The Great Goddess Concept: Myth or Reality?

The latter half of the 20th and the first part of the 21st centuries may easily be seen as a time of spiritual revival. Some of this has been expressed as an intensification of Islamic, Christian, or Jewish fundamentalism. Another phenomenon has been the resurgence of a worldwide Goddess cult or Goddess movement in popular culture. The main thesis of this populist cult is clear. It proposes that during the evolution of humankind, and up until the invasion of war-like Indo-Europeans about five thousand years ago, there existed a peaceful, egalitarian civilization in Europe and the Near East that worshipped a Great Mother Earth Goddess. In this view, the social order and all economic and political power were based on women. Female divinities as reflected in oral and written mythology are viewed as survivals of this ancient religion and way of life.

“Remembering” and “reclaiming” the ancient civilization’s lost spirituality and millennia-long traditions of respect and reverence for women and our Earth Mother are considered by adherents of this movement to be key to a “more evolved consciousness.” Indeed, in the eyes of some, it is the only way to save ourselves and save our planet. Meanwhile, critics of the very existence of a prehistoric Great Mother Goddess are just as passionate in their rejection of this notion as are the “believers” in the primordial reality of matriarchy.

Our aim in this article is to describe how the Great Goddess concept is presented in our day, to outline how the concept has developed historically, to point out problems inherent in the concept, and to sketch what can – and cannot – be sustained by historical and anthropological data in the search for the traces of the Great Goddess. The article is limited in its scope; it is a brief reply to “The Great Goddess: Myth or Reality? (Didžioji deivė: mitas ar realybė?),” an episode of the television program series “The Ethnocultural Wheel (Etinkultūros ratas)” which aired on Lithuanian television in Autumn 2001.

Not surprisingly, Marija Gimbutas (1974, 1982, 1989, 1991; Gimbutienė 1996) was the main focus, since she is considered by many to be the Great Goddess cult’s main archaeological authority, but she is not the only proponent and she was not the first to champion this notion. Critical works that doubt the existence of a Goddess cult in prehistory have traced a deeper history of the concept of the Great Goddess and its development in the West (e.g., Eller 2000, Goodison and Morris 1998, Hutton 1997, Meskell 1995, Osborne 1998). These studies illustrate how the concept of the Great Goddess developed, in large part, during the past few centuries. These studies also demonstrate how the revival of the Great Goddess cult may relate more to recent sociocultural phenomena than to the ancient past.

The precise origin of the modern notion of a Great Goddess is difficult to trace. At some point there was a transformation from the worship of Civilization to a reverence towards Nature. A noted historian has placed the roots of a “back to Nature” ethos in a growing tendency, beginning in the 15th century, to believe that one should “live according to Nature. Nature is never wrong and [one err] by forgetting it” (Barzun 2000. – P. 125). Some historians (i.e., Hutton 1997)
begin the origin story with an account of the shift in the way in which goddesses were treated in European letters during the 18th century. Previously, just as in the classical ancient world, Goddesses were seen mainly as patronesses, or allegorical figures, representing all that was good in Civilization (Hutton 1997. – P. 91). With the Romantic movement, a Goddess is idealized as the moon and the spirit of the green earth, or, more simply “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature” (Hutton 1997. – P. 92, Smith 1984).

European intellectuals in the 18th century were debating the nature of prehistoric religion. Many arguments were presented contesting the notion that prehistoric religion was a superstitious compound of ignorance and fear. German scholars were the most active among those who argued that one of the eternal truths that had degenerated and been forgotten among most modern tribal peoples was monotheism. Also lost was the instinctive understanding of the processes of nature and of human life. Classicists drew support for the idea that a single great goddess existed in prehistory from ancient Anatolian and Mesopotamian cultures, assumed to be ancestral in some measure to the civilization of Greece. These ancient cultures contained some prominent deities associated with motherhood or the earth (Hutton 1997. – P. 92–93).

