

Miriam Dexter Robbins Interview
by Riyana for the Goddess Salons, April 2006

How did you begin your studies in goddess religion? Was there any specific point that you can cite as the one that marked a drastic change in your perception of ancient goddess-worshipping cultures?

I have been studying ancient religion, and the goddesses, since the early 1960's, when I became an undergraduate Classics major (Greek and Latin) at UCLA. I became more focused on female figures in graduate school, in Indo-European Studies (UCLA). In the early '70's, I wrote a grad school paper on Indo-European female figures. At that time, I was about a year away from finishing my PhD course work, taking my comprehensive exams, and beginning a dissertation. The professor who received my paper was Jaan Puhvel, my advisor and chair of the program. He liked the paper and suggested that I make it the topic of my dissertation. The dissertation combined linguistics, ancient languages (I translated the pertinent mythological texts), myth, and archaeology. When Marija Gimbutas, who was the archaeologist in the Program, found out that I was going to write about female figures, she had herself put on my dissertation committee, and so I found myself immersed in archaeology as well as myth and linguistics. I finished in 1978. A year or so later, I proposed a course at UCLA on ancient goddesses and heroines, based upon the dissertation (a course which I still teach, by the way -- over 25 years later). Because of my interest in female figures, I found myself one day -- somewhere in the early '80's -- at a 'Goddess' conference. The conference was in the Pacific Palisades, in a wooded area enhanced by a creek. I remember going off by myself and standing on a bridge overlooking the creek and having an epiphany: the creek, the water, was the Goddess -- she was alive, not just an abstract entity. Almost 25 years later, my perception of the Goddess is the same.

How have your studies been personally meaningful?

In my case, my personal life, my research, and my teaching wonderfully intersect.

Often work that celebrates ancient goddess cultures, or that simply states that such cultures existed, is criticized as romanticizing the past. How do you address these critics -- especially the ones lurking in our own minds and hearts?

I try to criticize my own work as much as possible, making it linguistically and archaeologically sound. For the early historic texts, I translate them myself, so that I know what they are really saying (without the bias of another person's translation). With regard to prehistoric iconography, I read as many excavation reports as I can, and I try to see if there is evidence for context. For example, if female figures outnumber male figures greatly in the Southeast European Neolithic, and if they are found in domestic shrines, near bread ovens, etc., then probably I can infer two things: the people integrated religion into their daily lives (the intersection of domestic paraphernalia with images of the divine) and they were more interested in female figures than male figures. If we infer religion, then these artifacts represented deities, and thus the goddess(es) received more attention than the gods. Further, if there was an absence of fortified sites -- and, pretty much, of weapons, except those probably used in hunting game -- in the early Neolithic of Southeast Europe, then it meant that these people were not being attacked. The culture was not militarized, and it did not have deadly enemies.

Marija faced resounding skepticism and disdain for her work throughout her career. Do you think academics and non-academics have opened up to her work? How far do you believe we still have to go to have the concept of ancient goddess cultures be well-received and widely acknowledged, and what are some of the challenges you see in our future?

Some academics have opened up to Marija's work. I believe that many academics accept her Kurgan theory; there is more skepticism about the nature of Neolithic European religion. To meet the challenge of having people believe in the possibility of prehistoric equalitarian peoples (I do not see evidence for women's rule, but I keep an open mind), it is important that we do very careful work. To me, that means always relying upon primary sources -- mythological texts, excavation reports -- rather than secondary sources. In this way, we build a firm foundation for knowledge.

Many ecologists and ecological philosophers, such as James Lovelock, Thomas Berry, Starhawk, Joanna Macy, believe that we are in the midst of a time of massive crisis on this planet, one which involves climate change, peak oil, the sixth mass extinction, etc. How can we justify spending our precious time and energy on looking back to the past, when it seems the future of life itself is currently at stake? What would Marija's response to the growing ecological crisis be?

We are indeed in a time of huge crisis. In my opinion, this lack of regard for our planet and its natural resources is exacerbated by fundamentalist belief that the planet is not sacred; that the Divine is transcendent, not a part of the physical world. This male divinity is, furthermore, a warrior deity who gives permission for one group of people to commit atrocities upon another, just because they are not 'believers' in a 'true' religion. That has been a recipe for disaster for centuries -- millennia -- and we must learn to balance our concept of the divine -- to understand the motherly, nurturing aspects of a loving divinity or divinities who may be concerned the best interests of the planet, not just with those of the 'chosen'. If we look at the possibility of the ancient female divine, we can extrapolate the possibility of a contemporary female divine. If one honors Her, then, one will honor all of Her creations. I believe that Marija would agree with me.