On June 27, 1993, the Frauen Museum of Wiesbaden, one of two women’s museums in Germany, opened an extraordinary exhibition of Neolithic images, “Sprache der Göttin,” directly inspired by The Language of the Goddess by Marija Gimbutas. Hundreds of people from Western and Eastern Europe, from as far north as Norway, converged during the opening week to pay tribute to Marija and to celebrate her interpretation of the symbolic imagery of Neolithic Europe. During the following year and a half, thousands more visited the exhibition, only one example of a growing worldwide interest in Marija’s work.

Marija Gimbutas was a woman with the rare courage to trust her own perceptions and to maintain the trajectory of her scientific work within a male-dominated field. Her enormous professional output of over twenty books (translated into numerous languages) and more than three hundred articles expresses an original scholarship that enlarges the traditional lens through which European prehistory is viewed. Although she had no mentor, Marija’s life was informed by a rich cultural inheritance that was a source of strength throughout her life.

Marija Birutė Alseikaitė was born on January 23, 1921, in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Her parents, Veronika Janulaityte-Alseikienë and Danielius Alseika, both medical doctors, were devoted to preserving the rich folk traditions of Lithuania that were being destroyed by successive foreign occupations. Her family was part of the Lithuanian intelligentsia that developed out of the peasant class during a century of czarist rule. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, education and intellectual achievements were cultivated as essential tools for personal and national liberation.

In 1918 Lithuania declared its independence from Russia, and soon afterward the Vilnius area was occupied by Poland. Because Marija’s father

1 In Lithuanian, the traditional ending of the last name indicates familial relations: e.g., Alseika (husband/father, brother), Alseikienë (wife/mother), and Alseikaitė (daughter,
was also the leader of the Lithuanian resistance movement, as well as a historian and publisher of a newspaper and cultural journals, her home environment was a major center for political and cultural activities. Marija's mother, an ophthalmologist, was considered a miracle worker who restored people's sight through some of the earliest cataract operations. She was also a cultural activist who supported the preservation of Lithuanian folk arts. The finest traditional and contemporary artists, musicians, and writers met frequently in their home.

When Marija was ready for formal education, she attended a liberal school created for the children of Lithuanian intellectuals (it was unthinkable for these children to attend Catholic or Polish schools). She also received private tutelage in music and languages and was nurtured by a supportive extended family. The vital intensity of that early environment promoted a devotion to political and aesthetic freedom, intellectual achievement, and a tenacious originality:

From the very beginning the children had total freedom. We were free to create our own individualities, although work for our nation and education always came first.²

Lithuania was the last European country to be Christianized, and the traditional lore that Marija absorbed was rich with prehistoric symbolism:

I always heard about the Fates, about the Baltic witch Ragana . . . how the earth must be kissed each morning and must never be mistreated.

The folklore and mythological imagery that Marija absorbed reflected not only the Indo-European pantheon of sky-gods but also a much earlier bond with the earth and her mysterious cycles that was still alive in the Lithuanian countryside:

The rivers were sacred, the forest and trees were sacred, the hills were sacred. The earth was kissed and prayers were said every morning, every evening. . . .

The balance of male and female powers expressed in the folk material had its correspondence in people's daily lives:

Officially the patriarchal system is clearly dominating, but in reality there is an inheritance from Old Europe in which the woman is the

² All block quotations, as well as quotations not otherwise identified, are excerpted from interviews with Marija Gimbutas conducted by the author between 1987 and 1993 as research for the author's forthcoming biography of Gimbutas.
center. In some areas the matrilineal system really exists, such as in my family. I don't see that the sons were more important.

Marija spent blissful summers at a small farm near Vilnius that her mother owned, where people nearby did their work in traditional ways:

The old women used sickles and sang while they worked. The songs were very authentic, very ancient. At that moment I fell in love with what is ancient because it was a deep communication and oneness with Earth. I was completely captivated. This was the beginning of my interest in folklore.

