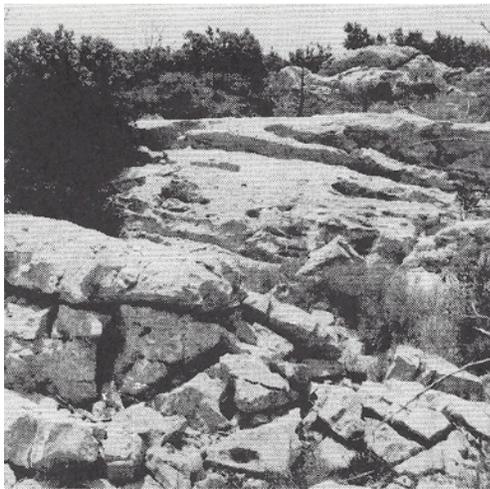




The journey up the mountain to the pre-historic cave began through a series of pine groves laden with cones.



What was once a path turned into acres of mountain rock—clearly, if you did not know the way you would be lost in no time.



Suddenly the blue Adriatic stretched before us—What an incredible location, the sea as your vista, a shelf of flat rock extended straight from the front of the cave with fruit trees and berry bushes on either side.

Pilgrimage/See for Yourself:

*A Journey to a Neolithic Goddess Cave, 1977.
Grapceva, Hvar Island,
Yugoslavia.*

Mary Beth Edelson

*Island of Hvar- Sunny Adriatic island of vineyards,
olive groves, aromatic plants and ancient culture.
From a tourist brochure*

For some years I had been attempting to make a pilgrimage to a Goddess site. I had been doing private rituals in my art for some time, both outdoors in natura and in the studio. I could feed off of them and hold them in my mind like totems, but I was still hungry. I needed to do my rituals in an actual prehistoric cave; to experience a Neolithic site where I could smell the earth, poke around in the soil, breathe the air and know that the cave air had circulated through my body and become a part of me. To go to a prehistoric site became an obsession, and represented the place to begin a new cycle. Numerous grants had not materialized and the trip was long overdue. I sold my car and bought the voyage.

Before leaving New York, I researched seven sites in hopes of being able to locate and gain access to at least one of them. (I had been there in my head many times.) My attraction to Yugoslavia, referred to as “Old Europe” by archaeologists, came from my wanting to start with a civilization linked to both the earliest Goddess worship and its art forms as well as to the later Goddess worshipping cultures. My fantasy and my plans are to continue my pilgrimage in the coming years throughout the Mediterranean, to trace our archaeological herstory, to photograph and document, perform rituals, gather natural objects from the sites, and record my responses while translating these perceptions into my work.

After arriving on the island of Hvar in the Adriatic off the coast of Yugoslavia, I set out to locate the Neolithic cave called Grapceva, knowing only that it was near Jelsa, which turned out to be a small harbor town on the north side of the island. My information was gleaned from Marija Gimbutas’ book, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*,* useful both for its wealth of Goddess information and its archaeological maps. Though not adequate for actually locating sites, the maps did get us to outlying villages. Once in the general

*Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe 7000-3500/ Myths, Legends, and Cult Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 27.

area, the best method for finding exact locations proved to be word-of-mouth. In Jelsa, we (Anne Healy and I were traveling together) tried to find someone who spoke English and knew the whereabouts of the Grapceva *spilja*, chosen because it appeared that I could be alone there. Little attention had been paid to the site after its initial excavation in 1955 by Professor Gyra Novak. I thought, from reading and intuition, that this cave was probably used as a sanctuary by Neolithic people.

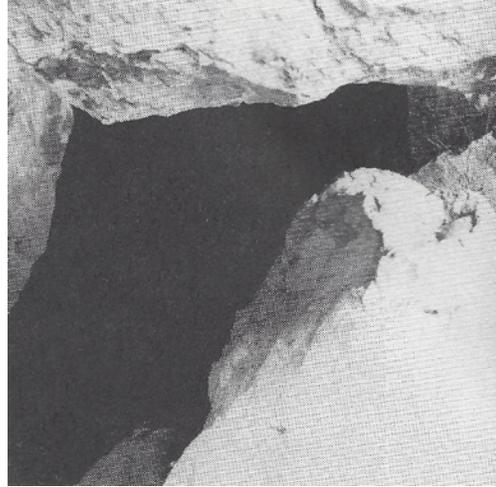
The travel agent in Jelsa said flatly that no one could tell us where the cave was, assuring us that he had lived in the area all his life and had never seen it. Obviously it was not worth bothering with. Finally we wrangled out of him that a villager, now retired, had led excursions by donkey up the steep mountain to the cave. The agent had trouble remembering the guide's name, but at last it came out: "Vicko."

