

Goddesses, Gimbutas and 'New Age' archaeology

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For a century a notion of a prehistoric Mother Goddess has infused some perceptions of ancient Europe, whatever the realities of developing archaeological knowledge. With the reverent respect now being given to Marija Gimbutas, and her special vision of a perfect matriarchy in Old Europe, a daughter-goddess is now being made, bearer of a holy spirit in our own time, to be set alongside the wise mother of old.

Introduction

The field of archaeology, like many others, is prone to fads and fictions within the academic community and general public alike. A recurrent interest since the 19th century has been the notion of an omnipotent Mother Goddess, whose worship symbolizes a cultural continuity from the Palaeolithic era to modern times. The principle advocate for this theory over the past two decades, Marija Gimbutas, is seen to offer archaeological validity to these claims as a result of her recognized academic standing and long history of fieldwork in southeast European sites. From the material particulars of archaeology in her earlier work she moved toward an ideal vision of prehistory (compare Gimbutas 1965; 1970; 1971a; 1973 with interpretations in 1974; 1981; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989; 1989a; 1989b; 1991; 1992). Her widely published theories appeal to those committed to ecofeminism and the 'New Age' range of esoteric concerns, which include ancient religion and mythology. Whilst this vision of the past appears to embrace aspects of cognitive, gender and even feminist archaeologies, the interpretations it presents are simply hopeful and idealistic creations reflecting the contemporary search for a social utopia.

The concept of The Goddess is entangled within a larger, more complex, political phenomenon that involves regional and nationalist struggles (Chapman 1994; Anthony *in press*), linguistic aetiology (Renfrew 1987; Mallory 1989: 81), contemporary gender strug-

gles and the feminist cause (Hallett 1993; Passman 1993). However, the revisionist histories on offer (Eisler 1987; Gimbutas 1974; 1989a; 1989b; 1991; 1992; Orenstein 1990; Spretnak 1992; etc.) do not aim for a more complete understanding of ancient societies *in toto*. Rather, they provide altogether alternative historical projections of what certain groups see as desirable. Re-writing the past from an engendered perspective is certainly long overdue, yet re-weaving a fictional past with claims of scientific proofs (e.g. Gimbutas 1992) is simply irresponsible. Such 'new and improved' histories are more telling of contemporary socio-sexual concerns rather than their ancient antecedents.

Why the Goddess and why now?

Why has there been a proliferation of studies devoted to the concept of a Mother Goddess in recent years? Why has this appeal been so persistent, particularly to the general public? Whereas the academic study of figurines is usually integrated within regional culture studies, the notion of the Goddess has assumed larger proportions to the wider community. As a result, the literature of the Goddess lies at the interface where academic scholarship meets New Age gynocentric, mythologized interpretations of the past (Eisler 1987; Gimbutas 1974; 1989a; 1992; Spretnak 1992). This is a radically burgeoning field in women's studies and New Age literature, and its books must far outsell their scholarly counterparts. Since

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achieving icon status, The Goddess has been linked with movements and disciplines as diverse as christianity, feminism and eco-feminism, environmentalism, witchcraft and archaeology. In each of these the Goddess phenomenon is taken as a given rather than one speculative interpretation to be considered with alternative hypotheses. The past is being used in the present as an historical authority for contemporary efforts to secure gender equality (or superiority?) in spiritual and social domains.

Scholarly ferment acknowledges the active role of the reader in examining and interpreting the past (Shanks & Tilley 1987; Hodder 1991; Frymer-Kensky 1992). Our own predilections shape our focus of study, the data employed and the types of questions posited. The current interest in the Goddess is not purely academic, but stems from a desire to remedy the results of millennia of misogyny and marginalization (Frymer-Kensky 1992: vii) in both religious and secular spheres. My contention is that the connection has materialized in response to female disempowerment in our own recent history, particularly within religious power bases. The Goddess serves as a vehicle for women's groups and activists to reinforce legitimization of their position by means of an ancient antecedent. Contrary to the bloodied, materialist history and overt androcentrism of the Church, she is earth-centred, offering refuge and a counterbalance to the remote, punitive male god of western religions (Frymer-Kensky 1992; Spretnak 1992).

While this may present a valid and necessary response to the prolonged sufferance of sexism and subordination, the political agenda presented generally rests on archaeological evidence which cannot confirm an ancient precursor. I am not suggesting an alignment to the Goddess in contemporary contexts is invalid. Simply that if justification is sought on the basis of ancient ritual behaviour and social dynamics, both archaeologists and mythologists alike are struggling! Most archaeologists acknowledge the ontological difficulties in accessing ancient *mentalités* through the material record, despite the possibilities of a cognitive archaeology (see Renfrew *et al.* 1993; Renfrew & Zubrow 1994). From this perspective it requires interpreters to experience the Neolithic, for example, both objectively and

subjectively, with the same linguistic and psychological competence of their subjects. By extension, archaeologists should be familiar with the intentions, mental history and life context of these individuals (Johnson & Olsen 1992: 41), entangling them in a hermeneutic dilemma. Consider tracing this back one or two million years (see Gimbutas 1992) to the originary concept of a supreme feminine creatrix? Whilst an external, materialist position might appeal to the archaeological evidence for the tangible correlates of human thought or planning, an internal, empathetic position aims to embrace a 'common spirit' and is inspired by faith and intuition in an unbroken chain of being.