In 1931 Marija's parents separated, and she moved to Kaunas with her mother and brother. To be parted from her father and from Vilnius was her first great sadness. Then, when she was fifteen, her father suddenly died. Marija turned inward in response to this tragedy and vowed to continue her father's life:

All of a sudden I had to think what I shall be, what I shall do with my life. I had been so reckless in sports—swimming for miles, skating, bicycle riding. I changed completely and began to read. . . .

At that point, Marija's life as a dedicated scholar began. The death of her father kindled a deep desire to investigate all that could be known about ancient origins, especially beliefs concerning death and prehistoric burial rites. She participated, at ages sixteen and seventeen, as the youngest member and the only girl on ethnographic expeditions to remote areas of Lithuania. While the young men were collecting farming tools, Marija sat with the old women, recording songs and stories. By the time she fled Lithuania in 1944, Marija had collected hundreds of folksongs and stories, which are preserved in the folklore archive of Vilnius University.

In her formal studies Marija was fascinated to discover that her mother tongue, Lithuanian, is one of the most conservative Indo-European languages and bears similarities to Sanskrit.

The question of origins motivated me at that time—of the Indo-Europeans, of the Balts. . . . So I decided to study archaeology to get an answer, but it was clear that I had to be a pioneer. . . .

After graduating from high school with honors in 1938, Marija began studying at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. She understood that it was necessary to generate her own academic path, which included not only archaeology but also a thorough grounding in linguistics, literature, ethnology, cultural history, and the arts. This interdisciplinary focus continued throughout her entire professional life.

In the meantime, enormous political forces were roiling. Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Vilnius was finally released from Polish occupation. Marija left Kaunas, enrolled in the newly reorganized University
of Vilnius, and became part of a spontaneous outpouring of cultural and educational reform by the citizenry and the new government.

The war years were horrific in Lithuania. During the Soviet invasion of 1940, thirty-five members of Marija’s family and close friends (“the best people—scholars, poets, teachers . . .”) were deported to Siberia in a single night. Marija returned to Kaunas and hid with her mother in the forest near their summer house. She also joined the underground resistance movement and took part in the Lithuanian Uprising of 1941 that helped to achieve liberation from the Red Army forces. The German occupation that followed was a crushing blow. Marija assisted her mother in sheltering Jews from deportation to concentration camps, knowing that Lithuanians were executed for such activities. During this time of chaos she also married her fiancé, Jurgis Gimbutas.

In June 1942, Marija Gimbutienė completed her master’s studies in archaeology at Vilnius University, with secondary studies in folklore and comparative philology. Portions of her dissertation, “Life after Death in the Beliefs of Prehistoric Lithuania,” were published in the journal Gimtasai Krastas. She immediately began the preparation of her doctoral thesis. During the next year, while pregnant and then while caring for her newborn under conditions of occupation, Marija published eleven articles on the Balts and prehistoric burial rituals in Lithuania. Her cousin Meilė Luksiene described Marija during this period: “She was writing her first book about burial practices with one hand and rocking her first daughter, Danutė with the other hand. Marija was a person of incredible will and organization.” Marija also reflected on this period:

[My work] clearly kept me sane. I had something like a double life. I was happy doing my work; that was why I existed. Life just twisted me like a little plant, but my work was continuous in one direction.

Because Vilnius University was closed by the Germans in 1943, Marija submitted her doctoral dissertation to the faculty of humanitarian sciences, which was operating underground. War conditions prevented her from defending her thesis publicly.

In 1944, as the Soviet front advanced on Lithuania for the second time, Marija, Jurgis, and baby Danutė took refuge in the forest at the summer house near Kaunas. On July 8 of that year, the family escaped on a crowded barge on the Nemunas River. Marija, then twenty-three years old, held her dissertation under one arm and baby Danutė in the other.

