BEYOND THE BACKLASH
An Appreciation of the Work of Marija Gimbutas
Charlene Spretnak

When Marija Gimbutas died on February 2, 1994, in Los Angeles, the New York Times ran an obituary that cited its own archives, as is its common practice. ¹ The Times could have drawn from either of two articles that had mentioned Gimbutas in recent years: an interview with a Stanford geneticist who pointed out that his genetic mapping project validated Gimbutas’s thesis concerning population migrations into Neolithic Europe; or a derogatory article by a religion staff writer, entitled “Idyllic Theory of Goddesses Creates Storm.” ² The Times cited only the backlash article when it composed Gimbutas’s obituary. (Times watchers will recognize a pattern here. When I once declared that someone should publish a collection of the Times’s lukewarm and slighting obituaries about accomplished women, the feminist novelist Mary Mackey laughingly suggested a title: Dead But Not Dead Enough.)

Patriarchal journalists and scholars alike are threatened by Gimbutas’s archaeological work revealing a nonpatriarchal stratum of cultural history as Europe’s early heritage. Attentive women wishing to curry favor with the backlash against feminism, then, have realized that attacking Gimbutas as a “feminist extremist” opens certain doors. For example, the New York Academy of Sciences sponsored a conference in June 1995 entitled “The Flight from Science and Reason,” to which speakers were invited to laud scientific objectivism as the antidote to “popular manifestations of irrationalism.” The Wall Street Journal commissioned a long editorial piece on the conference from Christina Hoff Sommers, author of Who Stole Feminism?, which asserts that the field of feminist studies has degenerated into encounter groups for

therapy and indoctrination. Hoff Sommers had no problem with the way in which the conference was framed and wrote admiringly about a presentation made by a fellow "feminist"-against-feminism, Rene Denfeld, author of The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order: "By rejecting objective scholarship, the ideologues license themselves to write history as they wish. Rene Denfeld reported on the feminist scholars (most notably UCLA archaeologist Marija Gimbutas) who postulate a Women's Golden Age, claiming that Stone Age Europe was the site of a harmonious, peaceful, egalitarian society that worshipped 'The Great Goddess.' This civilization was purportedly destroyed between 4000 and 3500 B.C. by violent, male-god worshipping Indo-European invaders on horseback—'herstory' with no basis in fact."

This account is typical of the backlash against Gimbutas in that the level of intellectual dishonesty and sheer ignorance is stunning. Far from "rejecting objective scholarship," Gimbutas was recognized within her profession as one of the giants in the field of pre-Indo-European archaeology whose own excavations and knowledge of the work of scores of European colleagues (much of it never translated into English) provided the factual basis for pioneering work. Gimbutas never "postulate[d] a Women's Golden Age." Rather, she observed that the pre-Indo-European burial patterns, which were roughly egalitarian between women and men; the plethora of female figurines; and the female-honoring ritual artifacts and temple models indicate that women were highly respected in those cultures. Finally, it is preposterous for Denfeld and Sommers to dismiss as "'herstory with no basis in fact'" Gimbutas's assertion that the pre-Indo-European cultures were abruptly interrupted by migrations, or invasions, of patriarchal tribes from the eastern Pontic and Volga steppes. Not only the historical genetic mapping of recent years but also scores of archaeological excavations and linguistic studies support Gimbutas's conclusion. A well-known example is J. P. Mallory's book In Search of the Indo-Europeans, which is accepted by traditional archaeologists.  

Anyone wishing to construct an informed opinion of Gimbutas's work should consult her primary texts written for a general audience, The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization and The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe. Her earlier works include The Prehistory of Eastern Europe: Part I: Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Copper Age Cultures in Russia and the Baltic Area and Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as The Balts

and The Slavs. For help sorting through the attacks that arose near the end of Gimbutas's life, her biographer, Joan Marler, is a knowledgeable guide in both her writing of "A Vision for the World: The Lifework of Marija Gimbutas" and her editing of a festschrift, From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas.

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 cultural orientation, based on the belief in a radical discontinuity between mind and body and between humans and nature, caused an extraordinary existential displacement. In recent years ethnography and comparative religion have provided cross-cultural perspectives on our own world-view, revealing that other cultures—not just a few but most non-European, nonmodern cultures—seem not to experience the haunting alienation common to modern Western life. Moreover, their philosophical and spiritual orientations, in all their variety, are based on a perceived continuity between humans and nature, between self and the world. One finds the perception of an unbroken web of life in countless native traditions and Eastern philosophies.

Seen in light of the entire human family, then, the Western perception of essential discontinuity can no longer be considered "natural," "obvious," or "a fact of life." It is a cultural choice and apparently a very eccentric one. All the hundreds of non-European cultures that have been studied on various continents for several centuries seem to have responded with immense cultural diversity to a common perception of human embeddedness in the dynamic, subtly balanced realities of the natural world. To perceive only a


denial of that continuity is, in the history of human cultures, quirky, rare, and arguably bizarre. How could the Greeks and their predecessors, the Indo-Europeans, have taken such a turn? Were they freaks of nature, profoundly dedicated to alienation from the web of life? Did they constitutionally lack fully developed modes of perception? If not, did they choose a life of spiritual exile from the rest of the natural world? Was that, in fact, the "original sin"? If Eurocentric cultures have always been alienated from nature, can we ever find our way beyond the destructive effects of modernity's war against the biosphere? Do Westerners have a heritage of a profoundly ecological grounding? Were we ever whole?

