I first met Marija Gimbutas in September 1972 when I decided to take a break from studying German near Munich to travel to Capo di Ponte, Italy, for a six-day international symposium entitled “Les Religions de la Préhistoire.” I had completed my first year of graduate school in June and had left New Haven for a year of study in Europe. In October I planned to settle down in Zurich for a year at the C. G. Jung Institute. My German was improving, and I hoped to be able to follow lectures in both English and German when I got to Switzerland. Although attending the symposium would interrupt my language training, the program looked too strange and wonderful to pass up. Four days of lectures on topics such as “prehistoric antelope cults” and “myth and imagery of Paleolithic times” lured me away from the monotonous but effective grammar drills to which I was subjecting myself in my class of “Mittelstüfe Eins.”

The conference was both fabulous and disappointing: fabulous because the setting in the mountains of northern Italy, the accommodations, and the food were all first-rate; and disappointing because most of the papers presented throughout the six-day period were dull in style and mediocre in content. With few exceptions, the majority of speakers were archaeologists who gave uninspired lectures characterized either by tedious descriptions of artifacts or by unsubstantiated conjectures about the behavior and thoughts of Paleolithic people. Years earlier, when I had studied archaeology in Greece for a summer, I had realized that archaeologists are often poor theorists. They tend to speak about their subjects in one of two ways: either they recite facts, such as “We found this one here and that one there,” or “This figurine is 4.5 centimeters high and has traces of red ocher around the eyes,” or “Each pot is incised with seven chevrons”; or they make far-reaching claims based on very little evidence, such as “The Minoans worshiped pillars,” or “The Pythia swallowed hallucinogens.” Formulating convincing and interesting hypotheses about data unearthed in excavations is a rare skill among those who dig.
At the conference in Capo di Ponte, when Marija Gimbutas started to speak, the level of discourse rose several notches. In a paper entitled "Figurines of Old Europe (6500–3500 B.C.)," she compounded important, intriguing hypotheses about miniature sculptures found on the Balkan Peninsula and in east-central Europe. She proposed that these artifacts from the Chalcolithic and Neolithic eras ought to be interpreted in reference to "associated archaeological and cultural contexts." She believed that "sanctuaries, shrine models, stamp seals, ritual pottery, reliefs on shrines or vase walls, paintings on walls of houses, and inscriptions on sacrificial vessels as well as the location of all items connected with cult practices must be considered in conjunction with the figurines in order to understand the functions, the religious significance, and the mythical imagery of the prehistoric religion of Old Europe."

Gimbutas spoke with precision and clarity. She illustrated every point with slides of photographs or sketches of the objects she discussed. She identified two main classes of female imagery: one was associated with birds, another with snakes. She placed schematic patterns such as meanders, chevrons, and triangles in a tradition of representation that showed consistency over time; and she connected these abstractions to basic categories linked to birds, mammals, reptiles, vegetation, and water. As I listened to her and looked at her slides, I began to see order where I had seen none before. It felt a bit like learning to read a new language: I was starting to pay attention to the relationships and repetitions of signs. Parallel lines and zigzags did seem to suggest water. Spirals and meanders resembled snakes. Lozenges might well be eggs. And because all these shapes so often appeared on carvings of female faces, breasts, and buttocks, it seemed probable that ancient artists were linking women to specific, vital features of the natural world in their creations.

Gimbutas's categories of the Bird and Snake Goddesses made a great deal of sense to me. As I listened to her, I associated many of her ideas to Greek mythology. The priestess at Delphi presided over a sphere once ruled by a huge female snake. The name Pythia derives from this history. In addition, several major goddesses were connected with birds. For example, Athena had her owl, and early images of Hera depicted her with a cuckoo. In the Iliad, Homer writes that one evening Hera and Athena turned into birds so that they could perch above the heads of the Trojan generals and eavesdrop on the generals' battle plans for the next morning. It is highly improbable that these connections were invented by the Greeks. It is more

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likely that Greek artists, poets, and mythographers were elaborating very ancient traditions of iconography and representation in the imaginative renderings that have survived. For me, Gimbutas's paper provided a plausible chain of associations that traced aspects of Greek myth back through time to the earliest remains of European culture. I was stimulated and excited by her work.

In the break after the lecture that had impressed me so thoroughly, I learned that many of the conference participants did not share my appreciation of Gimbutas's work. When I spoke with a group of Scandinavian archaeologists about Gimbutas's paper, the Swedish man holding the title of "the king's archaeologist" laughed dismissively and waved his hand in the air to indicate that he had found her presentation flimsy. "Well, one thing I will say about her," he said when I disagreed with his assessment, "she always stirs the pot." Then he leaned over and whispered to me, "She used to be quite a sexpot, you know."

With the exception of Nancy Bong Chao, one of Gimbutas's students who had accompanied her to the conference, I met no one at this gathering of distinguished scholars who spoke well of Gimbutas's ideas. Although they all seemed to enjoy her company, they did not take her theories seriously. In fact, they did not discuss her work at all; they simply chuckled about it. I was amazed.

Two other things surprised me. First, Gimbutas did not seem bothered by her colleagues' reactions. Throughout the conference she chatted with them amiably and gave every appearance of having a fine time. It was as if she already knew what she could expect from these people and was not taking their rejection to heart. I remember thinking that this would be sane behavior for any aspiring feminist scholar to emulate. Second, the king's archaeologist gave what I consider to be one of the more absurd papers of the conference. He presented some improbable notions about where ancient Scandinavian priests would stand when they conducted sacrifices. His whole argument centered around two vague depressions in a rock, which he interpreted as footprints. Although the markings looked as if they could have been anything or nothing at all, he presented this "evidence" as if it were solid proof of something important. To me his work seemed weak and trivial. His colleagues, however, appeared to find it brilliant.

