

OLD EUROPE: SACRED MATRIARCHY OR COMPLEMENTARY OPPOSITION?

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In the past decade, it has become increasingly popular to view Neolithic cultures in general as being matriarchal or matrifocal. These cultures are portrayed as peaceful, harmonious, and artistic, in contrast to the warlike, destructive, and coarse patriarchal cultures that followed them. The matriarchal political and social organization is thought to be reflected in the Sacred sphere by cults of a Great Goddess which dominate religious life, a supernatural being from which all Life spontaneously and parthenogenetically stems. The claim is often made that *Homo sapiens* did, in fact, not know the facts of life in the Paleolithic or in the Neolithic. This interpretation of cultural evolution is essentially a restatement of the nineteenth century unilinear evolutionist views of Morgan, Marx, Engels and others. Most of twentieth century archaeology in Western Industrial countries has tended to argue that cultural evolution was considerably more complex than such unilinear schemes. However, in the contemporary climate of nuclear war threats and accelerating changes in women's status, it is easy to understand why such interpretations might become increasingly popular. To what extent is the matriarchal Neolithic scenario a verisimilitude? To what extent is it a hopeful and idealistic creation on the part of some contemporary writers in search of a social utopia? That is the topic of my paper.

Of all the Neolithic cultures that have been archaeologically investigated, perhaps none have been adduced to demonstrate the reality of the Neolithic matriarchy more strongly than the cultures of Old Europe and its neighbors, including Minoan, Mesopotamian, and Anatolian communities. Therefore, let us examine the Old European case in more detail.

One of the foremost archaeologists whose views have been used to support the matriarchal scenario for Old Europe is Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas herself is somewhat ambivalent as to her exact position. In some passages, Gimbutas (1982:237) views both male and female deities manifesting side by side, the masculine force strengthening and affirming the creative feminine force. Neither masculine nor feminine Sacred force is subordinated to the other, but both work to

complement the other yielding double power. In social terms, this is inferred to mean that women were not subject to males and that all human resources in Old European societies were used to their fullest.

On the other hand, Gimbutas presents other claims that stand in stark contrast to this balanced, complementary role of the sexes, in both the Sacred and profane domains.

1) She argues that the Old European pantheon reflects a society “dominated” by the mother (*ibid*);

2) She devotes the vast bulk (11/12’s) of her book to the goddesses and their manifestations and deemphasizes representations of gods;

3) She argues that the principal deity — a Great Goddess — is androgynous and a supreme creator that fashions all Life from herself (as opposed to the Indo-European Earth Mother that must be fecundated by a masculine deity in order to bring forth life — *ibid*: 196);

4) And finally Gimbutas raises the notion of Old Europe being a matriarchal society in the old nineteenth century sense (elsewhere as a matrilinear society), and from there goes on to contrast it with her idea of an extreme form of patriarchy represented by the Indo-Europeans. She claims that the Old European matriarchal societies were “savagely destroyed by the patriarchal element” and that patriarchy was thus imposed on Europe by invaders from elsewhere (*ibid*: 152, 238).

From these interpretations and arguments, it is quite easy to formulate an interpretation of beliefs and social roles very different from the balanced equality between the sexes that Gimbutas mentioned earlier. It could well be assumed that she endorses the traditional view of the matriarchal phase of cultural evolution. Although the format of this presentation precludes an in-depth discussion of each of her arguments, some general assessment of them can be attempted. They will be discussed in order.

THE DOMINANCE OF GODDESSES

In her treatment of goddess representations in Old European archaeological remains, it sometimes seems as though Gimbutas interprets everything that is not clearly phallic, and even somethings that are clearly phallic, as symbols of the Great Goddess or her variants. Thus, oblique parallel lines, horizontal parallel lines, vertical parallel lines, chevrons, lozenges, zigzags, wavy lines, meanders,

circles, ovals, spirals, dots, crescents, U's, crosses, swirls, caterpillars, double axes, chrysalises, horns, butterflies, birds, eggs, fish, rain, cows, dogs, does, stags, toads, turtles, hedgehogs, bees, bulls, bears, goats, pigs, pillars, and sexless linear or masked figures all are viewed as symbols of this goddess. One wonders what is left.