The Gimbutas family spent the war years in Austria and Germany, in sometimes desperate conditions. Nevertheless, Marija attended lectures at the University of Vienna and continued independent work on her doctoral thesis so as “not to lose time.” She also translated her thesis into German. Immediately after the war, in September 1945, Marija enrolled at Tübingen University. In March 1946, she received her doctor of philosophy degree in archaeology with emphasis on prehistory, ethnology, and the history of religions. Her thesis, “Die Bestattung in Litauen in der vorgeschichtlichen Zeit” (Burials in Lithuania in prehistoric times), was published in Tübingen later that year.⁵

In 1947 the Gimbutas family’s second daughter, Živilė was born. Although forced into refugee camps, Marija continued independent research at Tübingen and managed to do further research at Heidelberg and Munich Universities. By the time the Gimbutas family immigrated to the United States on March 21, 1949, Marija had published nearly thirty articles on Lithuanian prehistory and had completed the research for Ancient Symbolism of Lithuanian Folk Art, which was published in Philadelphia in 1958.

The first years in America were difficult. At first, Marija worked as a maid and took other menial jobs while Jurgis worked as an engineer in Boston. Then, in the fall of 1949, she presented herself at Harvard University. Recognized for her knowledge of Eastern and Western European languages, she was encouraged to translate archaeological monographs that the American professors could not read. Very soon she began to write texts on the prehistory of Eastern and Central Europe:

I had such a strong determination that I started right away to do research. For three years I wasn't given any money. I felt like a drowning person.

Marija eventually received partial support from the Bollingen and Wenner-Gren Foundations for the preparation of Prehistory of Eastern Europe (1956). This was the first of a series of fellowships and prestigious awards that supported her ongoing research. Prehistory of Eastern Europe was well distributed, and Marija Gimbutas was soon recognized internationally as a rising star. As the recipient of numerous fellowships, she began to travel and lecture extensively and to develop a vigorous exchange of ideas with colleagues throughout the world.

During thirteen years of intensive scholarship, she studied every European archaeological report, in its original language, that came into the Peabody Library, which she called “the best library for archaeologists in the world.” In 1954 her third daughter, Rasa, was born. In 1955 Marija was

⁵ The bibliography following this essay includes complete listings for all of Marija Gimbutas’s books.
named a research fellow of Harvard's Peabody Museum. The annual report to the president of Harvard on the activities of the Peabody Museum for 1954–55 states, "[Gimbutas's] study of the prehistory of European Russia and the lands along the shore of the Baltic will be a classic which will stand for many years as an outstanding reference work. . . . No such synthesis has ever been attempted, even by the Russians, and the whole subject is known to prehistorians in the rest of Europe only in a fragmentary and confused state. . . ."6

Most archaeologists are specialists of a specific region, are rarely trained as linguists, and often cannot read archaeological reports in languages other than their own. Marija Gimbutas was therefore in a unique position to develop an encyclopedic knowledge of European archaeology:

The question of the origins of the Indo-Europeans was always in my mind. This was inherited from my early studies in Lithuania. Writing about the East European Neolithic, Copper, and Bronze Ages, between the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, and the Urals—this was my area.

I probably read all the nineteenth-and twentieth-century literature that existed. . . .

Thoroughly knowledgeable about the linguistic search for the ethnonogenesis of proto-Indo-European speakers, Marija Gimbutas was the first scholar to link linguistic research with available archaeological data to identify the homeland of these people, whom she called "Kurgans," and to trace their invasions into Europe:

Linguists were talking about the Indo-European origins, and this influenced me, of course. The origin had to be the steppe region.

This was the first linguistic solution.

An early version of Marija's "Kurgan Hypothesis," presented in 1956 at the International Congress of Ethnological Sciences in Philadelphia, provided a significant point of departure for all continued research in both archaeology and linguistics.7 After decades of scholarly debate, her thesis of the Kurgan invasions, and the subsequent hybridization of the indigenous European population, has been verified by the independent research of Stanford geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza.8

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In 1960 Marija Gimbutas was awarded the Outstanding New American Award by the World Refugee Committee. The following year was spent at Stanford University as a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where she worked on the six-pound tome *Bronze Age Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe* (1965):

That was the accepted archaeology. It had nothing to do with religion or symbolism. . . . What I was writing about the Bronze Age was clear to every archaeologist: chronology, typology, that's it.

