

The Iconography and Social Structure of Old Europe: The Archaeomythological Research of Marija Gimbutas.

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Lithuanian/American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994)¹ was a pioneer in the study of the symbolic imagery of the earliest farming peoples of Europe. Her primary research and interpretations of European prehistory have been at the center of the most crucial debates on European genesis for more than four decades. In her view, the settlement patterns, burial evidence, and iconographic imagery of the cultures she called “Old Europe”² reflect peaceful, matrilineal, endogamous social structures that were economically egalitarian in which women were honored at the center of ceremonial life.³

Old Europe

Between the seventh and fifth millennia BC, communities throughout southeast Europe developed mixed horticultural economies,⁴ villages with well-built houses, an abundance of sculptural and ceramic art, craft specialization including weaving and metallurgy, and elaborate ritual traditions. There is abundant evidence for long-distance trade as well as the use of a linear script within a ritual context. Examples of long-lived Old European societies include the Sesklo culture in Thessaly and southern Macedonia from c. 6500-5500 BC, followed by the Dimini culture, c. 5500-4000 BC; the Star_evo culture of the central Balkans, c. 6300-5300 BC, followed by the Vin_a culture c. 5400-c. 4100 BC; the Cucuteni/Tripolye culture, c. 4800-3500 BC in Moldavia and the Ukraine; the Butmir culture in Bosnia, c. 5300-4300 BC; the Karanovo sites in central Bulgaria from the early sixth to the mid-fifth millennium; and the Linearbandkeramik, spanning central Europe, c. 5500-4500 BC, among others BC (see Gimbutas 1991). Although distinctive cultures developed over a large geological region, Gimbutas and other scholars have described similarities in economy, social structure and ritual activities within the Neolithic period (Gimbutas 1956, 1974, 1989, 1991; Whittle 1985: 64; Milisauskas 2002). Considered together, the non-Indo-European Neolithic societies which Gimbutas referred to as the “civilization of Old Europe” reached

a florescence of cultural development during the fifth millennium BC made possible by long-term dynamic stability.

Between 1967 and 1980, Marija Gimbutas directed five major excavations of early Neolithic sites in Bosnia, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy.⁵ The development of calibrated radiocarbon dating revealed the true antiquity of these ancient societies. Gimbutas' Greek excavations at Sitagroi and Achilleion yielded hundreds of anthropomorphic figurines and abundant ritual equipment reflecting "the small, ragged remnants of a rich fabric constituting the mythical world of their time" (see Gimbutas 1986:225-301, 1989:171-250). No one before Gimbutas had systematically analyzed the rich symbolic imagery from Neolithic southeast Europe. These items were typically considered to be "curiosities of art history with no standard method of description and interpretation" (Bánffy 2001:53). Their contexts were sometimes not even recorded. As Gimbutas remarked, "I saw thousands of figurines lying in boxes in museum storerooms, completely ignored and not understood" (personal communication).

During the 1960s, proponents of the "New Archaeology" considered it unscientific for archaeologists to investigate the beliefs of prehistoric people. At the same time, excavations of Neolithic sites throughout southeast Europe were unearthing thousands of exquisitely painted ceramics, temple models, altars and offering vessels, stylized anthropomorphic sculptures, often with animal masks and ceremonial clothing. Gimbutas recognized it was impossible to understand the early societies that produced these extraordinary remains without studying their abundantly preserved symbolism. She, therefore, devoted the remaining thirty years of her life to an in-depth investigation of the iconography and social structure of the earliest farmers of Europe whose distinctive cultures virtually disappeared during the transition to Bronze Age societies.

Methodology

In the absence of written texts, an understanding of the nonmaterial aspects of culture is not possible through the description of artifacts alone. Gimbutas, therefore, developed *archaeomythology*, an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship that combines archaeology, mythology, ethnology, folklore, linguistic paleontology, and the study of historical documents. This methodology is informed by the

following assumptions: Sacred cosmologies are central to the cultural fabric of all early societies; deeply rooted beliefs and rituals expressing sacred world views are often slow to change; and archaic patterns can survive as substratum elements into later cultural periods. Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach provides a corrective: if an interpretation based upon one or more disciplines does not hold up according to the findings of another, the initial interpretation must be reexamined.

