iconography and those centered on male iconography, or on the significance of mythological systems that hold a belief in the immanence and transcendence of divine powers; nor have they sufficiently explored the possibility that the life of a culture may be altogether spiritual and symbolic and not separated into sacred and secular compartments (see Renfrew and Bahn 1996:388; Renfrew and Zubrow 1994:47-48).

Some scholars unfairly seek to dismiss Gimbutas’ work as unscientific speculation or merely idiosyncratic interpretation. However, Gimbutas’ archaeomythology scientifically analyzes the material database for Old Europe and draws possible and probable inferences from these analyses, mediated by the application of her knowledge of mythology, folklore, history of religion, and linguistics, to reconstruct the symbolic, religious ideology of Old Europe. To the extent that cognitive archaeology is unwilling to grapple with the possible and probable reality of an immanent and transcendent goddess mythology and its implications for gendered social relations in Neolithic Old Europe, it still appears to carry a cultural bias that hinders its study of the “ancient mind” of Old Europeans.

Gimbutas remains unsurpassed as a scholar in the combination of both empirical and mythological breadth and depth of knowledge as the framework of inference and interpretation for Old European civilization and its takeover by Indo-European culture. No one before Gimbutas had made a careful catalogue of signs and symbols of Neolithic Europe and subjected them to exhaustive comparative analysis. When she did so, she began to see repeated correlations of signs and images and contexts (called “continuities of cult” or “redundancies” by other archaeologists) from which she inferred persistent attributes of the female images. She determined that many of these female icons represented goddesses because of their use in ritual context, the consistency of their symbolic designs, the shamanic combination of the human female with animal powers (as in the images of the Bird Goddess and Snake Goddess) and the widespread utilization of similar symbolism across wide expanses of geography and chronology. Moreover, Gimbutas could find “no images . . . of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record” (Gimbutas 1991:x). Surprisingly, male icons made up no more than 3-5% of the archaeological record (Gimbutas 1990). The multitude of correlated signs and images finally led Gimbutas to reconstruct an internally coherent mythological symbol system for Old Europe centered on a Great Goddess of Birth and Nurturance, Death and Regeneration. This system contrasted sharply with the well-known warrior Sky-God mythological framework inferred from the archaeological remains of later Bronze Age Indo-European cultures. Contrasts include different correlations for the color black, the color white, the serpent, the bull and the bucranium, the sun and the horse (Gimbutas 1991:400).

Gimbutas’ study of the “language of the goddess,” as she called it, has been criticized but not seriously critiqued by other archaeologists. That is, no one to date has
attempted to re-examine all the same artifacts, their contexts, dates and inscriptions, to see if there are repeated patterns of association that substantiate, or unfound, Gimbutas’ theory. However, an important step in this direction has been taken by the linguist Harald Haarmann in his exacting analysis in *Early Civilization and Literacy in Europe* (1996). His work confirms that Old Europeans did use a script, most frequently in religious contexts, and that it was nearly identical to the Linear A script of early Bronze Age, pre-Mycenaean Crete! Perhaps Gimbutas’ work will provide the key to unlock the full decipherment of Old European and Cretan Linear A writing. When these scripts are finally translated, scholars will have to acknowledge Old Europe and pre-Mycenaean Crete, with their Goddess civilizations, as belonging to “history” (which, by scholarly definition, begins with written records) and “civilization.”

If the empirical aspects of Gimbutas’ theory of early European origins are corroborated by empirical science; if her multidisciplinary methodology is more comprehensive in scope and more appropriate to a culture that was both material and symbolic in expression; and if her symbolic inferences and interpretations are increasingly corroborated by scholars in the fields of archaeology, linguistics, genetics, geography, mythology, history of religion and folklore; then why is there so much resistance to Gimbutas’ methodology, findings and resultant theory of European origins? To answer this question, we must address another set of questions, not only about methodology, but about cultural substance and ideology (ideas used for value-based social construction).

**IV. Contemporary Cultural Transformation**

In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Gimbutas addresses the contemporary relevance of her work. “This material, when acknowledged, may affect our vision of the past as well as our sense of potential for the present and future. We must refocus our collective memory. The necessity for this has never been greater as we discover that the path of ‘progress’ is extinguishing the very conditions for life on earth” (Gimbutas 1991:vii, emphasis added). Why are some people resistant to entertaining this possibility, to considering seriously the Gimbutas paradigm? Why might some reject this re-telling of the cultural origins of Europeans?

Socrates believed in the capacity of the human mind to be illumined: to apprehend the underlying oneness, beauty and goodness of life itself. In addition to the “Divided Line” and the “Myth of the Cave,” we also have Socrates’ teaching called the “Ladder of Love,” in Plato’s “Symposium.” After one has ascended the “Divided Line” or the “Ladder of Love,” then from the vantage point of illumination—as if one had looked directly into the radiant sun (to use another of Plato’s metaphors), or had received a beatific vision of the heart of reality by turning one’s eyes “toward the open sea of beauty” (Plato 1961:562)—a person becomes capable first of discerning which of the first premises of differing theories are preferable, then of choosing between competing theories, and from there of drawing
implications and finally conclusions about matters of fact and of morality in the visible world.