Some of these interpretations are undoubtedly justified, such as the bear association since there are figurines that incorporate the features of women and bears. Other associations, such as those between toads or fish and a goddess form are not so certain because of the indeterminacy of the sex of the human forms or the animal forms. The toad figures are largely sexless, while the excavator of the Lepenski Vir fish-humans that Gimbutas uses as her main example, indicated that they represented a male divinity (*ibid*: 110).

Still other symbols that Gimbutas claims represent the Goddess seem entirely out of place, being more logically associated with masculine Sacred forces. These include the bulls, stags, rams, snakes, pillars, he-goats, and bucrania. Gimbutas claims alternatively that antlered animals really are the Goddess equipped with male defenses or that the Great Goddess dominates these horned animals so that when they are depicted, the viewer is really supposed to think of the Great Goddess. Sometimes, as in the case of Artemis, she even claims that the Goddess appears as a doe (elsewhere as a doe with stag's antlers), is represented by a stag, and goes around hunting stags. I would argue that there is something inherently inconsistent in the idea of a doe-stag going around hunting herself. I suggest that there is an alternative and more sensible way of interpreting this class of observations and associations. Namely that if Artemis hunts stags then the stags must represent something different from herself, a separate concept or form of Sacred force. Extended to the panoply of Neolithic sacred symbols, I would argue that many of the symbols that Gimbutas interprets as referring to goddesses, actually represent major forces in their own right — the missing masculine force that Gimbutas has chosen to minimize. This is a central concept in the rest of this paper.

Let us briefly see whether it makes sense to view the bull, the ram, the goat, the stag, the pillar, and the snake in terms of symbols of a Sacred masculine force, the complement of a Sacred feminine force. Here, even Gimbutas is forced to admit that in some circumstances the bull and the goat represent gods since there are numerous ceramic figurines of bulls and goats with horned human masculine heads. However, she relegates their origin to the Neolithic claiming that they did not exist prior to agriculture. Only the Great Goddess supposedly

existed then (*ibid*: 216). Given what we know of Paleolithic religion, even this claim seems unfounded, as I shall argue in the next section. For the time being, it is adequate to note that bucrania, bulls, and rams were strongly associated with shrines and temples in Old Europe, the Minoan islands, Anatolia, and the Near East. From the earliest historic times, the bull and ram were intimately associated in Egypt with the pharaoh and the sun god, the masculine moon, and rebirth. Mellaart (1965: 94) and Singh (1974: 89) categorically state that masculine gods are represented by bull's horns or ram's heads while goddesses more generally take anthropomorphic forms in Anatolia.

As for the snake, Gimbutas again is equivocal about its symbolism. The aspects that she emphasizes are those she sees as representing the Great Goddess: water, rain, earth, cyclical change, eggs. However, she cannot avoid its strong association with Old European representations of male phalli, horns, and ithyphallic figures. She overtly refers to the snake as representing a "stimulating" force (*ibid*: 95). The meaning of snakes is thus at least ambiguous in Gimbutas' presentation. If we were to take a psychoanalytic approach, snakes would clearly be masculine forces. Taking a comparative religious approach, Eliade (1976:397-9) notes that snakes often are associated with the moon due to the cyclical shedding of their skins and disappearance into the earth. In these roles, the snake and moon are regarded as the "husband of all women", and Eliade gives a number of examples of societies that believe that the moon or snakes can impregnate women if they do not take precautions. Significantly, these beliefs occur among non-agricultural hunter/gatherers as well as among agriculturalists.

The pillar is yet another symbol that Gimbutas interprets as representing the Great Goddess, whereas all common sense and psychiatric wisdom would associate it instead with the phallus or masculine forces.

