The Interface of Archaeology and Mythology: A Philosophical Evaluation of the Gimbutas Paradigm

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In her corpus of twenty books and over three hundred articles, Marija Gimbutas makes a comprehensive study of empirical archaeological data that serves as the basis for her challenging new theory of the cultural roots of Western civilization. To substantiate her thesis that Old Europe was relatively peaceful, egalitarian and primarily goddess-worshipping, Gimbutas cites (1) the frequent placement of villages on open plains without fortifications; the absence of caches of weapons; no artistic images of weapons, warfare or warrior deities, and no evidence of violent destruction of villages (until the Kurgan invasions); (2) comparable burials for women and men in terms of wealth and social status; and (3) a much higher proportion of stylized female figures in ritual or sanctuary contexts (interpreted as goddesses) in comparison to images of stylized male figures in similar contexts (interpreted as gods) in the “approximately 30,000 miniature sculptures in clay, marble, bone, copper and gold from some 3000 sites from southeastern Europe alone” (Lerner 1986:146). Her discussion of the evidence gives rise to a new understanding of the (pre)history of Europe and to a new theory of cultural transformation (Eisler 1987, 1995).

In this essay I argue that Gimbutas’ thesis is worthy of consideration for three reasons. First, a careful reading of her work and of the dynamic controversy surrounding it supports the view that Gimbutas’ theory is to date the most scientifically plausible account of the available information regarding Neolithic Europe (c. 6500–3500 BCE in Southeast Europe) and the transition to the Indo-European Bronze Age (c. 3500 BCE). Second, Gimbutas’ methodology of archaeomythology is germinal for the important interfacing of science and religion, for bridging the still antagonistic ideologies of matter and spirit. Third, the implications of Gimbutas’ theory of European origins converge with various other tributaries of post-modern reconstructive thought to provide an important stimulus for the contemporary transformation of culture toward a survivable, sustainable future.

I. Gimbutas’ Theory of European Origins

The view taught as canonical in universities of Europe and the United States has insisted that civilized history begins at Sumer in Mesopotamia about 3500 BCE with the onset of the Bronze Age and the rise of empire-building, standing armies, class stratification, monumental architecture and writing in service to the ruling
class (see Kramer 1956). The enslavement of defeated enemies by warrior-priest-kings and their armies, to form a slave-based economy, is generally treated by Western scholars with disinterest. The historical subjugation of women and the establishment of male dominance are usually not mentioned, the assumption being, perhaps, that male dominance has always existed (see Lerner 1986:4, 7–8).

Gimbutas fundamentally challenges this established view in her companion works The Language of the Goddess (1989) and The Civilization of the Goddess (1991). Her theory of the cultural origins of Europe can be described in three stages:

1. Neolithic Europe was a pre-Indo-European civilization that was socially egalitarian, communal, peaceful, highly artistic and primarily Goddess-worshipping. It flourished in Southeast Europe for at least 3000 years, from 6500 to 3500 BCE, and 2000 years longer in Crete and the Aegean islands, until c. 1450 BCE.

2. This civilization was overrun and dominated by patriarchal, horse-riding, Indo-European-speaking, Sky-God-worshiping invaders from the Russian steppes in three successive waves: I c. 4400–4300 BCE, II c. 3500 BCE, and III c. 3000 BCE.

3. The subsequent cultures of Europe are the result of a hybridization of the Old European and Indo-European cultures. I recommend that this dramatically different way of understanding European origins be called the “Gimbutas paradigm.”

Some of the major points of controversy around Gimbutas’ theory are whether or not Old Europe should be called a civilization; whether or not it should be seen as a sexually and economically egalitarian (or “gynic”) society, whether or not it should be considered a peaceful culture, and whether or not it should be interpreted as a “Goddess civilization.”

Once these major points of controversy are resolved, we will be able to assess Gimbutas’ overarching conclusion that Neolithic Europe underwent a cultural transition “from matrilineal to patrilineal order, from a learned theocracy to a militant patriarchy, from a sexually balanced society to a male dominated hierarchy, and from a chthonic goddess religion to the Indo-European sky-oriented pantheon of gods” (Gimbutas 1991:401).