For Gimbutas, prehistoric images are not mute, but speak a language of visual metaphor. Since Neolithic symbols are remnants of once-living contexts, they should not be studied in isolation as arbitrary images, but are best understood “on their own planes of reference, grouped according to their inner coherence” (Gimbutas 1989:xv). In *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974) and *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), she discusses Old European symbolic elements as part of a “cohesive and persistent ideological system” that crosses the boundaries of time and space. Extremely ancient rituals and myths that have endured into the historic period offer invaluable opportunities for studying the function of prehistoric imagery.

In the folk culture of Lithuania, for instance, that Gimbutas experienced as a child, the ancient songs, stories, dances, seasonal celebrations, communal rituals, sculptures, textile patterns, even architectural features are elements of a complex fabric of ancient beliefs arising from a deep respect for the natural world. She observed people kissing the earth in the morning and in the evening as though the earth was their actual mother. The life-giving, death-wielding, and regenerative powers of nature are venerated in zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms. In the Baltic pantheon, Laima, the cosmic goddess of Fate, who controls the powers of creation, is a shape-shifter who can appear in human form, or as a bear, sacred tree or waterfowl. She can be touched as stone, or heard in the voice of the cuckoo. The Earth Mother Zemyna, related to seasonal awakening, creates life out of herself and represents justice and social conscience. The death goddess Giltine can appear as a slithering snake or can be seen in human form standing at the head of a dying person. Ragana, the death goddess who oversees regeneration, is a seer who sometimes appears as a snake or bird of prey. Vaizgantas, the male god of fertility, rises, dies

and resurrects as the flax (Gimbutas 1999:213). Gimbutas' early experience of these ancient beliefs within a still-living context informed her study of Old European symbolism.

The Context of Neolithic/ Old European Symbolism

A profusion of dynamic designs painted and incised on well-fired Neolithic ceramics and sculptures of the sixth-fifth millennia BC feature rhythmically interconnecting spirals, zigzags, circles within circles, egg shapes and serpent forms coiling and uncoiling. Similar patterns are found in regional variations throughout central and southeast Europe in Butmir, Karanovo, Bökk, Cucuteni/Tripolye, Linearbandkeramic and other Neolithic traditions.

In *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) Gimbutas states, "Symbols are seldom abstract in any genuine sense; their ties with nature persist, to be discovered through the study of context and association. In this way we can hope to decipher the mythical thought which is the *raison d'être* of this art and basis of its form" (1989:xv). What *was* the underlying context and mythical thought of early horticultural societies that gave rise to Neolithic imagery? The answer is rooted in the most basic life experiences of Neolithic peoples.

The creation of sustainable communities based on reliable food production required fine-tuned responsiveness to ecological conditions and the progressive development and transmission of traditional knowledge. Early human communities were continually concerned with the fragility of life and the need to renew the generative processes of nature (Gimbutas 1989:xvii). Human survival depended upon an intimate and respectful relationship with the seasonal transformations of the natural world—the fertility of the soil, the abundance of water, the climate, the teeming presence of birds, animals, plants and myriad life forms.

From this perspective, it is no surprise that many Neolithic artifacts feature cyclic patterns combining plant, animal and human forms. Such interconnecting motifs, by no means exclusive to Old Europe, have been created by indigenous peoples on every continent of the world who share a sacred relationship with the living world. These designs often express an uncanny resemblance to writings by quantum physicists who describe the universe as a web of relationships between the various parts of a

unified whole. Physicist Fritjof Capra, for instance, identifies dynamic patterns on the micro and macro levels that continually change into one another in a “continuous dance of energy” (Capra 1983:81, 91). David Bohm speaks of an “implicate order” within the universe as analogous to a hologram in which the entire cosmic web is enfolded within each of its parts (Capra 1983:95). Anthropologist/ecologist Gregory Bateson refers to the self-organizing dynamics of the universe as “the pattern that connects.”

Gimbutas writes that Old European symbolism is lunar and chthonic, built around the understanding that life on earth is in eternal transformation, in constant and rhythmic change between creation and destruction, birth and death. “The concept of regeneration and renewal is perhaps the most outstanding and dramatic theme we perceive in this symbolism” (Gimbutas 1989:316). The “mythical thought” at the basis of Neolithic art appears to be inseparable from concepts of the sacred and a consciousness of intimate participation with the cyclic processes of the natural world.

Well composed, dynamic designs are found on ceramics, sculptures, temple models and on actual houses and communal shrines, such as those of the Vin_a, Tisza, and Karanovo cultures where structures were painted inside and out with great swirling motifs, formal geometric patterns, even three-dimensional spirals (Hodder 1990:54-55). At the fifth millennium BC site of Casciorarele, on an island in the Danube in southern Romania, a two-room ceremonial building (16 x 10 meters) was richly decorated with red and cream spirals, concentric circles, red eggs, and swirling designs which Gimbutas associates with regeneration. A raised clay altar was painted red and two wooden columns plastered with clay were elegantly decorated with interlocking curvilinear patterns (Gimbutas 1991: 258-262; Whittle 1985:154).