The fact that bulls, rams, pillars and snakes often appear with images of a goddess does not necessarily mean that they represent her, or even that she is in a dominant position over the forces they represent. It may simply mean that there is an important cosmic interaction in the scene, or it may represent an important sacred relationship between two important forces. The animal representations may even be considered the more important of the two elements in the portrayals. This is exemplified by Gimbutas herself when she notes that Dionysius is almost certainly a pre-Indo-European bull god of virility and rebirth close in meaning to the Great Goddess in

her form as a vegetation deity (*ibid.*: 227-28; 237). Significantly, Dionysius was crowned with snakes, and phallic cups were used to celebrate his rebirth in the spring. Even more interesting is the fact that his barebreasted female worshippers at Keos would wear horns or snakes as collars or belts to imitate him. At this point, there is no discernable difference between the Dionysian cult practices and what we know of the so-called Minoan or Old European "snake goddesses." A final note of interest is that the reborn Dionysius ultimately marries the Great Goddess and brings fertility to the land.

In addition to symbols that cannot clearly be related to either sex, and symbols that appear more logically to relate to masculine forces, there are also an entire series of abstract symbols that Gimbutas interprets as referring to the Great Goddess. While some of these symbols do legitimately appear to be symbols for goddesses and their fertility aspects, such as lozenges with dots in them, others are so abstract and so widespread that serious questions must be raised about interpreting them in any gender terms, or in any terms other than referents to very broad concepts. King (1983:7) has recently criticized the over-interpretation of geometric designs, especially repetitive ones that can and do occur just about anywhere. When is a design a symbol, and when is it simply a decorative motif? When does a design have a specific meaning, and when is it only of the broadest significance? These questions are difficult to answer. Gimbutas ignores them completely in her headlong drive to establish the dominance and preponderant presence of the Great Goddess in Old Europe. Chevrons, parallel lines, crosses, crescents, zigzags, ovals, spirals, dots, continue in an unending avalanche of highly subjective interpretation. At least a few other art historians would argue that, contrary to Gimbutas' views, almost any linear representation should be interpreted in terms of masculine forces (e.g. Leroi-Gourhan 1965).

Another possibility is that many of the symbols that are interpreted as representing goddesses may simply symbolize general concepts. Symbols like chevrons that occur on goddesses and on rams may simply designate those elements as "Sacred." Meanders or spirals may serve a similar purpose, or as Campbell (1969) suggests, the spiral may represent a concept such as "Life" while the meander represents "Death." Marshak (1985) similarly suggests that meanders may represent "water," or "change" wherever they occur in the world. Surely, crosses and ovals might also represent similar concepts, and not be tied to specific deities of whatever gender.

Although Gimbutas is often inconsistent in the meanings she

attributes to symbols, resulting in pretzal-like accounts of epiphanies and the evolution of deity indicators, the overriding impression that she leaves is that of an inverted patriarchal pantheon for Old Europe, i.e. a matriarchal pantheon. Any attentive reader that examines the illustrations she provides to support her claims must be bothered at times by identifications and claims that seem to be verifiable only with the eye of faith. Nowhere is there even a mention of methodology, testing, statistics, chance variation, assumptions, or rigor.

ANDROGYNOUS PARTHENOGENESIS OF THE GREAT GODDESS

Once again, Gimbutas sends out contradictory signals as to how the Great Goddess and her relation to the indisputable presence of some masculine deities is to be interpreted. On the one hand, she acknowledges that the god representations are “stimulators” without which nothing will grow. This is used to explain the phallic obsession of the Near East, Anatolia, and Old Europe since Natufian times (Gimbutas: 216). She even refers to the bull as an “invigorator” (*ibid*: 91).

On the other hand, Gimbutas argues that the Great Goddess was androgynously all powerful, that she created everything out of her own powers, that phallicism was cathartic rather than erotic, and that Neolithic peoples did not understand the biology of conception (*ibid*: 196, 237).