II. Gimbutas’ Methodology: Archaeomythology

During the early 1970s, Gimbutas invented the methodology she called archaeomythology in order to comprehend the civilization of Old Europe where, as best she could tell, the material and spiritual aspects of culture had not been sundered, but were still whole (Gimbutas 1974). Although “previous books on Neolithic Europe have focused on habitat, tool kits, pottery trade, and environmental problems, treating religion as ‘irrelevant,’” Gimbutas insisted that archaeologists “cannot remain scientific materialists forever . . . A combination of fields—archaeology, mythology, linguistics, and historical data—provides
the possibility for apprehending both the material and spiritual realities of prehistoric cultures ... [which are] “intertwined ... reflections of each other” (Gimbutas 1991:x).

The Greek archaeologist Nanno Marinatos, in her outstanding book on ancient Crete, *Minoan Religion* (1993), also addresses the issue of narrowness in empiricist archaeological research. Like Gimbutas, she argues for a more well-rounded approach that includes a consideration of religion. “Religion is elusive, it is claimed, in comparison to economy and subsistence ... [but] no ancient culture can be understood without its religion. If we reduce the study of culture to pottery classification and data quantification (with some spice from the socioeconomic sphere), the scope of the humanist may be lost to that of the pseudo-scientist” (Marinatos 1993:10).

Gimbutas’ interpretation of the symbol system of Old Europe constructed a bridge between archaeology and mythology. This was the result of a lifetime of work, primarily in archaeology. Gimbutas pursued her internationally acclaimed studies of the Indo-European Bronze Age from the 1940s into the 1970s, publishing extensively, before turning to studies of Neolithic Europe. She directed five major excavations in Southeast Europe, and pursued her study of Neolithic artifacts in museums throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Meanwhile, she continued her exhaustive reading of scholarly reports (in their original languages) on both Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, combining her background in linguistics with a working fluency in twenty European languages. Finally, she applied her studies of mythology, history of religion and folklore (which began in her homeland of Lithuania), searching for “internal coherence” in the Old European symbols and their associative contexts. She brought her prodigious knowledge plus her life experience to the construction of a comprehensive view of Old European culture that, to her surprise, contrasted sharply with that of the later Indo-European cultures, of which she was a world class expert (see Marler 1996).

Partly because of Gimbutas’ groundbreaking work, the field of archaeology is beginning to address the matter of gender, and the role of ideology—not only in ancient cultures, but also in contemporary archaeologists’ culturally constructed and biased frameworks of interpretation. Archaeologists influenced by the feminist epistemological critique of modern science are beginning to replace narrow empiricism with an engendered, anthropological archaeology that has “empirical depth” and is also able to deal with the interpretive, symbolic and even mythic dimensions of culture (Conkey 1990). At the same time, scholars in the fields of mythology, theology, history of religions and religious studies are developing a more relational and intersubjective understanding of reality, as well as adopting a more multidisciplinary approach. These epistemological expansions enable us to see more clearly the value of Gimbutas’ archaeomythological approach, which includes her love for and empathetic understanding of her subject matter, along with her rigorous scientific investigations and application of extensive
mythological, religious, folkloric and linguistic knowledge.  

III. Evaluating the Glimbutas Paradigm, Amid Controversy

Gimbutas’ thesis has not been widely accepted by the archaeological establishments in the United States and Europe (Davis 1993:49–66; Fagan 1992; Lefkowitz 1992:29; 1993; Meskell 1995:74–86). I want to address this controversy philosophically in order to engage in dialogue those who are resistant to, or who actively oppose, Gimbutas’ findings, by referring to the epistemological theory advanced in Plato’s Republic called “The Divided Line,” and its corresponding metaphysical or mythological theory as related in “The Myth of the Cave.” These passages from Plato’s writings grapple with the complex, interconnected epistemologies of both science and mythology, and thus serve as a useful beginning point for our evaluation of Gimbutas’ work.

Plato depicts his teacher Socrates explaining that truth-seeking occurs on four levels, with a different method of awareness or recognition appropriate to each. The first two levels deal with the visible world and conventional morality. The first level of awareness, ekstasis, is that of imagining what is reflected to us, taking sense perceptions or moral projections at face value, at first blush. It is the level of unfounded opinion, of imagined perception of objects and values. At this stage of seeking to know, one operates largely on conjecture, and one has the tendency to take as real, as genuine and true, the shadows or somewhat murky reflections of objects not clearly seen. This is like believing in the shadows cast on a cave wall by firelight (to use Socrates’ metaphor), or like believing that what one sees on television, or hears as gossip, is the same as reality. Now, we may want to believe that what we see on television is accurate, or that what we hear from friends as gossip or hearsay is the whole truth, but what we are receiving may be at best only fragments of truth, or partial truths, and at worst distortions or negations of truth by the false use, false contextualization or false depiction of events. How can we tell false opinion from correct opinion, for example, in the televised retelling of daily news events, or, for that matter, in the differing scholarly accounts of past events?

