

Mythos Project: The Cycle of Life, Death and Regeneration Continues

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Since the publication of the work of Marija Gimbutas and Christine Downing there has been enormous progress in terms of women finding their own voice and taking that voice out into the world. I am frequently asked, “What’s the new phase of the heroine’s journey? What happens after women have made their descent to the Goddess and reclaimed their feminine nature? How do they move out of darkness into the light and integrate both aspects of their feminine and masculine natures? What have we learned about feminine consciousness?”

We have several well-researched and articulated Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, and Latin American myths of the Descent but we don’t have well-researched and articulated myths of the Ascent and the Conjunctio from a feminine point of view. I researched the OPUS archives of Marija Gimbutas and Christine Downing to help me answer the following question: “What is the archetype of the current heroine who has come through the Descent into the light?”

What I have realized is that from a feminine point of view, what is central to a feminine consciousness is a focus on assimilation of the descent and rebirth and regeneration rather than ascent and redemption. Instead of a myth of ascent and redemption, which falls very much into the language of the patriarchal journey (up and out), what is needed at this point in our evolution as a culture is a focus on the assimilation of what has been learned in the Descent, and a recognition of, and full acceptance of, the ongoing cycle of life, death and rebirth.

This brings us to the work of Marija Gimbutas whose contribution can shift the focus to the next phase of the heroine's journey. In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Gimbutas writes, "All life in nature proceeds from death, as death from life.[. . .] The acknowledgement of the interdependence and continuum between life and death is expressed in prehistoric mythologies as the Mystery at the core of all being" (243).

The ancients knew and accepted this cycle of death and rebirth through their physical observation of nature and their seasonal observations of death and regeneration. The Greeks celebrated this in ritual of the Eleusinian Mysteries honoring the return of Persephone each year bearing a single ear of wheat, symbolically reassuring the people that life endures beyond death. At Eleusis, Kore came in answer to the call. She rose from the dead. She appeared. In "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries" Walter Otto writes, "This is proved, if proof is needed by a newly found papyrus text, in which Herakles declares that he has no need to be initiated, because he himself, in his descent to the underworld, has seen everything that they Mysteries have to offer. She speaks of the sacred night, 'I have seen Kore'" (Downing, "Books that Never Got Written" 27).

In the Eleusinian Mysteries the people participated in making the gods come alive and partaking of their gifts. At this time in the twenty-first century, we are also asking Kore, as symbol of the sacred feminine, not only to ascend from the underworld and bring us a symbol of civilization but to also be present for us in the moment of our death.

We have lost a sense of celebration in regards to life and death because, as a culture, we are afraid of the finality of death. Through her archeological discoveries and deciphering of the artifacts, Gimbutas re-imagined what might have been a culture that was not afraid of death but instead honored the divine powers that oversaw death and regeneration. Death was seen as just a transition immediately followed by regeneration. Through the artifacts unearthed by Gimbutas, as well as the interpretation of the myth of the Greek Demeter and Persephone found in the Downing Archives, we are drawn to the Elusinian Mysteries to remind us that the sacred feminine continues through the centuries to bring back the life force.

As a complement to the research by Gimbutas on the Neolithic goddesses of life, death and regeneration, I have created a slide show that illustrates the Evolution of the Sacred Feminine from Paleolithic Times to the Present, including some of the images from the Gimbutas collection in the Archives. This visual component is an occasion to discuss what the re-emergence of the sacred feminine means for us today.

As Marija Gimbutas has said in many interviews, it was her “fate to do this work” because of her family background and the pagan heritage of her country (Gimbutas, Kearns). She grew up in Lithuania, the last country in Europe to be Christianized (it didn’t take root until the 16th century), and as a child she experienced respect for Mother Earth. Each day she saw people kiss the earth in the morning and say prayers in the evening. She experienced the sacredness of wells, streams, water animals, and trees, all of which were considered to have healing power. Hers was an embodied spirituality from her earliest memory. As such, her

life story is as precious a testimony as an artifact can be for archeologists. She was not just a scholar but as a political activist, she risked her life to provide books and teach literacy to the oppressed people of her country. Her life was truly heroic.

Gimbutas was raised in an atmosphere in which family spirits and the spirits that infused folk art were respected. Her family collected folk songs and folk art and Gimbutas herself collected 5000 folksongs and attended ethnographic expeditions until World War II broke out. When she was seventeen she became curious about the Indo-Europeans and began to question their origins. After moving to the United States, she studied Indo Europeans at Harvard University as a visiting scholar and wrote a book on the Bronze Age. "I devoted at least 10 years of my career studying Indo European war gods and weapons and that was too much for me" (Gimbutas, Kearns). Her life changed when she moved to California and taught at UCLA. This was the beginning of her exploration of the culture that preceded the Indo Europeans.

Between 1968-80 Gimbutas directed 4 excavations of Neolithic cultures (7000 BCE-2000 BCE) in southeast Europe in Sitagroi, Greek Macedonia; Anza, Macedonia; Thessaly, Greece; and Manfredonia, Italy. She found thousands of Neolithic artifacts throughout Eastern Europe that spoke of an ancient aesthetic different from the material culture of the Bronze Age. Gimbutas determined a "culture existed that was opposite of all that was known to be Indo-European and this led me to coin a new term 'Old Europe' in 1968" (Marler 15).