Bourdieu’s (1973) study of Berber houses is instructive as a way of appreciating the Old European cultural environment. Bourdieu discovered that children brought up surrounded by traditional imagery within Berber houses absorbed Berber concepts through “an education of attention” that focused their perceptions. As Malike Grasshoff discusses in her research (see Grasshoff, this volume), the pottery, weavings and intricate wall paintings of the Kabyle/Berber people in Algeria are entirely created by women. Their designs are encoded with secret signs containing an ancient cosmology of sacred female knowledge passed down from mother to daughter. In a similar way, many Old European houses,

sculptures, ritual items and domestic implements were covered with dynamic patterns rich with female imagery which created a visually rich symbolic context replicated over many generations.

Iconography

According to Balkan archaeologist Henrieta Todorova (1978:83), more than 90 percent of the identifiable Neolithic figurines found in Bulgaria are female. Of the two hundred-fifty anthropomorphic sculptures from Gimbutas' excavation at Sitagroi, Greek Macedonia, none can be identified as male (Gimbutas 1986b:226; Hodder 1990:61). Of the two hundred figurines found at the Sesklo site of Achilleion in Greece, only two are assumed to be male due to the absence of female attributes (Gimbutas et al. 1989:198). Throughout southeast Europe, Anatolia and much of the circum-Mediterranean world, a similar pattern obtains.

Woman's centrality within the domestic and horticultural realms is emphasized throughout Old Europe by the overwhelming abundance of female imagery.⁶ Elaborately incised Cucuteni figurines; enthroned female sculptures from the Tisza culture engraved with complex textile designs; hundreds of Vinča sculptures stylized as bird-women, masked as mother bears, anthropomorphic vessels, and thousands of other images indicate a gendered relationship between the human, animal and mythic realms. The refined stylization of form and posture of many of these female sculptures, their ritual and ubiquitous contexts, the frequent use of masks and exaggerated attributes suggest an association with the sacred which Gimbutas calls "Goddess."

Although goddesses are well known from the Greek and Roman periods, the idea that female deity was venerated at the dawn of European prehistory with a relative absence of male imagery, challenges the charter myth of Western civilization in which male dominance in both human and mythic realms is assumed. The term "Goddess" for many researchers is opaque and problematic, conjuring a utopian fantasy about a matriarchal fertility cult (i.e., Meskell 1995). In actuality, Gimbutas repeatedly insisted that the concept of Goddess is not limited to fertility and motherhood, but includes the entire cycle of life including death and the reappearance of life. Gimbutas defines "Goddess," in all her manifestations, as a cosmogonic symbol of the *unity* of all life in Nature. "Her power was in water and

stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoetic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on Earth” (Gimbutas 1989: 321).

Gimbutas’ excavation at the seventh-sixth millennium BC Sesklo culture site of Achilleion in Thessaly provided *in situ* contexts for specific types of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic sculptures. She was, therefore, able to formulate a classification system based on morphology and style and to identify twenty categories of figurines associated with seven distinct deities (Gimbutas et al. 1989:171). Bird and snake goddesses, for instance, were found in house shrines. Sculptures indicating pregnancy were found on altars near outdoor ovens and in places where grain was stored, ground, and baked into bread. Figurines in birth-giving posture were found in the courtyard at circular hearths. The fecundity of the womb is associated with the grain that nourishes the community (Gimbutas 1991:228, 254). This motif repeats throughout Old Europe on pottery designs, on figurines impressed with grain, on sculptures with wombs sprouting like plants, on grain storage containers in female forms, and bread ovens shaped as pregnant bellies. Neolithic imagery is permeated by symbols associated with the life-creating female body.

Male images found in other Old European sites, often in ithyphallic posture, are interpreted by Gimbutas as “gods,” consorts of the youthful goddess in her springtime aspect (Gimbutas 1991:249-251). Evidence for males as fathers during this period is absent. “My archaeological research does not confirm the hypothetical existence of the primordial parents and their division into the Great Father and Great Mother” (Gimbutas 1982: 316).

