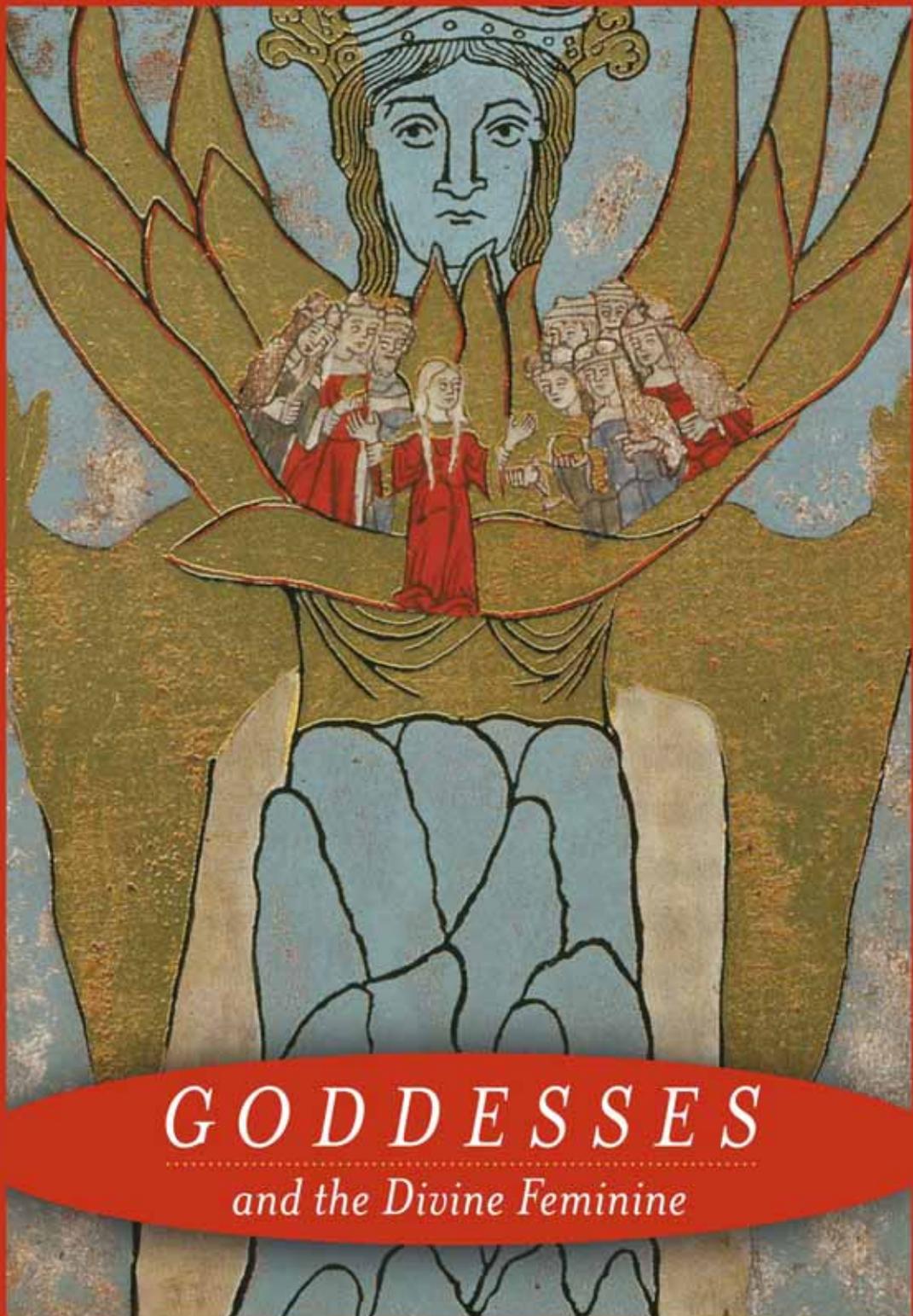


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GODDESSES

and the Divine Feminine

A WESTERN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

ONE • Gender and the Problem of Prehistory

IMAGINING PREHISTORY

To examine the contested issue of gender in ancient Near Eastern prehistory, I begin with a definition of the period. Prehistory is the time before the invention of writing (which took place around 3500 BCE in the ancient Near East). This period is divided into several major eras of human development in eastern Europe and the ancient Near East: late Paleolithic (c. 30,000–9000 BCE), proto-Neolithic and Neolithic (c. 9000–5600 BCE), and Chalcolithic (5600–3500 BCE). In the European late Paleolithic, we begin to have some evidence of human creative consciousness in the form of cave paintings, figurines, and tools decorated with designs or with figures of animals or humans. The Neolithic is divided from the Paleolithic by the movement from food gathering (hunting and collecting fruits, nuts, and plants) to food growing and domestication of animals. The Chalcolithic describes a time of more developed agriculture (including the use of the plow and irrigation) as well as trade and early urbanization.

The Neolithic revolution took place gradually in the ancient Near East between 9000 and 7000 BCE. At first, herds of wild animals or areas of wild grains were cordoned off and controlled by more settled human groups; later, with full domestication, animals were bred for food, milk, or skins, and seeds were conserved for planting grains. These innovations developed along parallel lines in several places in the ancient Near East and spread to other nearby areas. There was not a uniform, straightforward pattern of development. Agriculture might have been started in one

area and then abandoned when water supplies gave out; the group that had begun to grow food might then have migrated and become pastoral. Earlier Paleolithic patterns of hunting and gathering continued in societies near those that had moved on to agriculture and stock breeding. Many Neolithic societies mixed stock breeding and agriculture with hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants.¹

A variety of female figurines with markedly large breasts, buttocks, and bellies are found in Neolithic sites. These figurines are often seen as reflecting a view that links the female body with fecundity, likely an inheritance from the Paleolithic period.² The development of pottery around 7000 BCE offers new artifacts with geometric designs, often molded in human and animal shapes. But without writing, it is very difficult to determine the actual thoughts or intentions of those who created these images. Even early writings, such as texts from third-millennium Sumerian cities, are not easy to interpret, a topic explored in the following chapter. With no writing, and with only those artifacts that happen to be made of materials capable of longer survival (stone, metal, baked clay, bone), determining what a group of people *meant* by particular images is guesswork, an area into which trained archaeologists venture with great caution.

Yet humans, including trained archaeologists, are driven to know what such things meant and thus what they might mean for us today. This is why such quests for evidence of the lives of earlier peoples are undertaken. How does knowing the paths trod by humans in the past inform us about what we are, about our potential as humans? Prehistory—precisely because one can say so little about it or about the inner life of its people with certainty—easily becomes a tabula rasa on which to project our own theories about what humans necessarily are or should be and hence must have once been. Questions of gender roles, in particular, have reflected the social assumptions of the archaeologists.

Archaeological studies of prehistory reflect sharply contrasting lines of interpretation of gender roles. The dominant line in archaeology, which continues today, simply assumes that, however much human society might change in terms of technology and movement from hunting and gathering to agriculture and stock breeding to industrialism, gender roles are fixed by biology. This interpretation holds that the male is the dominant food provider, that from the dawn of human development he was the one who left the home base to secure food, primarily by hunting animals. The focus of many paleoanthropologists, then, has been on “man the hunter.” This view assumes that the primary diet of early humans was meat and that the role of hunter was filled exclusively by males. Males are also seen as the primary innovators of social and technological advances: hunting generated both so-

cial cooperation among men and the impetus to create implements such as spears, axes, and knives.³

This view casts women as passive recipients of the food brought back to the home base by the males. Women's primary work was maternal, producing and raising babies. They also did secondary food processing, grinding and cooking grains or meat. This image of Paleolithic humans has had an overwhelming impact on anthropological museums throughout the world as well as pictorial representations in introductory anthropology books.⁴ Representations of "early man" picture males as mobile, working in groups, hunting, fishing, and shaping tools for the hunt; women are isolated, sedentary, caring for children, cooking food.