Now, persons who do not believe that an illuminating experience of the essential nature of reality is possible cannot utilize the Socratic methodology of truth-seeking. A person simply cannot use a methodology into which she or he will not put any interest, even tentative trust or effort. And yet, this is problematic for truth-seeking. For, as quantum physics has demonstrated in the sub-visible realm, and psychology has also demonstrated in the invisible realm of the mind: what we see and come to know is interdependent with where and how we choose to look. What if life itself, as embedded in the universe, is rationally approachable yet beyond complete human comprehension, hence also mysterious and thus susceptible to mythological and cosmological explanations?

Socrates and Plato used both logic and analogy, scientific as well as mythological reasoning, to persuade their interlocutors of the insights or wisdom they desired to impart. They used both masculine and feminine metaphors to midwife experiences of spiritual insight or vision. While some of the metaphors may seem more masculine to some (a linear, hierarchical, disembodied ascent up a ladder, using reason, to see the sun, the logos), I can also imagine a contrasting process in what seem to be more feminine metaphorical terms (a spiraling descent into the void that issues into embodied love spreading through concentric, nested circles); both of these may lead to the same place of noetic beholding. Perhaps Socrates, an initiate of the Mysteries of the Goddess at Eleusis, used both these kinds of methods, and a more masculine emphasis was eventually given by an older Plato and subsequent Platonists to the linear metaphors without their feminine complements. In any case, I recommend their combination as a more complete, multifaceted and holistic epistemology.

To further compare our two competing theories of European cultural origins, let us review their first-premise beliefs as if they are working assumptions used for the (re)construction of particular social systems. If, after assembling the relevant material facts and studying the competing theoretical explanations, we could engage not simply in discourse but in dialectical dialogue about European cultural origins; if we could finally allow this dialogue to lead us toward an intuition or vision of the first principle or source of all life, of reality in its fullness; if we could open ourselves to this as though beholding the brilliant, life- and death-giving sun spiraling through the spacious void of the universe; and then, having opened to this radiance and this generous blackness, if we would ask which set of working assumptions leads to greater understanding of human culture, its past, present and future possibilities—what might we believe?

One first-premise belief is the prevailing view that the cultural origins of Europe began in the Bronze Age, with its empire-building, standing armies, class stratification, slave-based economies, monumental architecture, writing used in service to the ruling class, male dominance, and male-
dominant religions. Would this assumption not bolster the belief that since its inception, the foundations of civilization have included class domination by warrior clans and the rule of the stronger over the weaker, wealth acquisition primarily through force and warfare, men’s domination of women and human domination over (the rest of) nature? Would believing what can be termed the “androcratic warrior theory of the origins of western civilization” further lead to contingent beliefs that the fruits and pleasures of human creativity are destined repeatedly to be produced and destroyed by forces of personal greed and collective warfare; suffering is the primary fate of the majority of humanity; women should be submissive and accept a servile status in relation to men, who are superior aggressors; the main hope for alleviating the suffering of the many is either a world-renouncing, ascetic, abstract spirituality or other addictions; and the dominant economic and political world powers will probably continue unchecked from their course of the “ecocide” and “omnicide” of life-systems through a dual attack by the non-sustainable consumption of the environment and military warfare?

On the other hand, might embracing the theory of the origins of European culture as reconstructed by Gimbutas lead to the sharing of a collective memory of an ancestral culture that was gynic (neither patriarchal nor matriarchal); egalitarian (not exploitative); communal (not egoistic); relatively peaceful (not warring); spiritual in the sense of an embodied, immanent and transcendent spirituality (not of disembodied transcendence); goddess-centered and god-revering (not exclusively God-centered); artistically and linguistically advanced, with a sacred script (neither primitive nor illiterate); and nature-embedded (not alienated from nature and the cosmos)? The implications of accepting Gimbutas’ radically different view of the origins of Western civilization would be far-reaching, not only for peoples within Western civilization, also but for non-Western peoples, for whom Westerners might begin to feel a greater sense of kinship.

It is difficult to imagine more profound implications than those that flow from the Gimbutas paradigm: the re-integration of science and spirituality, the primacy of cooperation over competition as the basis of cultural development, re-conceiving loving relationships among the sexes, and the rebirthing of human community, embedded within an awareness of cosmic unity. If one were given a choice between the one theory or the other; and if one were able to use empirical data and also artistic sensibility, ethical values and spiritual wisdom; and finally, if one were able to attain a vision that sees clearly into the radiant, vibratory nature of reality—which would be the more truthful, reliable, morally valuable and wise theory to choose?