Some anthropomorphic sculptures have no sexual characteristics. Others appear to combine both male and female attributes – such as those from the Star_evo culture, c. 5000 BC, as well as sculptures from the Gumelnitsa and Hamangia cultures in Romania. The combination of male and female elements may suggest a unity, wholeness, a fluidity of gender, or one who is “self-generating.” There are also doubles, most generally two females fused into one body, implying a bonding between women or between mother and daughter, suggestive of a matrilineal structure.

Although many hybrid images are found in Neolithic contexts (combining snake, frog, hedgehog, and other creatures with the human form), the bird-woman, which Gimbutas calls Bird Goddess, illustrates the symbolic range and temporal longevity of one of the most prominent visual metaphors. This figure with a woman's body and bird mask, rendered in numerous stylistic variations from the Neolithic into the historic period, expresses life-nurturing qualities, but can also appear as a bird of prey or corpse eater, linked with the powers of death and regeneration. The Bird Goddess must have carried a constellation of meanings associated with the departure and reappearance of great flocks of migrating waterfowl signaling the end of summer or the beginning of spring. Her hybrid nature suggests a mutual identity between woman and bird which has great longevity in European folkloric traditions.

Social Structure

According to Gimbutas, settlement and cemetery evidence as well as linguistic, mythological and historical research indicate that non-Indo-European Neolithic societies were matrilineal, matrifocal and economically egalitarian. Gimbutas rejects the term "matriarchy" because it too often implies a hierarchical structure of domination in which women rule society by force (Gimbutas 1991:294-296, 324-349; 1999:112-125). She writes,

we do not find in Old Europe, nor in all of the Old World, a system of autocratic rule by women with an equivalent suppression of men. Rather, we find a structure in which the sexes are more or less on equal footing, a society that could be termed a *gylany* [in which] the sexes are 'linked' rather than hierarchically 'ranked.' I use the term *matristic* simply to avoid the term *matriarchy*, with the understanding that it incorporates matriliney (Gimbutas 1991:324).

In actuality, Gimbutas' description of Old European societies resembles the cultural and cosmological matrix of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, the Mosuo of China and other egalitarian female-centered peoples who call themselves "matriarchal" (see Sanday 2002; also Göttner-Abendroth, Sanday, Ruxian Yan, Lamu Ga tusa, and Bennholdt-Thomsen in this volume).

According to Gimbutas, the prevalence of female-centered cosmological imagery and rituals and the absence of signs of male dominance support the interpretation of a mother-kinship system in which mothers and grandmothers were honored and a female ancestor was venerated as progenitor of the lineage (Gimbutas 1991: 342; 1999:113). The continuity of women's traditions at the center of cultural life

promoted the longevity and cohesion of Old European societies. The spiritual and social worlds were intimately intertwined. Caches of female figurines found within ritual contexts, such as those from the Cucuteni culture, may reflect councils of women who functioned as collective entities to guide community life (1991:344).

The long-term development and transmission of cultural memory throughout the duration of Old Europe (c. 6500-3500 BC) nurtured finely developed mature traditions, a symbiosis with specific landscapes, and cooperative balance between community members. Settlement evidence indicates balanced, non-hierarchical societies. Internal differentiation is not readily apparent within individual settlements in terms of either layout or structure.⁷ Long houses, such as in the Tisza, Linearbandkeramik, Cucuteni and other cultures contain no evidence of chieftains or “Big Men” and were most likely occupied by stem families of matrilineal lineage (Gimbutas 1991:331; see also Whittle 1985:63). Large buildings, used as communal buildings or shrines, are often indistinguishable from residences except for more elaborate decorations and a greater abundance of ritual artifacts (Gimbutas 1989, 1991; Marangou 2001:155). The pattern of communal shrines attended by several households of women has endured to the present day in the Aegean islands (Gimbutas 1991).

During the Early Neolithic, particularly in the Balkans, women, children, and youths were buried under house floors and between buildings. Habitation areas functioned as realms of the ancestors as well as of the living in which the sacred bond between women and their children was preserved even after death. The burials of adult males are conspicuously absent. When cemeteries of kin-related burials came into use around 5000 BC, there is no evidence of spatial hierarchy in which rich and poor graves are placed in separate areas (Gimbutas 1991:331; Whittle 1985: 89).

Evidence does exist, however, of burials in which older women were highly honored. In western Poland, for instance, a 70 year old woman from the Funnel-Necked Beaker (TRB) culture (end of the fifth millennium BC) was buried within a huge triangular barrow, thirty meters long. Such a prominent construction may have functioned for many generations as a shrine in honor of an Ancestral Mother (Gimbutas 1991:336).

