

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

A FEMININE ALTERNATIVE: MARIJA GIMBUTAS AND THE MATRIFOCAL  
MODEL

By

SEAN MILLER

Integrated Studies Project

submitted to Dr. Lisa Micheelsen

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

August 2014

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Part One.....	8
Part Two.....	26
Part Three.....	49
Conclusion.....	60
Bibliography.....	63

## Abstract

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in tandem with transformations within and challenges to the traditional Western archaeological canon, a new and highly contentious theory gradually evolved within the halls of academia, a theory which contended that egalitarian and women-centred societies proliferated within “Old Europe”, a geographical territory which today encompasses parts of Eastern Europe and the Greek Isles, during the Neolithic, New Stone, and Copper Ages (roughly 6500-3500 B.C.). The basic tenets of this theory are centred upon the notion that within these ancient societies women and men lived as relative equals in virtually all aspects of daily life. Moreover, women were often accorded esteemed status due to their reproductive capabilities; indeed, the identity of women as life-givers was closely tied to the life-giving goddess who served as the focal point of Old European religion.

Although this “matrifocal” model for Old European society has its share of supporters and proponents, the individual most responsible for its formulation and subsequent dissemination was the renowned and highly accomplished Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas incorporated her extensive knowledge of prehistoric Eastern European folklore and burial rites, the symbolic nature of the multitude of artifacts accrued from her Eastern European excavations, and her fluency in a number of different languages (including those of Eastern European origin) in order to develop the matrifocal model. It is of paramount importance to be cognisant of the fact that at no time during her life and academic career did Gimbutas ever characterize the egalitarian societies of Old Europe as matriarchal, nor did she ever suggest that males were dominated by females.

Despite the fact that Gimbutas and many other supporters of the matrifocal model are/were fully qualified and distinguished members of the Western academic community, both they and the model have been subjected to an onslaught of derogatory, vituperative, and often vicious criticism, condemnation, and ridicule from a variety of elements within the realm of conventional academia and

even, as in the case of Cynthia Eller, from scholars and academics who identify themselves as feminist and progressive.

Closer scrutiny of its nature and substance (or lack thereof) may lead one to conclude that the impetus behind such criticism transcends simple concern with the veracity of the evidence and methodologies upon which the matrifocal model was formulated, and instead extends to a much larger concern, namely, that the model represents a legitimate and pernicious threat to the traditional Western patriarchal order, in which men predominate in virtually all avenues of daily life at the expense of women. If the idea that women were once accorded social status, rights, and privileges on a level equal to that of men gains sufficient credibility and support, who is to say that the more “radical” elements of contemporary Western society will not demand the establishment of a similar social structure, one that may be potentially fatal to the perpetuation of the patriarchal order?

In any case, what cannot be denied is the fact that the matrifocal model has served as a source of inspiration and empowerment for a myriad number of women who feel alienated from and exploited by the traditional Western patriarchal establishment, from feminists working to establish equal rights and freedoms for all women to goddess adherents who are seeking alternative means of enhancing and celebrating their inner spirituality.

Here we are roughly fifteen years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time in which technological innovations, especially in regards to social media and global communication, seem to crop up on a daily basis, enhancing and improving the lives of millions of people and all at the touch of a few buttons. Many individuals living in the Western world are probably inclined to think that they live in a highly evolved and progressive era, that human civilization and human relations have advanced far beyond any previous level which has existed during the course of history. Many of these same individuals might also suggest that various factors and circumstances which have plagued humanity and human relations in the past, such as racism, sexism, and other inequities that have made some groups subordinate to others, have decreased and become relatively obsolete in tandem with the emergence of our progressive and evolved 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

However, there are other groups and individuals, perhaps more so, who would vehemently challenge and deny the assertion that human beings in the Western world are identified and perceived as relative equals, with little to no variations, despite such differences as gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, and religious denomination. After all, one merely has to pick up a newspaper, turn on the TV, or peruse the internet and social media sites to be bombarded with events, images, and news articles which suggest that sexism, racism, and other forms of intolerance and bigotry are as alive and prevalent today as they have been in the recent past, that the introduction of innovative and highly advanced technologies and forms of communication have not been accompanied by the emergence of a more evolved, tolerant, and civilized society.

With respect to the status of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society, some may contend that they have made significant inroads during the past century, that women today enjoy many more freedoms, privileges, and opportunities in the social, political, and economic spheres than their counterparts experienced one hundred, fifty, or even twenty years ago. While such an assertion may be accurate to some degree, one would have to have his/her head buried quite deep in the sand to actually believe that

men and women living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society are seen and treated as equals.

Even if progress has been made in regards to creating equality between men and women, much work remains to be done. We are still exposed to stories in the media which highlight the many inequities inherent in the infrastructures, institutions, and general beliefs of contemporary society that place and keep women in a position subordinate to that of men, such as the fact that women are often payed less than men for performing the same occupations, that violent acts committed against women, such as rape, occur all too frequently, and that a significant portion of the population, mostly those who subscribe to conservative values and rhetoric, are uncomfortable with even the modest gains which the feminist movement has made since the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the point where a backlash against the movement, in addition to anyone or anything perceived as being feminist, has arisen and appears to be gaining strength and momentum. The American election of 2012 featured Republican candidate Mitt Romney running on a platform which many critics charged amounted to little more than an all-out war against women.<sup>1</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Western women, both feminists and non-feminists, often feel discouraged and disconsolate with respect to the continual and growing resistance which the fight to achieve full equality between men and women frequently encounters, in addition to the argument that traditional inequities between the sexes, as well as sexist and misogynistic practices and behaviours, are mostly a thing of the past. In the wake of such resistance and ignorance, it should come as little surprise that many women seek out and support evidence, arguments, theories, models, and paradigms which place women in a far more empowering, privileged, and esteemed position than they enjoy in actual reality.

One such theoretical model pertains to the ostensible existence of matrifocal and matrilineal

---

<sup>1</sup> “Shortchanged: Why Women Get Paid Less Than Men”, *Bloomberg Business Week*, June 21, 2012, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-06-21/equal-pay-plaintiffs-burden-of-proof>; “Backlash by Susan Faludi”, *The Guardian*, December 13, 2005, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/13/classics.gender>.

societies in Eastern Europe during the Neolithic Age, societies which were peaceful, sedentary, and characterized by equal and harmonious relations between women and men. Moreover, these ancient societies were centred upon the worship and celebration of a divine feminine figure, in other words, a goddess. There is little doubt that the possible existence of such women-centred and egalitarian societies would serve as a source of great comfort and inspiration for contemporary Western women who continue to live in a male-dominated society as second-class citizens. It should also come as little surprise that this theoretical model has been met with substantial levels of criticism, rejection, and outright contempt, including within the halls of academia.

This essay will be divided into three components. The first will provide a history and discussion relating to the theories, arguments, and evidence which support the contention that women-centred societies existed in Eastern Europe during the Neolithic Age; special attention will be paid to Marija Gimbutas, the noted archaeologist and scholar who is largely responsible for promoting the existence of such societies, in addition to the primary role played by the goddess played within them. This first section will also provide a brief overview of the contemporary feminist spirituality movement which is also centred prominently on belief in and celebration of the goddess in Western society, particularly the United States.

The second component of this essay will focus on the multitude of attacks and criticisms which the matrifocal/goddess theory has been subject to, especially within the confines of Western academia, with special emphasis placed on two of its more hostile and virulent critics, Cynthia Eller and Bruce Thornton.

The final section of the paper will examine the impetus behind such harsh and widespread criticism. The evidence offered will demonstrate that a significant proportion of this criticism and hostility may derive from the belief that the matrifocal/goddess paradigm represents a legitimate threat to the long-established and entrenched Western patriarchal order, in which men predominate in

virtually all positions of power and influence in the social, political, and economic spheres, while women seeking to make inroads into such realms face continual barriers and resistance. This last section will also include a discussion with respect to why the very idea of a matrifocal society, in addition to the contemporary feminist spirituality movement, are so important to so many women, regardless of whether or not the actual existence of such a society can be proven beyond any reasonable doubt.

### **Part One**

There is a plethora of evidence from a multitude of sources which indicates that societies in which women and men were treated as equals (and in some instances where women were accorded great respect and esteem) have existed in several geographical regions across the globe throughout the course of human history. Perhaps the most widely-known and contentious example pertains to the societies of Old Europe. Old Europe, coined by Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, refers to the various peoples and societies which inhabited Eastern Europe and the Greek Isles (a geographical territory stretching from the Aegean and Adriatic northward to the former Czechoslovakia, Southern Poland, and Western Ukraine) during the Neolithic, New Stone, and Copper Ages (roughly 6500-3500 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>

According to Gimbutas and the evidence she uncovered, these societies shared several general characteristics, the most significant of which included egalitarian and mutually-respectful relations between women and men, a sedentary lifestyle centred upon agriculture, a peaceful existence and unfamiliarity with violence and warfare, and a religion which was based upon the recognition, worship, and celebration of the goddess.<sup>3</sup> The goddess was perceived as being the Giver, Taker, and Renewer of

---

2 Carol P. Christ, "A Different World": The Challenge of the work of Marija Gimbutas to the Dominant World-View of Western Cultures," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996): 53; Norvene Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted: The Imaginal and the Work of Marija Gimbutas," *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 243.

3 Asphodel Long, "The One or the Many: The Great Goddess Revisited," *Feminist Theology* 5 (1997): 15; Joan Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory," *Feminist Theology* 14 (2006): 164, 176, 180, 195; Luciana Percovich, "Europe's First Roots: Female Cosmogonies before the



Life, and was closely linked to nature and the wonders and beauty of the physical world. Animals such as birds, snakes, and bears, in addition to plant life, were believed to represent the goddess and her mysterious powers and forces.<sup>4</sup> Because the central religious figure of these prehistoric societies was female, everyday women were also accorded great esteem, respect, and privilege, particularly in regards to the reproductive capabilities which defined them as life-givers, albeit on a smaller scale than that of the goddess.<sup>5</sup> Gimbutas further contended that women played the primary roles in religious life and ritual, and characterized these societies as being matrifocal and/or matrilineal.<sup>6</sup>

It is very important to note that at no time during the course of her examinations of Old European societies did Gimbutas ever describe them as matriarchal, nor did she suggest that males were ever dominated by females.<sup>7</sup> Her stance on this issue is crucial considering the fact that many of the academics who so vigorously reject her conception of Old Europe tend to view the matrifocal model as the mere inverse of contemporary patriarchy, that is, a model in which males are subordinate to females and treated as virtual slaves.<sup>8</sup> Gimbutas never implied that such was the case and, indeed, stressed that men still played valuable and fundamental roles in Old Europe, especially with respect to trading. Moreover, she argued that male gods were also prevalent in Old Europe, although they did play more of a supportive role to the goddess.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, males in Old Europe represented “spontaneous and life-stimulating, but not life generating, powers”.<sup>10</sup>

Old Europe was also highly advanced and civilized for its time; indeed, many of the towns

---

Arrival of the Indo-European Peoples,” *Feminist Theology* 13 (2004): 29; Kelly Hays-Gilpin, “Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571 (2000): 99; Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244.

4 Christ, “A Different World”, 53; Percovich, “Europe's First Roots”, 32.

5 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 164, 176-177; Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244; Long, “The One or the Many”, 14-15; Bruce Thornton, “The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise,” *Arion* 7 (1999): 85.

6 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 175-176; Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244; Long, “The One or the Many”, 15; Christ, “A Different World”, 54.

7 Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244; Christ, “A Different World”, 54.

8 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 165; Max Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls: A Critique of Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*,” *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 185-186.

9 Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244; Christ, “A Different World”, 54.

10 Long, “The One or the Many”, 15.

which comprised it featured large populations, temples several stories high, dwellings which contained up to five rooms, and professional ceramicists, weavers, metallurgists, and other artisans.<sup>11</sup>

Gimbutas posited that these peaceful, sedentary societies existed and thrived in a generally linear fashion from roughly 7000-4400 B.C., after which Old Europe was infiltrated, violently suppressed, and eventually usurped by the Kurgan invaders, a group of bloodthirsty warriors originating in the Russian Steppes that ran amok over much of the European continent.<sup>12</sup> The term “Kurgan” translates to pit-grave in English, and refers to the style of grave in which Kurgan chieftains were laid to rest (often accompanied by the wealth they had amassed during their rule, their servants, and their women).<sup>13</sup> She further argued that the Kurgan invaders overthrew the existing social and religious structures of Old Europe, ushering in an era characterized by warfare, violence, increased competition for resources, stratified and hierarchical societies in which a small minority enjoyed wealth, privilege, and prosperity at the expense of the majority, the predominance of men in all aspects of society and the accompanying subordination of women, and the marginalization, if not outright suppression, of the female divine or goddess.<sup>14</sup>

Other scholars also support the Kurgan hypothesis, some arguing that an expanding population coupled with dwindling resources (especially food) prompted the tribal warriors to branch out from the Russian Steppes into eastern Europe in order to pillage, plunder, and eventually assimilate weaker societies, such as those which constituted Old Europe.<sup>15</sup>

It is easy to understand why Gimbutas' Old Europe hypothesis rocked the very foundations of

---

11 Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 244.