From her excavations in 1973 and 1974, she found temples and sculptures that began to influence her views that the sculptures represented goddesses. She

and her associates discovered certain bird head sculptures in the temples and sculptures of pregnant females in the courtyards, and there were neither weapons in the graves nor fortifications in the villages. From this, she concluded that this was a very different culture from that of the later Indo Europeans: it was peaceful.

In 1979 Gimbutas organized the first interdisciplinary conference in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia to stimulate new research on the radical shift of economic, religious, and social structures that took place between the 5th and 3rd millennium BCE. She became convinced that the art of Old Europe reflected a sophisticated religious symbolism (Marler 16). She developed an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry she called “archeomythology,” a union of archeology and mythology. She stated, “They cannot be separated because this helps us reconstruct the spirituality of our ancestors” (Gimbutas, Kearns). She wrote, “interdisciplinary research requires the scholar to view a problem with an entirely different mental focus, which means learning to assemble the data with a goal of seeing all details at once, in situ” (qtd. in Marler 21). Her work drew from mythology, linguistics, ethnology, folklore, comparative religion and historical documents. She presented the first overview of art, religious symbolism, and social structure of Neolithic Europe (Marler 21).

Her work on the Bronze Age was accepted by archeologists because it had nothing to do with religion or symbolism but they did not accept her deciphering of a goddess religion because they did not accept the notion that a religion could be extrapolated from the artifacts. In the interview tapes found in the Gimbutas Archives, one can hear how she felt about the criticism from archeologists who did

not respect her research. She felt it was important to move beyond the limits of scientific materialism alone and use all possible sources to understand the ancestors (Gimbutas, Kearns).

In an address in 1992 at Interface in Sudbury Massachusetts, Gimbutas said, "If you say anything about the ritual side of the culture they will say you are cracked. You cannot say anything about the spiritual side of the culture. I don't care if I will be accepted or not accepted. I care only for the truth. What is the sense of being a scholar if you have to be afraid of some other forces?" ("Women and the Goddess").

The way Gimbutas was treated by the male establishment in academia might be one more example of the sexism that glorifies male heroes and ignores or denigrates the heroic work of women. It is also a standard practice among sexist scholars (whether male or female) to insist on the weakest aspect of a theory to invalidate an entire work.

Gimbutas' work in both *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess* has been criticized by archeologists because of her insistence on her interpretation of the figurines as objective evidence of the existence of a goddess religion and on her "lack of precision, and uncorroborated speculations, particularly in view of her earlier esteemed scholarly work" (Long 16). In a 1993 review in *American Anthropologist*, Ruth Tringham criticizes her for stating there is unequivocal evidence to support her interpretation of Goddess symbology and for denying the validity of alternative interpretations. She writes "Feminist archeological research is based on a celebration of the ambiguity of the archeological record and a plurality of its interpretation, and the subjectivity of the

pre-histories that are constructed is a part of its discourse. Gimbutas, however, has mystified the process of interpretation and has presented her own conclusions as objective fact" (197).

Tringham and her colleague, Margaret Conkey do, however, feel that Gimbutas's work reviving goddess religions provides important new perspectives on archeological concerns and challenges the androcentric structure of archeology viewed by many of its professionals. They write: "We have come to see that our enquiry is just as much about key issues in contemporary archeological interpretation as seen through the topic of the Goddess as it is about how the Goddess movement uses archeology" (Conkey and Tringham 200). Even though they take issue with many of Gimbutas's assertions, they find the paradigm shift to which she contributed as valid and forceful (200).

Feminist archeologist Lynn Meskell questions Gimbutas's deployment of an archeological past--convinced that there was an egalitarian culture prior to the Indo-Europeans--to bring about social and political change in the twentieth century. But she gives credence to Gimbutas's work as a form of "mythopoetics whereby a cultural identity is constructed or reconstructed" (Long 16). Long quotes Meskell, "Most images and artifacts are borrowed, if not appropriated, and with them their contexts meanings and symbologies have been transformed or lost completely. The drive for Western colonization of ancient territory continues. . . it would seem that mythopoetics as a genre has an inherent structure which not only makes the past a more habitable place, but a reassuring archetype which potentially provides the model for the next millennium" (16).

It took Gimbutas thirty years of research and deciphering to understand the symbology in excavated places; her background in myth and folklore helped her see the symbology in the sites and figurines she excavated. In *From the Realm of the Ancestors*, Joan Marler writes, “Joseph Campbell said that if her work had been available earlier he would have written things differently. He neglected goddesses because there was no way to find out more about them” (19).

Gimbutas knew that to reconstruct the social structure of a culture, researchers had to look at cemeteries and study burial rituals to discern how people were buried and with what kind of gifts. In the tombs she excavated there was no hierarchy of males over females; the burial sites showed an equalitarian society. She revolutionized the field by demonstrating that Neolithic settlements of Europe prior to Indo-European influence (around 4400 BCE in eastern Europe) were radically different than later societies. It is Charlene Spretnak’s understanding that this is now accepted by most archeologists (Spretnak 401).