This speculation lands on dangerous ground when accredited academics offer an archaeological foundation to these kinds of claims. These statements of validity are an acknowledgement that archaeologists often function as external judges of what is meaningful within other cultures (Brown 1993: 240). Many of these initial gynocentric theories of prehistory share a fundamental commonality to prior androcentric premises since they both employ 'sexist' paradigms in re-constru(ct)ing the past. Thus they do not promote credibility: rather they damage and delimit the positive attributes of gender-based research, due to their poor scholarship, ahistorical interpretations, fictional elements and reverse sexism. I see no detriment to current quests if we acknowledge that inequality was operative in the past, as it was in the historic cultures of the Near East and Mediterranean.

The figurines as archaeological data

Figurines collectively termed Mother Goddesses or Venuses emanate from various regions and span an immense time-depth from the Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age and into historical periods, with considerable variability in form, style, decoration and context. This class of artefact — if that is an appropriate term — appears throughout much of Europe and southwest Asia, primarily southeast Europe and the Mediterranean islands from the Cyclades to Crete, Malta and Majorca (Ehrenberg 1989: 65; Malone *et al.* 1993: 76). The figures are generally accorded the status of 'art', although ethnographic evidence suggests that they do not form a distinct category. In a fur-

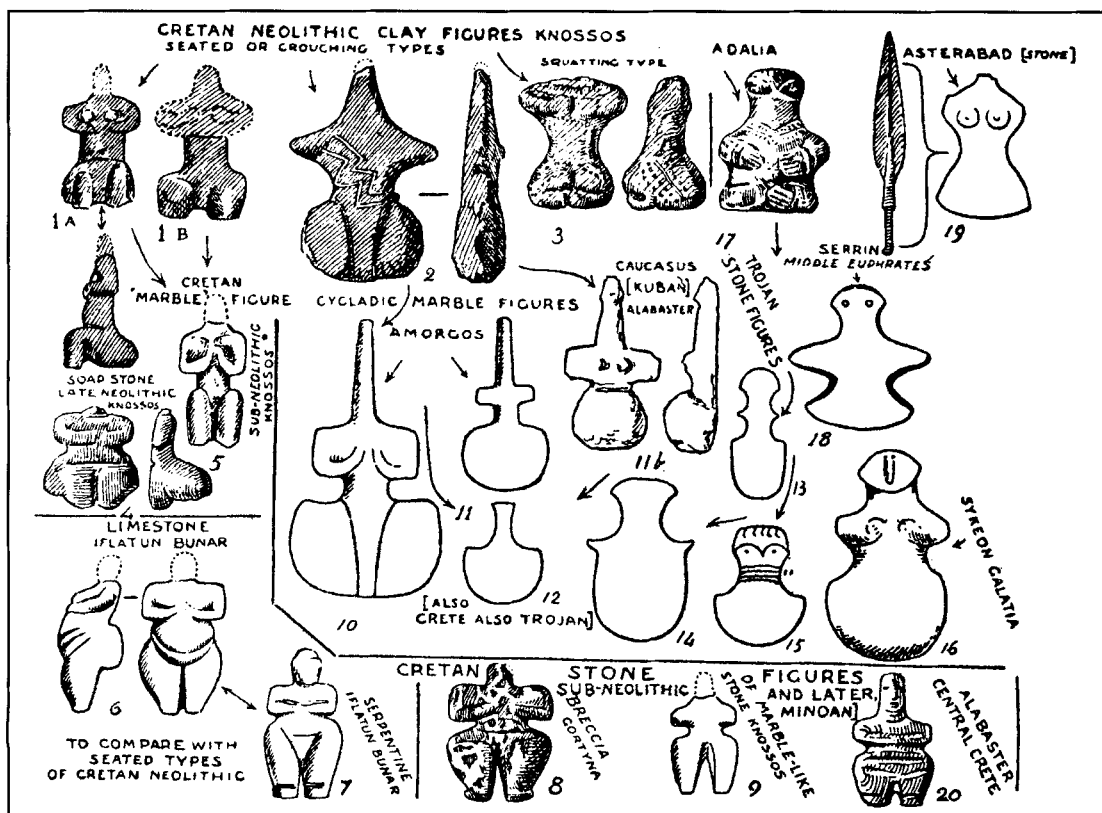


FIGURE 1. The figurines of early farming societies in southeast Europe have long provided the core of the material repertoire in which the goddess is seen. They are here seen with their suggested kin in a sketchy drawing from Childe's *Dawn of European civilization* (1927: figure 10), itself following an older publication by Sir Arthur Evans.