In central Europe, Neolithic male graves are associated with trade items and tools whereas women's graves include pottery tools, quern stones and symbolic items. Nevertheless, the division of labor between males and females reveals a certain fluidity: quern stones for grinding grain are sometimes found in male burials while stone celts for woodworking also appear in female graves (Gimbutas 1991:133).

From the late fifth millennium BC in the central Mediterranean, hundreds of rock cut tombs created in egg- or womb shapes contained skeletons in fetal position. In Sardinia, the symbolism associated with these burials included triangles, snake coils, spirals, concentric circles and the use of red ochre as well as female sculptures with bird masks, sometimes with prominent vulvas. In the later Neolithic, the egalitarian pattern of kin-related burials continued in the collective graves of western Europe where communities of ancestors were honored in large-stone monuments. Gimbutas associates these graves with uterine symbolism in which the tomb functions symbolically as a womb for rebirth.

A major tenant of Gimbutas' theory is that the deeply rooted Old European cultural traditions did not produce the patriarchal system that later took hold. The dramatic transformation in Neolithic social structure, economy, language, and religious beliefs that took place during the fourth and third millennia BC was not the result of internal development of elite dominance out of simpler, egalitarian, woman-centered societies. Gimbutas' Kurgan Hypothesis describes a progressive collision between two entirely different ideologies and social systems (see Gimbutas 1997; Marler 1997, 2001).

After the introduction of androcratic structures and the demise of Old Europe, matristic patterns endured in some regions as substratum features into the historical era. Ancient sources from Herodotus in the fifth century BC to Strabo in the first century AD, describe cultures still practicing matriliney, endogamy, matrilineal and group marriage with common ownership, and *metronymy* (naming through the mother) (1991: 349). The Greek term for brother, *adelphos*, meaning 'from the womb' is a relic from an earlier time when kin relationship was determined by the mother.

Matrilineal succession continued in such non-Indo-European societies as the Minoan, Etruscan, Pelasgian, Lydian, Lykian, Carian in western Turkey, Basque in northern Spain and southwest France, and the Picts in Britain before the Celts (Gimbutas 1991: 344).

Beneath the intertwined layers of Indo-European and later Christian influences, many Old European elements have been preserved in myths and folklore that speak of a veneration of the earth, female deities, and women as cultural and religious leaders guiding their communities. These motifs are found in ancient Greek and Roman mythologies as well as in Basque, Old Irish, Welsh, Gaulish, Norse and German, Baltic and Slavic traditions (1991:324). As Gimbutas has written, “There is no question that Old European sacred images and symbols remain a vital part of the cultural heritage of Europe . . . the matrix of much later beliefs and practices” (1991:320).

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Footnotes:

¹ Gimbutas used the term "Old Europe" to indicate the earliest farming cultures of Europe before the influence of Indo-European speakers. She considered these non-Indo-European societies to be diametrically different in terms of language, ideology, economic patterns, material culture and social structure from the Bronze Age cultural patterns that replaced them.

² This paper includes references to writings by other archaeologists to indicate ideas shared by colleagues in her field.

³ The complete bibliography of Marija Gimbutas (up to 1996) is published in *From the Realm of the Ancestors*, (Marler 1997: 609-25).

⁴ Although "Neolithic" literally refers to the production of the new lithic technology of ground stone tools, the definition of a Neolithic society in most regions of Europe refers to the transition to a sedentary life-style, a progressive reliance on village gardens, and ceramic production.

⁵ "Mixed horticultural economies" refers to gardening combined with animal husbandry and a measure of hunting and gathering in the surrounding environment.

⁶ Between 1963 and 1989, Marija Gimbutas was Professor of European Archaeology at University of California, Los Angeles. Her excavations took place through the auspices of UCLA.

⁷ In concert with this concept, Gheorghiu has recently suggested that encoded artifacts can function as holograms to be used for cultural interpretation (Gheorghiu 2001:73).

¹ For biographical information about Marija Gimbutas see Marler 1997.

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⁶ Ian Hodder (1990:61-63) also writes about the centrality of women, culturally and economically, within the domestic realm.

⁷ Even Colin Renfrew describes the farmers of this period as “egalitarian peasants,” whose societies “probably embodied no hierarchical ordering whatever: certainly their material culture does not reflect it. . . . [T]here is no reason to suggest the existence in them of hereditary chieftains, and certainly none to warrant a specialized functional division of population into warriors, priests and common people” (Renfrew 1987:253).