Villages from 7000 BCE had workshops and a temple proper. In the temple the people prepared pottery for rituals. In her talk at Interface, Gimbutas said that in many female graves she found “cult objects filled with red ochre buried next to houses. These houses were the core houses of the village where the main family lived” (“Women and the Goddess”). She found “middle aged women and girls richly equipped with beads, figurines and a model of the temple.” She speculated that these girls might have been in the line of priestess showing a matrilineal system. In contrast, no cult objects were found in men’s graves. Men’s graves were “equipped

with craft tools, axes, hoes, trade objects, obsidian for knives, some stone or flint. Clearly men were in trade which was very important" ("Women and the Goddess").

Finding thousands of female figurines and female-honoring ritual artifacts and temple models, Gimbutas concluded that women were highly respected in the cultures of Old Europe. She speculated that the female figurines were used in ritual: some standing on altars waiting for a ritual to begin and others found around bread ovens. "In northern Greece in Thessaly they had rituals before the baking of bread and during the baking of bread. Women made small figurines at the same time they were making the bread; bread was sacred" ("Women and the Goddess").

Gimbutas found 100 pregnant goddess figures in Achilleion in an excavated area little more than 100 square meters, and more than 200 clay figures in northern Greece. "This site revealed that certain types of female figurines (bird goddess, snake goddess, nurse) were temple or house gods. Others, such as the pregnant goddess were worshipped in the courtyard at specially prepared platforms with offering pits near bread ovens. These pits were for sacrifices and we found organic remains of plants or grains that were sacrificed. From the 200 figurines found at Achilleion, only two fragmented ones represented a male god, seated on a stool with hands on his knees" (*Civilization of the Goddess* 22).

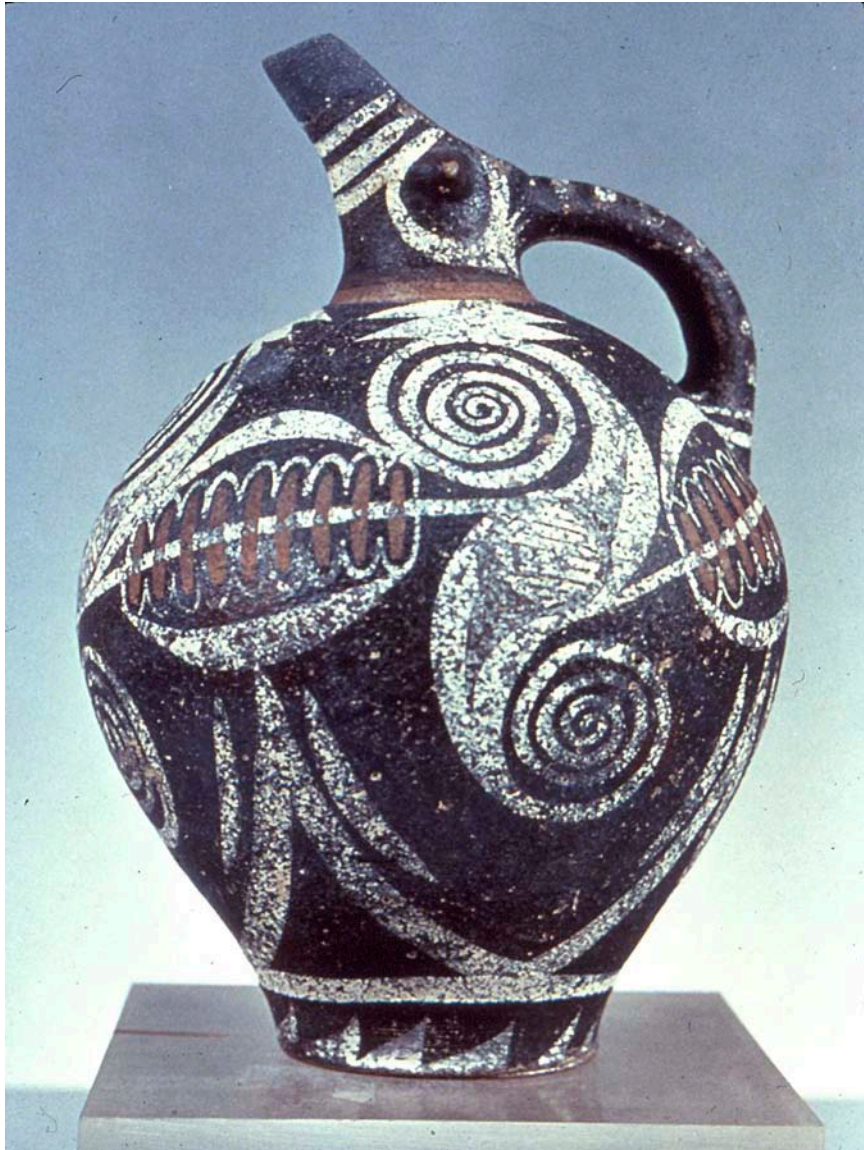
Citing evidence from her excavation of cemeteries, settlements, the historical records of the continuance of a matrilineal system, from portrayals in frescoes and from folklore and similar evidence in the Minoan culture of Crete, Gimbutas concluded that Old Europe was a matrilineal society with a female deity. "We know that at the top was the goddess and the mother or grandmother was the main

priestess. Next to her was her brother or uncle. Motherhood determined the social structure and religion because religion always reflects social structure. Old Europe was a matrilineal society where the queen was on the top and her brother next to her” (Gimbutas, Kearns).