The notion of a single Great Goddess and a prehistoric matriarchy was already forming in some scientific works by the middle of the 19th century. At that time in 1861 a Swiss-German scientist, Johann Jakob Bachofen wrote the work “Das Mutterrecht (The Mother’s Rule/Mother Law).” He was primarily a scholar of Roman law and was not an archaeologist. In this publication, he argued that long, long ago, well before writing, but after or only a little before the appearance of farming, people worshipped a single Great Goddess who ruled over all of Nature, humankind included. The key elements in the worship of the Goddess were birth, fertility, and death. These were combined with the notion that the physical manifestation of the Goddess was represented by the Earth, caves, and the moon.

By this view, societies who worshipped the Great Goddess were assumed to have been matriarchal. The mother ruled in the family. Yet Gimbutas saw females as equal partners in a sort of glyly – an egalitarian society where both men and women ruled (Gimbutiene 1996. – P. 234). Some adherents of the notion of matriarchy have perverted it to appear as a mirror image of the idealized patriarchate. The era of the Great Goddess slowly transformed, for reasons not entirely clear, into a hierarchical, patriarchal, and polytheistic one. Echoes of this worldview are found in myths about how the sky gods killed reptilian or chthonic monsters, these having been Her symbols. Bachofen viewed this transformation as Great Progress, as a critical, fateful step in the progress of humankind and toward the establishment of the “true religion,” i.e., Christianity. (Goodison and Morris 1998. – P. 7, Hutton 1997. – P. 93, Osborne 1998. – P. 7).

Bachofen's work had a profound impact on many scholars. The famous ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, was then researching the evolutionary schemes of global societies. In his “Ancient Society” (1871), he supported Bachofen's thesis that a patrilineal stage followed a matrilineal stage in cultural evolution. As one of the pioneers in the study of North American Indians, he noted that in certain Indian societies, for example, the Iroquois, women's social status was clearly higher than in his own society. Iroquois women dominated in certain economic spheres; their role in politics and rituals was very important. Descent was matrilineal in this society. Morgan argued that this scheme of descent was changed to a male type when society became more sedentary and private property became common. In his “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State” (1884), Friedrich Engels used Morgan's and Bachofen's works. According to Engels, in the beginning it was the women who controlled the family's common property.

When agriculture appeared, men used and therefore owned farming tools, especially plows and domestic animals. With wisdom of hindsight, it is clear that both Morgan and Engels confused the concepts of matrilineality and matriarchy. The former is simply one of the many ways people recognize kinship; the latter concerns the ways in which power is distributed – the power to influence and coerce others to perform in a certain fashion. In his influential “Primitive Culture” (1871), Edward B. Tylor was also supporting the then universal model of cultural evolution. Societies were seen to have progressed from savagery to barbarism to civilization. He coupled each of these stages of social evolution with stages in the evolution of religious practice (animism, polytheism, and monotheism, respectively). Faced with a three-stage religio-cultural scheme and the dualism of patriarchal and matriarchal power structures, he spent much of his research life trying to understand the 'why' and 'when' of the demise of matriarchy and the rise of patriarchy (Harris 1968).

Parallel to the musings of ethnographers, the work of certain archaeologists added impetus to the growing tendency to assume that a feminine monotheistic deity was the rule in ancient prehistory. By the end of the 19th century, excavations of prehistoric sites in Southeast Europe and the Levant began to turn up many female figurines. Some major archaeologists, such as the English scholar, Sir Arthur Evans, interpreted such figurines as images of a prehistoric Great Goddess, assumed to have been at one and the same time Virgin and Mother. (Evans 1895. – P. 124–131, 1901. – P. 185, 1921. – P. ii, 45–52; Hutton 1997. – P. 93).

With the important exception of Soviet
anthropologists who persisted in the tradition of Engels (Gellner 1980), many cultural anthropologists dropped the idea of matrarchy rather abruptly around the turn of the century. The universalizing premises of evolutionary anthropology came under fire and the armchair anthropology upon which the matriarchal thesis largely relied upon was rejected in favor of a new emphasis on fieldwork. But while so many anthropologists dropped the matriarchal notion, leaders in other fields of study did not. One such example from the beginning of the 20th century was the work of a major British classicist who belonged to the Cambridge circle of scholars – Jane Ellen Harrison. In “Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion” (1903), she posited the previous existence of a peaceful and intensively creative woman-centered civilization, in which humans lived in harmony with Nature and their own emotions. Worship was centered on a single female deity, who represented the Earth and had three aspects, including those of Maiden and Mother (she did not name the third). A few maverick anthropologists such as E. S. Hartland and Robert Briffault persisted with the matriarchal theories, despite the jeers of most of their colleagues. Armchair anthropologist Sir James Frazer, in his widely popular work in comparative mythology, “The Golden Bough” (1911–1915), included much speculation on prehistoric goddess worship. (Eller 2000. – P. 32–33, Hutton 1997. – P. 93–94).

