

# Understanding Marija Gimbutas

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In the March number of *Antiquity* 69, 1995, pp. 74-86, Lynn Meskell in "Goddesses, Gimbutas and 'New Age' Archaeology", suggests that when Gimbutas writes that the Palaeolithic and Neolithic feminine figures suggest a gynocentric and not an androcentric culture, this is proof of irresponsible and non-scientific behaviour. Meskell has failed to refer to "Figurines of Old Europe (6500-3000 B.C.)" in *Les Religions de la Préhistoire, Valcamonica Symposium '72* (Capo Di Ponte: Edizioni del Centro, 1975, pp. 117-142) and the articles in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (editor in chief Mircea Eliade, New York Macmillan, 1987), which all give excellent syntheses of Gimbutas's work.

From our points of view as specialists, the one in reconstructing prehistoric religions and semiotic systems, with a focus on the Mesolithic and Paleolithic; the other in the field of the Early Iron Age in Italy, Marija Gimbutas' contributions are three:

1) She has identified a diverse and complex range of Neolithic female divinities, including bird goddess, mistress of animals, Queen of the Mountains, snake goddess, deer mother, bear mother, life-giver, craft-giver, birth-giver, nurse, pregnant earth or earth mother, double goddess (mother-daughter), goddess of death, triangle-hourglass goddess, frog goddess, hedgehog goddess, fish goddess, bee and butterfly goddess and regeneratrix, and thereby invalidates the simplistic hypotheses of one "Great Mother" deity for the Neolithic. Marija Gimbutas designated these multiple forms as manifestations of the "Great Goddess" as opposed to the "Great Mother", who is secondary, to the decipherment of the various female deities.

Meskell obviously is not conversant with this for she constantly talks about theories of "the omnipotent mother goddess" as if Gimbutas believed such a theory, when in fact a major point in her work is to refute it! Contra Meskell, work agrees fully with

Ucko's position that Greta" female figurines are not a singular deity.

Gimbutas also identified a rich array of Neolithic male deities, including an ithyphallic-snake god (a proto-Hermes), divine child, bull or goat-masked proto-Dionysos; sorrowful god; proto-Linos flax god, dying and rising vegetation god, proto-Asklepios, and master of animals or forest god with hook.

2) Gimbutas identified and deciphered the ideogram system of the European Neolithic, decoding at least fifty ideograms, including many geometric and abstract signs (e.g. V, chevron, zigzag, M, meander, net, bi-line, triline, lozenge, circle, triangle, egg, checkerboard, spiral, hook, axe, comb, whirls, four-corner designs, life-column, hourglass-shape, bird's claw, breast, vulva, uterus, phallus, ship, lunar shapes, flowers and other vegetable shapes); and animal symbols (e.g. dove, cuckoo, hawk, waterbird, vulture, owl, mm, deer, bear, snake, pig, boar, dog, frog, toad, fish, hedgehog, bull and bucrania, butterfly and bees). The decipherment of the meaning of each of these ideograms is most fully presented in *The Language of the Goddess* (1989). Gimbutas discovered that these ideograms express the numinous life-energy in nature and in human life, and that combinations of them could be used to express "sonatas of becoming" as she called them (1974:167).

3) Gimbutas clarified the differences between this "Old European" iconographic system and the later Bronze Age and Kurgan symbol systems, which have transposed color symbols, solar symbolism, dominance of male gods, and ideology of tools and weapons of war.

Meskell is not conversant with the second of Gimbutas' major contributions. For instance, Meskell asserts that Gimbutas does not explain why the geometric and other signs are symbols of the goddess and not of the gods. The problem is not with Gimbutas but with

Meskell's inadequate reading. On the one hand, Gimbutas shows clearly that the iconographic system is applied to both male and female figures; and on the other, that the preponderance of geometric and animal symbols are associated with female figures. While male figurines are far fewer in number and in evidence as ideograms, Gimbutas gives a precise categorization of those symbols associated with the male gods, and thereby helps us for the first time to decode the semantics of the Neolithic male gods.

Further, Meskell's argument implies that religious ideology cannot be inferred from archaeological artefacts. For instance, she suggests "alternative hypotheses" for the function of Neolithic female figures: territorial makers, ancestor cults, teaching devices, birthing rituals, healing, marriage contract tokens, toys etc. While all these might be possible, it is an irrational leap to conclude that because female (or male) figurines have various functions, any attempt to interpret the iconographic system applied to these figures, which gives them their theological or mythological meaning, is refuted. Ironically - since Meskell believes these alternative uses of figurines invalidate their theological significance - almost all of the alternative functions listed by Meskell are "religious" and thus would beg for the decipherment of the iconography of the artifacts.

Does Meskell believe that because statues of Hermes in ancient Greece were used as territorial markers, in ancestor cults, as teaching devices, in healing rituals, and might even have been used as toys, it follows that if one has discovered a Greek male statue one is forbidden to determine if it has sacred iconographic elements, and if it does have such elements, whether it represents Hermes or some other god? What kind of a logic argument is this?

As for the issue of egalitarianism, Gimbutas has marshalled a lot of evidence for it and Meskell a little against it. Further Meskell fails to know or acknowledge that Gimbutas has repeatedly stated that the Neolithic culture was not a "matriarchy" - matriarchy is a literary and

fantasy notion - but was most likely matrilinear. Considering the nature of its ideological system which she so well decoded - and other archaeological evidence, Gimbutas chose the term "matrifocal" to characterize the social structure of Neolithic Europe. She chose this term in part to honor the uniqueness of the archaeological data for Neolithic Europe and eschewed ethnographical analogies. By this measure, Meskell's allusions to data from Africa and Egypt stand unjustified.