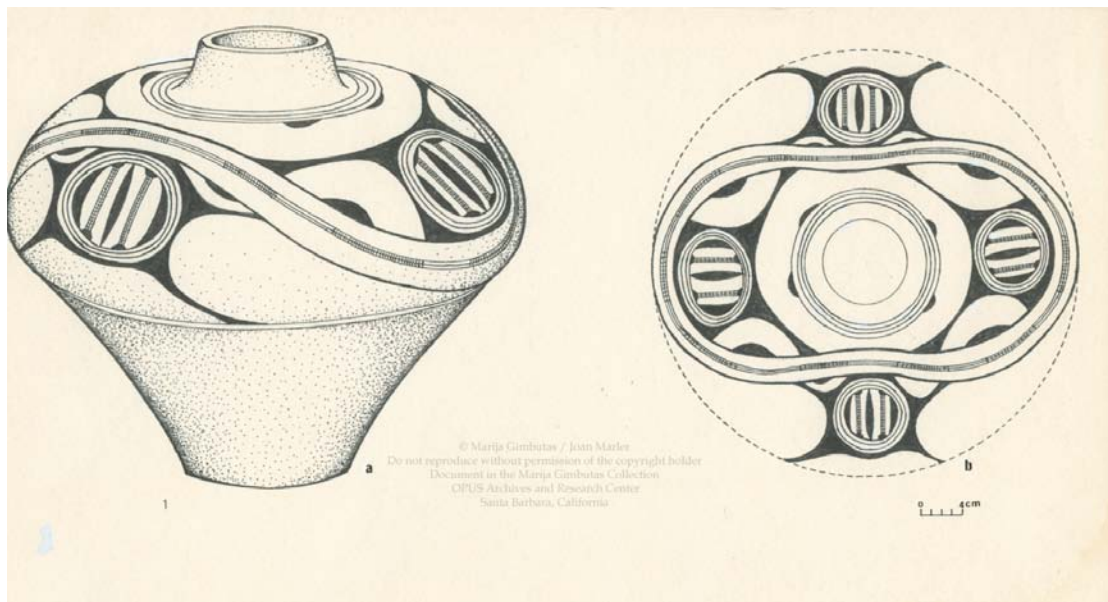
Gimbutas did not use the term matriarchy but rather matrilinearity because unlike women in patriarchy, men were not suppressed. Men were very important in society in trade, architecture, shipbuilding and crafts. There was no marriage; the mother had a consort but no husband. Gimbutas found a ratio of 98% female goddess figurines to male gods. “My excavations do not prove the existence of mother and father because the figurines represented female goddesses. There were never any father images in Neolithic villages” (Gimbutas, Kearns). Some figurines found in Knossos from the 2nd millennium were the same as those she found in Europe like the bird goddess and snake goddess, which indicated a continuum throughout the whole of Neolithic cultures in Crete, which started in the 7th millennium BCE.

Gimbutas became convinced that the art of Old Europe reflected a sophisticated religious symbolism and in 1974 she began to investigate the bird goddess (Marler 16). She looked at how the figurines and objects were found in situ and whether they belonged together. She interpreted the number of dots and meanders and chevrons on figurines as having certain meanings. She saw the V or chevron as almost inseparable from the bird goddess. She saw spirals as symbolic of snake energy. She began to decipher a language of the goddess.

She categorized the energies of the goddess in terms of life-giving, death-taking, and regeneration. She identified life-giving goddesses such as the bird goddess, snake goddess, and the bull; death-taking goddesses such as the vulture and owl and symbols such as the tomb/womb; and goddesses of transformation such as the egg and the frog.

