

The Goddess and Marija Gimbutas

by Maureen Murdock, Ph.D.

The work of Marija Gimbutas has been crucial to the growth of feminist spirituality, feminist religious scholarship, feminist psychology, and the liberating implications that the existence of a goddess tradition can bring to women everywhere. Whatever the reactions to Gimbutas's theories, it is important to acknowledge the larger implications of the idea of an embodied sacred feminine that preceded patriarchy. As Charlene Spretnak writes:

Gimbutas' work, which was illuminated by her sensitivity to spiritual matters and to sculptures of all eras, has radical implications for the history of both Western religion and Western philosophy. In each of those fields, the early belief systems and schools are not seen to be *bridge* traditions. That is, the attention in both the Greek "mystery cults" (demeaned as pre-Christian pagan irrationalism) and the pre-Socratic philosophers to unitive dimensions of being and a cosmological wholeness was an attempt to preserve the remnants of Old European wisdom (Spretnak 403-404).

Gimbutas' work helps us entertain the hope that the oppression of patriarchy did not always exist. If a culture did exist in peace approximately 8,000 years ago, prior to the Indo-Europeans, that would certainly be a model of a mythos for the 21st century.

From her excavations in 1973 and 1974, she found temples and sculptures that began to influence her views that the sculptures represented goddesses. She and her associates discovered certain bird head sculptures in the temples and sculptures of pregnant females in the courtyards. There were neither weapons in the graves nor fortifications in the villages. From this, she concluded that this was a very different culture from that of the later Indo-Europeans: it was peaceful.

Citing evidence from her excavation of cemeteries, settlements, the historical records of the continuance of a matrilineal system, from portrayals in frescoes and from folklore and similar evidence in the Minoan culture of Crete, Gimbutas concluded that Old Europe was a matrilineal society with a female deity. "Motherhood determined the social structure and religion because religion always reflects social structure. Old Europe was a matrilineal society where the queen was on the top and her brother next to her" (Gimbutas, Kearns, 1990).

In *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, Gimbutas writes:

The Fertility Goddess or Mother Goddess is a more complex image than most people think. She was not only the Mother Goddess who commands fertility, or the Lady

of the Beasts who governs the fecundity of animals and all wild nature, or the frightening Mother Terrible, but a composite image with traits accumulated from both the pre-agricultural and agricultural eras. During the latter she became essentially a Goddess of Regeneration, i.e., a Moon Goddess, a product of a sedentary, matrilinear community, encompassing the archetypal unity and multiplicity of feminine nature. She was giver of life and all she promotes fertility, and at the same time she was the wielder of the destructive powers of nature. The feminine nature, like the moon, is light as well as dark" (152).

The ancients knew and accepted this cycle of death and rebirth central to Goddess spirituality through their physical observation of nature and their seasonal observations of death and regeneration. For example, the Greeks celebrated this in ritual of the Eleusinian Mysteries honoring the return of Persephone each year bearing a single ear of wheat, symbolically reassuring the people that life endures beyond death. At Eleusis, Kore came in answer to the call. She rose from the dead. She appeared. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the people participated in making the gods come alive and partaking of their gifts. (Downing, "Books that Never Got Written," 27). At this time in the twenty-first century, we are also asking Kore, as symbol of the sacred feminine, not only to ascend from the underworld and bring us a symbol of civilization, but also to be present for us in the moment of our death, to give it meaning and comfort us.

Through her archeological discoveries and deciphering of the artifacts, Gimbutas re-imagined what might have been a culture that was not afraid of death but instead honored the divine powers that oversaw death and regeneration. Death was seen as just a transition immediately followed by regeneration. Through the archeological work of Gimbutas, as well as the interpretation of the myth of the Greek Demeter and Persephone by Downing, we are drawn to the Eleusinian Mysteries to remind us that the sacred feminine continues through the centuries to bring back the life force.