Archaeologists have typically assumed that males created and used most of the surviving stone or bone tools from Paleolithic peoples. Thus, a rounded implement is likely to be interpreted as a mace used by males to kill animals, rather than as a pounding tool used by women to process grain or nuts.⁵ Such depictions of Paleolithic "man" reproduce the presumed sexual division of labor within the Western industrial middle class, with its split between "home" and "work," with men as providers and women confined to domestic work and child raising.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a different picture of prehistoric humans, as originally matriarchal and only later developing patriarchal societies, was advanced by a few Western thinkers, based more on traditions of classical literature than on field studies. The pioneering exposition of this thesis of original matriarchy was the three-volume work *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, published by German classicist J. J. Bachofen in 1861. This work had a major impact on nineteenth-century thought. It shaped the way classicists such as Jane Harrison and archaeologists such as Sir Arthur Evans, who explored the ruins of the palace of Knossos in Crete, looked at the evidence of pre-Hellenic societies.⁶

Lewis Morgan, in his study *Ancient Society* (1877), on American Indians, also read his evidence through the lens of the idea that human society passed through an original matriarchal stage. From Morgan's work, the idea entered Marxist discourse and became a permanent part of Marxist theory as it described stages of social development. Frederick Engels, in his treatise *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), drew from Morgan the concept of an original stage of "mother right" that had been superseded by patriarchal property holding and lines of descent.⁷

Bachofen did not see original matriarchy as a time of high civilization. Rather, he considered the end of matriarchy and the development of patriarchy as the triumph of the "masculine" qualities of rationality over the inferior "feminine" qualities of instinct. Engels, however, drawing on patterns of Western thought that

posited an original “Eden” followed by a “fall,” described original matriarchy as a time of “primitive communism,” contrasting it to the ascendance of patriarchy that followed, with its unjust domination of the male over the female. As Engels put it, “the overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex.”⁸ This, for Engels, was the cellular model of all subsequent oppressive class relations between owner and worker. He argued that civilization had been built on a series of unjust systems of exploitation, but that this history would culminate in a final transformation, in which women would be emancipated and communism would reappear as a higher and final stage. Late Victorian feminist theorists, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage, in her 1893 treatise *Woman, Church, and State*,⁹ also imagined the time of original matriarchy as one of high civilization, followed by a fall into violence and oppression under patriarchal rule.

But these nineteenth-century theories of a fixed sequence of social stages, in which original “promiscuity” was followed by matriarchy and then by patriarchy, were discredited in the new anthropology pioneered by Franz Boas in the 1920s.¹⁰ Boas considered such theories of universal social evolution to be unscientific and argued that they should be entirely abandoned in favor of painstaking research on particular local societies. Each society, he believed, was *sui generis* and needed to be studied for its own distinct configurations rather than being fit into a universal theory of stages of development. Boas’s methods have helped to provide a foundation for modern scientific anthropology and archaeology.

The link between nineteenth-century concepts of early matriarchy and both feminism and Marxism perhaps made this theory particularly objectionable to American male anthropologists of the twentieth century. Robert Lowie, author of *Primitive Society* (1920), sought to demolish this hypothesis as it had been advanced in Morgan’s study of indigenous American societies. In this work, Lowie asserts that there has never been an instance of actual matriarchy—that is, rule by women that parallels patriarchy. He goes on to claim that matrilineal descent has had no universal priority in human history. In his view, it occurs only rarely and only as an anomaly when normative paternal rule is temporarily interrupted. But it is inherently unstable and soon disappears.¹¹ For Lowie, paternal descent and male dominance are the natural and universal human patterns.

The primacy of patriliney became a widely shared consensus in American anthropology into the 1960s, as theories of the evolution of society and the search for the origins of certain developments assumed to be normative in human society came back into favor.¹² Elman Service’s *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective* (1962) reflects this consensus. Service traces the organization of human

society back to the earliest emergence of hominids from prehuman primates. Although the mother-child dyad may be the core of the human family, he assumes that prolonged human infantile dependency and the change from seasonal to continual sexuality in females created the necessity of protecting women from sexually aggressive males and the need for males to provide for women and children. The conjugal male-female bond developed to satisfy these needs, he argues.¹³

Service concedes that females gathered plant foods, but he seems to regard this as a very inadequate food supply compared to the animal protein derived from hunting by males. He also sees females as incapable of forming organizations among themselves and describes them as gathering plants alone with dependent children. Males, in contrast, developed hunting as the main human food supply early in human history, an activity that inherently created cooperation among groups of men. The need to defend one's own group against other males, presumed to be always aggressive, made war necessary. Thus, men bonded through hunting and war.¹⁴ This theory of male bonding in the context of hunting and war as uniquely masculine activities was popularized in the era of the Vietnam war, reflecting the first wave of antifeminist backlash in books such as Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969).¹⁵

Described as physically weaker by nature, unable to travel far or run swiftly because of continual pregnancy and child care, the female necessarily submitted to the male to receive food for herself and her offspring and protection from the sexual aggression of other males. The male, superior in strength and mobility, decreed virilocal residence as the normal family pattern: the female was transferred from her natal family to that of her husband, while the sisters of her husband were similarly transferred to the households of other males. Service argues that this exchange, or "reciprocal giving," of women was the first expression of "human" sharing, and itself reflected the emergence of a truly human capacity to organize and plan for the future, as distinct from prehuman primates.¹⁶ Through such reasoning, Service construes something very much like the monogamous, male-dominant family, with male provider-protector and dependent female, as the original and universal human family.

This view was challenged by a growing number of women anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s. Studies of existing foraging and gardening societies conducted by male anthropologists were shown to be skewed by the men's inability to actually observe and speak with the women in such settings. Female anthropologists who could locate themselves in the women's community saw a very different picture. Their studies of foraging societies showed that female gathering of plants, nuts, and berries not only was an equal source of food for many communities but for some

supplied the predominant food source.¹⁷ In addition, related females and their children generally gathered as a group, not in isolation.

Females also bonded with one another. Particularly in matrilineal societies (in which a male joins his spouse in the location of her mother's family), they worked together in procuring and processing food. Women, too, were toolmakers. They fashioned digging tools, invented weaving and basket making, and created slings to carry children, freeing their hands to gather food. Women invented tools for chopping and grinding gathered foods and containers for cooking and storage. Women in their work as gatherers and food processors were the primary creators of the technology that turned the raw into the cooked, plant and animal matter into clothes and containers. In their role as plant gatherers, they were probably the first to learn to scatter seeds to grow new plants.¹⁸

Some women paleoanthropologists also challenged the dogma of a primordial division of labor between male hunters and female gatherers dating to early hominid or even prehuman primates. They suggested that a long period of scavenging young, weak, or dead animals preceded organized hunting, with both males and females participating equally in such scavenging.¹⁹

In their landmark book *The Female of the Species*, M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies describe matrilineal and matrilineal social organization as enduring and stable rather than rare and aberrant. Starting from the premise that the mother-child dyad is the core human group, they regard matrilineal and matrilineal societies as originally much more widespread in early foraging societies than they are now, although not universal. In these societies, the grandmother was the central ancestress, with her children and grandchildren clustered around her in an extended family. Men, rather than women, moved between matrilocal extended households. The male gained access to a wife through serving her and her family, although he retained his relationship to his own mother's household and lineage. Male leadership was provided by brothers of the matrilineal group.²⁰

Matrilineal societies flourished particularly in situations of relative abundance, where there was not severe competition for resources. Such situations were common for early human foragers, who gathered food in regions that later became sites for the development of agriculture. In a 1965 symposium on "man the hunter," the mostly male contributors disputed the assumption that foraging societies were driven by scarcity and were always on the brink of starvation. On the contrary, they described this way of life as "the most successful and persistent adaptation man has ever achieved"—much more successful than the way of life initiated by the agricultural revolution and industrialization, which the writers saw as bringing humans to the

brink of annihilation in the second half of the twentieth century. This early abundance and the ease of the foraging lifestyle that sustained humanity for 99.9 percent of its history have been obscured as patriarchal agricultural and industrial societies have taken over these regions, pushing foragers into marginal areas of the world.²¹

Martin and Voorhies point out that matriliney and patriliney are not fixed alternatives. Humans throughout history have created a complex variety of kinship patterns that include both paternal and maternal kin. Bilineal descent is common in many societies. For example, in the Tiwi culture in Australia, men trace their ancestors patrilineally for the purpose of allotting territory, whereas marriage is organized matrilineally through a common grandmother.²² Women's status varies greatly in patrilineal societies, depending on the extent to which women retain control of the fruits of their own labor, which they allocate to the family or market, and on whether they inherit and control land or other means of wealth from their own families. Simply proving that women have a large work role in a society says nothing about women's status unless one can also show that they control the means of production and the fruits of their work.