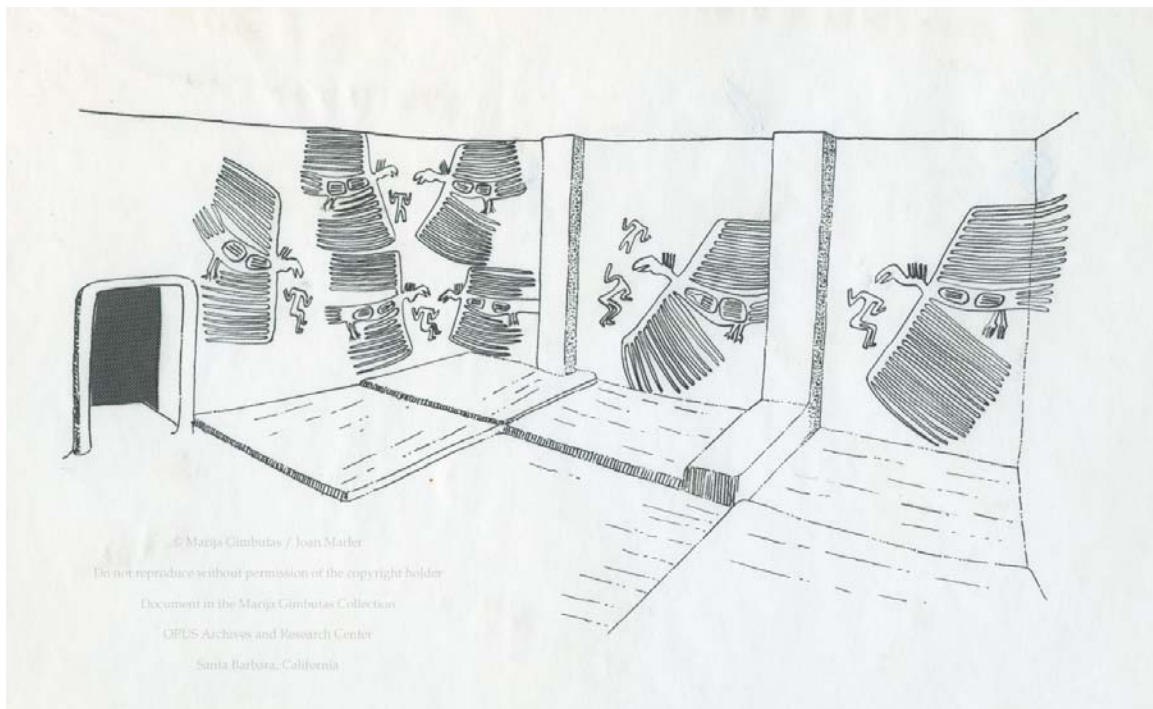


The symbology of the bird, especially the water bird and hybrids of woman and bird connected with the symbolism of water. Gimbutas said, “She is the bringer of life and the bringer of nourishment; she is giving milk; she is also a healer” (Gimbutas, Kearns). She interpreted the snake as a symbol of life energy. “Ancestors worshipped the energy of the snake, spiraling and coiling. The ceramics of Old Europe are full of the snake motif and from European folklore we can read and understand the pre-historical snake goddess. She is a seasonal goddess appearing in spring. She became the symbol of immortality parallel with the image of Mother Earth” (Gimbutas, Kearns). Children, including Marija, were taught not to kill a green snake.



Gimbutas interpreted the vulture, owl, crow or raven as the death wielding images of the goddess. Vultures appeared in Paleolithic wall art from 25,000 BCE through the Neolithic to the Bronze Age. In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Gimbutas wrote,

“The most impressive Vulture Goddess are those from wall paintings of Catal Huyuk where they are visualized attacking headless bodies. The head, as the primary dwelling place of the soul, was removed after death and placed near the head of a bull (a symbol of regeneration). The appearance of the Vulture Goddess in the motherly act of gathering the remains of the dead into herself undoubtedly goes back to very ancient times” (238). Bird images appeared in both life giving and death wielding goddesses because in the image of death there is already an image of rebirth and life.