12 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 179-180; Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 192; Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 243.

13 Andre Martinet, “The Indo-Europeans And Greece,” *Diogenes* 37 (1989): 4.

14 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 179-180; Thornton, “The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise”, 80-82, 90; Percovich, “Europe's First Roots”, 30-31; Martinet, “The Indo-Europeans And Greece”, 4; Long, “The One or the Many”, 23; Patricia Reis, “Good Breast, Bad Breast, This Is the Cuckoo's Nest: Ken Kesey and the Myth of Matriarchy,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987): 79-80.

15 Martinet, “The Indo-Europeans And Greece”, 4-5; Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 193.

conventional archaeology and incited a severe backlash within the academy.<sup>16</sup> It is logical to assume that had Gimbutas been perceived as little more than a crackpot at the time in which she introduced her Old Europe hypothesis, the model would have been refuted, ridiculed, and discarded in quick fashion. However, the challenge which faced her detractors lay in the fact that Marija Gimbutas was indeed a highly respected and accomplished archaeologist, one who could not be so easily written off the page by her colleagues, although this did not stop them from trying.

Gimbutas was born in Lithuania in 1921 to parents who were medical doctors and who were also committed to celebrating and preserving Lithuanian culture and folklore traditions, a campaign which included many relatives and family friends, and which had a profound impact on the young Gimbutas. To be sure, Gimbutas' parents were leading members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia and resistance movement, the latter of which was born after Lithuania became occupied by Poland soon after declaring independence from Russia in 1918. Gimbutas was taught from a young age that receiving a good education and pursuing intellectual interests were paramount for both personal and national liberty.<sup>17</sup>

It is also important to note that Lithuania was the last European country to be Christianized, thus Gimbutas was surrounded by and exposed to folklore traditions and mythology, many of which were steeped in prehistoric symbolism, from a young age.<sup>18</sup> These traditions and mythologies pertained to both the Indo-European cultures (to which the Kurgan invaders belonged) and the societies which predated them, such as those which Gimbutas would later describe as Old European. The folklore and mythological traditions peculiar to the societies which predated the Indo-Europeans placed a large emphasis upon the wonders and mysteries of the physical world and nature, a tendency which was not lost on the young Gimbutas.<sup>19</sup>

---

16 Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 247.

17 Joan Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996): 37-38.

18 Christ, "A Different World", 61; Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 38.

19 Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 38.

Moreover, these older traditions were characterized by equal relations between males and females, relations which still existed largely unchanged in the Lithuania of Gimbutas' childhood. To be sure, according to Gimbutas, although Lithuanian society was ostensibly patriarchal in character, the fact remained that women often played the central role in the everyday lives of their families, many of which were matrilineal, including Gimbutas' own.<sup>20</sup>

After her father's death when she was fifteen, Gimbutas dedicated herself to becoming a scholar, with special emphasis placed on ancient origins and burial rites. At the ages of sixteen and seventeen, Gimbutas would participate as the only female member in excavations which were undertaken in remote areas of Lithuania. She also spent a considerable amount of time with local elderly women, recording their songs and stories and thus supplementing her knowledge of local folklore and mythological traditions; by the time she left the country in 1944, she had amassed hundreds of such songs and stories. Gimbutas would also discover that Lithuanian is one of the most conservative of the Indo-European languages, sharing many similarities with Sanskrit; she subsequently decided to focus her energy on tracing the origins of the Indo-European peoples, an endeavour which she recognized would require a degree in archaeology, in addition to other disciplines, such as linguistics, literature, ethnology, cultural history, and the arts.<sup>21</sup>

In 1942, Gimbutas obtained her master's studies in archaeology, with secondary studies in philology and folklore; during this period, she also published eleven academic articles pertaining to both the Baltic peoples and prehistoric burial rites in Lithuania. Gimbutas received her doctor of philosophy degree in archaeology, with a strong concentration in prehistory, ethnology, and religious history, from the University of Tubingen in 1946.<sup>22</sup>

Gimbutas and her family immigrated to the United States in 1949. After struggling to secure a

---

20 Ibid, 38-39.

21 Ibid, 39.

22 Ibid, 40-41.

foothold in the American academic community for several years, Gimbutas would begin to receive funding for her research endeavours via a number of fellowships and awards. In 1955, she was named a research fellow at Harvard's Peabody Museum and, the following year, published *Prehistory of Eastern Europe* to wide acclaim. Gimbutas would also spend the thirteen years following her appointment to the Peabody Museum scouring and examining every European archaeological report, in its original language, which found its way to the Peabody Library. Moreover, Gimbutas would, in time, visit the majority of regional museums in Eastern Europe, where she examined a number of Bronze Age artifacts.<sup>23</sup>

By 1960, Gimbutas was working at Stanford University in California, where she would stay for three years before accepting a position at UCLA; she remained at UCLA until her retirement in 1989. Gimbutas would eventually be appointed curator of Old World archaeology at the Cultural History Museum at UCLA. It was during her tenure at UCLA that Gimbutas led five major archaeological excavations in Eastern Europe between the years 1967-1980; the sites included Sarajevo, Macedonia, Thessaly, and southeastern Italy. The excavations would yield a number of artifacts and other archaeological evidence, such as female figurines, decorated ceramics, sculptures, and temples containing ritual assemblies, which would in time form a substantial basis of Gimbutas' theoretical model for Old Europe.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Gimbutas would draw upon her extensive knowledge of prehistoric Eastern European folklore, mythology, and burial rites, the archaeological expertise she acquired both at university and in the field, and her ability to speak twenty different languages (many of them Eastern European) to form her hypothesis for the existence of matrifocal, goddess-centred Old European societies.<sup>25</sup>

Gimbutas had incorporated an interdisciplinary approach when conducting her examinations of

---

23 Ibid, 41-42, 44.

24 Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 242; Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 43-45.

25 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 176; Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 191-192; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 242.

prehistoric and Indo-European societies, an approach she would later call archaeomythology, that is, an amalgamation of archaeology, anthropology, mythology, ethnology, linguistics, religion, and historical documents.<sup>26</sup> Gimbutas was somewhat of a maverick in combining archaeological data with linguistics when forming her hypothesis (a method which was quite unorthodox at the time), a combination which eventually led her to also conclude that Old Europe had been supplanted by the Kurgan invaders.<sup>27</sup>

Gimbutas was also a prolific writer, authoring numerous books both during and after her excavations, the most notable of which include *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000-3500 B.C.* in 1974 (later republished in 1982 as *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myth and Cult Images*), *The Language of the Goddess* in 1989, and *The Civilization of the Goddess* in 1991.<sup>28</sup>

It was in *Language of the Goddess* where Gimbutas described her method of analyzing and interpreting the many symbols and images found on excavated artifacts in order to develop a language through which she could begin to form a picture of Old Europe and the women and men who inhabited it. This alternative method was necessary since there are no extant written records dating from the Old Europe epoch.<sup>29</sup> Her exhaustive examinations of the artifacts were buoyed by her extensive knowledge of prehistoric folklore, mythology, and burial rites, and ultimately led her to conclude that the goddess served as the focal point of Old European religion, while everyday women were held in high esteem and treated with great respect by their contemporaries due to their life-giving capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

In her writings, Gimbutas also discussed her examinations of Old European burial sites, noting that no discernible differences could be identified between the resting places of men and women, nor between individuals, thus hinting at truly egalitarian societies.<sup>31</sup> Gimbutas also noted that Old Europe was greatly interested in art, particularly pottery and sculptures (hence the many artifacts uncovered

---

26 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 176; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 243.

27 Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 42.

28 Ibid, 45-46.

29 Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 243; Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 45.

30 Christ, "A Different World", 60-61; Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 44.

31 Christ, "A Different World", 54.

during the excavations), and the natural world, which should come as no surprise seeing as how the goddess was closely linked to the beauty and mysterious forces of nature. She also concluded that the usurping Kurgan invaders had little to no interest in art, being much more preoccupied with erecting military fortifications and producing weaponry.<sup>32</sup>

One of Gimbutas' more intriguing arguments pertains to the nature of the myriad figurines and other visual representations of women unearthed during the excavations; to be sure, Gimbutas contended that these images were produced in order to personify and celebrate the physical female form, and all of the reproductive and nurturing qualities associated with it, rather than for the sexual enjoyment or gratification of men as some other scholars have suggested.<sup>33</sup> Gimbutas further avowed that the goddess was not associated exclusively with sexuality but, rather, symbolized birth, death, and the renewal of life for all living creatures on Earth and within the cosmos.<sup>34</sup>

The tendency of some scholars to charge that these female figurines and other images merely served as forms of prehistoric eroticism is a stark example of how even the most studious and seemingly objective historians inevitably impose present-day contexts, practices, and beliefs on past societies, even those of the ancient past.<sup>35</sup> Just because many images of women produced today contain obvious sexual overtones, it does not stand to reason that like images created during Neolithic and Paleolithic times served the same purpose.

The above chronicle of Marija Gimbutas and her life and work is necessary seeing as how she is largely responsible for developing and disseminating the theory that pre-Indo-European societies were not patriarchal in character but, rather, were peaceful, sedentary, and women-centred; Gimbutas also had a profound impact upon the emergence of the contemporary feminist spirituality movement in the

---

32 Ibid, 54-55.

33 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 174-175; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 245; Thornton, "The False Goddess and her Lost Paradise", 89.

34 Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 244.

35 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 178-179.

early 1970s.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the above summary clearly demonstrates that Marija Gimbutas was a fully qualified, accomplished, prolific, and highly intelligent person and academic who served as a source of inspiration to both her fellow colleagues and students at UCLA. She was a unique scholar given that she possessed vast and detailed knowledge pertaining to prehistoric Eastern Europe, fluently spoke a multitude of different languages, and could read archaeological reports in their original language (something which many of her contemporaries could not do).<sup>37</sup>

To be sure, Gimbutas' reputation as a highly respected and accomplished archaeologist and academic also gave substantial credence to the nascent feminist spirituality movement.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps most importantly, Gimbutas' impressive record and reputation make it extremely difficult for detractors of her matrifocal model to simply write her off of the page as an uninformed, delusional crackpot, although more than a few critics have striven to do so as we will see below.

Gimbutas was certainly not the only scholar who argued that matrifocal societies have existed in the past, nor was she the first. In 1861, Johann Jakob Bachofen published *Das Mutterrecht*, in which he described ancient societies where women were the dominant force and daughters inherited various rights through the mother's line. According to Bachofen, prior to the advent of these matriarchal societies, women had been denigrated and oppressed by their male counterparts, thus they instigated a kind of Amazonian revolt and developed the institution of marriage in order to tame the savage male. In direct contrast to Gimbutas however, Bachofen did not laud this matriarchal past as constituting a golden age for humanity, instead labelling it backward; he also viewed the eventual emergence and predominance of the patriarchal order as an evolutionary improvement.<sup>39</sup>

---

36 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 169, 171; Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35 (2009): 586; David W. Anthony, "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories: ideology and empiricism in Indo-European archaeology," in *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, ed. Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93.

37 Marler, "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas", 42-43.

38 Klein, "Goddess", 586.

39 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 165; Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 189.



In 1724, the French missionary Lafitau chronicled his encounters with local North American Iroquois, noting that significant power and authority were granted to the Iroquois women, a practice which was also noted by Lewis Morgan in 1877 after he had spent roughly four decades studying Iroquois culture.<sup>40</sup> It must be noted that both Lafitau and Morgan ridiculed the idea of women being given special privileges and prestige in Iroquois society, a sentiment which was not shared, however, by Matilda Joslyn Gage, who also spent a considerable amount of time examining Iroquois society. Gage argued that the Iroquois could serve as a source of knowledge and inspiration for those groups and individuals seeking an alternative to the European patriarchal order. The elders of the Mohawk nation eventually made Gage an honorary matron of the Wolf clan.<sup>41</sup>

Sally Roesch Wagner discussed the impact which the Iroquois and its social structures had upon early American feminists such as Gage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others, the individuals who would later be responsible for establishing the women's movement.<sup>42</sup> It must be kept in mind that women such as Gage were interacting with and studying the Iroquois at a time when they did not possess the right to vote and were seen as second-class citizens. Within the presence of the Iroquois, Gage and others encountered women who participated in councils and decision-making processes, including selecting the male leaders who would become chiefs, and were treated with great respect; even the male chiefs vigorously defended the Iroquois women's rights and status to White males with which they periodically came into contact.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that the first women's rights conference in America was held at Seneca Falls (a location which was named after one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois) demonstrates the profound influence and effect which Iroquois culture and gender relations had upon early American feminists.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, just as

---

40 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 190.

41 Ibid, 190.

42 Ibid, 190.

43 Ibid, 190.

44 Ibid, 190.

contemporary feminists look to Old Europe as evidence that alternatives to the patriarchal order once existed and can exist again, early American feminists looked to an alternative social structure as evidence that women need not live perpetually under the thumb of the patriarchal establishment.