ther tendency to project 20th-century biases of what constitutes 'good art', it has been suggested that carefully made sculptures were produced for important occasions by priestesses or mother figures (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 220). Conversely, the simple, schematic examples could have been made by any member of the community (male?). Figurines have been objectified, taken as devoid of spatial and cultural specificity; yet objects do not have inherent meaning divorced from their historically specific context of production and use (Hodder 1991; Dobres 1992a; 1992b).

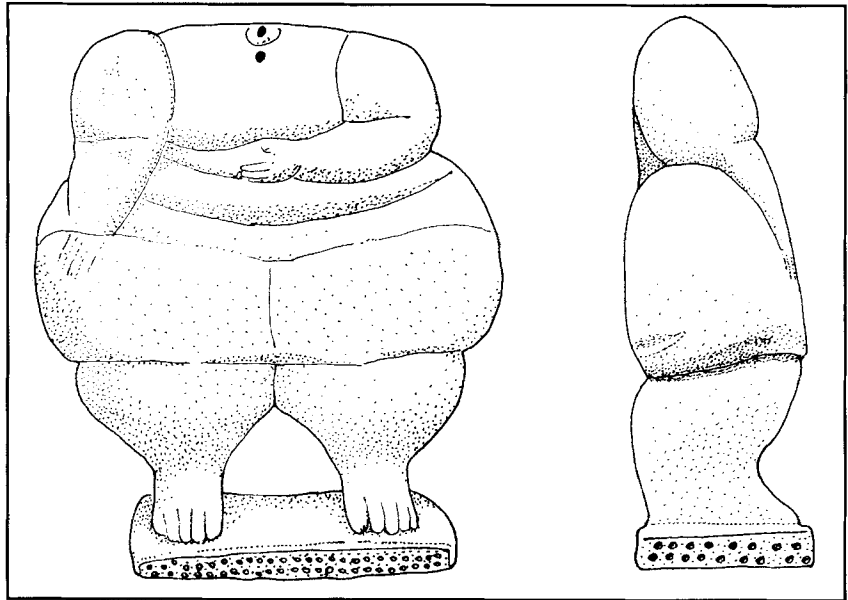
For many figurines, provenience and context are lost due to poor excavation or non-archaeological recovery (for Cycladic figures see Gill & Chippindale 1993). Runnels (1990) and McPherron (1991) have noted the limits of excavation and recording by Gimbutas for her own site at Achilleion (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989),

on which much of the larger picture is reliant. Dating, methodology, testing, typological and statistical analyses have all come under fire, not to mention artistic licence and over-interpretation. Weaknesses in scholarship have prevented Gimbutas' attempts, and the question of gender studies, to be taken seriously in archaeological circles (Tringham 1991: 97; 1993).

As part of a gynocentric agenda, female figurines have been considered largely to the exclusion of male and sexless examples (Gimbutas 1971b; 1974; 1986; 1989a; 1989b; 1992; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989), this selection shaping the vision of a single, omnipresent female deity. Her position is clear: male divinities were not prominent before the Indo-European invasion (see van Leuven 1993: 84). Many are undeniably female. Many are also male, androgynous, zoomorphic or indeterminate (see Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Hodder 1990; Milojkovic 1990;

FIGURE 2. *Carved figure in stone from Hagar Qim, Malta, c. 3000–2500 BC. (Drawing by David Trump.)*

Prehistoric sculpture from Malta has always featured prominently in both archaeological and New Age discourse on figurines. From a purely representational point of view we could be witnessing obesity rather than divinity. Moreover, many of the Maltese figures, like this one, lack the primary and secondary sexual characteristics of females, deified or not.



Pavlovic 1990; Talalay 1993); these are dismissed.

To her credit, Gimbutas assembled a large corpus of southeast European figurines in English publications, with copious photographs and illustrations. She aimed to investigate figurine attributes such as raw materials, production and form to some degree. However, studies of production have been undertaken more systematically by other scholars (Murray 1970), coupled with analyses of decorative motifs and positioning (Ucko 1968; Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Pogozheva 1983) and patterns of breakage. It is unfortunate that Gimbutas did not incorporate findings from these studies into her later publications.