Many archaeologists persisted with the notion of a goddess religion as well. The theories of Jacquetta Hawkes, who wrote popular works in history and archaeology (i.e., Hawkes 1951, 1954, 1963, 1968) seemed legitimized by her general readership and by her authority as an archaeologist. Starting in the 1940s, Hawkes wrote of the megalith builders of Western Europe being converted to the religion of the Great Goddess of fertility by missionaries moving through the Mediterranean from the old center of Her cult in the Balkans and Levant (Hawkes 1945. – P. 16–18). During the mid-1950s, three renowned British archaeologists, G. Childe, O. G. S. Crawford, and G. Daniel, declared their belief that a single female deity was venerated by Neolithic cultures from the Atlantic Littoral to the Near East. Furthermore, Childe asserted that the Goddess image lay behind the medieval Christian veneration of female saints, while Crawford found traces of the Goddess in a range of folk customs (Childe 1954, Crawford 1957, Hutton 1997. – P. 96).

Specialists in the history and theory of religion were quick to take the existence of this single deity as an empirical truth, something also seen in the field of psychology. William Reich used it to buttress his claim that sexual freedom, even promiscuity, would result in more peaceful and harmonious, less repressed and patriarchal societies. (Eller 2000. – P. 32–33; Reich 1971). The Jungian psychoanalyst Erich Fromm used the matriarchal myth to argue against the inevitability of violence, aggression, and war. He argued that “the evidence for the universal goddess indicated that the archetype of the Great Mother had been a constant ‘inward image’ at work in the human psyche” (Neumann 1963. – P. 1–2,336).

Just as many feminists began believing these assertions and incorporating them into their worldview, many archaeologists were becoming increasingly skeptical of the entire idea (Goodison and Morris 1998). By the 1960s, some archaeologists began to publicly doubt the notion of a Great Goddess. Among others, Peter Ucko, in his work on anthropomorphic figurines from Egypt and Crete, and Andrew Fleming, in his seminal article “The Myth of the Mother Goddess,” pointed out the weak evidence and the massive assumptions built into the existing Goddess theories (Fleming 1969, Ucko 1968).

The New Processual Archaeology of the 1970s and early 1980s sought to explain social and economic change by the processes in which such change came about. Stressing the need for tangible data, this school of thought took a negative stance on the possibility of effectively studying religion through archaeological remains. However, several newer approaches to archaeological data emerged in the 1980s. The establishment of cognitive archaeology and gender or feminist archaeology created a renewed interest in studying the symbolic and ideological realms in archaeology and, in consequence, a revival of interest in the Great Goddess.

Many feminist scholars today enthusiastically affirm the Great Goddess religion interpretation. Yet it is precisely those archaeologists who are interested in a feminist interpretation of the archaeological data who are very critical of this theory. The conceptions of M. Gimbutas and the scenario she created have been the focus of most of the criticism, since she is the most often cited (though not necessarily correctly) archaeological authority. The central issue in the critique of Gimbutas and her Great Goddess theory is that she presented her informed, but often imaginative, interpretations as though they were empirical truths. Most archaeologists now acknowledge that archaeological interpretations are not indisputable facts and should not be presented as such. As have many scientific realms, archaeology has started to recognize the rules of science (Popper 1968). Any interpretation of an ancient society is a working hypothesis and must always be open to modification or rejection as further evidence or analysis emerges.

Other archaeologists have upheld the notion of multiple, equally valid "readings" of the past (i.e., Hodder 1986, 2000). Somewhat later than was the case in biology and paleontology (Mayr 1982), the problem of "essentialism" has been raised by gender archaeologists. To essentialize something is to reduce a complex idea/object to simplistic characteristics.