With respect to Europe, Luciana Percovich has developed a historical model outlining the advent, predominance, and decline of the goddess in various sectors of ancient society, a model which is comprised of three distinct stages. The first stage occurred roughly 27,000-30,000 years ago (before the last Glaciation) and consisted of goddess-worshipping civilizations spanning from Lespugue and Laussel in northwestern France, to Willendorf in Austria, to Italy, and, finally, eastward to Russia and Siberia. The second stage spanned the period 8000 to 4000-2000 B.C. and is characterized by the Old European societies and subsequent Kurgan invasions noted by Gimbutas. The final stage (4000-2000 B.C.) notes the prevalence of the Megalithic culture, which extended from the Black Sea to the islands of the Mediterranean and up to the Atlantic coasts of Spain, France, and the British Isles, and which was succeeded by the Greeks and Romans.<sup>45</sup> The Megalithic culture also worshipped various goddesses, many of whom were later incorporated into the cultures and/or mythologies of the Greeks, Latins, Celts, and Norse.<sup>46</sup>

On a more global basis, Peggy Reeves Sanday published *Female Power and Male Domination* in 1981 which documented her research of over 150 indigenous societies, the results of which indicated that numerous social entities in which women and men lived as relative equals, and in which the matrilineal line of descent was adhered to, did exist in the past. For instance, Sanday conducted extensive studies of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, Indonesia over a period spanning two decades, noting many of the same elements and traits discussed by Gimbutas with respect to Old Europe, such as egalitarian relations between women and men, an emphasis on the crucial role played

---

<sup>45</sup> Percovich, "Europe's First Roots", 29-30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 30.

by mothers in everyday life, and following the matrilineal line of descent.<sup>47</sup>

Sanday also commented on the goddess, arguing that the proliferation of female figurines in Old Europe indicate that women living at the time were accorded a special and esteemed status in everyday society, just as the prevalence of male gods in later times corresponded to an enhanced position for men.<sup>48</sup>

Ethnographic evidence has demonstrated that a number of distinct societies still revere the goddess today, such as the Finno-Ugrians and other peoples living in the vast lands of Siberia, some of whom associate the goddess with the natural elements of Earth, like wind, fire, forests, and water, similar to how the Old Europeans also saw strong connections between the goddess and the wonders of the natural world.<sup>49</sup> The Evenki people of Siberia have traditionally kept a female figurine in each tent as a tribute to an ancestral female guardian who they believe will protect the fireplace and ensure the health and well-being of the family. The Chukchee of northeastern Siberia practice a marriage custom whereby a doll is given to the bride in order to serve as an ancestral guardian and protector.<sup>50</sup>

Evidence of goddess worship and religious ceremonies centred upon a feminine divine have also been found in other parts of the world, for instance amongst the Australian and Melanesian peoples, the Dogon and Mende of west Africa, the Kikuyu of east Africa, and various peoples inhabiting the northern Amazon and Tierra del Fuego.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, researchers have uncovered evidence which demonstrates that the matrilineal line of descent was adhered to in western Iran and ancient Korea.<sup>52</sup> The oldest recorded epic of West Africa (the *Duga*) contains this revealing statement: “descendance from the woman had ended”<sup>53</sup>, an indication that the traditional custom of matrilineal

---

47 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 169, 176-177.

48 Ibid, 175-176.

49 Ibid, 174.

50 Ibid, 174.

51 Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 199.

52 Ibid, 201.

53 Ibid, 201.

descent was eradicated, perhaps via the establishment of a patriarchal order and the concomitant repression of women.

With respect to India, the Adivasi peoples, particularly the Toda, continue to worship the goddess Tokisy, follow the matrilineal line of descent, and practice womanhood initiation rituals; it is logical to assume that the Toda have maintained their traditional customs due to the fact that they have retained their sovereignty even in the wake of imperial expansion.<sup>54</sup>

Marija Gimbutas was also not the first archaeologist to oversee excavations which ultimately provided substantial evidence and artifacts that hinted at the existence of matrifocal societies. In 1900, Sir Arthur Evans led an excavation at the site of Knossos on the Greek island of Crete, concluding that the region had been inhabited between roughly 6100-1400 B.C. by a civilization which, he argued, worshipped a goddess in almost monotheistic fashion. He further posited that the existence of this goddess-worshipping civilization serves as an indication that matriarchal societies may have been a reality in the past.<sup>55</sup>

However, Evans' theory was met with considerable scepticism, even from classicist Jane Ellen Harrison who, like Bachofen before her, stressed that the supplanting of matriarchy by the patriarchal order was a necessary and positive step in human progress and evolution. According to Harrison, the advent of patriarchy ushered in an era of rationality and enlightenment which was far more preferable than the irrationality and backwardness which defined the matriarchal order.<sup>56</sup>

Marymay Downing has noted that the ancient Cretans associated the goddess with functions other than those connected to birth, death, and rebirth, such as those linked to seafaring and wind patterns; being an island-based society, the Cretans were obviously heavily involved in transporting goods and trading with other peoples by sea, thus it is easy to understand why they worshipped and

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>55</sup> Marymay Downing, "Prehistoric Goddesses: The Cretan Challenge," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 7-9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 9-11.

celebrated a feminine deity which could offer them protection and safe passage.<sup>57</sup> Downing has also suggested that the frequent presence of female figurines in Cretan burial sites may reflect the Cretans' belief that the goddess possessed the power to transform the recently dead back into life.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most famous archaeological excavations carried out during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was headed by James Mellaart at Catal Huyuk in Turkey in the early 1960s. Mellaart would subsequently hypothesize that based upon the nature of the wall paintings, figurines, sculptures, and shrines (some which symbolized birth, death, and life cycles) found at the site, a Neolithic goddess most likely played a central role in the lives of those who inhabited this ancient society. However, like Evans before him, Mellaart was castigated by the archaeological community for entertaining such supposedly wild and unfounded assumptions.<sup>59</sup>

Such vitriolic and widespread criticism notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that a substantial number of credible and accomplished archaeologists and scholars other than Marija Gimbutas have supported the contention that matrifocal societies once existed (and, in some cases such as the Toda in India, continue to exist) in the past in various parts of the world. The longevity of this particular hypothesis, in addition to the diversity of the academics and theorists who support it, makes it very difficult for an objective and unbiased observer to lend much legitimacy to those critics who simply dismiss the idea of ancient matrifocal societies as little more than a silly pipe dream orchestrated by groups and individuals who are supposedly following a hidden agenda.<sup>60</sup> The evidence provided over the years demands that both the archaeological and wider scholarly communities take this hypothesis more seriously rather than simply relegating it to the academic dustbin.

The contemporary feminist spirituality movement, of which goddess worship is a crucial component, emerged in the United States and some parts of western Europe in conjunction with the

---

57 Ibid, 16-17.

58 Ibid, 13-14.

59 Downing, "Prehistoric Goddesses", 13-14; Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 98-99.

60 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 186.

advent of second-wave feminism.<sup>61</sup> However, as noted by Luciana Percovich, feminine spirituality and/or goddess worship had continued to exist on the fringes of conventional society well after the establishment of the patriarchal order, although its practitioners were often labelled as mere pagans, heathens, or even witches.<sup>62</sup>

With respect to our own time, the publication of Gimbutas' various texts pertaining to Old Europe further buoyed and lent greater legitimacy to the spiritualist movement. To be sure, Gimbutas' model of ancient societies in which women were seen and treated as the equals of men, in addition to the prominent status granted to women via their reproductive capabilities and preponderance of the feminine divine, have served as sources of great inspiration and empowerment for contemporary feminists who are dissatisfied with the patriarchal order and ardently believe that this golden age can be established once more.<sup>63</sup>

Eco-feminists also strongly support the Gimbutas hypothesis, seeing as how Old Europe placed great emphasis upon treating the physical environment and its many wonders with reverence and respect, the polar opposite of present-day societies which have pillaged and exploited the physical environment for centuries, to the point where some environmentalists fear for the future health of the planet.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, veneration of the goddess has also provided a religious and spiritual alternative for women, and even men, who feel excluded from and uncomfortable with traditional religions, such as Christianity, which are often tied to the preservation of the patriarchal establishment.<sup>65</sup> Cynthia Eller and Ruth Green have noted that the goddess movement is characterized by both monotheism and

---

61 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 167, 171; Long, "The One or the Many", 19; Klein, "Goddess", 580; Mary Zeiss Stange, "The Once and Future Heroine: Paleolithic Goddesses and Popular Imagination," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21 (1993): 55.

62 Percovich, "Europe's First Roots", 31.

63 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 164; Klein, "Goddess", 580, 586; Stange, "The Once and Future Heroine", 55-56; Cynthia Eller, "Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16 (2000): 24-25.

64 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 171; Anthony, "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories", 90.

65 Klein, "Goddess", 580; Kristy S. Coleman, "Who's Afraid of 'the Goddess Stuff?'," *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 225-227, 229, 234-235.

polytheism, that some proponents revere a single feminine divine while others celebrate a variety of female deities.<sup>66</sup>

The goddess movement has also allowed many women to experience a spiritual awakening and the opportunity to connect with their inner beings, a practice which is also strongly adhered to within the cultural feminist campaign that emerged during the 1970s, and whose practitioners draw close connections between their physical bodies and inner spirit and the forces of nature and cycles of the Earth. Quite obviously, feminists spiritualists, Eco-feminists, and cultural feminists are seeking to reestablish the intimate connections between human beings and nature which were so prominent in Old Europe.<sup>67</sup>

Asphodel Long has elaborated on this trend, noting that paganism and neo-paganism are making significant headway in present-day society, two religious movements which also venerate a great goddess and identify her as representing the sanctity and purity of the Earth and natural world, both of which are facing tremendous threats from unbridled technology and exploitation of the land.<sup>68</sup> Long has also examined the Wicca movement, noting distinctions between the way it is practised in Europe and the United States; one such difference relates to the fact that in Europe, both women and men may participate as active members, while the movement itself is not considered to be feminist; in America, the practice is indeed closely aligned with feminist spirituality and is considered by some to be women-only. Both manifestations also use the term witch, although there is no definitive explanation for what the term actually represents.<sup>69</sup>

Jennie Klein has also examined feminist spirituality and the goddess movement, commenting that goddess veneration and pilgrimages are now big business complete with tour guides, cruise ships,

---

66 Long, "The One or the Many", 19-20.

67 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 171; Klein, "Goddess", 580; Stange, "The Once and Future Heroine", 55.

68 Long, "The One or the Many", 20.

69 Ibid, 20-21.

and easily-locatable archaeological sites.<sup>70</sup> Klein has also discussed specific forms of feminist art which have gained considerable popularity in tandem with the advent of feminist spirituality. She has related how artists use both their physical bodies and various forms of art to acknowledge and celebrate the powers and beauty of the goddess, in addition to allowing themselves an alternative means of expressing their devotion, means which are not commonly found in traditional religions. Cheri Gaulke has often used her physical body as the centrepiece of her art, while Mary Beth Edelson has conducted rituals with her children in order to emphasize and honour connections between mothers, children, and nature.<sup>71</sup>

Cynthia Eller has posited that some feminist artists showcase their physical (and sometimes nude) bodies in their work as a means of reestablishing control and ownership over their physical and, by extension, spiritual selves. Moreover, by using their bodies in an artistic and spiritual context, these artists are hoping that the female body can be seen and celebrated as a beautiful and wondrous entity which is closely associated with nature rather than merely as a sexual object.<sup>72</sup>

As noted above, Gimbutas asserted that the many female figurines uncovered by her and others' excavations were created for the specific purpose of artistically expressing reverence for the goddess and the female physical form, rather than as an expression of prehistoric eroticism. Visual representations of the goddess, both historical and contemporary, may thus serve as powerful reminders that women were not always seen as sexual objects and second-class citizens but, rather, were once held in high esteem and treated with great respect.

Klein noted that southern California served as the home base for the development of feminist spiritual art during the 1970s. California was somewhat of a prime location for this type of artistic movement, seeing as how the climate here was fresher and far less conservative than in the more

---

70 Klein, "Goddess", 576.

71 Ibid, 580-582.

72 Eller, "Divine Objectification", 23-25, 33-34.



entrenched New York art community.<sup>73</sup>

While still in the process of gaining momentum, feminist spiritual art was greatly assisted and given credence via the publication of Gimbutas' *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* in 1974. As noted previously, the fact that a widely recognized and respected archaeologist supported the notion that a goddess (or goddesses) was worshipped by many groups and individuals in prehistoric Europe served as a source of great motivation and empowerment for contemporary feminists and artists seeking to establish their own personal connections with feminine divinity and express their devotion through their work.<sup>74</sup>

Klein further discussed how the growth in feminist spiritual art resulted in the establishment of the Los Angeles Woman's Building, which operated from 1973-1991 and was the only academic institution in the United States which sought to provide an education in feminist art; feminist spirituality and goddess worship were also prominent features of the Woman's Building, at least during its early years. The Woman's Building also published its own magazine (*Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture*) which ran from 1977-80, and featured discussions pertaining to feminist spirituality and feminist culture, in addition to specific works of art and poetry celebrating the goddess.<sup>75</sup>

Notwithstanding the closure of the Woman's Building, it is apparent that feminist spirituality, veneration of the goddess, and feminist spiritual art have gained tremendous ground and popularity both within the United States and western Europe since their inceptions in the early 1970s. It stands to reason that such movements will only continue to grow and attract new members as more and more individuals become disenchanted with the patriarchal order and the exclusionary nature of traditional western religions and, thus, seek religious and spiritual alternatives.