The work of Marija Gimbutas offers a full-bodied yes to that question. She revealed that the Neolithic cultures of pre-Indo-European "Old Europe" were informed by a well-developed awareness of their embeddedness in the dynamics of the natural world. A spiritual sense of connectedness was artfully expressed through a sophisticated symbol system and an abundance of ritual objects. Nature and body (especially the female body) were honored in Europe for tens of thousands of years. Ecological wisdom and reverence for the processes of nature long preceded the torturous denials of that embeddedness that so twisted the Western heritage.

Why had the archaeologists of Neolithic European settlements prior to Gimbutas failed to perceive all that? Their prevailing assumption was that European prehistory was patriarchal all the way along. The values of their own patriarchal societies—denigration of nature and women, honor to warriors and aggressive behavior, location of divinity in a sky-god—were, after all, assumed to be the guiding principles of the Indo-European world they were excavating. These values seemed only "natural." Consequently, they fully expected to find more of the same as earlier sites were excavated. Whenever evidence was unearthed that did not fit this model, it was held in abeyance as an anomaly.7 Gimbutas revolutionized the field—and helped to establish a new field, pre-Indo-European archaeology—by demonstrating that the Neolithic settlements of Europe prior to the introduction of Indo-European influences (which first appear in eastern Europe shortly after 4400 B.C.E. and show up later in central and then western Europe) were radically different from the later societies. Few archaeologists now dispute this distinction, although the profession was nearly blind to it before Gimbutas made the case.

In Gimbutas's memorable phrase, the Indo-Europeans were "indifferent to art." Other than decorating their weapons, they had only an impoverished

7 See, for example, Carol P. Christ, "Mircea Eliade and the Feminist Paradigm Shift," _Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion_ 7 (Fall 1991): 75–94, for careful documentation of how a major scholar marginalizes evidence about early religions that does not fit his patriarchal world-view.
symbol system featuring the sun or a pine tree, which were generally applied by means of a primitive impressing technique. In contrast, the settlements of Old Europe have yielded a sophisticated variety of art and artifacts, whose religious significance became a focus in Gimbutas's work. The two types of cultures also differed radically in their burial patterns. Old European graves were roughly egalitarian between the sexes, with women's graves often containing slightly more artifacts, whereas Indo-European graves (barrows) reflected a patriarchal social system, a high regard for weapons, and chieftain-centered burial practices in which a chief was surrounded by his subordinates (retainers, wives and concubines, and children). To facilitate this Indo-European ideal, suttee (ritual slaying of wives upon the death of their husbands) was sometimes practiced but later was phased out as the Indo-Europeans migrated south, west, and northwest across Europe, creating hybrid cultures such as the Mycenaeans and the Celts. In India, of course, the Indo-European introduction of suttee was maintained.

What caused the radical transformation of Old Europe? There is no consensus among archaeologists today. Widespread evidence of invasions into Neolithic Europe had been accepted long before Gimbutas, but earlier archaeologists believed that the warrior hordes had come from northern Europe. Gimbutas and others amassed evidence that the migrations had come into east-central Europe from the Volga steppe region to the east. The new arrivals were nomadic horsemen and cowherds—albeit with a warrior cult—from the plains of central Asia. The historic genetic mapping done recently at Stanford University by the geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza has corroborated Gimbutas's findings. According to Cavalli-Sforza, a gene pool from the steppes entered Europe when and where Gimbutas indicated. It mixed with the Old European gene pool and then spread across Europe, moving up and then outward from the Danube, Elbe, and Rhine Rivers. (A rival theory, proposed in recent years by a British archaeologist hostile to Gimbutas, Colin Renfrew, claims that Indo-European languages spread into Europe not by any invasion of warrior cults but by the gradual migration of farmers spreading out from Asia Minor in search of new land to cultivate. Such a scenario fails to account for the abrupt change in burial patterns, the sudden disappearance of the Old European symbol system, the displacement of refugee populations, the sudden erection of fortifications, and various problems with the linguistic evidence.)