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thereby denying diversity and multiple meanings and interpretations” (Tringham and Conkey 1998. – P. 22).

Gender and post-processual archaeologists stress the plurality and multi-vocality of the archaeological record; we should inquire into the variable, dynamic, and historically-specific gender roles, relations, ideologies and identities (see, for example, Gero and Conkey 1991; Hodder 1986, 1992; Hodder, et al. 1997). But this sort of gender research runs against authoritarian and totalizing accounts of the past such as those in popular culture views of the Goddess. In a totalizing account, the whole of European prehistory is treated as a homogenous entity as regards religion and social organization. The figurine-rich archaeological record of Neolithic Southeast Europe is taken as being representative of what was occurring across the entire continent. Gender roles are also homogenized, ignoring the agency of prehistoric men and women as well as their variable roles, identities, and practices. The inference from artifact to interpretation is mystified. Ambiguities in the archaeological record are hidden (Conkey and Gero 1991, Tringham 1993, Tringham and Conkey 1998).

A major archaeological source from which data are taken for interpretations of the Great Goddess religion are anthropomorphic figurines (Bailey 1996, Biehl 1996, Marcus 1996, Tringham and Conkey 1998, Ucko 1996). Most researchers believe that not all figurines necessarily had only the one function usually attributed to them, that being an image or representation of a Goddess. Many East Baltic archaeologists, for example, interpret anthropomorphic figurines as vestiges of an ancestor cult (Gurina 1956, Rimantienė 1984, Zagorskis 1987). Other possible interpretations of their functions include teaching devices, toys, “primitive contracts,” or tools of sorcery, magic, healing, or initiation (Ehrenberg 1989). There is, moreover, the strong possibility that the prehistoric individuals who fashioned and used these items had a view of them that our imagination cannot comprehend.

An especially important problem that is not adequately addressed in interpretations of the Great Goddess religion is the problem of context. Context is important on all possible levels. It has become clear in many studies that in analyzing female figurines, male figurines and figurines of indistinct gender are often ignored. The first researcher who distinctly drew attention to this important problem in interpretation was the archaeologist Peter Ucko. In his study of the Neolithic figurines of Crete, six figurines were male (had phallicuses), thirty-three were female (had breasts), while forty-two figurines were sexless — it was impossible to say whether they were male or female. Having quantitatively analyzed the art artifacts of the East Baltic region’s Neolithic time period, it was found that anthropomorphic art does not show preference for either gender; 83 percent of all anthropomorphic figurines were androgynous — their gender was unidentifiable. It is also worth noting that representative art motifs were only 31 percent anthropomorphic and 69 percent zoomorphic (Antanaitis 1998, Antanaitytė 1998).

There also is the chronological context. Most prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines belong to two very long time periods — the Late Palaeolithic time period and the Neolithic and Bronze Age time period. Gimbutas’s study is very clearly focused around the latter time period’s figurines. Comparing Late Palaeolithic figurines with Neolithic and Bronze Age figurines is illogical and unscientific given the 10–20 thousand year difference between these time periods, as well as the fact that the economy, social organization, environmental conditions during these times were significantly different during the two periods. In keeping with the Goddess motif, the most attention has been directed to the 20 thousand year old Venus figurines. These are found from Western through Eastern Europe, yet the attention directed towards the female figurines seems to be theory-driven, rather than compelled by the archaeological record. In the very same deposits were found many zoomorphic figurines, as well as male and androgynous representations. More often than not, these outnumber the clearly female icons (Soffer, et al. 2000).

Then there is the context of the figurines themselves (Delpoire 1993). What material were they made from? Was it from poorly fired clay or from very sturdy material such as bone or stone or ivory? Were the figurines only one inch long or one to two feet long? Were the figurines richly ornamented or represented very abstractly? Was the figurine crafted with a specific person in mind or was it an idealized abstraction? That the former scenario was played out at times is documented by the 22,000 year old burial of Dolní Věstonice 3, in Moravia. The skeleton of a young woman was recovered. She had clear osteological indications of a muscular palsy on one side of her face. Found elsewhere at the site were fired clay figurines depicting precisely what she must have looked like in the flesh (Klímá 1963). Yet many of the Neolithic figurines in Ucko’s 1968 study did not have any clear facial features: What does that mean? One can only conclude that an analysis of each figurine’s various attributes is very important.