Although men tend to be the hunters of large game and women the gatherers of plant food in surviving foraging societies, this division of labor is by no means fixed. When animals are hunted by driving them into a trap, men and women both participate. Women often hunt and catch smaller animals. In the Tiwi culture, women both gather plant food and hunt smaller land animals, while the men primarily focus on fishing and catching birds.²³ The work assigned to women varies greatly in different societies. In some fishing cultures, women are the primary fishers or the gatherers of shellfish.²⁴ The basic rule of foraging societies is that no one, except the very young, is a passive, dependent nonproducer. The work involved in procuring and processing food demands the skills of both male and female, beginning at an early age. The model of family based on a male provider and a female dependent is a product of projecting the ideology of the industrial middle-class household of modern society back onto Paleolithic times.

Martin and Voorhies see patrilineal and patrilocal societies developing in foraging and early gardening societies in two contexts: in regions of scarcity and harsh competition for resources; and in situations of abundance, when early agriculture and trade create the possibility of surplus wealth.²⁵ With the development of gardening, very likely initiated by female food gatherers, people begin to claim particular plots of land for ongoing use, and this land is marked off as controlled by specific cultivators. Domestication of plants allows the accumulation and storage of food. Trade develops, as people exchange food, artisan work such as pottery, and espe-

cially useful materials, such as obsidian or special kinds of stone or wood, between different regions.²⁶ Work to accumulate wealth replaces a less hurried way of life in which food was simply gathered for each day. The accumulation and storage of wealth creates divisions between wealthier and poorer members of the society, in contrast to the community of foragers, in which food was not accumulated and all shared on a relatively equal level.

In this new situation of the quest for surplus wealth, the female role as worker, not the female as helpless dependent, is the root of her subjugation in developing patrilineal and patrilocal societies. Men accumulate wealth by accumulating a female workforce. Women are married out of their natal households and located in the household of their husbands, where they lose the support system of their own parents, sisters, and brothers. Polygyny is the way in which males accumulate wealth, by acquiring many female workers. Yet not all polygyny is experienced as oppressive by women. In some cases, especially when the wives are related, they bond, work as a team, and effectively control their common husband.²⁷

Anthropologists such as Martin and Voorhies generally describe foraging societies as egalitarian, but this primarily means that there is no class hierarchy, although some individuals may be given higher status. Men and women play complementary roles in hunting and food gathering, but these roles can be organized in various ways that may or may not concede decision-making roles to women. Some hunting-gathering or hunting-gardening societies in which women have a large work role and provide the majority of the food can nevertheless feature male violence against women.²⁸ Thus, work role complementarity in foraging and gardening societies cannot necessarily be idealized as a blissful time of equality between men and women.

REDISCOVERING “ORIGINAL MATRIARCHY”

As women anthropologists struggled to map the complexity of male-female roles and actual power relations in preindustrial societies, a renewed feminist movement was raising questions about the origins of patriarchy. In this context of the 1970s, the nineteenth-century theory of original matriarchy as a time of female power, harmony, and justice resurfaced. The writings of nineteenth-century matriarchalists such as Bachofen, Gage, and Harrison were rediscovered and heralded as a revelation of the true history of gender relations, long concealed by triumphant patriarchy.

This literature, however, had been totally discredited among professional anthropologists and archaeologists. Women archaeologists became increasingly concerned with the way in which archaeology was being cited as proof of this story of

original matriarchy. They wanted to clearly distinguish their own carefully scientific studies, which vindicated larger roles for women in early human societies, from such revived matriarchal theory.²⁹ But their critique was not widely known outside professional circles. It did not deter the popularity of the theory among a new wave of cultural feminists, often linked with a reclaimed Goddess worship, seen as the original religion of humanity.

A major authority for the new matriarchalism and Goddess quest of the 1980s and 1990s has been Marija Gimbutas, archaeologist and cultural historian of Neolithic “Old Europe” and author of such treatises as *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982) (originally *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, 1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). Gimbutas’s credentials as an archaeologist gave scientific credibility to the new matriarchalism for popularizers such as Riane Eisler (*The Chalice and the Blade*, 1987) and Charlene Spretnak (*The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, 1982.)³⁰

In her successive books, which are copiously illustrated, Gimbutas not only describes the extraordinary pottery and figurines of Neolithic cultures in the Balkans from 7000 to 3000 BCE but also embeds these images and artifacts in a story of great mythic power. It is this narrative that has caught the imagination of those women and men who are engaged in a search for a more life-sustaining deity and spirituality in the midst of modern dehumanization and threatened ecocide. This narrative is so symbolically compelling that it has become a kind of dogma for many people involved in this Goddess quest. Disputing its details is treated as a treasonous heresy directed against feminist hopes, perpetrated by heartless academics. The emotionality of this debate indicates the high stakes it involves.³¹

What are the stakes involved in this debate? The Gimbutas narrative tells of a time before patriarchy, war, and violence when humans lived together peacefully and were in harmony with nature, a time when both men and women revered the female as the immanent power of renewal in nature that carried life through creation, growth, decline, death, and renewal of life. Gimbutas suggests that this egalitarian, peaceful time reigned from human beginnings well into the Neolithic agricultural revolution, not only in a restricted region of the Balkans and the northeastern Mediterranean but worldwide, and was also the original culture of all the great civilizations of Asia.³²

In her view, this happy time was destroyed by a small group of militaristic, patriarchal nomads who originated in the Russian steppes and swept down on horseback into southern Europe in successive waves (4400–4300 BCE, 3500 BCE, and 3000 BCE), conquering the unprotected, peaceful peoples of these regions and imposing

their patriarchal culture and way of life on them. The matricentric, goddess-worshipping folk of Old Europe and the eastern Mediterranean eventually amalgamated with their conquerors, although they kept remnants of their own cultures, which are preserved in the surviving goddess figures from the historic cultures of the Near East, Greece, and Rome. This goddess-centered subculture also survives in European folklore down to our own time.

This narrative is a powerful identity myth for some European and American women and men. It allows them to imagine a peaceful, matricentric, and ecologically sustainable culture as their own “original culture” and to disown the patterns of patriarchy, violence, and domination that have characterized Western culture from its alleged roots in the ancient Near East and Greece. By imagining a time—indeed, the primeval time—before this culture of violence and domination, one can also imagine a time after it, a day when Euro-Americans can reclaim their original and more authentic mothering, peaceful, ecologically sustainable cultural selves. The culture of patriarchal domination of women and nature thus loses its claim to primacy and “naturalness” and becomes a “bad interlude” that can be overcome.

This narrative provides a basis for a modern countercultural identity that is very empowering for those who seek such an alternative to the looming disasters of modern industrialism and militarism. Two questions need to be asked, however. First, is this narrative historically true? Asking this question is not simply academic quibbling. It goes to the heart of how we tell the story of our past in order to mediate our future. If we tell the story of our past in a way that significantly distorts the knowable evidence, we may not understand how we got to be the way we are and, more important, what we really need to do to change. Second, as a myth, does this narrative mediate real liberating transformation for women and men? We must consider the possibility that it contains the very assumptions that have caused our problems and hence may tie us to and reproduce these same problems rather than helping us overcome them.