Mediterranean matriculture and the Indo-European debate

One key debate in 19th-century anthropology, currently experiencing a revival, hinges on the traditional matriarchal view of cultural evolution. Eminent scholars such as Morgan, Engels and Bachofen led the early debate, influenced by their own socio-intellectual biases, though failing to make the distinction between matriarchy, matrilinearity and matrilocality. Bachofen's evolutionist interpretations, long since discredited within academia, have now resurfaced in the Goddess literature. In part the writings of Freud and Jung, who both asserted that devo-

tion to female deities appeared early in human evolution, still influence some schools of anthropology (Talalay 1991: 47). This may explain why Gimbutas described herself as an 'archaeo-mythologist' or 'palaeopsychologist' who traced the ancient roots of emerging feminine consciousness (1989a: xix; 1991; 1992).

Diffusionist concepts prevailed in writings about the Goddess of the 1950s and '60s, in the writings of Crawford (1957: 20–22) and of Vermeule (1964: 21), who asserted that one Goddess was worshipped universally all over Greece with similar ceremonies, sacrifices and hymns. These rituals would have also been recognized by visitors from Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, the islands, Bulgaria and Hungary, since they too worshipped this deity (Vermeule 1964: 21). Yet the figures are not homogeneous, but diverse and scattered spatially and temporally; there is no cause to interpret every figure from 'old Europe' in this 'religious' light (Ehrenberg 1989: 73). The ancient Mediterranean was not a single cultural unit, trapped over the millennia in cultural stasis. Ucko's research made this clear (1968: 387–90) by recognizing inter-cultural connections between the Mediterranean/Europe and Near East, yet allowing for parallel evolution.

It has become popular in the past decade to view Neolithic cultures as matriarchal or matrifocal (Hayden 1986: 17), and to depict

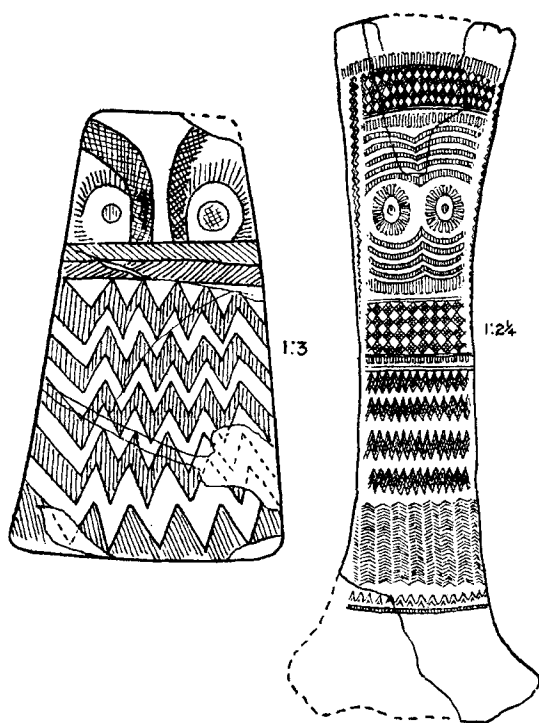


FIGURE 3. Images of the 'Face-goddess' as perceived by O.G.S. Crawford, and published in his *The eye goddess* (1957).

The theory of an omnipotent and omnipresent Mother Goddess has been popular amongst archaeologists of various generations. Here O.G.S. Crawford, renowned British prehistorian and the first editor of *ANTIQUITY*, makes the goddess connection with schist plaques from Portugal and a decorated bone from Almizaraque (Almeria), Spain.

That the circles are eyes and therefore that these objects represent the human form is one assumption; that the depicted form is inherently female is another; and that it was deified makes another substantial leap up the ladder of inference.

them as peaceful, harmonious and artistic in contrast to the more aggressive, destructive patriarchal societies that followed (Chapman 1991; Tringham 1991; Conkey & Tringham in press): the overthrowing of matriarchy by patriarchal society was the real Fall which has beleaguered Europe ever since. Childe raised a powerful analogue, arguing that using female figurines to substantiate matriarchal or matrilineal society was as accurate an indicator as the image of the Virgin Mary in the modern

patriarchy (Childe 1951: 65). We should not ignore the possibility of matriarchy; rather we are not clear what form such evidence would take.

This line of reasoning ties directly into the polemic debate surrounding Indo-European archaeology and linguistics, in which Gimbutas was a major player (see Renfrew 1987: xiii; Mallory 1989: 182). Briefly, her view of Old Europe in the Neolithic period was characterized by its unfortified settlements (*contra* Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Anthony in press) where a peaceful existence prevailed without threat of violence or fear of death itself. Within the matriarchy there were no husbands, yet men fulfilled important roles in construction, crafts and trade. Women's lives were liberal, socially and sexually, and inextricably bound to the rich religious system which ensured their prominence (Gimbutas 1992). Old Europe is portrayed as culturally homogeneous (*contra* Pavlovic 1988: 33; Mallory 1989: 22), socially egalitarian (*contra* Tringham 1990: 605; Anthony in press), devoid of human or animal sacrifice (*contra* Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Anthony in press). Accordingly, this utopian existence was abruptly destroyed by Indo-European invasions: more specifically by the equocentric Kurgan culture from the Russian steppe.