Vicko lived on a street behind a cafe in Jelsa. A second inquiry in town directed us there. "Yell his name and someone will point to his doorstep." This done, we were on the threshold of a house where we were offered old world hospitality and an abundance of homemade wine. Yes, he was too old to go up the mountain, but his fourteen-year-old son knew the way.

At daybreak the next morning we began the trip, climbing on and on while we and the heavy camera gear baked in the intense sun. At the top of the mountain, beyond the deserted village of Humac, we began our descent to the barely accessible cave. The climb down was a series of straight drops. What had once been a path was now acres of mountain stone, obscuring the way to those unfamiliar with it. Suddenly the blue Adriatic stretched before us, and in the next moment, we realized that we had reached the area around the cave. What an incredible location: the sea vista, a shelf of flat rock extending from the front of the cave, fruit and nut trees and berry bushes on either side. We could easily visualize the daily activities of the Neolithic inhabitants gathered there, talking, cooking, sunning.

Vicko's son unlocked the gate placed over the mouth of the cave. I can think of our entrance only in personal terms. It is very difficult to convey how thrilling this experience was to me. The cave was dazzling. It was magnificent. The main room, the great hall, sparkled and glistened with coral quartz. Stalagmites and stalactites, suggesting great temple pillars, divided the rooms into chambers. The atmosphere created a feeling of reverence and awe. For me, it was a holy place.

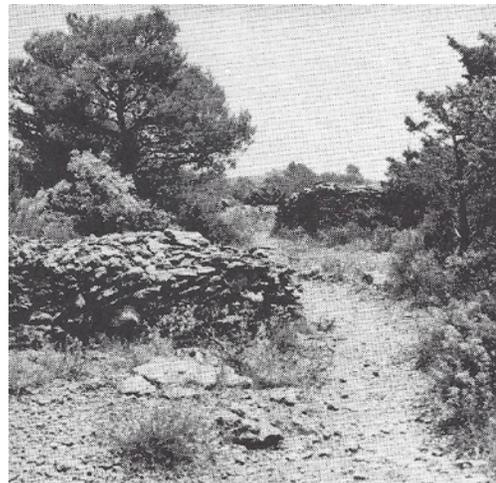
Vicko's son began to dig in the floor of the cave and shortly produced some bones. As it turned out, there were bones, shards and shells everywhere. But the cave completely lacked light and the few candles we had did not begin to



Our entrance to the cave I can only think of in personal terms. It is difficult for me to convey to you how thrilling the experience was. The cave was dazzling, it was magnificent.



Going back down we spent time in the village, and here again was magic. The houses, made of field stone, piled one upon another without mortar grow up out of the ground as if molded from the earth- everything was in harmony.



We continued to come down with our physical bodies, but our spirits are still up there, high.

penetrate the surrounding darkness. Although our eyes could pick up a faint glimmer, a camera could not record more than the light of the candle itself. After resting, we headed down the mountain to ask Vicko whether Anne and I could have the key to the gate to go back by ourselves the next day.

The following morning we set out with two dozen candles and three Yugoslav flashlights. First, I wanted to explore the cave for myself. The low contracted entrance to the cave opened into an anteroom or anterior hall with a side chapel of the darkest and richest coral quartz imaginable. Leading into the great hall, a vaulted ceiling with two massive stalagmites, which had become pillars, added to the majesty of the grotto. A dip in the middle of the hall- no doubt formed from centuries of use- was a natural center. To the left side, chambers formed by smaller stalagmites turned into narrow passages melting one into another, curving downwards or upwards. Nature had produced a complex labyrinth of sanctuaries.