The second level of conscious awareness Socrates calls belief, pists. This level deals with the direct sensory perception of the objects and relationships of the visible world, “the living creatures about us and all the works of nature or of human hands” (Plato 1965:224). At this level, Socrates teaches, one can hold correct opinions about directly observed empirical and moral facts, about first-person, embodied experience. For example, one can have a commonsense opinion about whether the weather is rainy or sunny, warm or cold; or about the general preferability of health to disease, pleasure to pain, kindness to cruelty. To develop clearer beliefs about Old Europe, it would be helpful, for example, if we, like Gimbutas, had firsthand experience of the sites of Old Europe and their thousands of artifacts.

While we might begin our search for the truth of a matter through dimly perceived
or partial truths, there is a point, especially when one comes upon confused sensations or contradictory notions, at which one feels moved to search further for a more complete and better-integrated picture. Socrates asserts that beyond these first two levels of impressionistic awareness and sense-based beliefs, there is a higher realm of intellectual knowing. It, too, is divided into two levels.

The third level is that of thinking within a theory, using a system of ideas that accepts first principles from which can be deduced reliable conclusions, as in mathematics, science or moral theory. Socrates calls this the level of ordinary knowing by discursive reasoning, dianoia. This third level of theoretical understanding does not dismiss the second level of direct sensory perception, but works with it, drawing the sense-based opinions which have been found to be persistent or reliable under scrutiny into a larger interconnected context or matrix, a larger framework or picture which can augment and further clarify the meaning of the facts, so they make more sense, have more meaning. For example, the disparate reports from different archaeological digs can be fitted together to provide a more compelling explanation of how the peoples of a particular region and era lived.

A theory is like a vessel or a model that holds together and interrelates various facts into a coherent and comprehensive whole that satisfactorily explains the many parts and their interrelationships. A theory (for example, of cultural origins) is a dynamic intellectual synthesis that should be consistent with the empirical facts, inclusive of all relevant factors, highly plausible, and elegant, and should have predictive or heuristic value for making new discoveries and expanding knowledge into new fields and domains. In addition, a theory must meet the criteria pertinent to a particular field of study.

Modern empiricist scientists operate on the second and third levels of inquiry, using sensory observations, measurements, empirical experiments and theoretical frameworks to assess material facts (artifacts), verify material causal relations and develop reliable explanations. Archaeologists use the methods of site survey, excavation and data analysis. Historians of religion, mythology and folklore also operate on these two levels of inquiry, using several methods of fact-finding as well as theological frameworks for interconnecting the facets of meaning into a larger, explanatory whole. Gimbutas used a fact-based, combinatory process, and the intersection of the scientific theoretical framework of archaeology (including the latest laboratory dating methods using radiocarbon 14 and dendrochronology) and the theological frameworks of diverse mythologies, religions and folkloric systems.

But for Socrates, there is a fourth level of intelligibility that is more deserving of the name of knowledge. This is the level of noesis, attained by the use of dialectical reasoning. Socratic dialectic is a form of critical thinking and truth-seeking by which persons, in dialogue, pursue an ever more truthful understanding of a controversial matter. Each speaker expresses her or his
personally held point of view. Where their views differ, the speakers engage in philosophical argumentation in hopes of mutually attaining closer and closer approximations of truth. Socrates believed it was more important to reach toward truth than to hold on to a personal need to feel right.

At this fourth, more advanced level of knowing, persons involved in knowledge-seeking need to be able to realize that competing theories, and especially the first premises they are holding onto as first truths, will have to be reconsidered as primary assumptions upon which the rest of each theory, continentally, depends. How then to evaluate which first premises or primary assumptions are more truthful, more reliable? At this point, Socrates becomes somewhat vague, and refers to the power of the dialectic to turn first premises into “hypotheses, in the literal sense, things ‘laid down’ like a flight of steps up which dialectical reasoning may mount all the way to something that is not hypothetical, the first principle of all; and having grasped this, may turn back and, holding on to the consequences which depend upon it, descend at last to a conclusion...” (Plato 1965:226). In this way, Socrates proposes, one arrives at knowledge in the fullest possible sense: noesis.