As Mallory states, 'even twentieth century writers portray the Proto-Indo-Europeans as a single people constrained within their homeland, perfecting their language and then bursting all over the earth waving swords and spreading paradigms' (1989: 22). More importantly, the Indo-European debate centres on a linguistic construct which has been coloured by politico-religious motivations from the outset (Mallory 1989: 9). Language and territory are politically guided by modern nationalist concerns; for example Baltic languages are in a minority as a result of Slavic expansion (1989: 81). Combine this with Gimbutas' vocal condemnation of Stalin's push into Eastern Europe (see Gimbutas 1992) and her reasoning comes into sharper focus.

There is a striking congruence between Gimbutas' own life and her perception of Old Europe. Born in Lithuania, she witnessed two foreign occupations by 'barbarian invaders'; however, those from the East stayed. This prompted her immigration to the United States

during which time the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states continued almost up until her death in 1994. In her own words, 'history is showing us between eight and ten million women had to die for her [the Goddess]... the wise people of the time... so it reminds me of the same [*sic*] what happened in Stalin's Europe when the cream of the society had to be removed and only fools were left to live. What happened in the twentieth century is the greatest shame of human history' (Gimbutas 1992). This strongly mirrors her view of Old Europe, a creative, matriarchal and *good* society which was invaded by men with weapons from the East.

Other writers (see Eisler 1987; Passman 1993) have run with Gimbutas' theories by stressing the superiority of assumed matrilineal cultures in Old Europe, Anatolia, Egypt and Minoan Crete on the basis of their peaceful, egalitarian, non-fortified communities and even their predisposition to vegetarianism (?) (Passman 1993: 187). Such a scenario is not borne out archaeologically. Walls and ditches at Nea Nikomedia, Dimini and Sesklo may have defensive functions. Both Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites like Tırpești, Ovcharovo, Polyanitsa and Tripolye clearly demonstrate fortification (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Anthony in press: 20). Sites such as Dimini and Agia Sophia (Demoule & Perlès 1993) suggest status differentiation within communities, as does Selevac (Tringham & Krstić 1990: 206), with more evidence of social hierarchy from the cemeteries at Varna, Durankulak and other East Balkan sites (Anthony in press: 20). In addition, there is evidence of human sacrifice at Traian-Dealui, Fântânilor (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981: 135) and later from Knossos (Wall *et al.* 1986); animal sacrifices are attested at Poiana în Pisc and Anza. Artefactual evidence from Egypt indicates that weapons, in addition to items displaying battle scenes, were amongst the most common in the predynastic repertoire (see Davis 1992).

Even without the overwhelming archaeological data, historical evidence from Greece (Humphreys 1983; Hallett 1993), Egypt (Robins 1993) and Mesopotamia (Frymer-Kensky 1992) plus numerous ethnographic accounts suggest that cultures with strong female deities — if indeed they are deities — may still regard women in the profane world as a low-

status group. The romanticized view of antiquity many feminists and pseudo-feminists present has more to do with creating an idealized past to contrast with our own secular, impersonal and industrialized present than with archaeological facts (Hays 1993: 84). Their visionary work links notions of 'ancient' and 'future', so enabling a richly figured heritage, once lived and lost, to be experienced again (Passman 1993: 182). This political reconstruction of a matrilineal past furnishes the seed for a return to Edenic conditions, ecological balance, healing the planet and matriculture itself, in opposition to the forecasts of Armageddon and the second coming (Starhawk 1982; Orenstein 1990; Passman 1993).

Cultic figurines from a sexist perspective

Although proponents of post-processualism (e.g. Hodder 1987; 1990; 1991; Shanks & Tilley 1987) aim to understand symbolic systems, they still regard the archaeological record as a polysemous text that can be read (Hays 1993). Some have taken their position as reader to the extreme. Herein lies Gimbutas' attraction for a New Age audience, since she adopts the role of translator (channeller?) for a symbolic language stretching back millennia into the Neolithic mindset. In answer to Onians' claim that figurines represent ancient erotica, Gimbutas argues that 'love-making is clearly far from the thoughts of the ancient artist' (1981: 32). Knowing 'our European prehistoric forefathers were more philosophical than we seem to think' (1981: 39); she understands how they would be stunned to hear these new hypotheses. She further claims that the Achilleion figurines 'represent deities and their sacred animals, witness to continuous ritual performances in temples and at ovens in courtyards' (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 335). Her typological analysis was narrowed to fit these criteria, without mention of other functional interpretations. Similarly, she dismissed alternative explanations of Cycladic figures from mortuary contexts in favour of the Great Goddess (or stiff White Goddess) from a deeply rooted European tradition (1974: 158; 1992).