Now, twenty-four years after that conference, the work of Marija Gimbutas still elicits contradictory reactions similar to mine and those of the king's archaeologist: like me, some scholars find Gimbutas's theories worthwhile

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and inspiring, whereas others consider them ludicrous. I am curious about why the latter opinion continues to hold sway among so many; therefore, I will try to theorize a bit about the rejection of Gimbutas's work.

It is important to state first that I do not believe that disagreements about "the evidence" explain why Gimbutas's ideas are so often thought of as preposterous. It is generally recognized that every theory about prehistory must be built on a certain measure of conjecture. Moreover, Gimbutas, in contrast to others, was careful in both oral and written presentations to show several examples of artifacts that she interpreted as supporting her hypotheses. Thus, her audiences and readers always knew the images on which Gimbutas was basing her ideas.

I would find it quite unremarkable if scholars were to take issue with Gimbutas about specific interpretations of her data. But this is not what usually happens. Like the king's archaeologist, those who dismiss Gimbutas's work do not argue about particular points; instead, they reject it completely. For example, I know of none of her critics who would say, "Although I find Gimbutas's notion about a highly evolved theology of the Goddess in Old Europe to be difficult to accept, I do think her descriptive phenomenology of many artifacts is plausible." Gimbutas's detractors do not engage her complex and varied body of work with such precise criticisms; they simply turn away. These out-of-hand, total dismissals lead me to believe that Gimbutas's theories are often rejected on emotional rather than rational grounds.

I think it important to ask why it is that Gimbutas's theoretical constructs are considered more improbable than the hypotheses of scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Even the most enthusiastic fans of these great men will admit that their mentors sometimes misinterpreted bits of data and sometimes were prone to exaggerate. For example, Lévi-Strauss is known to have based many of his ideas on an embarrassingly minuscule amount of fieldwork. However, finding flaws in the sweeping formulations of these masters does not cause either the men or their work to be seen as without enormous value. Their theories continue to be accorded respect and to be considered worthy of careful study despite any imperfections.

It appears to me that the work of Gimbutas is at least as sound and as important as that of Eliade or Lévi-Strauss. Her classifications of prehistoric imagery are certainly based on a great deal more data than are Eliade's ideas about the myth of the eternal return or Lévi-Strauss's theories about nature and culture. Nevertheless, Gimbutas's hypotheses are accorded little respect.

For an examination of the limits of Eliade's work in comparison to that of Gimbutas, see Carol P. Christ, "Toward a Paradigm Shift in the Academy and Religious Studies," in The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy, ed. Christie Farnham (Bloomington:
Judith Butler’s work on performance has helped me think further about the reception of Gimbutas’s work. In regard to acts of speech, Butler writes, “a performative [action] . . . succeeds . . . only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. What this means, then, is that a performative ‘works’ to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.” If we think about the conference in Italy in reference to Butler’s statement, we could consider that both Gimbutas and the king’s archaeologist were engaged in “performative” acts of speech; that is, each scholar was advancing a theory that would either be accepted by the audience or not. Acceptance in this setting meant that the speaker would be praised and that some form of his or her theory would be carried forward by others. In the context of the conference, the Swedish man’s presentation worked better performatively. Despite the fact that Gimbutas presented more data and evidence to support her views, her work did not have much influence at the gathering. If we use Butler’s terms, we might say that the king’s archaeologist managed to echo “prior actions,” and that his words accumulated “the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.” Gimbutas, in contrast, did not mobilize the “historicity of force.”

How could Gimbutas have succeeded? Or, to put the question in another way, how could any theory about the religious importance of female imagery call on a repetitive, authoritative chain of citation? When Gimbutas’s Swedish colleague conjured up an ancient Scandinavian priest standing on a rock before an adoring crowd, he drew on an infinite number of similar representations. After all, in the imagination of the audience, priests, gods, and most of their official advocates were known to be male. Likewise, such male religious figures were known to behave as the king’s archaeologist described his imaginary ancestor: uttering sonorous phrases with arms outstretched to the heavens. It didn’t matter that two indistinct dents in a stone were all that existed to verify this particular image. The vision appeared plausible, or, to use Butler’s word, worked well as a “performative” because the audience could place it in a chain of familiar, authoritative, prior repetitions.

Gimbutas could not draw on such weighty traditions of representation when she put forward her descriptive phenomenology of the Bird and Snake Goddesses. Although some of us at the conference could recall corroborating

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references in classical literature or similar images from other ancient cultures, our scattered, discrete memories were fragile in comparison to the sustained, almost totalizing impression made by the male-focused religions that permeate culture. Against the historical backdrop of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, nearly any academic theory—like that of the king’s archaeologist—that takes the primacy of male divinity and clergy as its starting point will seem somewhat believable, whereas any theory—like that of Gimbutas—that questions the originative importance of maleness is likely to appear anomalous and to be judged out-of-order.

My chief interest in religion or a theory about religion lies in the creative possibilities it fosters. Intellectual traditions, such as those expressed in art, literature, drama, and theory, have flowed from the writings and memorabilia of what are known as the “great religions.” I believe that the male-centeredness of secular culture has its derivation in religious patterns and formulae that have trumpeted the glories of masculinity through the centuries; and I am intrigued with the cultural directions that might be explored if such bravado were tempered. Gimbutas’s ideas are important because they threaten to disrupt the performance of male grandiosity by suggesting that in some parts of ancient civilization, intense aesthetic focus was not accorded to maleness. The facile rejection of this rather modest hypothesis is testimony to the hold that androcentric religions and the theories that support them have on the imagination of many scholars. Academia would be much more interesting if this were not so, that is, if theories like Gimbutas’s could be attended to as carefully as those of the king’s archaeologist.
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