According to this epistemology or theory of knowledge, to attain clear, reliable, noetic knowledge one needs to reach toward the direct apprehension or intuition of “the first principle of all.” Some scholars refer to this act of intelligence as “rational intuition,” others as “mystical intuition” (Thandeka 1995: Introduction). For Socrates and Plato (although not for most of us today), these two seem to have meant the same thing. That is, for ancient Greeks from Pythagoras to Socrates to Aristotle, intuition was seen as both rational and mystical. Reality itself, conceived of as logos, was understood as being both rational and mystical, and thus essentially accessible to the dialectically reasoning intuiting mind. Since the classical Greek era, reason has become largely separated from intuition, and it is difficult for many of us today to imagine how the two could be related, let alone how they might be interrelated. And yet this is where I believe a new epistemology of physics and metaphysics is leading us today (a point to which I return in the fourth section).

As I see it, those archaeologists (and others) who hold the epistemological assumption that only empirical knowledge is reliable knowledge cannot logically believe it possible to have any probable knowledge of the mind-states or spiritual experiences of ancient peoples—be they pre-literate or literate. Strict empiricists may disparage as purely speculative or imaginary any efforts to consider and understand religious beliefs, or any beliefs. They have reached the limits allowed them by their own theory of empirical science. But when they justify their positivist views by invoking the empiricist scientific methodology and its encompassing theory of science, and proceed to reason discursively from only those premises to their conclusions, then their work is constrained by a worldview or theory that accepts without question its own
first premises about what is valuable and reliable in the work of seeking knowledge. They are in the epistemologically awkward, self-contradictory position of believing in a theory of empiricism that itself cannot be proven empirically. This is not to say that empirical science is without value; it has great value. But its own method is too limited to explain its own value.

The Euro-American discipline of empiricist archaeology challenges Gimbutas’ new discipline of archaeomythology. Are these simply different fields of study with different theoretical frameworks of interpretation and different methodologies? Shall we resolve the controversy by proposing that those who wish to deal only with matters of empirical (artif)facts should confine themselves to that sphere and engage only in the precise cataloguing of material data (a very valuable task in itself)? Do empirical archaeologists wish to shun all nonmaterial inferences whatsoever and remain strictly silent in relation to the interpretation of cultural meaning from artifacts? If not, if empirical archaeologists to any degree pursue this same goal of the interpretation of cultural meaning, as inferred from the material artifacts, then our two theories and methodologies are to some extent in competition as to which can construct the better interpretation of culture. Then we can ask the question, which is better suited to the task?

Let us compare methodologies by first focusing on the more empirically testable findings of the Gimbutas paradigm. Gimbutas documents a profusion of evidence (mentioned at the beginning of this essay) for her characterization of Old Europe as a peaceful, egalitarian, Goddess civilization. Perhaps most telling for her theory is the contrast between the burial customs of the Old Europeans and the invading Kurgans. In the graves of Old Europe, women, men and children were typically buried with comparable respect, with objects of their crafts, jewelry, tools, trade goods or ritual items. With the incursions of horse-riding nomads from the Russian steppes, the kurgan burrow-graves appear for the first time, containing privileged male burials that not only have weapons and an extraordinary amount of wealth goods (especially gold), but also sacrificed animals such as horses and oxen, and sacrificed women, children and others, probably slaves (Gimbutas 1991:331–341, 352, 357–401).

An interpretation of these data countervailing the one presented by Gimbutas argues that such cultural shifts are the result not of invasion by outsiders but of a gradual change that emerges from dynamics within the societies in question (Renfrew 1987; Ehrenberg 1989:99–107). This view may, to some extent, contribute to a more complete understanding of the cultural shift that took place in the later centuries of Old Europe, as it was in transition from a matrific communal society toward a patriarchal class society. However, Gimbutas’ discovery of a pattern of Kurgan invasions from the Russian steppes into Eastern Europe has recently been corroborated by the work of the Stanford University geneticist Cavalli-Sforza, who has found genetic evidence for a population expansion into Eastern Europe stemming from an area.
“that almost perfectly matched Gimbutas’ projection for the center of Kurgan culture.”

Additional scientific corroboration for Gimbutas’ theory of the domination of a pre-existing matrific Old Europe by an androcratic Indo-European warrior culture is provided by the work of the geographer Robert DeMeo. Using a vast database and computer-generated models, DeMeo has coordinated climatic changes and human migration patterns around the globe since the Paleolithic. His evidence indicates that climatic changes caused drought and desertification in what he calls “Saharasia,” resulting in mass human migrations out of the Middle East as well as from the Kurgan homeland in Eurasia, around 4000 BCE, by what he called “patricic” cultures (see Eisler 1995:92–96).