Gimbutas directly challenged the econometric focus of contemporary archaeology by insisting on an interdisciplinary approach to interpreting excavated cultures. Instead of focusing solely on tools, production, and

8 Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, "Genetic Evidence Supporting Marija Gimbutas' Work on the Origin of Indo-European People," in Marler, From the Realm of the Ancestors.
trade—and thereby remaining in thrall to the modern era’s prejudice in favor of economism and against religion—Gimbutas considered the evident probability that the secular and sacred realms were not divided in Old Europe as they are today. To peruse the photographic plates and line drawings of the Old European artifacts in Gimbutas’s books brings to mind the clarion call issued by the great Cambridge classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, whose sensibilities, like those of Gimbutas, allowed her to perceive in the pre-Greek evidence an orientation rich in religious meaning. She authoritatively declared the deep significance of the earlier stratum of Europe’s cultural history in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903): “The habit of viewing Greek religion exclusively through the medium of Greek literature has brought with it an initial and fundamental error in method. For literature Homer is the beginning, though every scholar is aware that he is nowise primitive. . . . Homer presents, not a starting point, but a culmination, a complete achievement, with scarcely a hint of *origines* . . . . Beneath this splendid surface lies a stratum . . . . at once more primitive and more permanent.”

Seventy years later Marija Gimbutas, beginning with *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, laid out thousands of remnants of that deep stratum of Europe’s cultural heritage in accessible form for all to see. Even without consulting the accompanying text, a modern reader is surely moved to a sense of wonder—and perhaps an aching allure—by the artistic expressions of a profound embeddedness in the natural world: ritual figurines that are half-female and half-animal, female sculptures incised with life-giving water, pottery echoing female shapes and animal forms. The art of the female figurines, outnumbering exponentially those of males, is not literal but stylized to express life-sustaining power, honoring the link among the cycles of the womb-body’s blood, the earth-body’s tides, and the moon-body’s rhythm. These artifacts are female embodiments of the sacred whole, the divine. We call them Goddess.

Gimbutas was deeply engaged with the challenge of comprehending the intricate symbol system of Old Europe. Toward that end, she developed a new interdisciplinary field, archaeomythology. She believed that the study of sacred symbols and metaphors, and the systematic ways in which cultures organize them, should be brought to bear on the artifacts of Old Europe. She boldly proposed a coherent explanation of all the recurring symbols of and variations on the Goddess. Understandably, this part of Gimbutas’s work is controversial. Some archaeologists object to the “certainty” with which she attached meanings to objects within the symbolic and religious logic.

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system she perceived. Often the connection is quite obvious; in other cases it is not. (Objection to the most speculative aspects of her archaeomythology, however, sometimes spills over unjustifiably onto other areas of her work.) Yet even archaeologists who hold back from accepting Gimbutas's full interpretation of the symbol system of Old Europe acknowledge her as a pioneer. She wanted all of us to know and love Old European sensibilities as she did so that we might be enriched by contact with Europe's original matrix, the bountiful earth-body of the Great Mother.

Gimbutas's work, which was illuminated by her sensitivity to spiritual matters and to sculpture of all eras, has radical implications for the history of both Western religion and Western philosophy. In each of these fields, early belief systems and schools are now seen to have been bridge traditions. That is, the attention of both the Greek "mystery cults" (demeaned as pre-Christian pagan irrationalism) and the pre-Socratic philosophers to unitive dimensions of being and cosmological wholeness was an attempt to preserve the remnants of Old European wisdom, which had fed the pre-Greek psyche for so long. The ritual practices of the mystery religions (focused on Demeter and Persephone, Dionysus, or Cybele and Attis) promised direct knowledge of the sacred whole. The pre-Socratic philosophers, in claiming variously that all existence is essentially air (Anaximenes), or water (Thales), or earth and water (Xenophanes), or the unity of opposites (Heraclitus), or the unlimited (Anaximander), were carrying forth into their natural philosophy the holistic sensibilities of Old Europe that had survived even through the Indo-European desacralizing of the earth and tiresome fascination with thunderbolt-wielding sky-gods. Nearly every scholarly book on the pre-Socratics declares that they are the only school of philosophy to have no predecessors, or it notes, merely in passing, that they may have been influenced by various strains in prehistory about which we can know nothing. These assumptions are utterly wrong. All such commentaries must now be rewritten in light of the considerable body of knowledge about pre-Indo-European cultures in Neolithic Greece and environs.

Nevertheless, although the Old European conceptual precedents directly challenge the assumptions that patriarchy and modernity need to insist are natural, that challenge is not the cause of the current backlash against Gimbutas. The Western split between humans and nature and between self and the rest of the world is far less a "hot" issue than is Gimbutas's focus on the honoring of the female during our Old European past.

Because Gimbutas's main interest was cultural history liberated from the denials of modernity's econometric focus, she would have pursued her monumental work at any time in this century. As it happened, however, her profusely illustrated books on Old Europe were published from 1974 through 1991, entering the cultural stream just as the ecology movement, the feminist and ecofeminist movements, and the peace movement of the early and mid-
1980s were in the air. To her surprise, her recovery of the lost history of Old Europe was hailed by numerous participants of those movements. It was found inspiring by countless artists as well. She graciously entertained questions from all of these quarters that must have been tediously elementary for someone with her level of expertise, yet she never lost her sense of wonder and profound appreciation for the civilization of Old Europe. Inside her field Gimbutas made enormous contributions to the archaeology of Neolithic Europe, but far beyond her field she sparked possibilities for all of us by revealing that an ecologically embedded, egalitarian, nonmilitaristic society is not a pipe dream. It is our heritage.
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