What was the figurine’s context in its find site? Was it found in a dwelling? A grave? A midden? What was its geographical/regional find site context? The level of North Europe’s socioeconomic organization in the East Baltic region’s so-called Neolithic, for example, was markedly different from South Europe’s Neolithic socioeconomic organization. In the former, a farming economy barely began only in the Late Neolithic, while in the latter a farming economy was already well developed. Social organization in the former area was still at the hunter-gatherer society level, while in the
latter area social organization was already at the tribal, segmentary, or, rarely, urban level of development. It is scientific folly to assume that figurines played the same role in such disparate societies.

In interpretations of the Great Goddess cult, sometimes called the Mother Goddess cult, Late Palaeolithic Venus figurines are often referred to as the oldest examples of Goddess worship. What was the context of these Venus figurines? Venus figurines have been found in Central Europe from southwestern France up to Germany, and Austria, and up to the Central Russian plain and the Northern Pontic region. The time period in which they were found is the Gravettian time period, i.e., from approximately 32,000 to about 20,000 years BP. Environmental conditions at that time were very unstable. One interpretation of the figurines’ role is associated with these unstable environmental conditions. Previously, people had been used to comparatively stable climatic conditions. With the approaching glaciation, the climate fluctuated considerably, even within the span of one person’s lifetime. With the fluctuating climate, the flora and fauna also changed from one season to the next and it was not possible to rely on the same animal and plant resources.

With the worsening climate, for their survival, people began to rely more on social networks. According to this one theory, the figurines were a means of maintaining and strengthening social relations; the figurines were a unique form of gift exchange. Ethnoarchaeologist Polly Wiessner studied gift exchange (Hxaro) among the !Kung-San (Wiessner 1982). This is not a literal trade or barter, but instead it integrates the persons involved into a larger community based on mutual dependency. Commonplace and generally economically useless items are given as gifts and the person receiving them usually keeps these for a few weeks, before passing them on to another person. These people are exchanging women and men, daughters and sons, yet the exchange involves much more than the inevitable mixing of genes, for they are also exchanging and strengthening social bonds.

If archaeology is seen as being more than the classification and dating of artifacts, the social roles of artifacts – tools, pots, figurines – become more apparent. By analyzing the precedents and products of human behaviour, archaeology is a science investigating people’s social relations. As yet another example from the !Kung-San, men make arrow points with which they hunt, but no one hunts with the points that they themselves have made. The arrow points are given to other hunters in the local group. When one man kills a large animal in a hunt, half of the hunted/killed animal automatically goes to the person who made the arrow point, while the hunter gets the other half. After that it is up to the two men to decide, usually along extended family and kinship lines, how they want to distribute among their extended kin the rest of the meat, bones, skin, fur, and all else. The proximate result is that everyone receives part of the kill, the long-term result is the reinforcement of social bonds.

Systems of exchange of rare, valued, and aesthetically pleasing items are not limited to the !Kung-San, but seem to be a universal tendency, found as far away as Papua New Guinea (Wiessner and Zumthor 1998). There is indebtedness, although not in the economic sense that we, having acculturated to mercantile systems, have become used to. It is a means of forming, reinforcing, and maintaining social ties. Those who participate in the exchange process belong to the same social system. They can depend on those in their social network during times of stress, and they can be depended upon when others are in need. It is not unreasonable to suggest that something similar might have been going on with the Palaeolithic figurines. Upon taking a closer look at this time period’s figurines, it is clear that the figurines are not only female, but had all kinds of forms. Some, for example, resemble phallics, while others are male and many are totally ambiguous.