As Marija Gimbutas has said in many interviews, it was her "fate to do this work" because of her family background and the pagan heritage of her country (Gimbutas, Kearns, 1990). She grew up in Lithuania, the last country in Europe to be Christianized—it didn't take root until the 16th century—and as a child she experienced respect for Mother Earth. Each day she saw people kiss the earth in the morning and say prayers in the evening. She experienced the sacredness of wells, streams, water animals, and trees, all of which were considered to have healing power. Hers was an embodied spirituality from her earliest memory.

Gimbutas was raised in an atmosphere in which family spirits and the spirits that infused folk art were respected. Her family collected folk songs and folk art; Gimbutas herself collected 5000 folksongs and attended ethnographic expeditions until World War II broke out. After moving to the United States, she studied Indo-Europeans at Harvard University as a visiting scholar and wrote a book on the Bronze Age. "I devoted at least 10 years of my career studying Indo European war gods and weapons and that was too much for me" (Gimbutas, Kearns, 1990). Her life changed when she moved to California and taught at UCLA. This was the beginning of her exploration of the culture that preceded the Indo-Europeans.

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Venus of Willendorf, c. 28,000 B.C.E – 25,000 B.C.E.

Between 1968-80, Gimbutas directed four excavations of Neolithic cultures (7000 BCE-2000 BCE) in southeast Europe in Sitagroi, Greek Macedonia; Anza, Macedonia; Thessaly, Greece; and Manfredonia, Italy. She found thousands of Neolithic artifacts throughout Eastern Europe that spoke of an ancient aesthetic different from the material culture of the Bronze Age. Gimbutas determined a “culture existed that was opposite of all that was known to be Indo-European and this led me to coin a new term ‘Old Europe’ in 1968” (Marler, 15).

In 1979 Gimbutas organized the first interdisciplinary conference in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia to stimulate new research on the radical shift of economic, religious, and social structures that took place between the fifth and third millennia BCE. She became convinced that the art of Old Europe reflected a sophisticated religious symbolism (Marler, 16). She developed an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry she called “archeomythology,” a union of archeology and mythology. She stated, “They cannot be separated because this helps us reconstruct the spirituality of our ancestors” (Gimbutas, Kearns, 1990). She wrote, “interdisciplinary research requires the scholar to view a problem with an entirely different mental focus, which means learning to assemble the data with a goal of seeing all details at once, *in situ*” (qtd. in Marler, 21). Her work drew from mythology, linguistics, ethnology, folklore, comparative religion and historical documents.

Her work on the Bronze Age was accepted by archeologists because it had nothing to do with religion or symbolism, but they did not accept her deciphering of a goddess religion because they did not accept the notion that a religion could be extrapolated from the artifacts. Yet, she felt it was important to move beyond the limits of scientific materialism alone and use all possible sources to understand the ancestors (Gimbutas,

Kearns, 1990).

In an address in 1992 at Interface in Sudbury Massachusetts, Gimbutas said, “If you say anything about the ritual side of the culture they will say you are cracked. You cannot say anything about the spiritual side of the culture. I don’t care if I will be accepted or not accepted. I care only for the truth. What is the sense of being a scholar if you have to be afraid of some other forces?” (“Women and the Goddess,” 1992).

Gimbutas’ work in both *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess* has been criticized by archeologists because of her insistence on her interpretation of the figurines as objective evidence of the existence of a goddess religion and on her “lack of precision, and uncorroborated speculations, particularly in view of her earlier esteemed scholarly work” (Long, 16). In a 1993 review in *American Anthropologist*, Ruth Tringham criticized her for stating there is unequivocal evidence to support her interpretation of Goddess symbology and for denying the validity of alternative interpretations. She writes “Feminist archeological research is based on a celebration of the ambiguity of the archeological record and a plurality of its interpretation, and the subjectivity of the pre-histories that are constructed is a part of its discourse. Gimbutas, however, has mystified the process of interpretation and has presented her own conclusions as objective fact” (Tringham, 197).

