realm' (A); the latter's subsequent transformation constitutes the Bronze Age 'Pelasgian realm' (B)

proposed spread from Late Bronze Age onward

Conclusion

The mytheme of the world egg, therefore, appears to have emerged in West to Central Asia (the 'proto-Pelasgian realm') in Neolithic times and from there spread into selected parts of Asia, Europe and into sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps largely as part of initiatory cults, of which Orphism is one relatively well documented example.

Apart from the early association with initiatory shamanistic cults and chariot technology, I cannot offer an answer to the question as to what driving force was behind this expansion from the proposed region of origin.

These proposed patterns of spread are in accordance with genetically established population movements, from West Asia into Europe and into Africa, from the Upper Paleolithic onward (cf. Forster 2004; and the growing literature on the Back-into-Africa movement:

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