However, Cynthia Eller has cautioned that any or all three of the aforementioned movements

---

<sup>73</sup> Klein, "Goddess", 582.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 586.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 587-589.

may fail to become truly universal in nature, and may actually be charged as exclusionary themselves, if they do not make more of an effort to reach out to women of colour and acknowledge the existence and celebration of goddesses not originating in Europe. To be sure, Eller has noted that many contemporary visual representations of feminist spirituality feature dark-skinned women, a trend which has prompted some critics to charge that the movement is exhibiting facets of colonialism via predominantly White women according mysterious and perhaps exotic status to non-White women.<sup>76</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is logical to assume that a unified and universal feminist spirituality movement will never be realized until all of its constituent parts, such as those found outside of Europe and the Caucasian race, are fully included.

## **Part Two**

As noted earlier, the assertion that ancient societies in which women held positions of power, authority, and privilege existed in various parts of the world has been subject to an overwhelming amount of criticism, scorn, and outright rejection. Although the evidence provided above notes that a number of archaeologists and academics have supported the matrifocal model, the criticism discussed below will largely focus on Marija Gimbutas, since her life, work, and hypothesis have formed a substantial component of this paper, and because it is reasonable to suggest that critiques of her Old Europe hypothesis can serve as a microcosm for criticism of the model as a whole.

One of the most frequent criticisms with which conventional archaeologists have attacked Gimbutas relates to her particular methodologies, especially when formulating her matrifocal hypothesis. Gimbutas readily acknowledged that a significant portion of her theory is based upon guesswork and imagination, that because there are no extant written records dating from Neolithic Europe, she was required to utilize her knowledge of prehistoric folklore, mythology, and burial rites when analyzing the many artifacts she uncovered during her excavations in order to develop a symbolic

---

<sup>76</sup> Eller, "Divine Objectification", 28; Klein, "Goddess", 595-596.

language through which the societies of Old Europe could be understood.<sup>77</sup> Obviously such a method does not sit well with traditional archaeologists and academics who demand that any credible theory be based upon and substantiated by valid, empirical, and irrefutable evidence, preferably evidence accrued via the scientific method.<sup>78</sup>

Because it is impossible for archaeologists, including those who support Gimbutas' theory, to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that Neolithic Age artifacts discovered in eastern Europe indicate that Old Europe was characterized by universal veneration of the goddess and an esteemed position for women, conventional archaeologists and other academics will refrain from granting any semblance of credibility or legitimacy to the matrifocal model.

Noted feminist academic Carol P. Christ has also criticized the methods and techniques utilized by Gimbutas, contending that the renowned archaeologist developed a grand theoretical model which fit with and was substantiated by specific artifacts she uncovered during her excavations; it is not clear if Christ is insinuating that Gimbutas merely glossed over or ignored artifacts and other forms of evidence which did not conform to the matrifocal model, a tactic which other critics have accused her of employing.<sup>79</sup>

Even prominent feminist archaeologists take issue with Gimbutas' methodologies. Indeed, both Ruth Tringham and Margaret Conkey have argued that Gimbutas relied too heavily upon symbolism when developing her model, further contending that the myriad figurines uncovered from various excavations cannot automatically be assumed to denote female power and prestige. Tringham and Conkey have further avowed that the symbolic meaning inherent in these figurines must be balanced

---

77 Thornton, "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise", 76; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 243.

78 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 178; Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 194; Long, "The One or the Many", 16; Christ, "A Different World", 62; Shelby Brown, "Feminist Research in Archaeology: What Does It Mean? Why Is It Taking So Long?," in *Feminist Theory And The Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 255.

79 Christ, "A Different World", 62.

against gender and power relations.<sup>80</sup> This last stipulation prompted Joan Marler to suggest that Tringham and Conkey are engaging in presentism, that is, imposing contemporary customs, practices, and beliefs upon ancient societies.<sup>81</sup> Marler's argument is logical seeing as how women and men lived as relative equals in Old Europe, while power relations (or, in other words, hierarchical structures) were non-existent, therefore there may actually be no gender or power relations against which the symbolism represented by the figurines must be balanced.

Tringham and Conkey are also just two of the many academics, feminist and non-feminist alike, who have dismissed Gimbutas' matrifocal model outright, insisting that women-centred societies have never existed and that even the very notion prompts contemporary feminists to deceive themselves into believing that a Golden Age for womanhood was once a historical reality, a reality which can be realized again.<sup>82</sup>

Rosemary Radford Ruether has expanded upon this argument, stating that it is irresponsible, and perhaps misleading, for feminist academics to contend that a feminine divine once served as the focal point of an ancient peoples' religion since the available evidence is so spotty.<sup>83</sup> It appears that Ruether may have been reprimanding academics such as Gimbutas for placing false hopes and ideas into the heads of present-day feminists, causing them to chase after a theoretical chimera or, in other words, the Golden Age of womanhood.

However, it should be noted that Ruether later expanded upon her original statement, even conceding that there is no extant evidence which irrefutably proves that egalitarian societies did *not* exist at some point in the past. To be sure, in *Gaia and God*, Ruether chronicles the gradual decline of women's power in ancient, and even matrifocal, societies.<sup>84</sup> She also asserted that by examining

---

80 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 178-179.

81 Ibid, 178-179.

82 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 166, 180; Long, "The One or the Many", 16; Thornton, "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise", 73-74, 77-78.

83 Coleman, "Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'", 218.

84 Ibid, 218-220.

indigenous cultures, present-day academics and scholars can identify “factors that may have undermined matricentric societies and led to patriarchy”.<sup>85</sup> These arguments may suggest that Ruether does support the idea of ancient matrifocal societies but has greater difficulty with the concept of a universally worshipped goddess. It can also be argued that Ruether, like other academics, may require more empirical evidence before she fully commits herself to the matrifocal model as others, such as Gimbutas, have done.<sup>86</sup>

Feminist archaeologist Lynn Meskell concurred with Ruether's original argument, avowing that it is grossly irresponsible for contemporary feminist academics to promote the matrifocal model (absent of any valid or conclusive proof) in order to initiate social and political change in our own time. Meskell further noted that even professional academics are sometimes guilty of reading too much into the past and supporting Golden Age myths in order to withstand the pressures and tribulations of modern life and retain the hope that a more preferable alternative may exist.<sup>87</sup>

Feminist theologian Pam Lunn has also cautioned Golden Age adherents to keep in mind that evidence pointing to the existence of ancient matrifocal societies is quite scanty in nature. Lunn fears that Golden Age supporters will place too much stock in this theoretical model, therefore making themselves vulnerable to other or new interpretations of the ancient world which conflict with or undermine the matrifocal model.<sup>88</sup>

Still other feminist academics urge Golden Age adherents to not romanticize or idealize the past with respect to the character of the women who lived in Old Europe. According to such arguments, we cannot take it as uncontested fact that all or even the majority of these women were pure of spirit and mind and, moreover, that the men (and women) who later succeeded them were bloodthirsty savages. As noted by Mary Zeiss Stange, the actual historical truth is likely far more complicated than a simple

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 219-220.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 224-225, 227.

<sup>87</sup> Long, “The One or the Many”, 16.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 16.

women-the-gatherer/man-as-hunter dichotomy.<sup>89</sup>

Stange also suggested that the goddess herself has often been idealized as the beacon of light and giver-of-life, while her darker and more sinister characteristics, such as her role as the taker-of-life (in addition to the awe and fear which her powers would instill in her worshippers), are often glossed over or ignored.<sup>90</sup> These admonishments serve to remind feminists and other proponents of the matrifocal model that it is highly unlikely that Old Europe was as pure, peaceful, and utopian as they would like to believe, that it may also be irresponsible and misleading to suggest so.

Another common criticism with which Gimbutas and her model have been attacked relates to the aforementioned figurines which, ostensibly, represent female power and divinity. A number of critics have felt that it was both unprofessional and illogical for Gimbutas to have asserted that such figurines held identical symbolic and spiritual meanings for all the individuals who constituted Old Europe. It must be kept in mind that Gimbutas' Old Europe stretched over a vast geographical area (from Spain to Russia) over a considerable length of time (some of the figurines date from roughly 20,000 years ago).<sup>91</sup>

As noted by David Anthony, it is extremely difficult for archaeologists and other academics to believe that feminine figurines dating from Upper Paleolithic western Europe, Copper Age southeastern Europe, and Bronze Age Aegean Greece all represented the same idea (feminine divinity) with no variations whatsoever.<sup>92</sup> Such contentions are more than reasonable, although it should be noted that some critics appear to be unacquainted with the fact that Gimbutas herself once stated that not all of the figurines are associated with the mother goddess.<sup>93</sup> Critics have also charged that many of the figurines are not readily identifiable as being female, nor is their connection to feminine divinity easy to discern

---

89 Stange, "The Once and Future Heroine", 61.

90 Ibid, 64.

91 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 177-178; Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 99; Thornton, "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise", 87.

92 Anthony, "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories", 94-95.

93 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 177-178.

in all cases.<sup>94</sup>

Yet another critique relates to that component of Gimbutas' theory which details the nature and rapidity of the Kurgan invasion of Old Europe. Some academics have questioned whether the infiltration and subsequent assimilation occurred in as quick and fierce a fashion as Gimbutas originally suggested. Colin Renfrew has posited that the Indo-European tribes actually originated in Anatolia and swept into eastern Europe in a more gradual fashion.<sup>95</sup>

David Anthony has also challenged Gimbutas' contention that Old Europe was peaceful and unacquainted with war by citing the existence of Copper Age settlements in the east Balkans which contain palisade walls and other fortifications, remnants which suggest that inter-village warfare may have been a common occurrence. Anthony has also pointed out that mace heads were a powerful symbol in Copper Age Europe, a fact which may further indicate that warfare was common since, unlike an axe, a mace is used for a single purpose only, namely, as a weapon of battle.<sup>96</sup>

Anthony also referred to grave sites uncovered in Varna, Durankulak, and other areas in the east Balkans which are structured in a way that suggests social stratification or hierarchical arrangements, such as the fact that the most well-endowed resting places belong to males.<sup>97</sup> Such evidence directly contradicts Gimbutas' assertion that Old Europe was absent of any hierarchical structures, although it could be argued that the presence of socially divided graves in a few eastern Balkan locales does not necessarily indicate that this was standard practice in every Old European society.

As mentioned above, some of the criticism to which Gimbutas and her theory have been subjected is easy to understand and more than reasonable. One of the central tenets of conventional academia, particularly in regards to those disciplines which involve the physical sciences, is the requirement that any valid and legitimate theory or hypothesis be based on and supplemented by

---

94 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 99.

95 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 194; Thornton, "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise", 92.

96 Anthony, "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories", 94-95.

97 Ibid, 94-95.

conclusive and empirical evidence, preferably evidence which was garnered through use of the scientific method. Although new and alternative methodologies and approaches have been introduced within archaeology and other disciplines, including the symbolic interpretation approach used by Gimbutas, it is not unreasonable for the majority of scholars and academics to demand verifiable and objective proof before supporting a given theory or hypothesis, especially one of such magnitude as that offered by Gimbutas.<sup>98</sup>

Although one can argue that conventional academics the United States, Europe, or elsewhere must be receptive to alternative means of experimenting, analyzing evidence, and formulating hypotheses, these same individuals must not be raked over the coals simply because they are reluctant to support a theory which is based more upon interpretation and guesswork than upon empirical evidence, just so long as they remain truly objective and unbiased in the process.<sup>99</sup>

With respect to Marija Gimbutas and her Old Europe hypothesis, it is easy to identify a number of critics who purport to be objective and unbiased in their analysis and subsequent rejection of the theory when in fact the language and tone used in their critiques appear to be anything but (this is especially true of Cynthia Eller and Bruce Thornton, both of whom will be discussed below). An impartial observer reading such critiques would most likely be struck by the blatant hypocrisy demonstrated by the authors.<sup>100</sup> For instance, Gimbutas has been charged with basing a significant portion of her theory on symbolic interpretation and guesswork, yet this is a method employed by many archaeologists, including some of her most vociferous critics, such as Bryan Hayden; Hayden has argued that Old Europe was dominated by Big Men, a theory which is not substantiated by any legitimate or concrete evidence.<sup>101</sup>

Moreover, male archaeologists have traditionally identified or labelled specific ancient artifacts

---

98 Long, "The One or the Many", 18, 26; Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 186.

99 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 95, 100-103.

100 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 186.