The burden of proof has now shifted. Those who do not accept Gimbutas’ theory of pre-Indo-European Old Europe and its overthrow by invading, horse-riding Kurgan nomads need to present persuasive material evidence of indigenous warfare, sexual and economic inequality and the dominance of male rulers and male power icons (male deities) as typical of Neolithic European (pre)history. Without a preponderance of evidence to the contrary, we are justified in acknowledging that Gimbutas has proposed the most plausible and probable interpretation of the presently available material data for these aspects of Neolithic Europe.

What about the less empirical, more symbolic aspects of Neolithic European culture? How does one construct a highly probable interpretation of symbolic meaning from material objects, images and signs? If we want to understand a civilization where spirituality may have been an integral part of peoples’ everyday life, which way of looking would be more successful: one that studies only the material artifacts, or one that studies the material artifacts plus the cultural symbolism of the people as expressed in their art, architecture and burials? If we want to understand the social relations of women and men, would we be more successful if we use a methodology that implicitly assumes male dominance, or one that poses gender as a question, discussing the reflections of gender in the art, architecture and burials? If we want to understand the relations of clans to their neighbors, whether they were largely peaceful or belligerent, would we use a methodology that fails to consider the absence of weapons, fortifications and images of warfare, weapons and warrior deities, or one that seriously considers the significance of this notable absence? If for all these cases we answer that the second methodology would have a greater chance of success in leading to more complete and coherent knowledge regarding our subject of inquiry, then wouldn’t we be agreeing that the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach of Gimbutas is preferable? Wouldn’t we be led to adopt archaeomythology as the larger field of inquiry, within which empirical archaeology would serve a valuable and indispensable subsidiary role, alongside the disciplines of linguistics and cultural anthropology and the histories of mythology, religion and
While Gimbutas amasses material evidence for her conclusions, she also uses intuition to discover within the widespread cultures of Old Europe repeating patterns that lead to her interpretations of the symbolic meanings for Old European inscriptions and artworks. How reliable are her claims that peoples primarily worshipped goddesses, as well as gods, during the Neolithic period throughout all of Europe? Did Old Europeans use, as she argues, a sacred script? Should the various societies of Neolithic Europe be grouped together as a single civilization? Were these peoples invaded and subordinated by warriors from the Pontic steppe region who primarily worshipped Sky-Gods? Were the warrior clans socially hierarchical, led by economically and spiritually privileged male chieftains, with women subordinate to men? Is European civilization since the Bronze Age a hybridization of the two cultures, the inheritor of two oppositional symbolic systems expressing countervailing values, ideals, spiritualities? Here we enter a level of interpretation that begins with, but inevitably moves beyond, simple material facts and causal material relations.

Fortunately, during the 1990s, more archaeologists, including Colin Renfrew and his colleagues, have begun to address the challenges presented by Gimbutas’ archaeology (as well as by post-structuralist, post-processualist and Marxist archaeology) to the overly empiricist approach of the “New Archaeology” of the 1960s and 1970s. This new approach, called “cognitive archaeology” or “cognitive-processualist archaeology,” is beginning to explore the archaeological record for material indicators of ancient mental processes—such as counting and measurement, planning, social relations, art-making, the evolution of symbolic script and religious practices, including ritualized burial practices and the focusing of attention toward superhuman powers or divinities (Renfrew and Bahn 1996; Renfrew and Zubrow 1994). Similar to the practice of Gimbutas, they propose a methodology of drawing inferences from the scientifically analyzed database of the culture to possible and probable interpretations of the artifacts. The primary goal, according to Renfrew and Bahn, is to develop frameworks and explanations for understanding “the symbolic side of human society” (1996:473). Because symbols are assumed above all else to distinguish humans from other animals, it is intended that symbols “will play a central role” in the inferential work of cognitive archaeology (Renfrew and Bahn 1996:473).

While cognitive archaeology reaffirms the importance of scientifically derived “empirical depth,” it yet lacks what could be called “mythological depth.” At last, some of these scholars are beginning to corroborate Gimbutas’ general findings and theoretical framework, although they tend to underplay the importance of the elements of goddess-worship, the egalitarian social relations and the general peacefulness of the people. For example, they have not yet explored in depth the basic questions of the differences between mythological frameworks that are centered on female