It is easiest to deal with the last notion first. The idea that pre-Industrial humanity was ignorant of the facts of life is a popular one, primarily kept alive by sensationalistic writers. The idea that hunter/gatherers and early farmers could live intimately in an environment where they were surrounded by the facts of life for two million years and still be oblivious to how reproduction took place on the physical plane is similar to the notion that domestication of plants did not occur prior to 10,000 years ago because hunter/gatherers did not know how plants reproduced. Hunter/gatherers just about everywhere know what makes babies. One woman in the Australian outback even told the Berndts that she refused to live with her husband because she did not want any more children. There are copulation scenes in Paleolithic art (Begouen *et al.* 1982), and the realities of conception were undoubtedly known about throughout most of the Paleolithic. It is naive to believe that groups intelligent enough to invent language, fire, sewn clothes, complex technologies, and great art were so stupid that they could not make the association between sex

and reproduction. The mere fact that *selective* genetic changes took place in domestic plants and animals in the Neolithic is proof that human beings knew the essentials of Mendelian genetics even then. Even today, peasant stock breeders in particular, are keenly aware of these facts of life. If it really was true that Neolithic communities were unaware of these facts, why should they insist on the Sacred Marriage and ritual copulation in order to insure crop fertility, as Gimbutas suggests they did in relation to the Dionysian cult? Accounts of groups in the world that did not recognize the realities of physical conception must be counted as exceptional and due to unusual conditions. Most reports of such groups must be categorized with the stories of storks that were told to children in Victorian Europe. Even today, many christians believe that God puts the souls in children and makes them live. The idea that Neolithic or Paleolithic communities were unaware of biological conception is simply untenable. And this means that much of the scenario written by the advocates of the Neolithic Sacred matriarchy is probably also flawed. If it takes both masculine and feminine principles to create life in this world, it is also logical to expect the same in the realm of the Sacred where the increase of plant, animal and human life is the highest priority. What does a review of the archaeological evidence reveal?

Gimbutas argues that the Great androgynous Goddess is directly descended from the Paleolithic, citing in her support the well-known Venus figurines and a few sculptures that are visual tricks, depicting feminine or bird heads from one view and male genitals from another view. She dismisses the representations of horned men in the caves as being irrelevant because they are from different social and religious contexts than the bull and goat-men of the Neolithic, whereas presumably the ignorance of human reproduction was continuous. I would argue that this is an unduly biased interpretation of Paleolithic religion. While the goddess statues obviously did function in a very public, domestic context, there is no evidence that they were androgynous or that they were the primary cult of importance. There are probably just as many phalli in the Paleolithic as there are Venuses. The few instances of visual double meanings can be accounted for in terms of artistic play and nothing more, just as such visual tricks appeal to psychology students, sculptors, and joke-shop clientele today. Many of the long necks that Gimbutas sees in phallic terms also occur on figures of male gods and can be found in the sculptures of other cultures such as Africa. It is worth considering that elongated necks may simply be a widespread indicator of beauty. Much more important in Paleolithic religion were the cults that absorbed great

amounts of time and energy underground. On the basis of Leroi-Gourhan's work, most anthropologists now accept the view that some sort of basic duality underlay the construction of the cave sanctuaries. There is indisputably a sexual element in the cave art, and one of the most plausible dualities that may have been used for structuring the most fundamental religious concepts in these Paleolithic communities is the sexual duality, as Leroi-Gourhan himself has argued (1965). Many modern hunter/gatherers existing in conditions similar to the Paleolithic, such as the Eskimos and some Australian Aborigines, also explicitly incorporate such sexual dualities in their rites, myths, and basic religious concepts (Berndt 1951; McGhee 1977).

This same basic duality emerges even more clearly in the earliest sophisticated shrines in Eurasia, those at Çatal Hüyük. As Mellaart (1965:94) notes: "In the plaster reliefs only the goddess is shown in anthropomorphic form, the male god, however, appears only as a bull's or ram's head. The shrines were evidently the scene of a fertility cult, the main aim of the religion being the procreation of life, and the ensurance of its continuity and abundance both in this life and the next. Sexual symbolism is absent and attention is drawn to the navel, pregnancy or scenes in which the goddess gives birth to a bull's or ram's head." Like the Paleolithic cave sanctuaries, animals representing masculine forces are on different walls from those representing feminine forces, but they form a complementary whole.