101 Ibid, 194.



as being priestly or princely in character without offering any solid proof which justifies their contentions, yet such individuals do not appear to have been subjected to the level of vitriol and vituperation hurled at Gimbutas.<sup>102</sup> As noted previously, Colin Renfrew maintains that the Indo-Europeans originated in Anatolia yet, once more, he seems to be basing his argument upon guesswork rather than irrefutable empirical evidence; why has Renfrew not been taken to task by the traditional archaeological community as vigorously as Gimbutas has?<sup>103</sup>

Lawrence Osborne has attacked Gimbutas for describing the Kurgan invaders as “patriarchal villains”<sup>104</sup>, and points to excavations of later Kurgan burial sites which feature the resting places of female warriors as evidence to the contrary. However, Osborne neglected to mention that a roughly 3,000 year gap separated the original invaders described by Gimbutas and the later culture discovered via the excavation; quite obviously, changes and variations in the customs and behaviours of a given culture are likely occur in tandem with the passing of three millenniums.<sup>105</sup>

It is therefore readily apparent that many “legitimate” and “objective” archaeologists and scholars are as guilty as Gimbutas for relying upon guesswork, interpretation, and estimation when developing their own theories and hypotheses and yet, as noted by Max Dashu, many will still maintain they are being wholly objective while simultaneously accusing Gimbutas and Golden Age supporters of being irrational, biased, and pursuing a hidden agenda.<sup>106</sup>

Part of the problem may stem from that fact that reputable archaeologists do not want to associate with or support unorthodox methodologies and approaches which challenge and undermine the traditional model.<sup>107</sup> Dashu has noted how, by the 1960s, the entrenched archaeology community was already showing signs of hostility and contempt towards certain practices in the discipline, such as

---

102 Ibid, 194.

103 Ibid, 194.

104 Ibid, 194.

105 Ibid, 194.

106 Ibid, 186.

107 Hays-Gilpin, “Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology”, 93, 95.

according prominence to neolithic female figurines like those analyzed by Gimbutas.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, it was not long before images and discussions pertaining to such figurines were relegated to the back pages of scholarly journals, while the front pages were dominated by articles on male warriors and other “Big Men”. Even in those rare instances when the figurines were alluded to, it was often in a condescending and belittling fashion, such as describing them as concubines or dancing girls as opposed to figures symbolizing female divinity.<sup>109</sup>

Norvene Vest has posited that Gimbutas and her theory have also been tainted by their association with the feminist spirituality movement discussed above.<sup>110</sup> Because conservative institutions, including Western academia, have traditionally not been overly enamoured with what they perceive to be radical movements, such as the feminist campaign, it is not difficult to fathom why Gimbutas' connection with contemporary feminism has damaged her hypothesis and, arguably, her credibility as an objective scholar.

Jennie Klein has argued that by the 1980s and 90s, even feminist academics, artists, and critics were seeking to distance themselves from feminist spirituality, lest their work and reputations be contaminated and called into question by the conventional academic community. Moreover, and as noted above, feminist spirituality has lost a substantial measure of legitimacy and cache due to its propensity for focusing almost exclusively upon European goddesses rather than incorporating examples of female divinity from other locales, such as Africa, which may potentially draw more non-White women to the movement.<sup>111</sup>

Two of Gimbutas' most vehement critics are Cynthia Eller and Bruce Thornton. It must be acknowledged, however, that both Eller and Thornton do at times offer reasonable and objective

---

108 Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 185-186, 196.

109 Ibid, 196.

110 Vest, “Is Reverie to be Trusted”, 245.

111 Klein, “Goddess”, 595-597.

critiques of her theory and methodologies, before descending into rhetoric and accusations which are often quite harsh in tone and only slightly above outright name-calling.

With respect to Eller, she does acknowledge Gimbutas' credentials as a fully qualified and accomplished archaeologist who possessed tremendous skill and expertise in linguistics and eastern European archaeological sites. She is also, however, very sceptical regarding the veracity of Gimbutas' matrifocal model for Old European societies and their subsequent usurpation by the violent and patriarchal Kurgan invaders.<sup>112</sup> Because part of Gimbutas' theory is indeed based on supposition and conjecture, Eller's scepticism is fully understandable and perhaps even justified. However, rather than offering a specific and detailed critique of Gimbutas' model, in addition to providing evidence which directly contradicts it, Eller appears to be more concerned with ridiculing and derogating both Gimbutas and, especially, those who support her Golden Age paradigm.

According to Eller, the notion that matriarchal or even women-centred societies existed at some point in prehistoric Europe is simply laughable, a ludicrous myth which disenchanted feminists have concocted in order to salve the frustrations borne out of their movement's failure and inability to achieve the goals it initially set out to accomplish in the early 1970s.<sup>113</sup> Eller refers to this phenomenon as “relative deprivation theory”, further suggesting that a utopian fantasy centred on a matriarchal past in which the goddess played a key role now serves as an alternative aspiration for feminists who were previously concerned with obtaining equal rights and freedoms for women in the contemporary world (Kristy S. Coleman disputes this theory, arguing that feminists have made significant gains since the 1970s; she also wonders why, if so many feminists are disconsolate over the movement's lack of progress, they do not turn to and support the Golden Age model in greater numbers).<sup>114</sup>

Eller avows that Golden Age adherents are merely chasing an illusion and deluding themselves

---

112 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 166-170; Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 186-188, 192.

113 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 166; Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 188, 197; Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 230.

114 Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 230.

into believing that such a utopian fantasy was once a reality which might be attained yet again.<sup>115</sup> Eller further states that such self-deception is dangerous not only for feminists on an individual basis but for the feminist campaign as a whole; if feminists spend the majority of their time and effort pursuing a mere chimera, the actual groundwork needed in order for women to make further progress in the fight to achieve equal rights and freedoms will suffer greatly as a result.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, Eller argues that feminists are not doing either themselves or the campaign any favours by glorifying this fictitious matriarchal past since, it could be argued, men (and even women) inherently suspicious of and hostile towards the concept of feminism will be further alienated by the notion that female-dominant societies were a reality in the ancient world, a reality which, if Golden Age adherents have their way, may be realized again.<sup>117</sup>

This last argument serves to highlight how out of touch Eller is with Gimbutas' model and the character and motivations of those who support it. Indeed, Eller refers to Gimbutas and her supporters as “feminist “matriarchalists”<sup>118</sup>; however, as noted earlier, Gimbutas never characterized Old Europe as matriarchal, nor did she ever imply that men were dominated by women in its constituent societies. Moreover, a number of feminists and feminist spiritualists have expressed reservations in regards to the authenticity of Gimbutas' research and the notion of a matriarchal past; such concerns belie Eller's assertion that virtually all feminists, spiritualist and non-spiritualist alike, blindly adhere to and feverishly support Gimbutas' theoretical model.<sup>119</sup>

These are crucial distinctions of which Eller is perhaps unaware or has simply chosen to ignore in order to enhance her argument; the latter possibility is perhaps more plausible, especially in consideration of the fact that Eller herself has admitted her inclination to lump all “matriarchalists”

---

115 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 166.

116 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 167-168; Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 197.

117 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 165-166; Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 224-225.

118 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 165.

119 Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 220-221.

together under the same umbrella without differentiating between reputable academics and New Age fanatics.<sup>120</sup>

As discussed earlier, the very concept of matriarchy is likely to instill a sense of fear and unease in groups and individuals who perceive the term as implying the inverse of patriarchy, that is, the subordination of males to females rather than of females to males. Therefore, by labelling Gimbutas and her followers as matriarchalists, Eller is ensuring that both will be subject to opposition, ridicule, and rejection, particularly from conservative circles and institutions, including Western academia.<sup>121</sup>

Joan Marler contends that Eller is promoting an essentialist model for historical gender relations, one which is predicated upon the notion that patriarchy and the subordination of females to males has existed in a universal and linear fashion since the dawn of civilization. According to Marler, Eller is able to preserve and substantiate this model by refusing to acknowledge any theories or evidence which contradict it, such as Gimbutas' claim that gender relations were egalitarian in Old Europe.<sup>122</sup> If such is the case, it could be argued that both Eller and Gimbutas have employed the same tactic when developing their grand theories, namely, sifting through the evidence and highlighting that which supports and enhances their particular models while simultaneously ignoring that which undermines them.

It is difficult to determine which of the two scholars is more credible with respect to their theories on gender relations in Neolithic Europe, although one could argue that Eller's position would be greatly enhanced if she offered more valid evidence in her refutation of Gimbutas' theory rather than engaging in simple ridicule and name-calling. It should also be acknowledged that Eller has conceded the fact that her linear patriarchy model is inconclusive and virtually unprovable, thus it may be unreasonable for her to engage in such vociferous attacks on a fellow colleague for basing a theory on

---

120 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 166.

121 Ibid, 165-166.

122 Ibid, 170.

supposition when she herself is guilty of the same practice.<sup>123</sup>

Eller has also commented upon the multitude of Neolithic female figurines unearthed via various excavations, including those led by Gimbutas. Eller does admit that the preponderance of these artifacts indicates that a goddess (or goddesses) was worshipped in Neolithic Europe, but qualifies her statement by avowing that the mere presence of the figurines and their association with feminine divinity does not necessarily mean that everyday or lay women were treated as equals in Neolithic Europe.<sup>124</sup>

However, in other discussions pertaining to this topic, Eller is far less conciliatory, even rehashing the argument that such artifacts were produced simply in order to provide erotic entertainment for men, thereby stripping the figurines of their sacred and religious overtones.<sup>125</sup> She further states that half of the Balkan figurines are male despite the fact that none contain a penis, while the majority also feature physical attributes which are more often associated with women than men, such as round hips and a violin-shaped body.<sup>126</sup> Eller also offers no comment on the fact that female figurines have been uncovered at archaeological sites all over the world rather than exclusively in Europe, such as in Utah, Alaska, Ohio, Colombia, Ecuador, Chad, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Japan, and the Punjab.<sup>127</sup>

With respect to conventional Western archaeology, Eller has contended that a major shift occurred within the discipline around the year 1900, a shift which was characterized by the academy's refusal to even entertain the notion that matriarchal societies existed at any point in the historical past in any part of the world.<sup>128</sup> Notwithstanding the theories developed by Gimbutas and other feminist academics who support the matrifocal model, it appears that little has changed in the intervening one

---

123 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 188.

124 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 175.

125 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 174-175; Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 206.

126 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 206-207.

127 Ibid, 206.

128 Ibid, 191.

hundred plus years, a fact which, based upon her vigorous and often vituperative condemnation of those who support the Golden Age paradigm, does not appear to trouble Eller.

Even if Eller is somewhat justified in dismissing the matrifocal model because it is based largely on guesswork, she does not possess enough authority and expertise to simply proclaim that women-centred societies have never been a reality at any time in human history.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Eller herself has been criticized for confining her own examinations and theories on this particular subject to Western societies only, in addition to ignoring the fact that societies in which women hold esteemed positions exist in our own time, such as the Haudenosaunee of New York and Ontario, the Keres of New Mexico, and the Khasi of northeastern India.<sup>130</sup> If women-centred societies are a reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who is to say they were not also so in Neolithic Europe?

As noted above, Eller has based some of her own arguments and theories on mere assumption, a charge with which she has consistently attacked Gimbutas. For instance, Eller disputes the notion that Old Europe was awed by and highly reverential of female reproduction and birth cycles by pointing to the nature of the graves uncovered at Catal Hoyuk, particularly the presence of a high number of female skeletons (most of whom were subsequently determined to have died while in their early twenties) coupled with a high infant mortality rate. According to Eller, it is unlikely that the Old Europeans placed much faith in the goddess (especially one who was supposedly linked to life cycles) when so many women and children died at such a young age.<sup>131</sup> However, Eller offers virtually no proof to back up this assertion.

Furthermore, Eller refuses to draw any meaning or implication from the fact that women were buried beneath the central platform at Catal Hoyuk while men were found at the peripheries. Eller circumvents this evidence by suggesting that men actually owned the platform and placed their women

---

129 Ibid, 199

130 Ibid, 202.

131 Ibid, 202.

beneath it as symbols of their property; once more, this theory amounts to little more than guesswork and conjecture.<sup>132</sup>

Remaining on the subject of Catal Hoyuk, Eller has insisted that the presence of maces at the burial site disproves Gimbutas' contention that Old Europe was peaceful in nature; the problem here is that Eller does not offer any additional evidence which belies the theory, as if the mere presence of maces at one burial site (substantial as it is) is all the proof which is required to debunk it.<sup>133</sup>

Another example of Eller basing parts of her own theories on presupposition relates to her discussion of contemporary primitive societies, such as those which live in the wilds of South America. Eller contends that because egalitarian gender relations and matriarchal practices are not evident in these societies, it stands to reason that neither element would have been present in any primitive society which has ever existed during the course of human history, including within Neolithic Europe.<sup>134</sup> Such an assertion can be discounted by pointing to the fact that no individual can accurately determine the nature of human relations in each and every society which has ever been; indeed, when making such all-encompassing generalizations, Eller only serves to undermine her own credibility.