Another interpretation – one of the newer ones – draws attention to what is represented on these “Venus” figurines – to the figurines’ iconography (Soffer et al. 2000). The figurines are ornamented. The ornamentation is not uniform, but exhibits different forms: caps and nooods, belts – from which sometimes hang skirts, bandeaux, bracelets, necklaces. There are also regional differences. For example, in Eastern Europe (Central Russian plain), belts are always on the waist; their skirts are sometimes worn only in the front, while elsewhere they are worn only on the back. In Central and Western Europe, belts are worn low on the hips (for example, at the Dolinka Vjestonice 3 and Pavlov 1 sites). Bracelets are represented on some figurines in Central and Eastern Europe, but are never encountered in Western Europe. Nevertheless, these regional differences are relatively minor. It is clear that a very similar stylistic and ideological tradition was manifest over a large geographic area, with the local variants being what one would expect of small populations living in smaller, semi-isolated territories (Gamble 1999, Wobst 1976).

According to scrupulous analyses, the various ornaments or clothing depicted on many figurines were clearly made from plant fibers – of the same kind that was used in making basketry in that time period and in this region. This clothing clearly does not represent everyday wear (in a cold climate, one might reasonably expect that women would have dressed more warmly). It seems far more likely to have been ritual wear, representing certain social categories and communicating precise social messages. In hunter-gatherer ethnography and ethnohistory, textiles and basketry are associated with women. They reflect not
only women’s work, but also one of the principles used to assign gender-specific roles to Late Pleistocene peoples. The association of textiles and basketry with only certain Venus figurines shows that the figurines reveal various women’s roles in society: women as social beings, as equal partners in their own society (not goddesses), and as representatives of their sex (in the biological sense). Both of these aspects can be conveyed in one figurine. These roles were most likely associated with achievements in women’s work (for example, in weaving) and/or age or status.

The multifold messages embodied in the figurines are demonstrated most clearly in the cap of the Willendorf Venus figurine (Soffer, et al. 2000). Regarding this most famous of figurines, anthropologist Alexander Marshack (1991) expressed this central concept very well: “The Venus of Willendorf, then, within HER culture and period, rather than within ours, was clearly richly and elaborately clothed in inference and meaning. She wore the fabric of her culture. She was, in fact, a referential library and a multivalent, multipurpose symbol.”

Gimbutas (1989:xix) wrote that the “archaeological materials are not mute. They speak their own language.” Indeed, if the archaeological record could speak to us, if it could tell us its story, then the interpretation of prehistoric artifacts and sites would be so much simpler. Regrettably, as Bourdieu has shown, when we analyze and classify, what we hear is the echo of our own selves, filtered through our own preconceptions (Bourdieu 1996). Unfortunately, archaeologists must reconcile themselves to reconstructing prehistory from material remains that have left no trace of the stories of the people who made them. This is especially acute in non-literate societies, which as recently as the late 20th century constituted 95% of all known languages (Wolf 1982).

However, some ancient cultures did leave written traces of some of their actual stories. Archaeological excavations in Iraq and the decipherment of numerous cuneiform tablets have revealed many details of the cultures rampant in the ancient civilizations of Sumer and Akkad, as well as their successor states, Babylonia and Assyria (Finegan 1979, Kuhrt 1995). These cultures extended from the fertile zone between the Tigris and Euphrates, through Syria to the Mediterranean coast, and the area of the Lower Nile in what is now Egypt. This sequence of cultures greatly influenced the many nations that emerged in the “fertile crescent,” something that required the ideological indoctrination and social integration of disparate peoples. Thus it is not surprising that Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets include the prayers, hymns, and myths composed and transmitted by the scribes, priests, courtiers, and intelligentsia of Mesopotamia from c. 2500 BCE until after the beginning of the common era.

What do the scholars who painstakingly study the oldest surviving actual literature of the ancient Mesopotamians say about the Great Goddess? “There was not one Goddess, there were many goddesses; they were not enshrined in a religion of women, but in the official religion of male-dominated societies; they were not evidence of ancient mother-worship, but served as an integral part of a religious system that mirrored and provided the sacred underpinnings of patriarchy” (Frymer-Kensky 1992, – P. vii). Goddess religion was not a separate religion. Both goddesses and gods were an integral part of Sumerian religion and thought and the earliest written records of the pantheon of goddesses and gods in Sumer show the importance of the male-female dichotomy in polytheistic thinking (Frymer-Kensky 1992, – P. 12-13).