Similar religious themes occur in the Neolithic farming communities of China in terms of the all-pervasive concepts of yin and yang, and in many other parts of the world. While Gimbutas would like to relegate the idea of a Sky-God/Earth Mother duality to Indo-European patriarchies, it actually appears to be relatively common throughout the world. Eliade (1976:205) observes its occurrence in Oceania, Asia, Africa, and both of the Americas, all of which were agricultural. In fact, on a comparative basis, Eliade and others have argued that some form of Sky God was universally present in all primitive cultures (Eliade 1978: James 1957; Narr 1964). All cultures also have a sacred center of their universe (Eliade 1976: 370). This is frequently seen as the meeting point of heaven and earth where creation began. It is the navel of the earth, a place where the sky and earth are unified in sacred marriage. Such sacred marriages are recorded in the earliest written records of the world, in which Ishtar lies with Tammuz on New Year's Day to insure terrestrial fertility. The complementary duality between sky and earth may also be reflected in the story of the cracking of the European cosmic egg into a bottom,

earth half, and an upper, sky half. In fact, Von Franz (1972: 157) indicates that these two parts of the cosmic egg are frequently personified as mother and father. In Egypt, too, from the beginning of written accounts, a heavenly cow is connected with the bull of heaven (Kramer 1961: 31), and the king is associated with the strong, virile bull.

Thus, it is possible to follow a basic sexual duality in fundamental religious outlooks from the Paleolithic through the Neolithic and into historic times in the Old World and among a large number of agricultural and hunter/gatherer communities throughout the world. What about Old Europe? I have already referred to the way in which representations of goddesses in association with bulls, snakes, pillars, goats, and rams can be viewed as representing the unification of masculine and feminine forces. Even the depictions of ritual grain grinding may represent this duality if the grain was considered an epiphany of a male deity, as in the case of the well-known John Barleycorn. Given the widespread temporal and spatial distribution of sexual dualism, it presents at least a plausible alternate interpretation to that of Gimbutas. The fact that all forms of European witchcraft provide the goddess with a male consort known as the "Horned God" (Goldenburg 1979: 103) may well indicate that this duality has roots in European folk culture that go back to the Neolithic. The records from Dionysian cults provide another strong indicator.

OLD EUROPE: A MATRIARCHAL UTOPIA?

The final issue that I would like to address is the degree to which Old Europe may or may not have been a matriarchal utopia. While there can be no doubt that the Indo-Europeans that invaded the towns of Old Europe were savage and predatory, it is erroneous to assume that the cultures of Old Europe were social utopias for anyone but the elites. At one time it used to be thought that the European Neolithic was quite peaceful. However, it is beginning to appear more and more as though the initial peace of the era was more a product of isolation rather than a fundamental change in the social fabric. As soon as fertile lands began to fill up in central and northern Europe, significant and sometimes surprisingly ambitious evidence of warfare begins to appear (Milisauskas 1978; Dixon 1979; Mercer 1985). In the area of Old Europe many of the earliest Neolithic communities such as Nea Nikomedia appear to have had defensive walls and to have been planned in labyrinthine fashion so as to thwart easy penetration into the settlements. Mural scenes from the Minoan settlement of Akrotiri similarly show armed warriors, possibly carrying out engagements

near North Africa at Minoan colonies. There was an indisputable Minoan expansion into the Aegean during the Late Bronze Age, also involving colonies. It is difficult to imagine such events as occurring without recourse to military means. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any complex society, especially those built on competitive trade, that could emerge or sustain itself without substantial armed conflict. The invading Indo-Europeans were simply better at such conflicts and took over the most lucrative trading routes as the Mycenaean expansion and Trojan war amply illustrate.

As for the role of women in Old European society, there are a number of indicators that women could and undoubtedly often did hold high status. The number and quality of female figurines from the Old European Neolithic seem to indicate this. There may have even been matrilineal inheritance. However, none of these observations warrant the extreme interpretation that the society was "dominated" by the mother. Matriarchal societies are unknown within the ethnographic present, and in all of the cross-cultural studies that have been carried out on women's status, there appear to be no societies where women's status exceeds that of men (Levinson and Malone 1980: 267; Rosaldo 1974; Sanday 1981: 165; Whyte 1978: 167-8; Schlegel 1972: 113, 138). Women sometimes have inferior status, and sometimes they have equal status to that of men. But on the whole it appears that men hold the critical reins of power in traditional societies, that is, physical and armed force. And males generally appear unwilling to relinquish these or to assume inferior status.