Five "lofts," which circled the back of the great hall and extended into the chamber rooms about five feet above the floor of the cave, were large enough to sleep three or four people. The largest caught my attention in particular because, unlike the others, its floor and ceiling were jet black with specks of mother-of-pearl imbedded in the surface. Many of the pots recovered from the cave were made from this black clay; others were made from more traditional red clays.

I crawled into the space where, deep in one corner, crouching to examine a broken area in the black floor, I found pure dark red clay, which was the right consistency, moisture content and texture to begin making a pot without further preparation. I wondered whether this blackened room could have been a kiln room. The clay, ready to use, could have been dried near the kiln and fired in the same place, a perfect set-up. An indoor kiln might have also driven out the dampness, the only aspect of the cave I found uncomfortable. Considering the surroundings, I began to revise my notions of the hardships of primitive life- at least in this location. The temperature and quality of the air, in spite of the heat outdoors, were far superior to our air-conditioning. In one corner of the cave, a constant trickle of water provided a natural water supply. Fruits, nuts and herbs were at the doorstep, and the scent of lavender filled the air. The black crust of clay on the surface of the "kiln" loft wall was thin; scratching through it I came to a bright white, and began to make the impressive patterns common to the area in Neolithic times. In a few strokes I felt one long hand extending across time, sending a jolt of energy into my body. I began my rituals. -

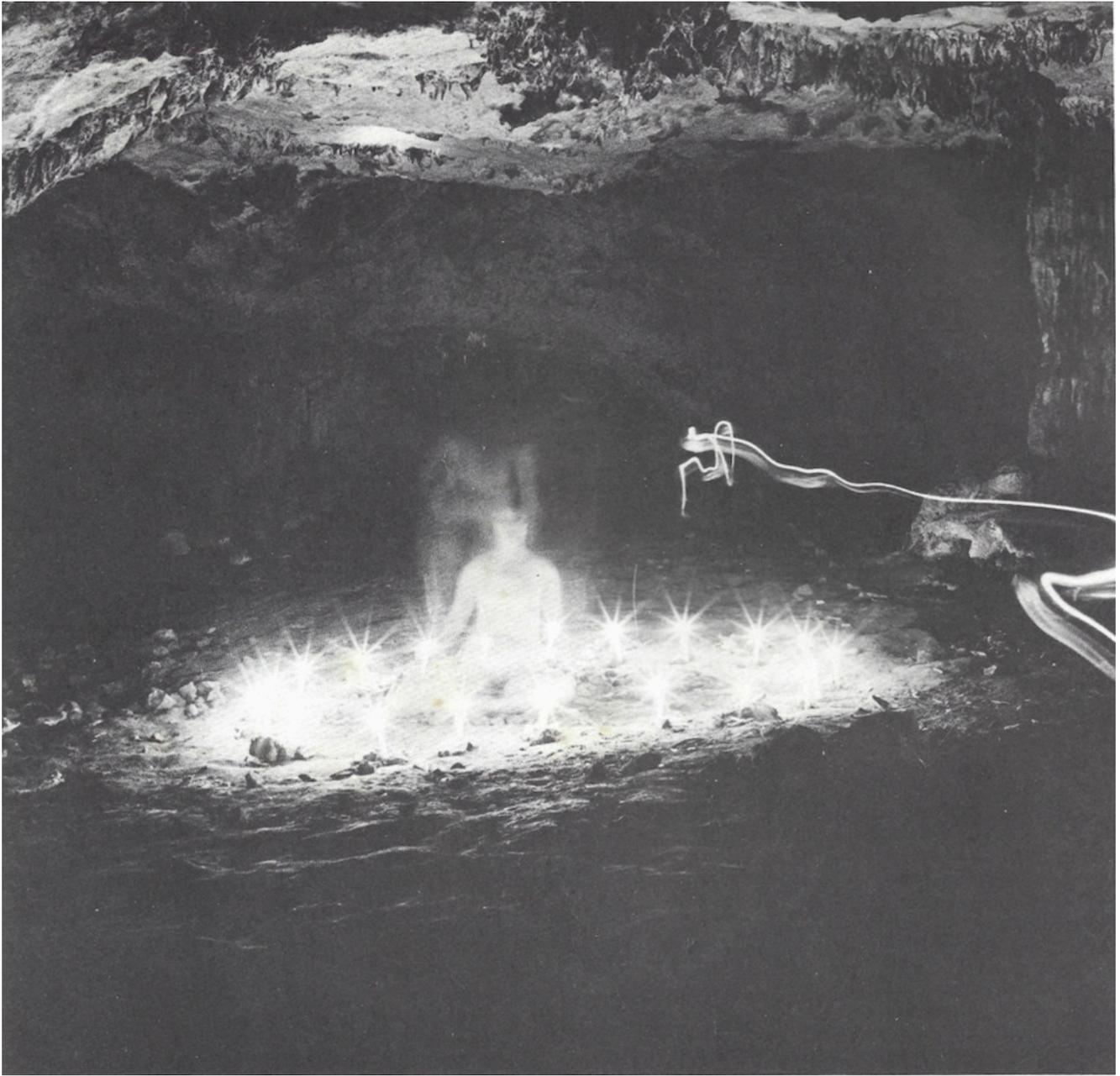
The energy from the rituals seemed to pulsate from the vaulted ceiling to me and back again.