These two questions are asked and answered in the negative in Cynthia Eller’s book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future*.³³ I am in basic agreement with this book; yet the critique needs further discussion. We should give Gimbutas’s work its due, while also recognizing its faults. To this end, I recount Gimbutas’s argument in further detail.

Before she embarked on her major publications, Marija Gimbutas was an established archaeologist who had participated in major excavations in regions such as Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and the Balkans³⁴ and who had amassed a huge inventory of Neolithic artifacts, pottery, and figurines from the entire area of southern Eu-

rope and the eastern Mediterranean. Her first major interpretive work was published in 1974 under the title *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*. Its republication in 1982, with a new title that reversed the relation of gods to goddesses, framed the images she described more explicitly in the context of a story of an original peaceful “paradise” and the “fall” into violent patriarchy. In the ten years between the first and second editions of this book, Gimbutas had apparently become convinced that the existing artifacts must be understood by placing them into this narrative frame.³⁵

But this interpretive frame does not deeply penetrate the main text itself. We read of Neolithic village cultures located in regions of Greece and the Balkans into the mid-Danube that had successfully domesticated a range of plants and animals, produced sophisticated pottery and figurines, and established trade and commerce. Gimbutas’s main contribution is that she validated this region as an area of autonomous cultural achievements, not simply as an outpost of the developments in the Near East and Greece.

In this second edition, we hear about a predominance of female figures, with a focus on fat buttocks, breasts, and bellies as well as elaborate costumes, hair arrangements, masked faces. There are miniature models of houses in which bulls’ horns and female figures are featured together with domestic implements, ovens, grindstones, and chimneys. These Gimbutas interprets as representations of “shrines.” A large number of animals are part of the imagery: snakes, fish, birds, bears, bees, butterflies, pigs. Almost all the images are seen as expressions of a unitary Goddess who governs birth, death, and regeneration. The identification of these images as expressions of the Goddess is carried primarily by Gimbutas’s assertions; there often seems to be little reason to see fish, bears, or birds as female rather than as male, or as not gendered at all.

Gimbutas concedes that a few images, such as those of phalluses and figures with prominently erect penises, are indeed male, but she describes male representations as marginal to the overwhelming predominance of images associated with the Goddess. She also concedes that snakes represent the male penis. We are told dogmatically that this was a female-dominated culture, but the author cites little to prove this assertion, other than the assumption that the existence of many female images means a female-dominated culture. But we know all too well from other cultures, such as contemporary India or even the Christian Middle Ages, that the existence of many female religious images does not equal female domination.

Gimbutas’s next major publication, *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), attempts to gather the symbols found on these figurines and pottery into a comprehensive system in order to interpret their meaning. Gimbutas sees the various decorative

patterns—Vs, Ms, zigzags, and the like—as a proto-writing for a form of pre-Indo-European language that is as yet indecipherable. Much of this attempt to identify symbols with definite meanings seems overly assertive. Are zigzags always rain? Are Vs always pubic triangles? It challenges credulity when Gimbutas confidently identifies megalithic stone altars in temples in Malta that have a slightly tapering lower end as “pubic triangles.”³⁶ Reviewers have questioned Gimbutas’s penchant for finding definite female gender symbols in every cross, double or triple line, or circle.³⁷

In *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas develops what she sees as the underlying religion of the Goddess. She claims that these ancient peoples did not worship a variety of images of life in localized expressions. Instead, she argues, they had one unified understanding of the Goddess as the power of creation and re-creation underlying all life and renewal of life throughout the whole region (the whole world?). All these many images of females in various forms, of diverse animals, and of natural phenomena such as rain were understood as expressions of a unitary female deity. Symbolic colors such as black and white had a meaning opposite from the one they acquired later in patriarchal cultures; black, for instance, symbolized the fertile earth, while white was the expression of death. Stiff, white female figurines represented the Goddess in her death aspect.

Gimbutas thus defines belief in a monotheistic Goddess, the unitary power of life and renewal of life underlying the process from gestation and birth to death and rebirth, as a shared religion of all these peoples. The earth as the place of burial was identified with the mother’s womb. In descending into the earth for burial in womb-shaped underground temples, one was at the same time affirming a faith in the rebirth of nature from death. These ancient people thus had no fear of death, understanding it as an integral part of the life process. This is an attractive worldview for contemporary ecofeminist spirituality, but can we know that this is what ancient people understood as their own worldview? Much of Gimbutas’s reconstruction of the Goddess religion seems eisegesis—that is, it involves reading into ancient artifacts a predetermined worldview in which she already has come to believe.

In her culminating tome, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991), Gimbutas offers more definite data to support her view of an original matricentric society overrun by patriarchal militarists. For nonarchaeologists who have not seen this data firsthand, this book seems to be her most convincing work. But the fact that other archaeologists who have studied this same data, including women with a feminist perspective, strongly dispute her interpretations should give one pause.³⁸ In this work, Gimbutas insists that she is not talking about a primitive *matriarchy*. In other words, women did not hold dominating power over men in a way that paralleled male power

over women in patriarchy. Rather, she claims that Neolithic European archaeological evidence discloses societies that were matricentric and matrilineal. The female descent group stayed together, and men married into the female-headed clan. This, Gimbutas says, can be deduced from evidence from graves in which the females are related to each other but the males are strangers.³⁹ She does not ask where these women's brothers are. They would have been related to the females, and matrilineal societies usually give leadership to brothers/uncles. She simply assumes that the males in the graves were all from other groups.

In her reconstruction of the social structure of these societies, Gimbutas seems reluctant to assign the males any leadership roles at all, hardly a pattern that has been observed in actual matrilineal peoples, including the famous matrilineal Iroquois, whose council of mothers stood behind and monitored the council of Iroquois chiefs.⁴⁰ According to Gimbutas, the societies of Old Europe were run exclusively by a council of women from the leading clans, headed by a priestess-queen. Men performed skilled roles as artisans and engaged in trade and commerce, but women governed the society as a whole, centered in its religious rites.

Despite the use of terms such as "queen," Gimbutas insists that she is talking about totally egalitarian societies in which men and women were fully equal. Men apparently were satisfied to ply their trades while ceding religious and political rule to women. It is hard to imagine males who have control of the sources of wealth in their hands yielding religious and political power exclusively to women for thousands of years. Archaeologists counsel caution in assuming that existing gatherer and horticultural peoples who have survived into modern times exhaust the possibilities of what might have existed in prehistory.⁴¹ Yet it is significant that feminist anthropologists such as those cited earlier have found no societies with exclusively female leadership, as Gimbutas describes, among the varied options.

In existing matrilineal societies, major spheres of power are given to males, even if their leadership roles are derived from their mothers. No society gives women all the public power roles in government and religion. Moreover, relative egalitarianism does not in itself prove that a society is matrilineal and matrilineal. Foraging societies are egalitarian in the sense of lacking class hierarchy, but they are not necessarily matrilineal and matrilineal. Although matrilineality may have once been more common than it is now, recall that Martin and Voorhies see patrilineal and patrilineal societies developing even in foraging societies in the context of food scarcity and a struggle for resources. (Perhaps such a situation explains the origins of Gimbutas's patriarchal, militarist horsemen from the Russian steppes.)

But the societies Gimbutas describes are not made up of foragers but of agricul-

turalists, with domesticated animals and plants, a developed material culture, and trade. Such a society allows accumulation of surplus wealth, a situation in which one would expect some class hierarchy to develop. Patrilineal and patrilocal patterns generally predominate in these societies. Gimbutas's efforts to explain away the existence of larger and smaller houses—and even palaces, in the case of Minoan society—by arguing that they are not evidence of class hierarchy seems highly strained. Indeed, her predilection for the term “queen” to refer to the presumed female clan head of these societies hardly squares with a lack of class hierarchy.