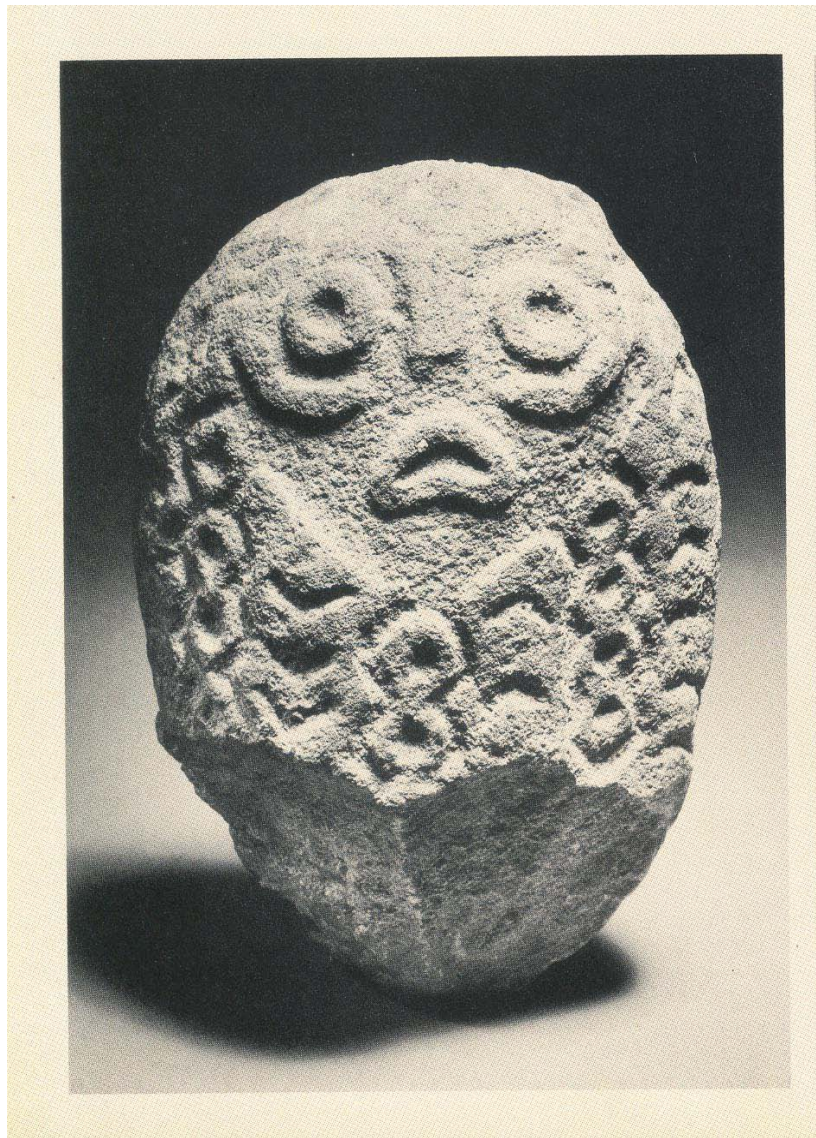


Gimbutas writes:

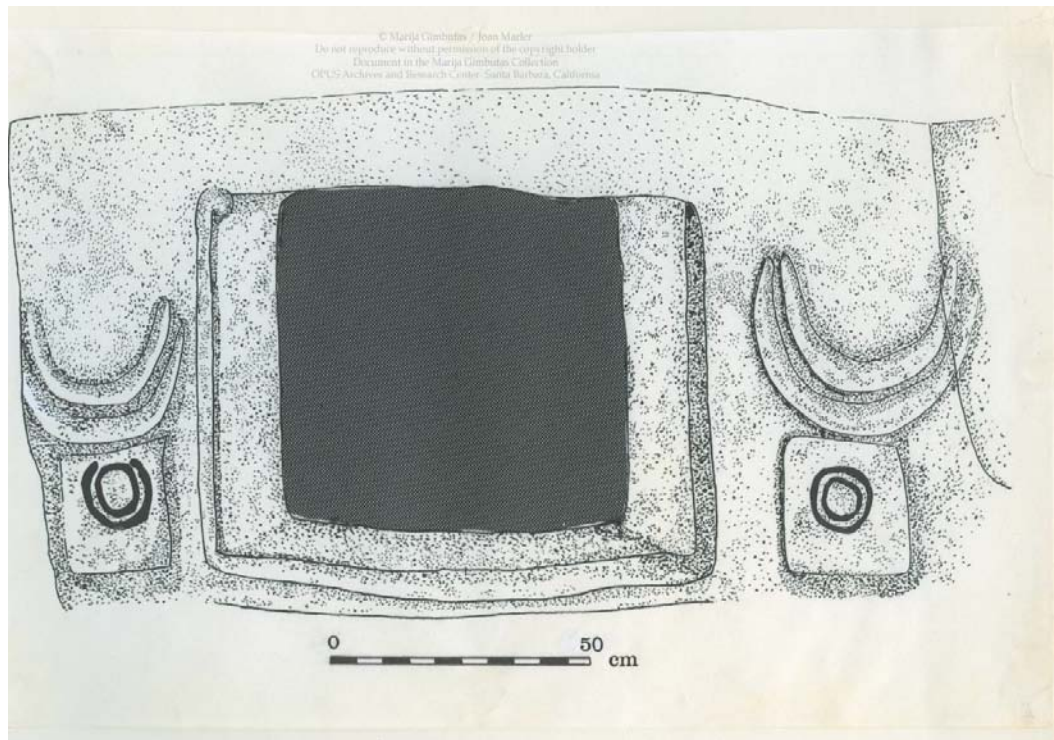
In the religion of Old Europe, death and regeneration are expressed as two interdependent, contiguous aspects of one deity. Although death and birth are seen as polar opposites in our linear, dualistic culture, the Great Goddess of the Stone Age embodies both simultaneously, representing the unbroken continuity of the one ever-repeating cycle

that underlies all manifestations. It is she who holds dominion over death; the cold darkness of winter, caves, graves, and tombs in the earth are her dominion, but she is also the one who receives the fertile seed, the light of midwinter, the fertilized egg, which transforms the tomb into a womb for the gestation of new life (Civilization 243).