From the 1970s onwards Gimbutas presented arguments, with increasing fervour, to challenge a balanced and complementary view of the sexes in sacred and profane spheres (Hayden 1986; Chapman 1991). Her publica-



FIGURE 4. The Goddess at Avebury/Silbury. Illustration by Monica Sjöö, the foremost artist and theoretician of the re-emerging Goddess religion, to the chapter on 'The Goddess at Avebury in Britain', in Monica Sjöö & Barbara Mor's *The great cosmic mother: rediscovering the religion of the earth* (2nd edition, 1991).

Centre is Silbury Hill, 'the pregnant womb of the Goddess'; below are the two snakes of the long Avebury stone avenues which 'represented the bisexual Snake/Dragon Goddess, male and female in one'. Top left is the Avebury stone circle: 'This stone circle forms both an enlarged cunt and a great head, the inner circles forming the lunar and solar eyes. It is also a world island surrounded by the cosmic ocean. And its hidden power and secret is the sacred underground water that seeps into the ditch in the spring. Here the unborn fetuses dwell' [emphasis in the original].

Among other images on the left are a Wiltshire white horse (18th–19th centuries AD) and a figure from Kato Ierapetra (Crete), Greek Neolithic.

In this interpretation, the Avebury monuments are aligned within the 'pubic' triangle of two rivers meeting, seen in prehistory as superhuman bloodstreams gushing from the earth womb of the Goddess.

tions, including site reports (where one expects some attempt to discuss the data without a charged interpretation), were devoted to the Goddess and her manifestations; the gods are overlooked. At Anza 'only one [figurine] can possibly be male' (1976: 200); at Sitagroi 'only 1% can be considered as possibly portraying men' (1986: 226); at Achilleion the divine creatrix does not require male fecundity since 'her divine bisexuality stresses her absolute power' (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 196). In these reports every figure that is not phallic — and some that clearly are — are taken as symbols of the Goddess. This includes parallel lines, lozenges, zigzags, spirals, double axes, butterflies, pigs and pillars. Why this miscellany are self-evidently emblems of a female, much less a deity, is never explained. And indeed even the *male* may be symbolically *female*: 'although

the male element is attached, these figurines remain essentially female' (1989a: 232). Gimbutas denied that phallicism was symbolic of procreation since Neolithic peoples did not understand the nature of biological conception (1974: 237).

Gimbutas was emphatic that Neolithic mythology was not polarized into male and female, due to the supremacy of the Mother. From this assumption she extrapolated, concomitantly, the role of women was not subordinate to men (Gimbutas 1974: 237; see Chapman 1991; Tringham 1991). Yet male, sexless and zoomorphic figures do exist, which makes the notion of an omnipotent Mother Goddess difficult to support. Ucko's examination of the later Knossos figurines demonstrated that androgynous examples were equal in number to the identifiable female statuettes (1968: 316;



FIGURE 5. Sekmet: Lionheaded Goddess of Fire and Sun. *Illustration by Monica Sjöö to We'moon '95: Gaia rhythms for womyn (1995).*

This pastiche of ancient images suggests a geographical and cultural continuity for the supremacy of the Goddess. The Egyptian female deity Sekhmet, in fact goddess of war, takes centre stage surrounded by menhirs from Atlantic Europe, Neolithic Greek and Balkan figurines, as well as a figure of a female in the process of giving birth that relates to James Mellaart's records of imagery from Çatal Hüyük. According to the new Goddess literature, the triangle and chevrons are obviously symbols of the goddess; so too are the crops and crescent moon.

This manifesto sees the Mother Goddess, capital M capital G, in many manifestations that are essentially one and the same. The picture uses the characteristic kaleidoscope technique of present Goddess imagery, bringing together inspirations scattered across space and time into the single vision.

see Conkey & Tringham in press). Ucko (1968: 417) further concluded that most scholars treat male figures as exceptions, dismiss the sexless examples and regard all female figurines as a singular deity without convincing explanation for their obvious variation.

The Goddess contextualized

In addressing the archaeological context of finds at Anza, Sitagroi and Achilleion, Gimbutas interpreted partially excavated dwellings as 'house-shrines' and 'cult-places', and

benches as 'altars' (1981; 1986; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989). She concluded human activities like grinding grain, baking bread, weaving and spinning were inseparable from divine participation (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 213–15). To Gimbutas it was 'obvious that the Goddess ruled over human, animal and plant life' (Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 220). Perhaps these areas represented dwellings or workshops in view of associated finds like spindle whorls, a needle, awl and pottery discs? Indeed, few artefacts and features from these sites are as-

signed a mundane status (1981: 198–200; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 36–46, 213–15).