On the other hand, Tringham and her colleague, Margaret Conkey feel that Gimbutas’s work reviving goddess religions provides important new perspectives on archeological concerns and challenges the androcentric structure of archeology viewed by many of its professionals. They write: “We have come to see that our enquiry is just as much about key issues in contemporary archeological interpretation as seen through the topic of the

Goddess as it is about how the Goddess movement uses archeology” (Conkey and Tringham, 200). Even though they take issue with many of Gimbutas’ assertions, they find the paradigm shift to which she contributed to be valid and forceful (200).

Feminist archeologist Lynn Meskell questions Gimbutas’ use of an archeological past—convinced that there was an egalitarian culture prior to the Indo-Europeans—to bring about social and political change in the twentieth century. But she gives credence to Gimbutas’ work as a form of “mythopoetics whereby a cultural identity is constructed or reconstructed” (Long, 16).

It took Gimbutas thirty years of research and deciphering to understand the symbology in excavated places; her background in myth and folklore helped her see the symbology in the sites and figurines she excavated. In *From the Realm of the Ancestors*, Joan Marler writes, “Joseph Campbell said that if her work had been available earlier he would have written things differently. He neglected goddesses because there was no way to find out more about them” (19).

Gimbutas knew that to reconstruct the social structure of a culture, researchers had to look at cemeteries and study burial rituals to discern how people were buried and with what kind of gifts. In the tombs she excavated there was no hierarchy of males over females; the burial sites showed an egalitarian society. She revolutionized the field by demonstrating that Neolithic settlements of Europe prior to Indo-European influence (around 4400 BCE in eastern Europe) were radically different than later societies. It is Charlene Spretnak’s understanding that this is now accepted by most archaeologists (Spretnak 401).

Villages from 7000 BCE had workshops and a temple proper. In the temple the people prepared pottery for rituals. In her talk at Interface, Gimbutas said that in many female graves she found “cult objects filled with red ochre buried next to houses. These houses were the core houses of the village where the main family lived” (1992). She found “middle aged women and girls richly equipped with beads, figurines and a model of the temple.” She speculated that these girls might have been in the line of priestess showing a matrilineal system. In contrast, no cult objects were found in men’s graves. Men’s graves were “equipped with craft tools, axes, hoes, trade objects, obsidian for knives, some stone or flint. Clearly men were in trade which was very important” (1992).

Finding thousands of female figurines, female-honoring ritual artifacts, and temple models, Gimbutas concluded that women were highly respected in the cultures of Old Europe. She speculated that the female figurines were used in ritual: some standing on altars waiting for a ritual to begin and others found around bread ovens. “In northern Greece in Thessaly they had rituals before the baking of bread and during the baking of bread. Women made small figurines at the same time they were making the bread; bread was sacred” (1992).

Gimbutas found 100 pregnant goddess figures in Achilleion in an excavated area little more than 100 square meters, and more than 200 clay figures in northern Greece. “This site revealed that certain types of female figurines (bird goddess, snake goddess, nurse) were temple or house gods. Others, such as the pregnant goddess were worshipped in the courtyard at specially prepared platforms with offering pits near bread ovens. These pits were for sacrifices and we found organic remains of plants or grains that were sacrificed. From the 200

figurines found at Achilleion, only two fragmented ones represented a male god, seated on a stool with hands on his knees” (*Civilization of the Goddess*, 22).

Gimbutas did not use the term “matriarchy” but rather “matrilinearity” because unlike women in patriarchy, men were not suppressed. Men were very important in society in trade, architecture, shipbuilding and crafts. There was no marriage; the mother had a consort but no husband. Gimbutas found a ratio of 98% female goddess figurines to male gods.

Gimbutas became convinced that the art of Old Europe reflected a sophisticated religious symbolism and she categorized the energies of the goddess in terms of life-giving, death-taking, and regeneration. She identified life-giving goddesses such as the bird goddess, snake goddess, and the bull; death-taking goddesses such as the vulture and owl and symbols such as the tomb/womb; and goddesses of transformation such as the egg and the frog. Gimbutas’ find of the thousands of archaic goddess figurines calls for an important interpretation.

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