Gimbutas insists that all the artifacts she has uncovered point to overwhelming female predominance. Males are hardly represented at all, never as fathers, and not in any way that suggests dominance. But she strengthens this impression by assigning virtually all the symbolism to women, unless a particular symbol is clearly and obviously phallic—snakes, phalluses, and male figurines with erect penises, for example. The minimizing of male presence in the symbolic system rests on several other questionable assumptions. One is that the people of these societies failed to recognize any relation between the male sexual act and female gestation. Fatherhood was unknown, Gimbutas repeatedly asserts. Yet she explains the prominence of phallic symbols as representing the male “stimulating” principle—that is, the stimulation of the Goddess's fertility. It is hard to know what this means if it does not connect male insemination with female fertility.

Gimbutas also contradicts herself on the question of recognized paternity. In the conclusion of *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, she states that “phallicism certainly had no obscene allusion; in the context of religious ritual it was a form of catharsis, not of symbolic procreation. There is no evidence that in Neolithic times mankind understood biological conception.” Yet in the introduction to *The Language of the Goddess*, she dates the lack of knowledge of paternity back to Paleolithic times, asserting that Neolithic people were very keen observers of nature and certainly understood “the paternal role in the process of reproduction.”⁴²

One very prominent set of symbols in many of the Neolithic cultures Gimbutas examines involves the heads and horns of bulls. Sculptured bulls' heads (bucrania) and bulls' horns are found in many of the shrines she describes throughout the region, from the Balkans to the eastern Mediterranean. They are, for example, central to the shrines of the seventh-millennium Anatolian town of Çatal Hüyük. The bull cult also played a major role in Minoan culture, and memories of the Mediterranean bull cult survive in the Spanish tradition of bull fights. In cattle-raising societies, bulls are generally located in the male sphere of power, and bull symbolism is associated with male virility, power, and wealth.

Gimbutas, however, removes this entire set of symbols from the male to the female sphere. She does this by arguing that these horned heads actually represent the female womb and fallopian tubes. She shows a representation of these female reproductive organs from a modern medical book, in which they appear, with some imagination, somewhat like a bull's head and horns.⁴³ But the likelihood of Neolithic people observing these organs at all, much less perceiving a resemblance to a bull's head and horns, is far-fetched indeed. By transferring bucrania from the male to the female sphere, Gimbutas conveniently redefines what was probably the most central symbol of male virility in her cultural artifacts.

Perhaps the most dramatic part of *Civilization of the Goddess* is the concluding chapter, "The End of Old Europe: The Intrusion of Steppe Pastoralists from South Russia and the Transformation of Europe."⁴⁴ In this chapter, Gimbutas describes the successive invasions of the people she calls "Kurgans" (from the name of their barrow-type funeral mounds). Unlike the inhabitants of Old Europe, the Kurgans had domesticated the horse and used horses for military forays against neighboring peoples. The Kurgans lacked the sophisticated agriculture, the artisan work, and the trade of the peoples of Old Europe, but they had a developed arsenal of weapons.

Drawing evidence from excavations of graves and villages, Gimbutas details what she describes as the decisive shift that overtook the peoples of Old Europe with the successive incursions of these invaders from the north. The graves of earlier times, she writes, showed little difference between men and women in the goods buried with the deceased, and the villages lacked hill forts. But with the arrival of the Kurgans, new patterns developed: rich grave goods of gold and weapons in the barrows of leading males, hilltop forts, and evidence of violent death and human sacrifice. Gimbutas sees these incursions as the sole impetus for the transformation of the cultures in southern Europe and the Mediterranean from peaceful, matricentric cultures to patriarchal, militaristic ones. Some island areas, such as Crete, were not affected as early and thus retained their matricentric, egalitarian societies into the second millennium, but they too eventually succumbed to the new patriarchal ways. Other peoples, such as the Etruscans, who preceded the Romans in central Italy, also preserved the old matricentric culture.⁴⁵

Several archaeologists who have worked in some of the same areas as Gimbutas question her interpretation, however. Ruth Tringham, for example, believes that Gimbutas has ignored evidence of fortification, inequality, and human sacrifice in earlier sites in order to fit her thesis.⁴⁶ One need not dispute the possibility that invasions of nomadic peoples, covetous of the wealth of agricultural settlements, had some effect in spurring the development of military defense in settlements in south-

ern Europe and the Mediterranean. But these settlements did not experience one commanding series of invasions from a single place, the Russian steppes. Rather, there were continual invasions of surrounding peoples from many directions, who entered more settled areas and amalgamated culturally with the existing societies. Gimbutas's thesis that peaceful, goddess-worshipping, matriarchal societies experienced waves of invasions from one area by patriarchal militarists with a completely different culture is not history.

Gimbutas compares the Kurgans' invasion of undefended, peaceful southern Europe to the horse-riding Spaniards who swept through Central and South America, quickly overcoming a people who lacked war horses.⁴⁷ But the comparison begs the question. The indigenous peoples of Mexico and Peru, who lacked both horses and wheeled vehicles, had already developed, over more than a thousand years, a patriarchal, militarist, highly stratified class society that practiced human sacrifice. Clearly, the presence or absence of horses is not the sole determinant for the development of such societies.

The major archaeological site often used as "proof" of a peaceful, matricentric, goddess-worshipping culture in the Neolithic era of Old Europe has been the town of Çatal Hüyük, which flourished in the central plain of Anatolia between 6500 and 5600 BCE. The discovery and excavation of Çatal Hüyük by British archaeologist James Mellaart pushed back the history of urban development in the ancient Near East several millennia and showed that well-developed centers of trade existed in Anatolia long before the urban centers of the Sumerians in the Tigris and Euphrates delta.⁴⁸ The people of Çatal Hüyük domesticated more than a dozen types of plants. They also domesticated sheep and goats, which were probably used primarily for wool and milk, and had begun to domesticate cattle. Large game hunting played a key role in the cultural life of the people of Çatal Hüyük, who hunted aurochs (a species of cattle), wild pigs, deer, and leopards. Leopards were especially valued for their skins, which were used in ritual hunting dances. The domesticated dog played a role in hunting.

The site of Çatal Hüyük is distinguished by its elaborate wall paintings and plastered reliefs in what Mellaart describes as domestic shrines scattered within the houses. Many of these wall paintings seem to portray woven wall hangings, indicating the extensive development of textiles. Some of the designs are still seen in woven rugs in the area today.⁴⁹ Mellaart speculates that the limited area of the town excavated during the period from 1961 to 1963 had probably been the "priestly quarter," because it contained a larger number of these domestic shrines than other areas did.

The architecture of Çatal Hüyük consisted of one-story houses linked together

to form a continuous outer wall. Inhabitants entered the main rooms through a hole in the roof, from which a ladder descended. Small passageways connected the main rooms with adjoining storage rooms and courtyards used to dispose of trash and human waste. The interior of the main rooms contained sleeping and work platforms as well as a hearth and an oven positioned so that the smoke could ascend through the opening in the roof. Twelve successive building levels were constructed, one over the other, during the settlement's eight-hundred-year history, until the site was abandoned for unknown reasons. There is no evidence that the town was ever conquered by outsiders.