Eller also has much to say on the topic of feminist spirituality, a substantial portion of which is highly negative. In regards to female artists who use their naked bodies to express their devotion to feminine divinity, Eller is more than a little sceptical, arguing that male observers will never be able to disassociate the nude female form from its sexual overtones (overtones which have been imposed on the feminine form via the tenets of patriarchy), further asserting that artists who believe men will actually be able to see beyond such eroticism to the deeper meaning inside are simply being naive.<sup>135</sup>

While her argument may be valid to some extent, Eller still appears unable to accept any concept which does not conform to her own preconceived notions, whether they relate to the idea of

---

132 Ibid, 202.

133 Ibid, 204.

134 Ibid, 199.

135 Eller, "Divine Objectification", 33-34.



women-centred societies in ancient Europe or the ability of feminist artists to adequately convey their spiritual message to their audience. Indeed, Eller suggests that perhaps the only means through which feminist artists can counteract the sexual objectification of their bodies is to simply refuse to have their bodies put on display or be represented in any visual form.<sup>136</sup> It is logical to assume that the majority of artists discussed above would take issue with this recommendation, artists who are perhaps not as cynical or narrow-minded as Eller.

Finally, Joan Marler has posited that by contending that men's domination of women has been standard practice, with little or no variation, since the dawn of civilization, Eller is actually playing into the hands of the patriarchal order.<sup>137</sup> To be sure, after absorbing Eller's arguments and theories, a reasonable person might be led to believe that no possible alternative to the patriarchal establishment has ever existed or will ever exist again; her pronouncements must be quite disheartening for those individuals, women and men alike, who are seeking to challenge inequities inherent in contemporary infrastructures and generate a more equitable world for all peoples.

Bruce Thornton has also devoted a significant amount of time and energy to denouncing both Marija Gimbutas and the matrifocal model. Like Eller, Thornton does offer legitimate critiques of Gimbutas' theory and the methodologies through which it was developed, particularly their unscientific and conjectural nature, in addition to her assertion that the goddess was uniformly and consistently worshipped across all of Old Europe throughout the entire Neolithic Age.<sup>138</sup> To his credit, Thornton does concede that intuition can be a valuable tool for the archaeologist, just so long as it is used in a supplementary fashion, and scientific and empirical methodologies are retained as the primary tools for research and theory development.<sup>139</sup>

However, as with Eller, the impetus behind Thornton's criticisms seems to go far beyond simple

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

<sup>137</sup> Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 182.

<sup>138</sup> Thornton, "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise", 76, 84, 87-88.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 77.

concern for the veracity of Gimbutas' matrifocal model, to the point where he too belittles and derogates both Gimbutas and those who support her hypothesis. Thornton's disdain for both the matrifocal model and its supporters is quite overt when discussing his own interpretation of the movement. According to Thornton, goddess worshippers are more often than not discontented urbanites who are unable to withstand and cope with the harsh realities and demands of modern life, thus they ameliorate the effects of their dissatisfaction by pursuing an illusion, namely, the Golden Age that was Old Europe.<sup>140</sup> Thornton's conception of the standard goddess worshipper mirrors Eller's contention that Golden Age proponents are largely comprised of disaffected feminists seeking to counter their disappointment by harkening back to a time in which women enjoyed equal rights and an elevated status.<sup>141</sup>

Indeed, in his treatise on Gimbutas, Thornton even cites Eller with respect to the latter's definition of the average goddess adherent, a definition which states that she is generally White, middle-class, college-educated, in her thirties or forties, and “disproportionately lesbian”.<sup>142</sup> As noted above, the feminist spirituality movement has been taken to task for being too exclusive in nature and failing to attract a sufficient amount of non-White, non-middle-class members, thus it can be reasoned that at least part of Eller's definition may be accurate. However, it is nevertheless quite insulting and not a little ignorant to suggest that the majority of goddess worshippers are lesbians, as if only those who deviate from traditional sexual practices would support a hypothesis which so dramatically deviates from traditional conceptualizations of ancient history. Reading between the lines, it is quite easy to discern both Eller's and Thornton's assumption that there is something lacking in the emotional and intellectual makeup of feminist spiritualists, that no truly “normal” person would put much stock in the matrifocal model.

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

Thornton also pulls no punches when discussing feminist academics, such as Carol P. Christ, who support at least part of Gimbutas' theory. To be sure, Thornton charges that these ostensibly reputable scholars are subverting standard academic practices and conventions by giving weight to a baseless and fantastical theoretical model which possesses little to no scientific legitimacy. Moreover, Thornton posits that scholars like Christ are engaging in this type of irresponsible behaviour because they too are pursuing a hidden agenda and hoping to lend authenticity to a fictional past which conforms to their own personal and preferable version of history.<sup>143</sup> Not only is Thornton's assertion deeply insulting to both the professional and personal reputations of fully qualified and accomplished academics such as Christ, it also seems a little paranoid in nature.

Thornton further lambasts feminist academics who support the matrifocal model because of their supposedly blatant hypocrisy in longing for a simpler age in which nature was highly revered and respected while simultaneously condemning the modern world and its propensity for exploiting natural resources and unceasingly pursuing technological innovations. According to Thornton, such women have no qualms over demonizing modern society and the resource extraction which largely defines it while, at the same time, reaping the rewards and benefits it generates, such as electricity and mammograms.<sup>144</sup>

Such an argument clearly demonstrates Thornton's ignorance in this matter, since he is casting aspersions on colleagues who, based on the lack of evidence contained in his treatise, have not actually spoken out against the development of all technological innovations but, perhaps, only wish to see modern society hold Mother Nature and the physical world in a slightly higher regard.

When discussing Gimbutas, Thornton states: “[she] had a long and distinguished career as an archaeologist at UCLA, producing some first-rate research , before she answered the call of the

---

143 Ibid, 74.

144 Ibid, 74.

Goddess.”<sup>145</sup> As acknowledged previously, Thornton has every right to question the legitimacy of research which is largely based on supposition, yet his tone also seems mocking and condescending, as if it is regrettable that Gimbutas answered a call which, at least in Thornton's eyes, has damaged her credibility and undermined the previous good work she had done in her capacity as an esteemed archaeologist.

Thornton has also castigated Riane Eisler (author of the immensely popular *The Chalice and the Blade* which offers its own chronicle of ancient goddess-worshipping societies), arguing that she too is guilty of basing her theoretical model on conjecture and selective interpretation.<sup>146</sup> To reiterate, while Thornton retains the right to attack academic theories which are not based on hard scientific evidence, he shows his true colours by subsequently professing that most rational individuals would attach little credibility to the goddess movement, even comparing it (in terms of its legitimacy) to psychic hotlines.<sup>147</sup> It appears that for Thornton, there is no redeeming value or benefit in pursuing the matrifocal model or partaking in feminist spirituality; one wonders if feels similarly for any theory or movement which challenges the authenticity of the linear patriarchy model.

Thornton's hypocrisy is perhaps never more evident than when he chastises Gimbutas, Eisler, and other Golden Age supporters for their inclination to base parts of their theories on assumption and selective interpretation. For instance, when discussing Neolithic Europe, Thornton states that “it's a good bet”<sup>148</sup> that those who inhabited this ancient society were far more likely to fear the varied and mysterious forces of Mother Nature, such as inclement weather and the threat posed by wild predators, than honour it through tribute to the goddess.<sup>149</sup> Much of Thornton's legitimacy as an empirical and objective scholar is lost when he reprimands Gimbutas and other academics for basing their hypotheses

---

145 Ibid, 75.

146 Ibid, 77-80.

147 Ibid, 77-78.

148 Ibid, 79-80.

149 Ibid, 79-80.

on mere assumption while simultaneously basing his own counterargument on “a good bet”.

Both Thornton and Brian Hayden have challenged Gimbutas' argument that women and their reproductive capabilities were highly revered in Old Europe. According to them, societies which possessed the wherewithal to develop fire, clothing, art, and a functioning social order were obviously intelligent enough to discern the role which men played in the reproductive process. Moreover, Thornton alludes to the proliferation of the phallus in prehistoric art as further proof that ancient men and women were wholly cognisant of the man's primary function in this regard.<sup>150</sup>

While this contention does possess some merit, was it not just as likely for ancient societies to celebrate and commemorate the role played by women in the reproductive process on a similar, or even greater, level to that played by men? Why must the man's role automatically be accorded greater weight and status? Just because Old Europe's inhabitants may have been familiar with the man's function in procreation does not entail that it placed greater emphasis upon it than on the function performed by women.

Thornton also disputes Gimbutas' notion that, based upon the prevalence of Neolithic sculptures depicting these animals, the goddess was closely linked to wildlife such as bears, deer, and elk. Thornton suggests that the creation of such sculptures may have had an alternative objective, such as serving as an artistic means through which Neolithic society could commemorate its hunting practices and traditions.<sup>151</sup> Once more, Thornton is challenging and discrediting an assumption made by Gimbutas by offering one of his own. Why is an ancient form of artistic expression given more credence if it is associated with what has traditionally been perceived as a male activity rather than with the feminine? Are loose assumptions only deemed illegitimate if they are used in order to benefit and empower the historical and/or contemporary status of women?

---

On the subject of the female figurines, Thornton posits that the significantly high number of

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 86.

such artifacts, and their association with female reproductive powers, does not necessarily indicate that lay women living in Neolithic European societies were held in higher regard than men. He notes that women living in Renaissance Europe did not witness an elevation in their social or political status when images of the Virgin Mary began to proliferate, thus it is unlikely that their Old European ancestors were any better off when the goddess served as the focal point of religion.<sup>152</sup>

In addition to serving as yet another unfounded assumption, Thornton's argument can also be seen as representing a kind of quasi-presentism, since he is imposing the conventional practices, beliefs, and mores of a later society onto one which preceded it. Just because increases in the production of images depicting the Virgin Mary did not result in a corresponding rise in the social position of women in Renaissance Europe it does not necessarily stand to reason that the same held true for Old European women at a time when the proliferation of figurines and sculptures symbolizing the powers of the goddess was at its apex. To be sure, Renaissance and Neolithic Europe were two entirely different historical epochs separated by thousands of years and a not inconsiderable amount of cultural, social, political, and religious variation, thus it is unreasonable for Thornton to suggest that standard practice in one (Renaissance Europe) was similar or even identical to standard practice in the other (Neolithic Europe).

Like David Anthony, Thornton is also sceptical with respect to Gimbutas' assertion that Old Europe was peaceful and unfamiliar with war. He too alludes to the presence of fortifications dating from the Neolithic era, and also cites evidence which appears to indicate that violent death, cannibalism, and human sacrifice were common practices; however, Thornton does not offer any specifics in regards to the nature, provenance, or legitimacy of this historical evidence.<sup>153</sup>

Thornton then concludes that such violent behaviour “probably arose out of increased

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 87-89.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 90.

competition for hunting grounds and other resources”.<sup>154</sup> The key word in this statement is “probably”; as already noted, Thornton has ridiculed Gimbutas and Golden Age supporters for not being sufficiently precise and exact when formulating and defending their theories, yet the above statement clearly demonstrates that he himself is guilty of similar practices, basing his own theory on a what amounts to yet another assumption.

Thornton's hypocrisy is even more blatant when he suggests that because hunting was a common activity in Neolithic Europe, it is logical to assume that violence in general was also prevalent “since any weapon that can kill an animal can kill a man”.<sup>155</sup> Apparently Thornton believes it was simply the next logical step for Neolithic Europeans to progress from hunting animals to hunting fellow human beings. Moreover, Thornton contends that because hunting requires some degree of organization and cooperation to be successful, it stands to reason that Neolithic societies were also organized, and even hierarchical, in structure.<sup>156</sup> Upon what empirical and scientific evidence does Thornton base these conclusions? How can he chastise Gimbutas and other academics for basing their theories on mere guesswork and assumption when he himself utilizes similar mechanisms when painting his own picture of Neolithic Europe and the women and men who inhabited it? Why should his presumptions be accorded more weight and credibility?

Thornton also suggests that environmental and demographic factors would have made warfare and violent competition for resources an inevitability in Neolithic Europe. He further asserts that because men have traditionally excelled in combat, hunting, and other activities which require a substantial degree of physical strength, it is reasonable to assume that they were held in high esteem by Neolithic societies.<sup>157</sup>

One wonders if Thornton is even aware of how hypocritical and contradictory his contentions

---

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 90-91.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 90-91.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 91.

are. He lambasts the notion that women were granted an elevated social status in Old Europe based on their mystical life-giving capabilities but has no trouble asserting that men were held in higher regard than women merely because they were more likely to partake in physical activities such as hunting and combat, even though the evidence which suggests that warfare was a common feature of Old Europe is far from overwhelming. Furthermore, who is to say that women did not also partake in hunting activities or combat? Where is the evidence which supposedly negates this possibility?