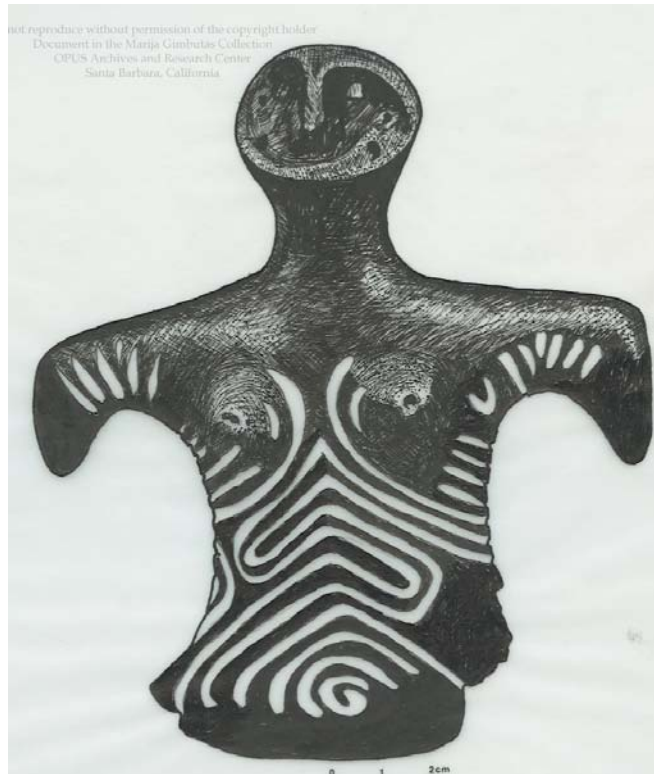
The tomb is the place where regeneration begins and the elemental form of the tomb is the egg, which is a symbol of regeneration.



Gimbutas saw the tomb in the form of the uterus of the goddess; the long corridor and chamber representing the vagina and uterus. “The image of the bull became one of the most important symbols in tomb architecture at the entrance of tombs, such as in Catal Huyuk. The head of the bull is flat and its horns can be seen as fallopian tubes” (Gimbutas/Kearns).



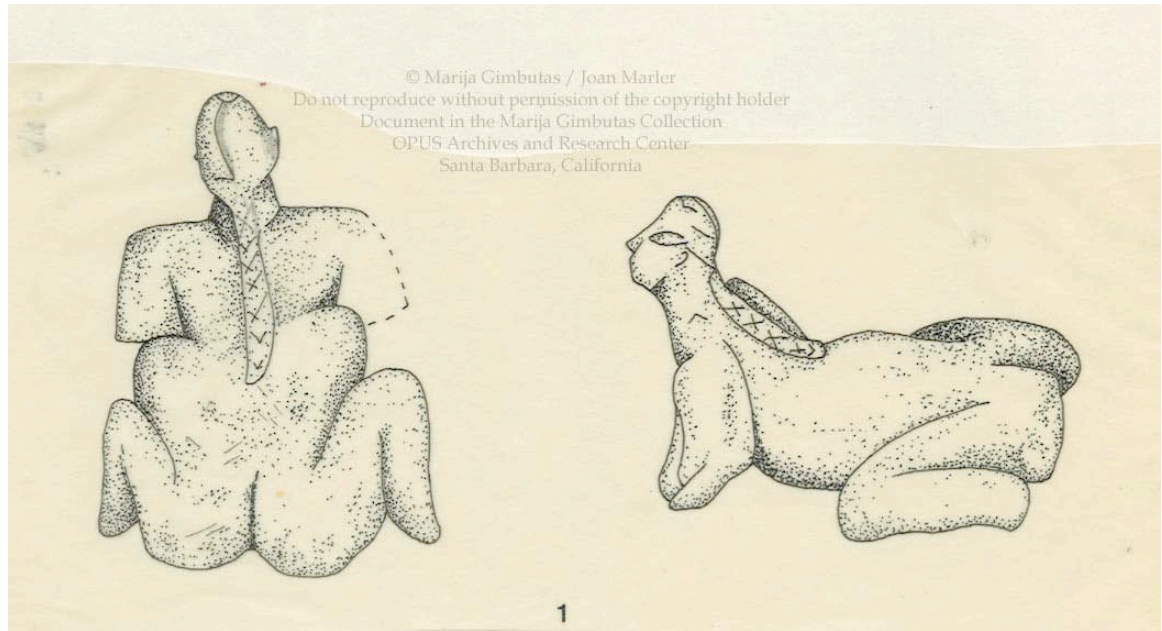
The owl is often connected with megalithic tombs; owls are engraved in the passage graves in Knowth, Ireland. (Marler 17) Gimbutas also interpreted the triangles that appeared in tomb architecture as the vulva of the Mother Goddess.



In *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, Gimbutas writes:

The Fertility Goddess or Mother Goddess is a more complex image than most people think. She was not only the Mother Goddess who commands fertility, or the Lady of the Beasts who governs the fecundity of animals and all wild nature, or the frightening Mother Terrible, but a composite image with traits accumulated from both the pre-agricultural and agricultural eras. During the latter she became essentially a Goddess of Regeneration, i.e., a Moon Goddess, a product of a sedentary, matrilinear community, encompassing the archetypal unity and multiplicity of feminine nature. She was giver of life and all she promotes fertility, and at the same time she was the wielder of the destructive powers of nature. The feminine nature, like the moon is light as well as dark” (152).

The frog or toad, hedgehog or fish were both funerary and life symbols in Old Europe. Gimbutas writes, “Their peculiar relationship—even equation—with the uterus of the life-giving, regenerating, and transforming Goddess accounts for their prominent role in Old European symbolism” (*The Language of the Goddess* 251).)