Mellaart's feminist interpreters have exaggerated his descriptions considerably, claiming to see in the unbroken longevity of Çatal Hüyük evidence of a time before war and violence in human relations. They describe the town as unwallled and lacking any evidence of weapons.⁵⁰ But this contradicts Mellaart's interpretation. He views the continuous wall formed by the linked houses and the rooftop openings as a very effective defense system, which prevented neighboring peoples who might have coveted the settlement's wealth from conquering it. "Even if an enemy succeeded in breaching the wall he found himself in a closed room from which the ladder has no doubt been removed with the defenders waiting for him on the roof. To take the settlement would involve close fighting from house to house in a maze of dwellings which would be enough to discourage the attacker. . . . It is also clear that the people of this city were sufficiently well equipped with slingshot, bow and arrow, lance and spear to keep any attacker well away from the foot of the wall."⁵¹ Likewise, Mellaart does not consider relations among Çatal Hüyük's residents to have been particularly peaceful. He notes a number of head wounds on the skeletons and suggests that there had been much quarreling and fighting among the inhabitants, reflecting the "rabbit-warren" nature of the closely packed quarters.⁵²

Mellaart believes that the people of Çatal Hüyük disposed of their dead by exposing them on platforms well away from the site. When vultures and insects had stripped the bodies of their flesh, the bones were collected and buried under the platforms in the houses. Women and children were buried under the larger platforms, while only adult males were buried under the smaller platforms. Grave goods provide evidence of female and male cultural differentiation: females are typically buried with cosmetics, mirrors, and jewelry; males are buried with weapons and belt fasteners.⁵³

Feminist interpreters of Mellaart, such as Anne Barstow, note that the female platforms were larger than those of the males, citing this as evidence that women enjoyed a higher status than men.⁵⁴ But this is not Mellaart's assumption. Rather, he

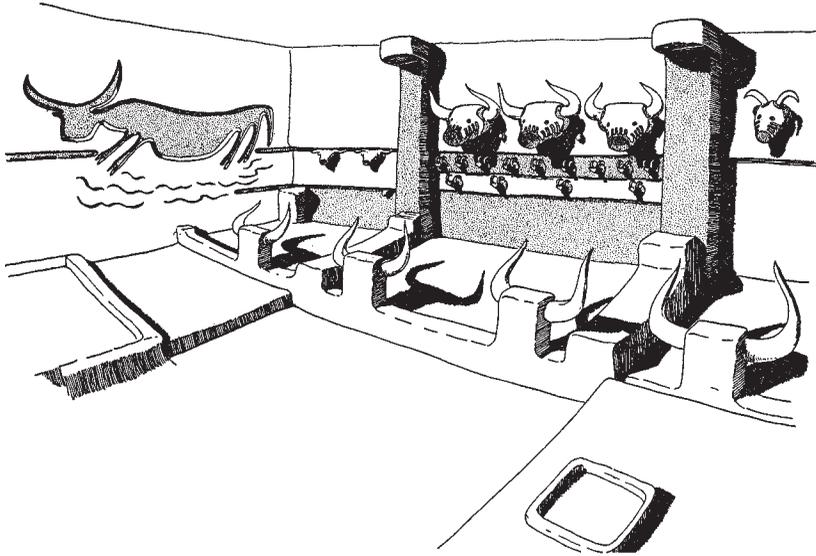


FIGURE 2

Bull, bucrania, and bulls' horns, seventh millennium BCE. Drawing from bas-relief, Çatal Hüyük. Life-size silhouettes of the bull, lively and naturalistic, were cut into the plaster wall and painted bright red. Bucrania (stylized bulls' heads) and horns set on pillars served as altars and ritual benches. (From James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1967])

sees the female platforms as larger because women not only slept there but also did indoor work with their children. Males worked outdoors and used their platforms for sleep. More recent excavations on the site by Ian Hodder have further eroded the impression that larger platforms identified with women meant that the women had higher status than the men.⁵⁵

Gimbutas, Eisler, and others describe Çatal Hüyük as centered on the worship of a Mother Goddess, writing that the shrines were dominated by images of a goddess giving birth. They also argue that the importance of this Mother Goddess was evidenced by the many small figurines of females with large breasts and buttocks found in niches of the houses and grain bins. However, a study of Mellaart's reconstruction of the sculptured and painted decorations of the domestic shrine rooms presents a much more complicated picture. Some paintings focus on hunting scenes, with representations of bulls, bears, or stags surrounded by excited figures, some waving weapons, others dressed in leopard skins. Some seem to be dancing, while others

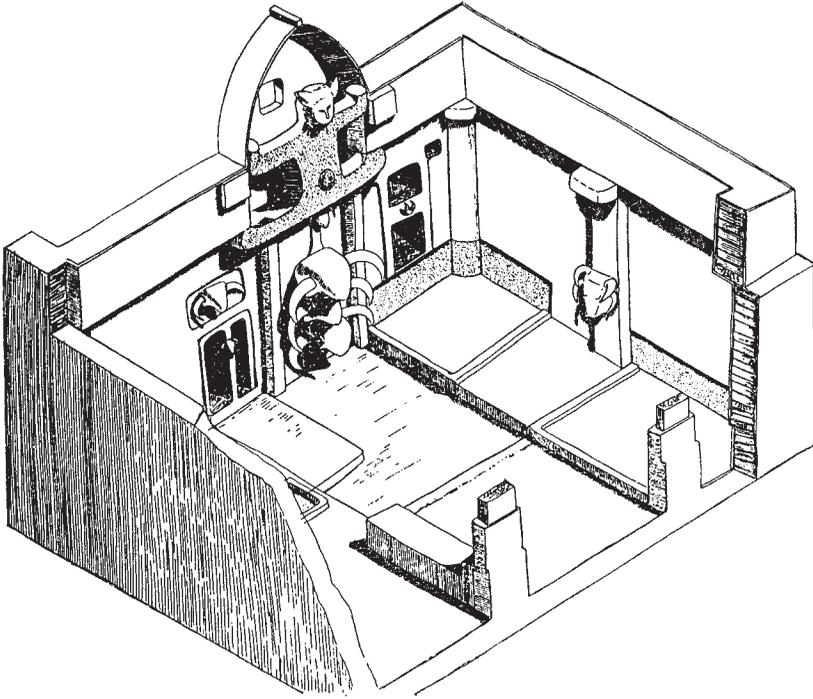


FIGURE 3

Leaping figure with catlike ears, above bulls' heads, seventh millennium BCE. Drawing from bas-relief, Çatal Hüyük. Three life-size plaster heads are superimposed in the wall below; actual skull plates with attached horns of the animals are embedded in the plaster. (From James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1967])

are tumbling over the backs of the animals. These human figures in hunting scenes portray what was perhaps a ritualized form of the hunt, in anticipation of actual hunts. Mellaart sees the human figures as entirely male, led by male priests clad in leopard skins.⁵⁶

The majority of the shrine rooms are dominated by the image of the bull. Large painted figures of bulls, bulls' heads, multiple bulls' horns are strikingly evident (fig. 2). In some of the shrines, an anthropomorphic figure with arms raised and legs spread apart horizontally from the body with feet straight up was placed in plaster relief above the bulls' heads (fig. 3). This figure Mellaart interprets as a "goddess giving birth." His interpretation of this figure was decisive for his own view that a "cult of fertility" played a central role in Çatal Hüyük, though others have

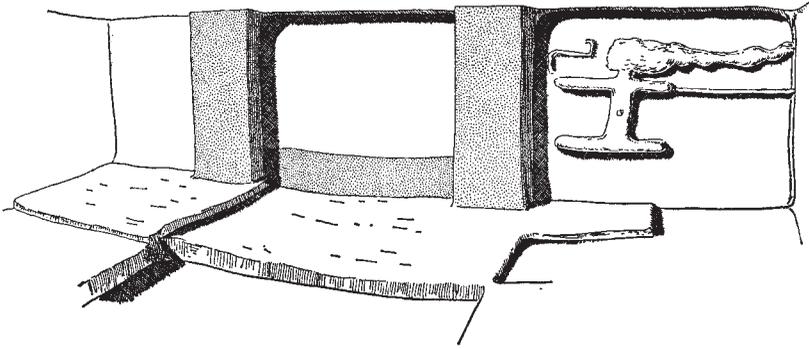


FIGURE 4
Leaping figure, seventh millennium BCE. Drawing from bas-relief, Çatal Hüyük.
The youthful figure has her arms and legs stretched wide, her hair floating behind her.
(From James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1967])

disputed this labeling.⁵⁷ The spread-legged figure with raised arms typically does not have breasts, usually has a flat belly with what appears to be an umbilical “button,” has no pubic triangle or vulva, but often does have what look like cat’s ears.⁵⁸ The body position of this figure is hardly that normally assumed by women giving birth. The raised arms might suggest an “orante,” or praying figure. But the ears, the horizontal legs, and the upturned feet suggest a partly feline figure that appears to be leaping.