In 1963 Marija Gimbutas accepted a position at the University of California at Los Angeles, left her marriage, and moved to California with her daughters. In that same year her book *The Balts* appeared in the Thames and Hudson series *Ancient Peoples and Places*, and a parallel work, *The Slavs*, was sponsored by the American Council of Learned Studies. *The Balts* was later published in Italian (1967), Lithuanian (1985), German (1991), Portuguese (1991), and Latvian (1994).

The arrival of Dr. Marija Gimbutas at UCLA, according to her colleague Jaan Puhvel, "meant the proximity and participation of the one person who was, even then, revolutionizing the study of East European archaeology and was laying the groundwork of a new synthesis of 'the Indo-European question.'" Puhvel, whose field is linguistics, was inspired by Marija's interdisciplinary approach, and the two immediately began to collaborate, "trying to conceptualize a unified field of Indo-European study, one that would bring together . . . archaeology, linguistics, philology, and the study of nonmaterial cultural antiquities." Marija remained at UCLA as a professor of archaeology until her retirement in 1989.

During these exceedingly active years, these two colleagues established the Institute of Archaeology, the Indo-European Studies Program, and the Graduate Interdepartmental Program. Gimbutas served as chair of European archaeology, professor of Baltic and Slavic studies (including language, mythology, and folklore) and of Indo-European studies, and curator of Old World archaeology at the Cultural History Museum at UCLA. She continued to write articles for numerous professional publications and encyclopedias, edited the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* and other publications, and attended yearly international conferences and symposiums. Most of all, Marija Gimbutas was an inspiring teacher who actively stimulated the budding careers of many young archaeologists and linguists. She encouraged her students to develop an interdisciplinary approach in contrast to traditional academic specialization.

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The preservation of her Lithuanian heritage was always of central importance. Among many other activities, Marija played a leading role in the advancement of Baltic studies, contributed articles to a variety of Lithuanian publications, and was one of the few Western scholars to travel and lecture in Lithuania during Soviet times. In 1969 she was an exchange professor with the USSR through the American Academy of Sciences, and she returned to the USSR on a Fulbright fellowship in 1981.

An important turning point in Marija's career as an archaeologist came when she began her own excavations in southeastern Europe. In 1967–68 she became project director for excavations of Neolithic sites near Sarajevo in Bosnia, sponsored by a Humanities Endowment Award from the Smithsonian Institute. She returned home to receive the prestigious Los Angeles Times Woman of the Year Award.

Over several decades of intense travel, excavations, lecturing, research, and writing, she visited nearly every regional museum in Eastern Europe. Bronze Age artifacts were well known to her, but earlier finds were an astonishment. Although technical reports existed from Neolithic excavations, there was no overview to explain what she was seeing:

I came to a point when I had to understand what was happening in Europe before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. It was a very gradual process. I did not know then that I would write about Neolithic religion or the Goddess. I was only trying to answer this question. During my excavations I became aware that a culture existed that was the opposite of all that was known to be Indo-European. So this led me to coin the new term Old Europe in 1968.

Between 1968 and 1980, Marija Gimbutas directed four other major excavations in southeastern Europe: in 1968–69, the Karanovo and early Bronze Age tell (ca. 5000–2000 B.C.E.) at Sitagroi, Greek Macedonia; in 1969–71, the Starčëvo and Vinča settlement (6300–5000 B.C.E.) at Anza in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia; in 1973–75, the Sesklo tell (ca. 6500–5600 B.C.E.) at Achilleion, near Farsala, Thessaly, Greece; and in 1977–80, the Scaloria cave sanctuary (5600–5300 B.C.E.) near Manfredonia, in southeastern Italy:

I found, myself, at least five hundred figurines. I have seen in the museums all over Europe thousands and thousands of them in storage rooms . . . lying there, not understood at all. In all the publications I knew, I never found any answer [to the question] What are these sculptures?