The frog woman image may be as old as the upper Paleolithic. Bones have been found in the cave of Les Trois Freres in southern France with a series of strange engraved creatures with frog shaped legs (*Language* 251). In testimony to the longevity of the frog woman association to the vulva of the goddess is a votive tablet from Bavaria, dated 1811 AD which includes a frog with a vulva on its back next to the Madonna (254).



Gimbutas writes, “The double axe of the Bronze Age was originally an hourglass-shaped Goddess of Death and Regeneration,” which is the butterfly, the embodiment of the principle of transformation (*Language* 273). “The butterfly was one of the many insectomorphic manifestations of the Goddess in whose hands was the magic transformation from death to life. [. . .] Indeed there is a very thin borderline between life and death, between the butterfly and the Goddess in her destructive aspect. Not neglecting death, Old Europeans sensed the short-lived beauty of life, which was deeply and dramatically manifested in bee and butterfly symbolism” (275).



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Charlene Spretnak writes,

To grasp the relevance of Gimbutas's discoveries about Europe's earliest cultural layers, one must first appreciate the vast implications of the anti-nature, anti-body orientation in western philosophy and spirituality, which was intensified and codified in classical Greek thought. That a cultural orientation—based on belief in a radical discontinuity between mind and body and between humans and nature—caused an extraordinary existential displacement (400).

Gimbutas's work revealed "Neolithic cultures of Old Europe to be informed by a well-developed awareness of their embeddedness in the dynamics of natural world. A spiritual sense of connectedness was artfully expressed through a sophisticated symbol system and abundance of ritual objects. Nature and body were honored in Europe for tens of thousands of years" (Spretnak 401). Sumerian,

Egyptian, and Greek cultures continued to honor sacred feminine symbols of life, death and regeneration. The ritual practices of the Greek mystery religions, particularly the Eleusinian Mysteries focused on Demeter and Persephone was an attempt to preserve the remnants of Old European wisdom which had fed the pre-Greek psyche for centuries (Spretnak 403-404). Like the Neolithic goddess before her, Kore is the one who receives the fertile seed, the light of midwinter, the fertilized egg, which transforms the tomb into a womb for the gestation of new life.

Gimbutas presents a symbol language that honors the transformation that occurs in death. In the Elusinian Mysteries Kore, too, enacts the transformation that occurs in death. She spends one-third of her life in the underworld but returns to the upper world when called. At the end of the secret dramas of the sacred ritual, a single ear of wheat was held aloft in silence, which is replicated in the elevation of the host in the Catholic ritual of transubstantiation. For the initiates, this must have been the ultimate symbol of what they were seeking, a symbolic reassurance that life endures beyond death (Downing, "Books that Never Got Written"). The goddess guarantees the continuance of civilization.

The Eleusinian Mysteries, which became the most important of the mystery cults in the Greco-Roman world for over a thousand years, promised happiness in this life and a blessed afterlife for all initiates. In describing the meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries, Walter Otto writes:

Without death there can be no life; without dying, no fertility. The stupendous moment has returned, the moment when the young goddess was ravished by darkness, when the divine mother sought her, mourning and lamenting her, until she rises up again and with her the grain, to which men owe their civilization. [. . .] And she will be present again for every single man when the moment of death has

come, that terrible festival of the death night with which the Eleusinian Mysteries have so often been compared. (29-30)

My interest in Gimbutas's work lies in the relationship to a feminine aspect of the divine she described rather than in a literal reading of the artifacts she unearthed. Her work was crucial to the growth of feminist spirituality, feminist religious scholarship, and the liberation that the implications of the existence of a goddess tradition can bring to women everywhere. This certainly was the experience of myself and many of my colleagues in the 1980s and 1990s. It is necessary for some scholars to critique any theorist; that is what academia is about. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the larger implications of the idea of an embodied sacred feminine that preceded patriarchy.

Gimbutas' work, which was illuminated by her sensitivity to spiritual matters and to sculptures of all eras, has radical implications for the history of both Western religion and Western philosophy. In each of those fields, the early belief systems and schools are not seen to be *bridge* traditions. That is, the attention in both the Greek "mystery cults" (demeaned as pre-Christian pagan irrationalism) and the pre-Socratic philosophers to unitive dimensions of being and a cosmological wholeness was an attempt to preserve the remnants of Old European wisdom (Spretnak 403-404).

Gimbutas's work helps us entertain the hope that the oppression of patriarchy did not always exist. If a culture did exist in peace approximately 8,000 years ago, prior to the Indo-Europeans, that would certainly be a model of a mythos for the 21st century.

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Illustrations

Bird Goddess, Neolithic (10,000-55,000BCE), ARAS Archives

Egg and Snake, Fig. 336, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Vulture Goddess, Catal Huyuk, Fig. 285, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Lepenski Virgin, Umetnost, published work

Tomb, Fig. 417, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Owl, Fig. 300, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Frog woman motif, Fig. 390, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Votive Tablet from Bavaria, Fig. 393, Language of the Goddess illustration materials (boxes 252, 253)

Bull's Head with Minoan Ax, Fig. 7-38, Civilization of the Goddess illustration materials (box 255)