Harris (1979:96-7) has argued that matrilineal descent or inheritance occurs primarily in situations where men are absent from their communities for prolonged periods of time on raiding or trading expeditions. They do not feel they can trust family affairs to wives who come from other lineages, and therefore the men leave family affairs in their sister's hands. However, when lineage males are around, it is they that make the decisions. Even among the strongly matrilineal Haida, where women occupied high overall status, the society was still a male dominated one (Blackman 1982: 50). The same can be said of Sumerian society. In both cases, men were frequently on trading and warring missions. The mere fact that Old Europe was agricultural and may have emphasized female fertility goddesses associated with the earth does not by itself mean that women would have had high status. Many simple horticultural societies recognize Earth Mothers and associate the seeds with males, for example in Uganda, the Indies, Italy, Borneo, the Ewe of Africa, the Orinoco and Jivaro of South

America, Egypt, Finland. However, the status of women is often low in the simplest of these societies, such as those of the Amazon Basin and Highland New Guinea, where women are taken in raids and carry out the most laborious work of the household. Even in such societies, female deities may be the most prominent in the pantheon while in the profane world, women's status may be quite low. Werblowsky (1981) has explicitly cautioned against inferring relative social status of men or women from the nature of principal deities. Examples where female deities predominate but where women had markedly inferior status include hunter/gatherers such as the Eskimo as well as civilizations such as Classic Athens. The practice of animal and human sacrifice that has now been documented for Old Europe and Minoan Crete (Gimbutas 1982: 74, 87; Sakellarakis 1981) also somehow seems at odds with the utopian matriarchy that some people would like to believe existed in Old Europe.

In the last analysis, it seems highly dubious that Old Europe was either matriarchal, or matrifocal, or unusually utopian. At its climax, it was certainly rich, undoubtedly hierarchical, aggressive, and competitive. It may also have been matrilineal, and women probably had a relatively high status compared to that of Semitic, Mesoamerican or European medieval patriarchies. But it seems unlikely that they would have had as great an overall say in running society as males. In the murals, the sailors and the soldiers are all males representing a fairly traditional sexual division of labor. There is no evidence that society was dominated by the mother. There is evidence that the earth became increasingly important in religious ideology associated with agriculture and may have been most emphasized in the Old European pantheon. However, as Eliade (1976:391) notes, where this happens, masculine roles are generally also important, and, I would argue, reflect a fundamental view of the universe that has persisted since Paleolithic times in which masculine and feminine forces interact to enable Life to continue.

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Summary

Some recent authors have argued that early agricultural religions were dominated by the worship of a Great Goddess and later by a Mother Goddess. The strongest case for this interpretation has been made for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic of Southeast Europe. However, when these data and arguments are examined in detail, it can be seen that 1) they do not fit well with ethnological data; 2) that the interpretation of archaeological symbols lacks methodological rigor and is excessively subjective, and 3) that there are internal inconsistencies in the arguments. This article suggests that Paleolithic and early Neolithic religions more likely emphasised both a major male and female deity whose interaction insured the annual renewal of the world and most Life forms in it.

Résumé

Quelques auteurs ont récemment interprété les religions dans le Néolithique comme dominées par la vénération d'une Déesse Suprême ou plus tard par une Déesse Mère. Le cas le plus favorable à cette interprétation est le Néolithique et Chalcolithique du sudest d'Europe. Cependant, quand ce cas est examiné en détail, il est évident que 1) les **arguments ne s'accordent pas** avec les données ethnologiques; 2) les interprétations de symboles archéologiques manquent de rigueur méthodologique et que ces interprétations sont excessivement subjectives; 3) les arguments ne s'accordent pas entre eux. Cet article suggère qu'il est plus probable que les religions Paléolithiques et Néolithiques ont mis l'emphase sur l'existence d'un dieu mâle et d'une déesse qui étaient ensemble responsable de la renaissance annuelle du monde comprenant toutes les espèces végétales et animales.

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