Thousands of exquisitely decorated ceramics, sculptures, and temples with ritual assemblies spoke of a sophisticated human culture that was impossible to understand without an investigation of Neolithic religion. Marija therefore devoted herself to an exhaustive study of images and symbols to discover their inner coherence. To accomplish this, it was necessary to widen the
scope of descriptive archaeology. This expanded approach, which she called "archaeomythology," includes linguistics, mythology, comparative religion, and the study of historical records:

In the beginning I couldn't see anything. Luckily, I started deciphering, and from very tiny shards I began to piece it together. None of the literature could help me. I had to make my own way, little by little. Later on I became passionate to find more.

Marija's initial book on Neolithic religion and culture, The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000–3500 B.C. (1974), was written in the Netherlands in 1973–74 while she was a fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences. This book was re-published in 1982 with its originally intended title, The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myth and Cult Images.10

I was always questioning myself—what are these symbols, what are these signs engraved or painted on sculptures . . . and hundreds of other items? . . . They had to have a great meaning. Gods and Goddesses was a result of five years of thinking written in three months, which was too fast. It was a sturm birth.

In 1979 Marija Gimbutas organized the interdisciplinary conference, "The Transformation of European and Anatolian Culture, 4500–2500 B.C.E.," held in Dubrovnik, in the former Yugoslavia. This was the first of several conferences held to stimulate new research on the radical shift of economic, religious, and social structure that took place between the fifth and third millennia B.C.E. Before this conference, few scholars were thinking in these terms.

Although Marija Gimbutas's writings on the Bronze Age were applauded by mainstream archaeology, her study of Neolithic religion was considered inappropriate by many of her colleagues. There was no archaeologist with whom she could discuss her ideas, because the interpretation of prehistoric ideology was considered taboo. After years of solitary research, her decipherment of the main themes of Old European religion was published in The Language of the Goddess (1989). In this book, she writes that the symbols of Old Europe "represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted."11 This "meta-language," according to Marija, speaks of a sacred relationship between human society and the natural world. The female form, expressed in thousands of images, reflects the centrality of women in religious and cultural life.

10 Although most of the imagery in this book is female, Thames and Hudson insisted, in 1974, that it would be "improper" to allow Goddesses to be first in the title.
The flood of appreciation that Marija received after the publication of *The Language of the Goddess* took her by surprise. Although archaeologists were reserved, women, artists, mythologists, and others became enthusiastic. Her work struck a chord that has resounded with cheers and controversy.

During the last decade of her life, Marija struggled with a recurrence of the cancer that had previously plagued her. Nevertheless, she maintained a demanding workload with a seemingly inexhaustible energy that resulted in the publication of *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). This book is a summary of her life's work that names Old Europe as a true civilization without war or male domination:

> In my understanding, civilization expresses itself in the creation of what is valuable, not in its destruction, not when half of humanity is denied the right of expression, when women are exploited. . . .

Marija Gimbutas was the first scholar to describe an overview of Neolithic cultures on a pan-European scale and the first to articulate the differences between the matristic Old European and the patriarchal Indo-European systems. In her view, these contrasting systems underwent a hybridization that determined the development of all subsequent European cultures. *The Civilization of the Goddess* provides an essential key for deciphering the sources of contrasting cultural elements that became tangled and fused over time. While most archaeologists are "looking through the telescope backwards," the enormous synthesis that Marija Gimbutas achieved will stimulate archaeological discussions for years to come, and "the unenviable burden of (dis)proof must fall upon the critics and sceptics." Regardless of her great achievements, Marija Gimbutas was acutely aware that the potential for knowledge is vast and the contributions of a single individual are limited. She possessed what archaeologist Michael Herity has called a "humility in the face of the evidence" that caused her to continually revise her conclusions based upon the most current data. Marija perceived her work as a beginning, not an end, and she knew that many younger scholars would stand on her shoulders:

> Scholarship is not a static thing, it is always changing. The search for truth continues; we are just the little link in a chain. You have to look for truth all the time; this is our purpose. This is the dynamic dance of creativity. Do not be conservative or imitative. Don't be

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sheep, repeating what the others say. I never did that in my life—and I don't want the younger students to do it. If they like what I accomplished, that is very good. But take the best of my work and continue with your own work. That's it!