A similar plaster figure, with legs extended horizontally on both sides, head turned, and hair streaming backward, is clearly leaping or flying through the air (fig. 4). Sometimes two such anthropomorphic figures of the same size appear together. These Mellaart interprets as a paired goddess, the Great Mother and Daughter.⁵⁹ In several cases, however, one figure has breasts and the other does not, prompting one to at least ask whether they might be male and female. Nevertheless, one cannot escape noticing that the shrines are overwhelmingly dominated by bulls—large paintings of bulls and bulls’ heads and horns—suggesting that these are highly important symbols for the culture. Mellaart unhesitatingly views these as expressions of male virility. However one interprets the plaster figures above the bulls’ heads, whether birthing or leaping, it would appear that the people of Çatal Hüyük were particularly preoccupied with bulls, probably linked specifically with male hunting and hunting rites, if not virility.

A third type of symbolism in the shrines seems to focus on the rites of the dead.

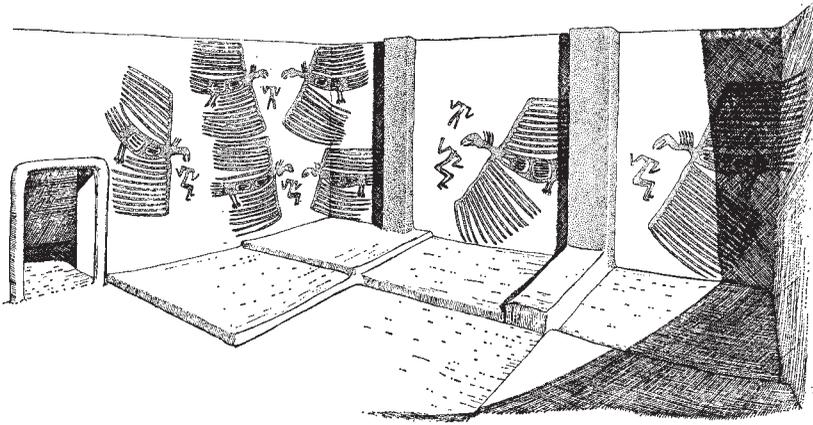


FIGURE 5

Vultures with wingspans of five feet swoop down on headless human corpses, seventh millennium BCE. Drawing from bas-relief, Çatal Hüyük. Three vultures fly toward the right, four toward the left in a continuous mural that wraps around the walls of the shrine. (From James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1967])

Giant vultures are pictured surrounding and pecking at headless stick figures (fig. 5). Sometimes other human figures are portrayed trying to fight off the vultures, a representation that is puzzling, given Mellaart's assumption that the community willingly exposed its dead to excarnation by these vultures.⁶⁰ Several shrines also contain rows of rounded reliefs molded over jaws of carrion birds in such a way that the beaks stick out in the middle. Mellaart interprets these as women's breasts,⁶¹ suggesting that the mother's breast was identified both with nurturing the young after birth and with stripping away flesh after death. The female breast is thus connected with the cycle of birth and death; the lactating breast is also the breast of death. If this is true, what does this mean about the view of women as "mothers" held by these people (or by Mellaart)? But since breasts usually come in pairs, not rows, one has to wonder about this interpretation.⁶²

In addition to the bulls' heads, plaster reliefs, and wall paintings, a number of small sculptures in the round have been found in Çatal Hüyük, many of them not in the shrines but in niches in the walls of the houses. The most striking is that of a female with large buttocks and breasts seated on a chair with arms resting on two leopards (fig. 6). Mellaart describes this as "the goddess giving birth."⁶³ But this description again seems questionable. A side view of the piece shows the female figure at ease,



FIGURE 6
Seated female figure between two leopards, seventh millennium
BCE. Çatal Hüyük. (Ankara Museum of Anatolian Civiliza-
tions; photo from James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic
Town in Anatolia* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1967])

resting back on her buttocks in a way that is not an obvious pose for giving birth. Her knees are almost together, and the round object between her feet does not appear to be an infant.

Several of the other figurines also depict females with large breasts and buttocks, although not with the distended bellies that might suggest advanced pregnancy. One rests her hands on her knees, another holds her breasts, while yet another holds animal cubs. One sculpture features four figures, two of which appear to be a male and a female in sexual union and the other two a mother and a child.⁶⁴ This sculpture seems to show an explicit connection between male-female sexual union and the mother-child relationship. The people of Çatal Hüyük were doubtless interested in sexual union and childbirth, but was it as dominating an idea as Mellaart and others assume?

When one studies the many “fat” female figurines collected by Gimbutas and oth-

ers from the European Paleolithic and Neolithic eras, it is remarkable how seldom these figures are either clearly pregnant, giving birth (that is, a child emerging from a female figure who is in a squatting, pushing position), or holding a child. Peter Ucko has studied hundreds of Neolithic figures from these regions and finds only six showing a female with child.⁶⁵ This relative absence of reference between these fat female figures and birth or children raises the question of whether archaeologists' interpretation of these rotund figures has not focused on the Mother Goddess—the deified female as birth giver—to the exclusion of other possible references.

The location of such figures in grain bins or in proximity to hearths and ovens might suggest a focus on food rather than birth. Perhaps their fatness celebrates the hope for abundant food rather than reproductive success as the major concern of the makers of these statues. Because the ability of humans to accumulate and retain body fat was a key way to survive periods of famine, fatness might have been prized.⁶⁶ The figures might have also referred to human fecundity, of course, although not necessarily as the only or main reference. Since women were connected with grain in all its phases, from planting, harvesting, and storage to grinding grain and baking bread, one might well imagine females as the creators of the small female figurines at Çatal Hüyük, in the context of promoting abundance of staple grains. My point in this suggestion is not to claim to know what those who made these objects had in mind, but simply to open the imagination to other options rather than prematurely closing it by declaring all such female figures to be “fertility goddesses,” pregnant and giving birth.

The concept of the Goddess as a monotheistic focus of religion, or even the idea of gods and goddesses as the references for figurines, itself needs to be questioned. How do we know that these people separated the natural forces in and around them from some “higher” or divine world of entities that they then thought of as “gods” or “goddesses”? Was there a “religion” separate from daily life? Feminist archaeologists, as noted earlier, have been highly critical of Gimbutas's reconstruction of an idyllic, matricentric world in Europe and the Mediterranean area during Paleolithic and Neolithic times, overthrown by Kurgan invaders from the Russian steppes. They have also questioned Mellaart's too ready interpretation of certain figures as representing a cult of the Mother Goddess in Çatal Hüyük, although he has not been the focus of a sustained critique.⁶⁷

Feminist archaeology, emerging in the mid-1980s, has been slower to develop than feminist anthropology, reflecting the greater difficulty women have had establishing themselves in the archaeological field. Feminist archaeologists such as Rita Wright, Margaret Conkey, Ruth Tringham, and Joan Gero have sought to establish careful

methodologies for both fieldwork and interpretation that counter the established dogmas of “man the hunter” propounded by structural-functionalism and sociobiology. Their aim has been to uncover a world of ancient humans that probably had a multiplicity of local economies, a world in which women were not simply helpless dependents but active participants in producing food; making and using tools; making pottery, baskets, and clothing; and creating symbolic representations.⁶⁸

This effort to establish credible feminist approaches to archaeology has been threatened by Gimbutas’s work, with her claims to archaeological credentials. The enormous enthusiasm for the work of Gimbutas and her followers in the popular culture and the disdain in which it is nonetheless held by most professional archaeologists put feminist archaeologists between a rock and a hard place. They needed to make clear their own critique of such work as professional archaeologists, while at the same time defending the appropriateness of raising feminist questions in archaeology, albeit in a way that would not be confused with Gimbutas’s approach.

This double critique is represented in a number of articles written by feminist archaeologists, featuring both discussion of methodological questions and their interpretations of particular excavations. These articles include several book reviews as well as more extended critiques such as Lynn Meskell’s “Goddesses, Gimbutas, and New Age Archaeology” and Margaret Conkey and Ruth Tringham’s “Archaeology and the Goddess: Exploring the Contours of Feminist Archaeology.” These reviews and articles severely question Gimbutas’s work, both for reading into her data an a priori worldview that cannot be proven by the archaeological findings and for ignoring or distorting data to bolster her conclusions.