At Achilleion these fanciful interpretations are based on an excavation limited to four 5x5-m units and seven small soundings. We have only one or two incomplete structures in any single phase, and no compelling cause to assume these are shrines rather than specialized storehouses, workshops or dumps (see Runnels 1990: 342; McPherron 1991). Fragments of figurines are dispersed so widely over the site — much as plant and animal remains are — that one need not wonder why everything is found in ‘association’ with them (Runnels 1990: 342–3). Evidence from Anza, Selevac, Tîrpesti and Achilleion (see Gimbutas 1981; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989; Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981; Hodder 1990; Tringham 1990) indicates that figurines are found in every kind of context — refuse pits included. This would signify, as Gimbutas prefers, that the sacred is everywhere. Conversely, it could demonstrate that these figures are not sacred at all; or they may have multiple meanings which change as a figure is made, used and discarded.

Alternative hypotheses

Recent work in Kephala (northern Greece) uncovered figurines near graves, which would indicate a possible function as territorial markers to reinforce ancestral ties in the Neolithic period (Talalay 1991: 49). Ethnographic reports from Africa over the past 200 years also suggest this kind of placement may be associated to ancestor cults. Further functions proposed include dolls, toys, tokens of identification, primitive contracts, communication or as part of birthing rituals (Talalay 1993: 40–43). Other plausible interpretations include teaching devices, tools of sorcery, magic, healing or initiation (Ehrenberg 1989: 75). Talalay proposes that clay legs from the northern Peloponnese served to symbolize social and economic bonds among communities like those of marriage contracts or identification of trading partners (1987: 161–2). These alternatives, as opposed to a universal deity, may explain the practice of discard. To assume *a priori* that there is a Goddess behind every figurine is tantamount to interpreting plastic figures of Virgin Mary and of ‘Barbie’ as having identical ideological significance.

In terms of gender status, Chapman has identified a correlation between the proportion of

deities and the productive contribution of women within society. A high percentage of female deities often reflects a high ratio of female contribution to subsistence (1991: 157). For example, if indeed the Balkan Neolithic figurines represented Goddesses, this could follow from a high female contribution to digging-stick and hoe agriculture, rather than secular dominance.

Hodder (1990: 45–68) links the production of female figurines to the concept of the *domus* and the economic process of domestication. He argues that the house becomes an important focus for productive and symbolic activities, which incorporates the provision and preparation of food, concepts of protection and shelter, coupled with the burial of women and children (1990: 45). This hypothesis would explain the domestic (and refuse) context of figures, especially in association with hearths and storage pits at sites such as Tîrpesti, Anza, Sitagroi, Selevac and Achilleion (Hodder 1990: 61, see also Marinescu-Bîlcu 1981: 26; Gimbutas 1981: 198–9; Gimbutas *et al.* 1989: 46; 1986: 226, 262; Tringham 1990: 400). Moreover, it incorporates the manufacture of figurines with anthropomorphic vessels and miniatures of animals, houses, stools and ovens (Hodder 1990: 63). Though certain aspects of womanhood may have been used as a metaphor for various social and productive activities, this does not prove the existence of a matriarchal culture.

Conclusion: the Goddess, pseudo-feminism and future research

Whilst the concept of gender as a structuring principle is relatively new to archaeology, many progressive and scholarly studies have emerged in the last few years (e.g. Gero & Conkey 1991; Wylie 1991; Dobres 1992a; 1992b; Bacus *et al.* 1993; Brown 1993; Conkey & Tringham in press). However, many feminists feel that the establishment of an originary myth on the basis of scientific historical reality will facilitate the restoration of women’s power. It then follows that the patriarchy will be dismantled and the lost pre-patriarchal culture can be regained (Passman 1993: 187). Matriculture is seen to give feminism the legitimacy the system demands.

Contrary to this position I argue, as feminist and archaeologist, that the approaches of Gimbutas and her advocates contrast markedly