Although Marija was frail from years of struggling with cancer, the enormous love and respect she received from thousands of admirers throughout the world sustained her until her death in Los Angeles on February 2, 1994. She demanded the highest standards of scholarship from herself and from her students and will be remembered for her brilliant intellect, warm-hearted generosity, and passionate originality. As Edgar Polomé wrote in a 1987 *festschrift* for Marija, "There are no words to describe the profoundness of the feelings that link this great scholar to her disciples and this great woman to her numerous friends and admirers."\(^{15}\)

Marija Gimbutas's ashes were returned to her beloved Lithuania and buried, in an owl-shaped urn, in the Petrasiusnai cemetery in Kaunas beside her mother, Veronika Janulaityte-Alseikienë, after ceremonies on May 7 and 8, 1994, in both Vilnius and Kaunas. Widely respected and revered for her contributions to the preservation of Lithuanian heritage, Marija Gimbutienë was honored as a national heroine. An estimated three thousand people attended her burial, including Algirdas Brazauskas, the president of the republic. Medical anthropologist Gintautas Ėsnyš spoke these words: "Now she has returned and belongs to us: a small sand grave on the bank of the Nemunas River, piles of books, and the powerful fluttering of Goddess's wings over the ancient land of the Balts. . . ."\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) Gintautas Ėsnyš, "Marija Gimbutas in My Life: Some Reminiscences," in Marler (cited above, n. 8).
SELECTED WORKS BY AND ABOUT MARIJA GIMBUTAS

Compiled by Joan Marler

Books*

1946


1956


1958


1963


1965


1971


*In addition to her books, Marija Gimbutas published more than three hundred articles in numerous languages.


1976


1980–81


1982


1986


1989


1994

18. *Das Ende Alteuropas: Der Einfall von Steppennomaden aus Sudrussland und die Umgestaltung Mitteleuropas.* (The End of Old Europe: The Invasion of the Southern Russia Nomads and the Reorganization of Middle Europe.) Innsbruck: Archaeolingua.

1996

19. *The Living Goddess.* Forthcoming. (This is the working title of an unfinished manuscript being edited for publication by Miriam Robbins Dexter.)

Archaeological Excavations with Marija Gimbutas as Project Director

1967–68

Joint excavation with UCLA and Sarajevo Zemaljski Mezej. Starčevo-Butmir sites, ca. 5500–4500 B.C.E., at Obre II, Bosnia (in the former Yugoslavia), with support from the Smithsonian Institution and a National Endowment for the Humanities award.

1968–69

Joint excavation with UCLA and Sheffield University. Karanovo and an early Bronze Age tell, ca. 5000–2000 B.C.E., at Photolivos (Sitagroi) near Drama, Greek Macedonia, sponsored by a National Science Foundation grant.

1969–71

Joint excavation with UCLA and Štip Muzej. Starčevo and Vinča settlements, ca 6300–5000 B.C.E., at Anza near Štip, Republic of Macedonia (in the former Yugoslavia), sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution.

1973–75

UCLA excavation. Sesklo tell at Achilleion, ca. 6500–5600 B.C.E., near Farsala, Thessaly, Greece, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.
Joint excavation with UCLA and Genoa University. Scaloria cave sanctuary, ca. 5600–5300 B.C.E., near Manfredonia, Italy, sponsored by the University Expeditions Program.

Collected Essays in Honor of Marija Gimbutas


Nonprint Media


Marija. A film in progress by Donna Read and Starhawk. Contact Friends of Marija, % Reclaiming, P.O. Box 410187, San Francisco, California, 94141-0187.

Tape-recorded lectures and seminars conducted by Marija Gimbutas. Available from Sound Photosynthesis, P.O. Box 2111, Mill Valley, California 94942.

Archive

Marija Gimbutas Archive. (Part of the Joseph Campbell and Marija Gimbutas Library.) Pacifica Graduate Institute, 249 Lambert Road, Carpinteria, California 93013, phone 805-969-3626, ext. 118. Donations for the upkeep and use of the archive are gratefully accepted.