Finally, Thornton takes issue with the argument that Old Europe was prosperous and harmonious. According to him, women and men who lived in societies which did not possess adequate medical resources, were vulnerable to the whims of nature, were largely unprotected from threats posed by wildlife, disease, and famine, did not always have access to shelter, and which were obligated to partake in ceaseless backbreaking labour could not possibly have been healthy or self-fulfilled.<sup>158</sup> While such threats, hardships, and tribulations were undoubtedly facets of everyday life, it is perhaps illogical to assume that the majority of the women and men who comprised Old Europe lived in perpetual pain, misery, and discontent, without devising suitable activities, amenities, or distractions which could ease and provide solace from the difficult conditions which defined their daily lives.

It could also be argued that the women and men who once inhabited Old Europe were perhaps made of heartier and more resilient stock than those of us who comprise the modern world, where technological innovations have made some aspects of our working and daily lives far more easier to bear. As for Thornton, he appears to be quite sceptical of the notion that women and men who were not fortunate enough to live in and have access to the amenities of the modern world could still have been happy and led prosperous and fulfilling lives. For him, it seems that the contemporary world serves as the acme of human evolution, progress, intellect, and spiritual fulfilment, regardless of the injustices and inequities bred and perpetuated by the patriarchal order, an order which he does not refer to even

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 91-92.



once in the course of his treatise.<sup>159</sup>

Thornton concludes his article by summarizing Elizabeth Kristol's attack on goddess-worshippers, whom she reprimands as hypocritical ingrates attacking and denouncing the very structure (western society) which permitted them the freedom and opportunity to pursue their intellectual interests free of the restrictions and impediments which plague their sisters in Third World countries and less enlightened societies.<sup>160</sup> Evidently, at least according to Kristol, western women should quit complaining and be satisfied with what they have since there exist far worse alternatives.

### **Part Three**

The preceding discussion offered many examples of the criticism and vitriol to which Marija Gimbutas, her matrifocal model, and Golden Age supporters have been subjected within the realm of conventional Western academia. Moreover, the above section provided a partial explanation for the impetus and motivation behind such scathing attacks, namely, the fact that the evidence upon which the matrifocal model was formulated is far from empirically sound. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that there may be other explanations which can account for the intensity of the backlash and condemnation which have been directed at Gimbutas and company.

Arguably, the most contentious alternative explanation is the belief that the majority of traditional academics, scholars, and theorists view the matrifocal model as a significant threat to the legitimacy, preservation, and perpetuation of the patriarchal order or, in other words, what is perceived as being the natural order of things. Indeed, the privileged and advantageous position enjoyed by mostly White males in the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious spheres for centuries on end could potentially be threatened and undermined by the notion that men were not always the dominant force in human history, nor need they remain so.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 91-92.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>161</sup> Coleman, "Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff'?", 229, 234-237; Long, "The One or the Many", 14; Christ, "A Different World", 56-57, 59.

The matrifocal model also challenges what have traditionally been viewed as the immutable laws of biology and nature, namely, that men are inherently more qualified to be placed in positions of power, leadership, and authority in the public realm, while women are better suited to nurturing roles and the rearing of children in the domestic sphere. To be sure, the division of men and women into the public and domestic spheres respectively has been perceived as natural since the age of Plato.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, the matrifocal model may possess the power to uproot, distort, or even destroy what many individuals (including women) have long held to be common practice and, in some cases, reality itself.<sup>163</sup> If men have not held positions of power, influence, and authority in each and every society across the planet since time immemorial, what other common practices and traditional assumptions might be misinformed or erroneous in nature?

Based on this scenario, it is not difficult to understand why both Gimbutas and the matrifocal model have been so resoundingly discredited and rejected by conventional academia which, as is an appendage of the patriarchal order, perceives both as representing a sinister and exceedingly dangerous threat to the established order (Carol P. Christ suggested that had Gimbutas' investigations led her to conclude that Old Europe was actually similar to the modern world, in that men predominated and violence and warfare were common occurrences, there would not have been such an uproar in the academic community).<sup>164</sup>

Quite obviously, a substantial number of academics and scholars, including those who identify themselves as feminist, would contend that this particular scenario is far-fetched and delusional. However, it is equally obvious that the very notion that women were once perceived as being equal to men, and could pursue their own interests, ambitions, and aspirations unencumbered by the barriers and restrictions which plague their descendants in the modern world, does pose a significant threat to the

---

162 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 168.

163 Coleman, "Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff'", 235-237.

164 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 93; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 247; Long, "The One or the Many", 14; Christ, "A Different World", 56-59.

supposedly natural order of things, suggesting as it does alternative ways of living which might upset traditional power structures and relations.

Another theory which seeks to account for the unreasonable amount of criticism with which Gimbutas and the matrifocal model have been received relates to the threat which a feminine divine poses to traditional Western religion. It should come as little surprise that those who adhere to Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, each of which places significant emphasis upon the divine character of specific male figures, would be deeply troubled by the notion that a feminine deity was once universally worshipped in parts of Neolithic Europe and is still celebrated and revered in certain sectors today.<sup>165</sup>

Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol P. Christ have contended that the patriarchal establishment is closely tied to and supported by Western Christianity, thus both the matrifocal model and contemporary feminist spirituality movement may be seen as posing dual threats to traditional practices and beliefs (such as the belief that women should defer to men and be relegated to the domestic sphere), hence the backlash.<sup>166</sup>

Kristy Coleman and Grace Jantzen posited that even if God is eventually acknowledged as an “It” rather than a “Him”, Western religion would still not be shed of its often violent, oppressive, and phallogocentric overtones and, thus, would not be accessible to the majority of women. Indeed, Jantzen further contended that the Western Christian God has been appropriated by the patriarchal establishment to be the representative of privileged White males rather than the representative of all devout Christians regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and so on.<sup>167</sup>

Scholars such as Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Alison Wylie have stressed that the matrifocal model, in addition to feminist archaeology, have also encountered fierce resistance and opposition because

---

165 Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 225-227, 229, 234-237; Christ, “A Different World”, 58-59, 62.

166 Coleman, “Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff?'”, 226-227.

167 Ibid, 235.

they threaten orthodox Western archaeology to the point where, if gaining sufficient momentum, either may turn the discipline on its head.<sup>168</sup> As noted by Wylie, for roughly three decades (the 1950s to the 1980s) western archaeology was primarily defined and predicated upon the ecosystems model, that is, the theory that throughout history, human beings have largely been interchangeable agents who consume resources relatively equally, thus there is little need for contemporary archaeologists to determine historical gender roles via the excavation and analysis of skeletons and other artifacts.<sup>169</sup>

Furthermore, the tenets of traditional archaeology dictate that only certain methodological approaches and techniques are permissible in both the classroom and the field, namely, those which are based in empiricism, objectivity, and rationality; there is no room for alternative approaches, such as those which rely on mythology and metaphor.<sup>170</sup>

Quite obviously, Gimbutas' matrifocal model, with its defining attributes centred upon feminine divinity and an elevated social position for women (in addition to its usage of myth and symbolic interpretation), directly challenged the ecosystems model, and suggested that ancient grave sites and other physical artifacts may actually provide archaeologists with much greater knowledge and insight with respect to the everyday lives of the groups and individuals which inhabited the ancient world than was originally thought.

Moreover, beginning in the 1980s, archaeologists examining human remains and artifacts dating from the ancient world developed another innovative practice, that of attempting to distinguish sex (biologically determined) from gender (the socially constructed roles, practices, activities, and behaviours ascribed to men and women). In this fashion, archaeologists could examine, analyze, and interpret the available physical evidence in order to discern specific roles and tasks performed by women and men who lived in the ancient world.<sup>171</sup> Of course, Gimbutas had already applied this

---

168 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 93.

169 Ibid, 93.

170 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 93; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 239-240, 247.

171 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 100.

technical approach years earlier when developing her model for Old Europe; the fact that it took the rest of the archaeological community roughly two decades to catch up serves to reinforce Gimbutas' reputation as an academic maverick.<sup>172</sup>

It can be argued that orthodox archaeologists must have felt as though they were facing a double whammy from Gimbutas and Golden Age proponents, that is, a threat to both the traditional identity and functions of their discipline and their preconceived notions regarding the roles and status of the men and women who inhabited the ancient world where, as conventional thinking suggests, men were the dominant and driving force.

Indeed, as noted by Joan Gero and Linda Hurcombe, some male archaeologists may be guilty of imposing contemporary gender roles on the ancient peoples and societies they examine; in other words, if these individuals believe that men predominate in specific activities and practices in our own time, such as hunting or the manufacturing of tools, they are likely to believe that men also performed the majority of these tasks in the ancient world (a theory which is somewhat akin to the linear patriarchy model). Arguably, the tendency to impose contemporary gender roles on earlier societies is one of the practices which archaeologists utilizing the sex/gender dichotomy approach are seeking to highlight and eventually eradicate.<sup>173</sup>

It should therefore come as no surprise that when the matrifocal model was first introduced in the 1960s, the archaeological community vociferously denounced and rejected it; based on the nature and extent of the criticism noted above, it would appear that little has changed in the interim.<sup>174</sup> In fact, feminist archaeology still retains its original stigma to the point where female academics and archaeologists who may sympathize with and even support Gimbutas' model make a conscious effort not to associate themselves with the radical fringe lest their work and reputations suffer as a result. It

---

172 Christ, "A Different World", 56.

173 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 96-103.

174 Dashu, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls", 185.

should also be acknowledged that even by the turn of the present century, archaeological approaches and pursuits which seek to examine and shed light upon the roles, status, and experiences of women who lived in the ancient world attract far more female than male scholars, an indication that this particular subject is still largely taboo.<sup>175</sup>

The matrifocal model has also been attacked because it presents a challenge to a widely held and longstanding belief, namely, that human beings and civilization progress and evolve in a linear fashion in conjunction with the passage of time. Put another way, as time passes and knowledge is gained, human beings and the social structures they create will only improve and expand, becoming more prosperous and productive in the process.<sup>176</sup> However, if Gimbutas' theory is accurate, the linear model of evolution is no longer valid, seeing as how even the most objective and open-minded theorist would have an exceedingly difficult time attempting to persuade anyone that the violent, oppressive, and backward patriarchal Indo-Europeans were actually superior to and more civilized than the peaceful, harmonious, and artistic Old Europeans they usurped.<sup>177</sup>

Indeed, it could be argued that the infiltration of the Kurgans into Old Europe represented a giant step backward in the course of human evolution and progress. Proponents of the linear model of evolution might counter this assertion by pointing out that there are no extant written records dating from the Neolithic era thus, as this line of thinking goes, any civilization which did not possess the ability to write could not possibly have been intellectually, mentally, or spiritually superior to that which did.<sup>178</sup> Adherents of the linear model of evolution also point to the predominance of the Greeks during the age of antiquity as further proof that human beings become more knowledgeable, rational, and logical as time progresses. Many historians identify the Greeks as the bearers of the intellectual light which led humanity out of the dark ages and into an era defined by rationality, democracy, and

---

<sup>175</sup> Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 95-96.

<sup>176</sup> Christ, "A Different World", 57.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 57-58.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

civilization.<sup>179</sup>

Once more, Gimbutas' matrifocal model turns this long-held assumption on its head since, if the theory holds true, a peaceful and cooperative society was subsumed by one which was far more backward and primitive not because the latter was more civilized and possessed a greater capacity for reason and logic but, rather, because it simply had more firepower.<sup>180</sup>

Finally, it is logical to suggest that the matrifocal model frequently encounters hostility and outright rejection because many groups and individuals, especially conservative elements within Western academia and other institutions, find the subject matter so disconcerting. As noted on more than one occasion in this paper, both men and women are often uneasy with respect to the topic and/or idea of matriarchy, believing that it denotes the inversion of patriarchy, that is, the domination of males by females.

Moreover, as discussed by Patricia Reis, men (and even some women) tend to associate females with specific physical, mental, and emotional attributes, such as weakness, frailty, helplessness, passivity, and neurosis. It is therefore not surprising that so many men possess an inherent fear of living in a society dominated by women, since they believe that their own masculine characteristics, such as strength, aggression, and the capacity for rational thought, will inevitably be suppressed and eradicated by their female masters, effectively neutering them in the process.<sup>181</sup>

The fact that these highly exaggerated and often erroneous characteristics have been thrust upon males and females by societal forces rather than scientific evidence, in addition to the fact that Gimbutas and other Golden Age supporters have never actually described Old Europe as matriarchal, appear to have done little in ameliorating the unease, suspicion, and hostility with which many supposedly rational human beings approach the idea of women-centred societies. If a substantial

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 57-58.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>181</sup> Reis, "Good Breast, Bad Breast, This Is the Cuckoo's Nest", 82, 85.

proportion of the Western world is already uncomfortable with and misinformed on the topic of feminism, it is small wonder that the same number (if not more) are highly suspicious of and opposed to the notion of matriarchy.