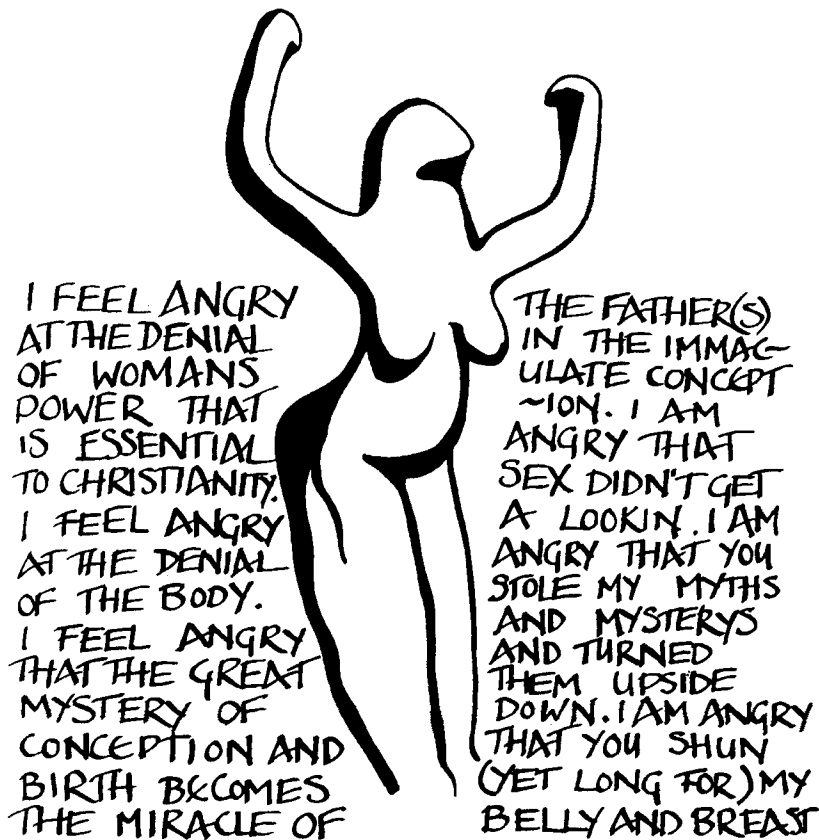


FIGURE 6. Drawing by Kirsty O'Connor after a prehistoric Amaratian figurine, Egypt, illustration to We'moon '95: Gaia rhythms for womyn (1995).

The text alongside is a declaration of woman's anger, beginning, 'I feel angry at the denial of woman's power that is essential to Christianity', that confirms the derision many New Age feminists feel for men and Christianity. The prehistoric figure employed to convey this comes from about 4000 years before Christ, and from an archaeological context where we know little about gender roles and attitudes. This archaeological image is the vehicle by which contemporary sexual politics are made 'timeless'. More concerning from a feminist perspective is that women's power is construed purely along biological and sexual lines.

to many feminists (Brown 1993: 254), especially those involved in archaeological discourse. This is not to say that Gimbutas claimed to do feminist archaeology; rather that she has been adopted as an icon within the movement, more ardently outside archaeological circles. However, some feminists do not accept her methodology, since she was so steeped within the 'establishment' epistemological framework of polar opposites, rigid gender roles, barbarian invaders and cultural stages (Fagan 1992; Brown 1993) which are now regarded as outmoded. It is unfortunate that many archaeologists interested in gender are drawn to historical

fiction and emotional narratives, which either replace or accompany serious archaeological dialogues. At this juncture sound feminist scholarship needs to be divorced from methodological shortcomings, reverse sexism, conflated data and pure fantasy, since this will only impede the feminist cause and draw attention away from the positive contribution offered by gender and feminist archaeologies. Gero & Conkey (1991: 5) assert that we are now in a position to draw from and contribute to emergent theoretical developments within archaeology, particularly post-processual directions that see social and symbolic theories as

central. Gender, however, cannot be separated from other archaeological considerations and become the type of speciality area Gimbutas created.

In future studies we should not expect to delineate a rigid and unitary code which holds for all contexts (Hodder 1987), but rather to identify the dimensions of meaning pertaining to particular societies and to comprehend their social locus. It may prove more informative to ask 'how did the social production of this object contribute to its meanings and uses?', 'how did these meaningful objects enhance people's understanding of their lives?' and 'what other associated activities were operative that can inform us about social context?' (Dobres 1992a: 17–18). Naturally the multiplicity of manifestations relative to their archaeological contexts must be considered, coupled with the socio-economic concerns of their manufacturers.

To conclude, academic and popular audiences alike need to review critically the evidence for a solitary universal Mother Goddess, along with other plausible interpretations. Although the post-processualists have stressed notions of pluralism, most now advocate that not *all* pasts are equal. The gynocentric narratives discussed above reveal more about our relationship(s) with the past and certain contemporary ideologies (Conkey 1992) than how these figurines were deployed in antiquity.

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The Mother Goddess metanarrative presents a possible challenge to feminist archaeologies in that solidarity can often prevent us from contesting theories presented by women which seem to espouse pro-female notions: even if the evidence would suggest otherwise. Loyalty to a misrepresented picture of the past and our human heritage by dismissing or misconstruing the archaeological record cannot be supported under the guise of any political standpoint. Needless to say, many men feel that they are not in a position to engage in these issues and that only other women can do so. This exclusivity is not conducive to scholarly development; neither is failing to counter claims of a gendered superiority supported by 'scientific' archaeology that ultimately has filtered into mainstream society. An engendered re-balancing of the scales is long overdue and critically important to the trajectory of the discipline. However, emphasis on one sex to the exclusion of the other is not only detrimental to serious gender/feminist studies, but threatens the interpretative integrity of archaeology.

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