Why do people who do serious research in analytical psychology and archetypal mythology appreciate her work which some of her colleagues deem to be unworthy of an archaeologist? Why did the editorial board of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* ask Gimbutas - and not, for example, Ucko - to write eleven articles? Why does the Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California, which is specialized in Jungian studies, house her archive and not her own university, UCLA? To understand this we need to look at the three pillars that uphold her mythological and psychological approach to the Neolithic iconography.

The publisher, Thames and Hudson, besides changing the title of the first edition, 1974, from *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* to *The Gods and Goddesses*, did not allow her to publish any reference notes. Thus, Gimbutas did not account for the works that had influenced her, except in her bibliography. Here we find - beside Bachofen, whose work is less important than *The Mothers* (1929) in two volumes, by Robert Briffault - Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and C.G. Jung.

The German theologian and scholar of the history and phenomenology of religions, Rudolph Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, 1st German ed. 1917, tried to identify the nonrational element in religious experience by describing what is left over after the rational elements have been subtracted. He found that the term *holy* had lost its primary meaning and had come to designate ethical and moral self-righteousness. Otto, therefore, coined a new word, *numinous*, to stand for the holy minus its moral factor. Numinous refers to a deep

emotion that can be understood only by those who have experienced it (Otto 1937:8). Otto calls it the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, because it cannot be described in rational terms (*mysterium*), and because it contains an element of fear or revulsion (*tremendum*) that continues to attract and fascinate (*fascinans*) the person involved (Otto 1937:5, 6, 27-37, 42-52; cpr. Ludwig 1987).

Otto's description of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is close to Jung's hypothesis of the constellation of an archetype, that is, the breaking forth of something hitherto unknown from the collective unconscious into the collective or personal consciousness (Jung 1981a).

Jung kept repeating that the archetypes are hypothetical factors. We cannot observe the archetypes in themselves but only their different manifestations. The archetypes themselves are deeply imbedded in our phylogenetic psyche which functions at subconscious psycho-biological levels (Stevens 1982:89).

When Meskell, citing Talalay, says that "the writings of Freud and Jung both asserted that devotion to female deities appeared early in human evolution", she is the victim of a misunderstanding. Jung does not write about religious entities as such: he leaves religion to the specialists (Jung 1981a). He and his followers Erich Neumann, Ernst Whitmont, and Silvia Perera who have all written books with titles that allude to goddesses (*The Great Mother, The Return of the Goddess, The Descent of the Goddess*), write about archetypes that have been understood (constellated) as divinities. The difference may seem infinitesimal, but it is important. Jung did, however, consider the archetype of the mother as constellated earlier than that of the father in the individual psyche. This, of course, has a biological explanation: all of us, men and women, are born of mothers. We have all lived nine months in symbiosis with our mother inside her womb and then, another year close to her receiving our nutrition, at least for some of this period, directly from her body. In the

human consciousness the figure of the father arrives later than that of the mother.

How do we express the deep emotions that the breaking through of a *mysterium awakes* in us? Even the smallest emotion, when we suddenly understand something new, is difficult to describe without resorting to an analogy. We have to use rational words or images taken from our physical world to describe nonrational emotions. Jung called these analogies symbols, the best possible descriptions of facts that are so deeply felt that they can only be described through analogies with our physical world (Jung 1981b: par. 814). A symbol is much more than a metaphor or an allegory. Symbolic expressions are not only words but also images, figures, dances, rituals. Although it is impossible to state just what prehistoric symbols mean to their users, it is at least possible to highlight the analogy between the prehistoric symbolic image and its underlying physical phenomena. The human characteristic of expressing symbols in images was certainly no less highly developed in prehistoric man than it is in us.

Because the archetypes belong to the collective unconscious, the analogies expressed by the symbols have a universal basis. It is, therefore, not against scientific method to interpret the feminine figures belonging to various cultures and civilizations as symbols of the same archetype, that of the feminine.

Hierophany (from the Greek *hieros*, "sacred," and *phainein*, "to show") is the term Mircea Eliade coined in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, (first English edition 1958) to designate how the manifestation of the Sacred Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* has been symbolized through the ages. According to Eliade, everything has been a hierophany somewhere at some time in history: all animals, tools, toys, all gestures, children's games, dances, musical instruments, wagons, boats etc. (Eliade 1983: par. 3). This presupposes a holistic concept of religion. (cf. Gimbutas 1989: 321). Prehistorians are apt to forget that the attempt to define religion as being opposed to the profane is primarily a Western concern, even now (King 1987). We should be wary of

projecting our modern Western dichotomy onto the past.

To these concepts Gimbutas added that of *ideograms* schematic, conventional signs that archaeological literature usually considers mere “geometrical motifs.” It took her years to discover that they were all symbols of the numinous powers of life. The prehistoric artists used the abstract “not because they were not able to make naturalistic art but because their art was meant to be read in symbolic and archetypal terms, not merely glanced at as we, who are on the brink of drowning in pictures, merely glance at them.

Thus, Marija Gimbutas’ hypothesis based on solid knowledge of the material coupled with profound studies in archetypal mythology and analytical psychology; opens new, exciting and valid paths toward deeper studies of prehistoric culture.

Finally, it is obviously unscientific to dismiss Marija Gimbutas’ analysis and conclusions because they are variously used and misused in popular culture, any more than Einstein’s theory of relativity is refuted because some people wear Einstein T-shirts. It is incumbent upon the critics to come up with a better and more accurate analysis of the iconographic system presented in the archaeological data.

Despite the misreadings by some in pop culture and academia of Gimbutas’ works, her “archaeomythological” decoding of the Neolithic iconographic system has tremendously

enriched our knowledge of the complexity and beauty of Neolithic culture and religion, and ranks at the top of a lifetime of important contributions to the fields of archaeology, mythology, folklore, and linguistics.

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