Bioanthropologists deal directly with data from the skeletal remains of prehistoric males and females. These data enable us to reconstruct how prehistoric peoples lived—their demography (a population’s age and sex structure) and paleopathology (the frequency and distribution of traumatic injury and disease). These data and their interpretations are relevant to the Great Goddess concept because they permit a glimpse of how females were treated in various prehistoric groups. It is not unreasonable to assume that in a society in which a female deity is revered and is the ideal sought in the production of numerous

Female long-bone penetrated by flint projectile point, dated c. 10,000-9,000 BP from central Ukraine (photo – K. Antanasis-Jacobs)
icons, living females would be treated with respect and deference. Yet precisely the opposite is evident in the prehistoric bioanthropological data.

Throughout prehistory, women have significantly shorter life expectancies than men, which pattern is the opposite of modern patterns (see the many papers in Cohen & Armelagos 1997, Paine 1997). Moreover, in the European Late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, from France to Ukraine, spear or arrow points are found embedded in the spine or elsewhere in the body, and 90% of the victims were women. The better known sites are Tević and Hođić, in France (Vallois 1961), along with the Ukrainian sites of Vasilyevka 2 and Voloshskyaya (Konduktorova 1973). Nor is the disproportionate level of violence towards women restricted to Europe. At the Late Stone Age site of Jebel Sahaba in Sudanese Nubia there is not a trace of pastoralism or cultivation. This hunter-gatherer society produced in which “nearly half of the fifty-nine individuals exhumed there either had unhealed antemortem skeletal injuries or had stone artifacts.” Slightly less than two thirds of the sample was comprised of adult females, yet nearly 92% of the trauma injuries were among the females (Wendorf 1968). In short, the bioanthropological data would seem to suggest that women – the living representations of the Goddess and the essential reproductive core of the society – were not the focus of reverence, but instead were the focus of violence. To imagine this in a patriarchal society, where the deity is female, requires more than a little leap of faith.

Many more lines of evidence – for example, sociocultural, linguistic, folkloric – could be presented, which would discuss the claims made for the existence of a universal single Great Goddess in prehistory. The vast majority of these would make it quite clear that such a notion is, at the best, simply wrong. Marija Gimbutas was a pioneer in her championing of the important role of women in prehistory and in her efforts to get more women doing archaeology. Yet in other scholars’ use of her ideas and, to a lesser extent, in Gimbutas’s own work there is evidence of what the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn (1996), characterized as the acceptance of the notion that “if I had not believed it, I never would have seen it.” During brief interludes there is a return to empiricism, the best known being the transition from medieval scholasticism – i.e., the repetition of revealed truths – to a more rigorous comparison of the actual data to ones previously formed and dearly held beliefs (Davies 1996. – P. 469–674).

As in all such cyclic phenomena there is the inevitable swing to the opposite view. Beliefs become accepted as facts and are woven into a tapestry that in reality is myth. Interpretations, taken as fact, gain all the socio-psychological power of myth. Over the past few decades, those interested in fomenting a greater awareness of feminism, women’s spirituality, gender equality, and the Earth’s ecology found in Gimbutas a strong scientific buttress to their arguments. Gimbutas, after all, did assert that “the culture called Old Europe was characterized by a dominance of women in society and worship of a Goddess incarnating the creative principle as Source and Giver of All” (Gimbutas 1982:preface). With validation by a noted scholar’s interpretation of the past, this nebulous movement gained credibility.

The past always has been, and still is, used in the present to validate movements organized to secure social power, economic advantage, gender equality, superiority in spiritual and social domains, or many other political goals (Kohl & Fawcett 1995). While the goals may be laudable, the misuse of the past is bad science and all too frequently leads to tragic consequences (Birstein 2001, Proctor 1991). We are certain that Marija Gimbutas was aware of this. She always insisted that archaeological science was an evolving enterprise and that evolution required the continuous revision of archaeological interpretations. It is highly likely that she would approve of many of the ideas she stimulated, be cautiously doubtful of others, and resolutely opposed to all the rest. We have tried here to put into historical context the notions proposed by this unique scholar.

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