Aware of the privilege of having the cave to myself, I felt like the center of the universe. My mouth was actually inhaling the cave, all of it, and breathing it out again. The cave contracted and expanded with my rhythms, and shimmered on its way back and forth. I made a pact with the cave: it would tell me some of its secrets in exchange for my rituals, rituals that it had not seen for millennia. I in turn would learn some secrets now and some later- I had only to listen, to keep in touch.

The first stalagmite chamber to the front and left of the great hall provided a natural altar, as it was elevated a few feet above the floor and in clear view from any point in the hall. In the center of the altar stood a stalagmite the size of a large Mother Goddess. Full-figured, she endured, frozen through the ages but still in charge. In front of Her and facing the great hall was a sloping stalagmite the height of a table, behind Her, concealed from sight, a small chamber divided into threes: a hidden sacristy.

We poked around in the ground outside the cave, the sun warm on our backs. Anne said, "I was in touch with myself today in a way that I have not been for a long time." On the way back down, we spent time in the deserted village, abandoned, we guessed, for lack of water. But here again was magic; on a back path we found a pomegranate tree in full bloom. The vineyards originally cultivated by Humac villagers are still harvested for their grapes and the fields for their lavender, which was in bloom. The houses, made from fieldstones piled one on top of the other without mortar, grew as if molded from the earth. Everything was in harmony. We continued to come down with out physical bodies but our spirits were still high up there.

Note: After this day, and with encouragement from the natives of Hvar Island, we located Professor Novak. Again by word of mouth, we found his house in the town of Hvar. He graciously allowed us to visit his observatory which he showed us with pride, and the visit ended with gifts of shards and shells from the cave. Among scores of artifacts, mostly bowls, removed from the cave or reconstructed from shards, there were two chalices in Professor Novak's observatory that were of particular interest to me. Identically shaped, their form was so non-functional that they must have been used for ritual purposes. They appeared to be very special; seeing them was like seeing tangible proof of an ancient secret. I struggled to get a photograph through the class case. Chalices of this type are referred to by Gimbutas as wine cups with phallus stem bases, used when the Goddess of Vegetation was born...[when] "caves were used as sanctuaries, particularly those with stalagmites and stalactites." (Gimbutas notes that quartz caves were particularly selected to be sanctuaries).



The atmosphere of the cave created a feeling of reverence and awe... for me it was a holy place. Grapceva Neolithic Cave Series: See for Yourself, 1977. Hvar Island, Yugoslavia. Ritual Performance.

I document my rituals with a camera set on time release; the technical procedures, now second nature, do not interfere with the process... The flow depends on preparation, research drawings, staring into space and allowing the ritual to spring from within. I start from a body position that leads to a mind spirit position, peeling back

through layers, trying to avoid the obvious, touching primordial places which take up from the present and move me forward. Once the involved preparation is complete, I put everything out of my mind and begin the ritual, letting it flow where it will. Often the essence of the particular environment takes over.