Jennie Klein has noted that while “radical” topics such as feminism and gay rights have made at least some headway in western academia, others such as feminist spirituality are still heavily denounced and relegated to the fringes of higher learning.<sup>182</sup> To be sure, even some feminists are opposed to the spirituality and goddess movements, arguing that they place too much emphasis on a woman's reproductive capabilities, as if a woman's ability to give birth is her only significant or most defining characteristic. According to this argument, feminist spiritualists and goddess-worshippers are therefore playing into the hands of the patriarchal order, since the latter's proponents often stress the role which women play as mothers and nurturers as a means of persuading women to remain in the domestic sphere.<sup>183</sup>

This last example serves to highlight a persistent problem which supporters of the matrifocal model continually encounter, namely, what to call the societies which constituted Old Europe. As noted repeatedly, matriarchy is both inaccurate and unacceptable, while matrilineal is insufficient because it only places emphasis upon descent through the mother line while ignoring other attributes such as egalitarian gender relations and the primary role of the goddess. Finally, even matrifocal is often deemed inadequate since some patriarchal societies also place great importance on the concept of motherhood.<sup>184</sup> It is reasonable to assume, however, that many groups and individuals would still oppose and reject the idea of women-centred societies regardless of what they are actually called.

Although the authenticity of the matrifocal model, along with the evidence upon which it is

---

182 Klein, “Goddess”, 578.

183 Marler, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy”, 172.

184 Dashu, “Knocking Down Straw Dolls”, 185-186.



based, are hotly debated and contested topics, what cannot be denied is the fact that both the model and the feminist spirituality movement have been beneficial for a substantial number of women living in the Western hemisphere, providing them with a sense of empowerment, spiritual well-being, and self-worth which the modern world and its patriarchal trappings have traditionally denied them.

Indeed, the accusation that the methodologies used in to formulate the matrifocal model are somewhat sketchy should be of secondary importance to the fact that this particular hypothesis has captured the imagination and interest of so many women who have traditionally felt isolated and disconnected from contemporary society, religion, academia, and so on.<sup>185</sup> Even if the matrifocal model is invalid to some degree, do these benefits not outweigh the dubiousness of its academic legitimacy in terms of their importance and relevancy to the lives of ordinary individuals, particularly individuals who have been oppressed and denied equal rights and freedoms for so centuries on end?

As noted earlier, Gimbutas' model has served as a revelation for Western women, many of whom formerly lived under the assumption that patriarchy has reigned supreme since the dawn of civilization, that women have always been disenfranchised, dispossessed and dominated by men. The very notion that females and males had actually once lived as relative equals undoubtedly serves as inspiration for both women and men who feel excluded from contemporary society and the patriarchal establishment and thus long for a more equitable and inclusive alternative.

If the notion by itself is powerful enough to motivate individuals who previously felt detached from society into working towards the betterment of the social and political order at local, national, or even international levels, does it really matter how academically or even historically valid said notion is? Is "legitimate" history not already the purview of the patriarchal order and those groups and individuals who seek to preserve and perpetuate it? Is "legitimate" history not already rife with inaccuracies and hyperbole? Even if the matrifocal model is eventually proven to be authentic, would

<sup>185</sup> Coleman, "Who's Afraid of the 'Goddess Stuff'?", 230-231; Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 91-94; Long, "The One or the Many", 16-19, 23; Klein, "Goddess", 598.

conventional academia actually accept it?

These questions relate to another benefit which the model has engendered, namely, challenging the traditional (and often exclusionary and narrow-minded) structure of Western archaeology and, by extension, wider academia. Even if one were to concede that many conventional archaeologists and academics are probably not evil and nefarious men seeking to protect their field and institution from feminists and other radical groups who would dismantle the patriarchal order, it still must be acknowledged that academic structures and disciplines are often quite resistant to and suspicious of change, especially that which threatens traditional practices, methodologies and ingrained ways of thinking.<sup>186</sup>

It is therefore almost irrelevant whether or not Gimbtuas' model is methodologically sound, since its very substance has forced conventional archaeology to widen its scope and be more open and receptive to alternative approaches and ideas, such as utilizing symbols, images, mythology, and folklore when developing conceptualizations of the ancient world. While empiricism and the scientific method should obviously remain the cornerstones of legitimate academic research and hypothesizing, it is equally apparent that other approaches, such as symbolic interpretation and intuition, are valuable tools which can supplement the standard research process and provide academics and scholars with new means of knowing and understanding the past.<sup>187</sup>

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, feminist archaeology (and, arguably, the matrifocal model) have inspired many young women to pursue careers in archaeology, anthropology, and other traditionally male-dominated fields, a trend which was largely non-existent for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>188</sup> With more women entering these fields, specific historical categories and issues which have previously been marginalized or ignored (such as women, gays and lesbians, non-conformists, feminist

---

186 Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy", 168; Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 93-103; Long, "The One or the Many", 26.

187 Long, "The One or the Many", 16-18, 26; Vest, "Is Reverie to be Trusted", 241-242.

188 Hays-Gilpin, "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology", 92-103.

religion, etc.) by conventional academia may finally be addressed, clarified, and made accessible to contemporary students and scholars.<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, since the 1980s, prominent archaeologists such as Janet Spector and Margaret Conkey have exhorted the Western archaeological community to adopt a more open-minded approach with respect to acceptable methodologies, techniques, and areas of study. Spector and Conkey have contended that by using gender as a valid category of examination (rather than merely operating on the assumption that only men were/are of primary importance), archaeologists will be able to acquire a more accurate and complete picture of historical societies, including the roles played by women and men in everyday life.<sup>190</sup>

Another benefit of the matrifocal model is the feminist spirituality movement which it helped inspire, particularly the role which the goddess has played in rekindling spiritual and religious sentiments in women (and men) whose initial spirituality and religiosity were gradually eroded via the often violent, exclusionary, and phallogocentric nature of traditional Western religions. The idea of a life-giving goddess who represents and is represented by the forces and beauty of nature and the physical world may serve as a more welcoming, wholesome, and gentle religious and spiritual alternative.

Asphodel Long has noted that women living in India (one of the foremost patriarchal countries in the world) still celebrate and worship various goddesses rather than gods despite their status as virtual second-class citizens; perhaps the feminist spirituality movement provides similar comfort and fulfilment for disenfranchised women living in the United States, Western Europe, and so on.<sup>191</sup>

The close connection linking the goddess and the natural world may actually prove beneficial to various environmental campaigns and projects as well, since this connection might motivate goddess-worshippers to show more respect for Earth and Mother Nature, perhaps by participating in protests

---

189 Ibid, 100-103.

190 Ibid, 94-95.

191 Long, "The One or the Many", 24.

aimed at preventing deforestation or simply making a more concerted effort to recycle.<sup>192</sup>

Feminist spirituality also provides women with a means of interacting with and expressing their inner selves, thoughts, desires, fears, aspirations, and so on in an artistic fashion, be it through art, sculpture, or even their physical bodies. Moreover, the use of such artistic expression may prompt women to see themselves as more than just an object of sexual desire for men and the patriarchal establishment, to realize that being a woman involves far more than just the size and shape of their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has provided an overview of both the matrifocal model and the feminist spirituality movement. The first component of the essay chronicled the life of Marija Gimbutas, examining the influences, experiences, and motivations which led her to dedicate her academic career to examining, analyzing, and interpreting archaeological, anthropological, and historical evidence pertaining to pre-Indo-European societies and the women and men who inhabited them.

By incorporating her knowledge of ancient eastern European folklore, mythology, and burial rites, Gimbutas was able to transform the various symbols and images featured on innumerable Neolithic artifacts into a language through which she developed her Old Europe paradigm, including her assertion that peaceful, sedentary, women-centred, and goddess-worshipping Old European societies were eventually overrun by violent nomadic tribes originating in the Russian Steppes, a process which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the patriarchal order and the suppression of the goddess.

The dissemination of Gimbutas' model, in addition to other accounts which suggest that women were not always the disenfranchised, dispossessed, and marginalized pawns of the patriarchal establishment, had a profound impact on both feminist academics and spirituality, inspiring many

---

<sup>192</sup> Anthony, "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories", 90.

women (especially in the United States) to challenge the often exclusionary, narrow-minded, and bigoted character of both Western academia and religion. Indeed, the increasing popularity of the matrifocal model has forced a traditionally obstinate and intransigent archaeological community into accepting the validity of alternative approaches and methodologies, a transformation which many progressive archaeologists and academics ardently believe will be beneficial to the discipline as whole since it offers new ways of exploring, analyzing, and knowing the ancient world and its inhabitants.

With respect to religion and spirituality, the notion of a feminine divine has provided a much needed alternative for women and men who have felt detached and excluded from conventional Western religion and its often violent and phallogentric overtones.

The second section of this essay offered a discussion relating to the vast and generally hostile criticism to which Gimbutas and her model have been subjected, particularly at the hands of conservative elements within the academic community, although even prominent feminist academics such as Cynthia Eller have also denounced Gimbutas. A significant portion of such criticism derives from the contention that Gimbutas has based too much of her theory on unsubstantiated claims, guesswork, and selective interpretation rather than upon scientifically corroborated facts and evidence.

While academics and scholars reserve every right to question the validity of theories, hypotheses, and conclusions which are not fully substantiated by the necessary criteria, this essay has demonstrated that much of the criticism and vituperation heaped upon Gimbutas and Golden Age supporters goes beyond mere concern with academic credibility. To be sure, many of the arguments offered by Eller, Bruce Thornton, and others seem to reflect personal biases and prejudices which have compelled these individuals to viciously attack and denounce both Gimbutas and the matrifocal model beyond reasonable limits, in addition to offering counterarguments which merely serve to highlight their own hypocrisy.

Finally, the third component of this paper provided possible explanations for the wide-spread

and overly hostile criticism and rejection with which Gimbutas and the matrifocal model have been received. The most contentious explanation centres on the argument that the matrifocal model represents a dangerous threat to the patriarchal order and the predominance of White males in virtually all avenues of social, political, economic, cultural, and religious power and authority. Indeed, the very notion that women and men once lived as equals, that females were previously accorded respect and esteem at levels which may have exceeded those granted to males, and that a peaceful, prosperous, and civilized society was supplanted by one which was far more primitive and backward turns the linear models of patriarchy and human evolution on their head.

If the matrifocal model continues to garner support and is seen by more groups and individuals as a credible and realistic alternative to the patriarchal establishment, more groups and individuals may no longer be willing to abide the present order; they may also begin to wonder what other commonly-held assumptions pertaining to human history and evolution are actually misinformed or outright erroneous.

This essay concluded with the argument that sketchy evidence notwithstanding, the matrifocal model has been and continues to be very beneficial for a substantial number of women living in the Western world because it provides them with feelings of empowerment, inclusion, participation, and self-worth in many aspects of social, political, religious, spiritual, and everyday life and existence, sentiments which have commonly been denied them throughout the patriarchal order's centuries-long reign.

## Bibliography

Anthony, David W. "Nazi and eco-feminist prehistories: ideology and empiricism in Indo-European archaeology". In *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, edited by Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, 82-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Brown, Shelby. "Feminist Research in Archaeology: What Does It Mean? Why Is It Taking So Long?". In *Feminist Theory And The Classics*, edited by Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, 238-271. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Christ, Carol P. "A Different World: The Challenge of the Work of Marija Gimbutas to the Dominant World-View of Western Cultures." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996): 53-66.

Coleman, Kristy S. "Who's Afraid of 'the Goddess Stuff?'". *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 217-237.

Coy, Peter, and Elizabeth Dwoskin. "Shortchanged: Why Women Get Paid Less Than Men."

*Bloomberg Business Week*, June 21, 2012. Accessed August 20, 2014.

<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-06-21/equal-pay-plaintiffs-burden-of-proof>.

Dashu, Max. "Knocking Down Straw Dolls: A Critique of Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*." *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 185-216. doi: 10.1177/0966735005051947.

Downing, Marymay. "Prehistoric Goddesses: The Cretan Challenge." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 1-22.

Eller, Cynthia. "Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16 (2000): 23-44.

Faludi, Susan. "Backlash." *The Guardian*, December 13, 2005. Accessed August 20, 2014.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/13/classics.gender>.

Hays-Gilpin, Kelly. "Feminist Scholarship in Archaeology." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571 (2000): 89-106.

Klein, Jennie. "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s." *Feminist Studies* 35 (2009): 575-602.

Long, Asphodel. "The One or the Many: The Great Goddess Revisited." *Feminist Theology* 5 (1997): 13-29.

Marler, Joan. "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996): 37-51.

Marler, Joan. "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory." *Feminist Theology* 14 (2006): 163-187.

Martinet, Andre. "The Indo-Europeans And Greece." *Diogenes* 37 (1989): 1-16.

Percovich, Luciana. "Europe's First Roots: Female Cosmogonies before the Arrival of the



IndoEuropean Peoples." *Feminist Theology* 13 (2004): 26-39.

Reis, Patricia. "Good Breast, Bad Breast, This Is The Cuckoo's Nest: Ken Kesey and the Myth of Matriarchy." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987): 77-96.

Stange, Mary Zeiss. "The Once and Future Heroine: Paleolithic Goddesses and Popular Imagination." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21 (1993): 55-66.

Thornton, Bruce. "The False Goddess and Her Lost Paradise." *Arion* 7 (1999): 72-97.

Vest, Norvene. "Is Reverie to be Trusted? The Imaginal and the Work of Marija Gimbutas." *Feminist Theology* 13 (2005): 239-248.