As Tringham puts it in her review of *The Civilization of the Goddess*, “In page after page [Gimbutas] attempts to convince us of her interpretation of figures as representations of particular manifestations of the Goddess (p. 242), or buildings as shrines (p. 326), and of carvings as snakes and vulvas (p. 304), as well as that traditional archaeologists are mistaken or narrow-minded (p. 338) and that the evidence exists unequivocally to support *her* interpretation. Alternative interpretations are denied any validity or are often not considered at all.” The heart of Tringham’s critique is represented by the following statement: “Feminist archaeological research is based on a celebration of the ambiguity of the archaeological record and the plurality of its interpretation, and the subjectivity of the prehistories that are constructed as a part of its discourse. Gimbutas, however, has mystified the process of interpretation and has presented her own conclusions as objective fact.”⁶⁹

Meskell’s overview of Gimbutas’s work offers similar criticism. Far from undoing sexist interpretations of prehistory, Meskell argues, Gimbutas and other followers

of gynocentric theories have simply created a reversed sexist myth, which they have imposed on the data. “Thus they do not promote credibility; rather they damage and delimit the possible attributes of gender-based research, due to their poor scholarship, ahistorical interpretations, fictional elements and reverse sexism.” For Meskell, Gimbutas’s work is not only problematic in itself; in addition, its lack of credibility threatens the efforts of feminist archaeologists who want “the question of gender studies to be taken seriously in archaeological circles.”⁷⁰

Feminist archaeologists are fighting to defend the standing of their own work in a male-dominated field in which feminist questions are likely to be dismissed in advance. To have their efforts confused with the untenable ideologies and poor critical methods of Gimbutas would be a professional kiss of death. That they are not “neutral” critics of Gimbutas (and, indeed, their own methodology precludes such simplistic notions of “objectivity”) does not, in my opinion, negate the validity of their criticism, although it has perhaps prevented them from giving attention to those parts of Gimbutas’s work that might still have validity.

I believe that Gimbutas has given us an enormous number of intriguing images of ancient cultural artifacts that leave no doubt about the creativity of peoples in the Neolithic Balkans, regions that were previously not recognized as areas of autonomous culture. But I see the overall interpretative framework as lacking credibility. This failing threatens the validity of her interpretation at many points in her account and leads one to question whether evaluation of evidence may have been biased to build up the credibility of the overall story. Archaeologists who employ both a feminist perspective and careful methods of sifting data may be able to give us better-grounded accounts of the possible economies of early peoples in particular sites. But these archaeologists are hesitant to generalize from one site to another. They see any determination of the social organization of a community to be tentative, and reconstruction of a people’s inner worldview even more so. Thus, feminist archaeologists usually do not try to define the “big picture” that many long for in order to understand “how we got the way we are.” This leaves a large void, which myth-makers such as Gimbutas step in to fill.

I certainly cannot claim to provide the “big picture” of the social organization and inner life of early peoples and the transformation into the patriarchal, hierarchical patterns we find in early historical societies, such as that of the Sumerians in the third millennium BCE. Yet I can at least suggest some of the ways this development is likely to have happened. This tentative sketch is shaped by two questions. First, are we stuck with only two choices: a view based on “man the hunter,” with patriarchy as biologically determined and unchanging; or a view based on the ex-

istence of an early matriarchy that was later overthrown by violent patriarchalists? Second, is the story of “original matriarchy violently overthrown” the myth that we need today to overcome the deleterious effects of male domination and violence on subjugated peoples and on the earth? My answer to both questions is no.

Although a detailed and comprehensive answer to the first question may never be attainable, it is possible, thanks to feminist work in anthropology and archaeology, to state the outlines of a more likely story. Human prehistory from hominids through the Paleolithic and Neolithic worlds did not consist of men providers and protectors sheltering and feeding dependent women whose main job was cooking and caring for children. Such a model of the human family is an ideology born of the nineteenth-century, postindustrial British and American middle class. Most human families, even in modern times, have depended on the productive work of both adult women and adult men, as well as that of their children. Only in a small sector of the middle class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did the male “head of family” have such a large income that he could afford to dispense with the productive work of women and children. The “man the hunter” view of prehistory misreads not only prehistory but most of recent human history as well.⁷¹

Towns in the Neolithic Near East, such as Çatal Hüyük, also depended on the work of both males and females. Women very likely predominated in certain areas of endeavor, such as spinning and weaving. This would suggest that the stunning textiles found represented on the walls of the town were their creations. Food processing was undoubtedly in their hands. Probably they helped sow and harvest the grains and other plant food. The storage of grain was very likely also their sphere. Fat female figurines perhaps reflect the connection of the female and the hope of abundant bread. Males probably predominated in hunting, but women are likely to have milked the goats and made dairy products.

The so-called shrines do not represent one gender at the expense of the other, but a complex world of life and death—excited hunters dancing around powerful animals, bulls’ heads, and flying cat-eared human figures that are not clearly gendered. Men and women alike knew that their bodies would finally be stripped in death and their bones interred under the areas where they slept and worked. There is no reason to assume that the spectacle of great vultures tearing human flesh did not hold an element of terror for them. But the idea that they identified the female breast with these scavenging beaks of birds of death seems more a modern projection than a certain interpretation of the data.

There were probably no priestess-queens ruling the society and dominating the religious sphere exclusively, if indeed the religious sphere was so clearly differen-

tiated from daily life. If a priestly class existed, males and females likely each had their roles in it. Both men and women contributed to the products of daily survival; both sexes shaped the culture. But perhaps all was not well between them. They may have looked at each other with some suspicion, as one sex claimed power in hunting weapons and the energy of great bulls, and the other monopolized the storage bin and provision of grains. Conflict and tension between men and women are not precluded by collaboration for survival.

But the route that led from such early Neolithic towns—still based partly on hunting, but with agriculture, domesticated animals, textiles, and trade—to the hierarchical, slave-owning cities of the Sumerian world, with their royal and priestly classes, great temples, palaces, and organized war three millennia later, is doubtless a complex one, not a straight evolutionary line. The major stimulus for this development came less from outside nomadic invaders and their horses and more from internal developments triggered by the accumulation of wealth. As wealth began to be monopolized in the hands of the few, the majority, males and females, became subjugated as exploited labor for this leisured, ruling class who came to control most of the land.

One key shift from the early gardening and hunting societies of the Neolithic era took place with the development of plow agriculture and irrigation, probably during the fourth millennium BCE in some areas of the Near East. When hunting begins to disappear as a male occupation, men turn to larger-scale agriculture, using as a labor force the cattle they have come to control. Ethnographic studies show that plow agriculture generally displaces women from their earlier role in hand-hoed gardening. Men then control both sources of food supply, grains and animals. Women still have major work roles, particularly in expanded textile production and food processing. But male plow agriculture reshapes land ownership in a way that decisively moves societies in the direction of both class hierarchy and male domination over women.⁷²

That story is elaborated further in the next chapter. The second question, whether we need a myth of prehistoric matriarchy today, is answered more fully through the arguments of successive chapters. I have reservations about the usefulness of this myth for two reasons. First, it is not history and so cannot really help us understand how we got the way we are and how to change. Second, and even more important, it duplicates what I suspect is one of the key roots of the need of males to dominate females—namely, it identifies women predominantly as the representatives of the “natural.”

If women, and women alone, personify the forces of nature in the cycles of birth

and death, either they need to be dominated by men in order to control these forces of nature, or they are the primary gender that will somehow “save” us from the destructive effects of millennia of male domination of nature. I suggest instead that the only way we can, as human beings, integrate ourselves into a life-sustaining relationship with nature, is for both males and females to see ourselves as equally rooted in the cycles of life and death and equally responsible for creating a sustainable way of living together.