As I understand it, a noetic act of intelligence is a rational intuition of the growthful, adaptive, creative dynamics of life as it actualizes the innate potential and inter-relational opportunities of sentient beings seeking the experiences of safety, satisfaction and fulfillment. It is a rational intuition that is sometimes imbued with feelings
of wonder, awe, reverence, joy and gratitude and, at other times, with feelings of fear, pain, hatred, guilt or other suffering. I see the new physics of today as closer to the body and mind physics-metaphysics of the ancient Greeks, and probably also of the Old Europeans, than has generally been recognized. Similarly, I think Gimbutas’ methodology of archaeomythology comes closer to the noetic insight Socrates recommended than either empirical science or religious studies as separated disciplines, because of its recombination of body and nature with mind and spirit. Here I use the word spirit to mean that which animates, like breath, fire, water and earth, like the creative forces of the universe.

As the works of Thomas Kuhn and others working on the sociology of knowledge have informed us, a radical change in scientific paradigms (or philosophical worldviews) is not easily accomplished, even when there is considerable evidence and incentive to do so. While I believe human beings are inherently truth-seeking creatures, we are also survival- and comfort-seeking creatures, and creatures of vested interests. It is very difficult for a person to give up a worldview or theory that has provided a sense of survival, stability and/or privilege. Moreover, even if someone wants to shift perspective from a habitual way of thinking, recent brain research informs us that the brain itself is “wired” into clusters of information, around nodes or central organizing points and matrices, that give each person a “mindset,” that is to say, a mind that is set into a structure of neurological networks and fields that become more and more firmly established, providing a person with his or her sense of identity. To change our paradigms or worldviews, we need to transform the brain circuitry itself! To change to a new theory of life, or theory of civilization, a person would need to allow him- or herself to experience the discomfort that would come from the deconstruction of a firmly constructed mindset and, thus, the dissolution of identity, with a subsequent sense of loss, disorientation and chaos. Yet these would be the preconditions and prelude to a new frame of mind, a new identity and a new way of viewing the world (Joseph Pearce 1992).

To become capable of accepting Gimbutas’ theory of the cultural origins of early Europe, an individual would need to question the inevitability of warfare, economic hierarchies of dominance and subordination and the exclusively male-centered concept of divinity. It is accurate to say that in the West, these are long-cherished and entrenched beliefs that have been upheld as pillars of Western civilization. Thus, when the work of Gimbutas is met with skepticism and rejection, it may not be because her methodology is unorthodox or her conclusions unfounded. It may be that the resistance to her discoveries stems more from the investment individuals have in the paradigm of civilization that is constructed in accord with the prevailing gender, race and class hierarchies of domination and submission.

Fortunately, scientists, humanists, historians of religion and historians of culture are now engaged in revising the course of Western civilization and reconstructing
the sciences, humanities and religions into a “new paradigm” that is more inclusive, more reliable and more integrated as a hologram of reality. Gimbutas’ work plays in concert with this larger endeavor to create a “paradigm shift” that interrelates more of the post-modern expansion of human knowledge. Her theory is compatible with the embodied cultural and spiritual understanding being newly proposed by cultural theorists and theologians, as well as with the “New Science” being developed by physicists, biologists, mathematicians, systems theorists and others coming to terms with the mysterious interface of mind and matter, body and spirit, reason and intuition. The New Science is in the process of exchanging the “dispassionate” pursuit of “objectivity” and “absolute certainty” for an epistemology that is “participatory,” “interdependent,” “inter-subjective” and “probabilistic.” It explores the noetic insights of the interdependence and underlying oneness of all life, the primacy of cooperation over competition for biological evolution, the aliveness of the whole Earth as GAIA and the integral relationships of humans to the larger cosmic whole.

As a feminist, philosopher and peace activist, I choose to imagine a global civilization that has matured beyond chronic warfare and competition as primary cultural values, by replacing these with cooperation, pleasure and compassion. I see a civilization that has moved beyond the splits of science and religion, nature and culture, immanent and transcendent religions, becoming a world community that has learned to cherish and care for the living mantle of the Earth Mother and Her offspring, sprung from the regenerative powers of both Earth and Sky. I see a world where women and men live in creative harmony, in a dance of polarity, partnership and diversity, a world that has applied creative human intelligence to the tasks of ending poverty, hunger and social injustice, and has thus created the foundations of enduring peace. All this, in significant ways, is not unlike the memorable lifeways our Old European ancestors once were able to create and enjoy.

1 A different version of this essay, “Gimbutas’ Theory of Early European Origins and the Cultural Transformation of Contemporary Western Civilization,” appeared in the Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion 12, no. 2 (Fall 1996). These ideas were first presented at “The Language of the Goddess,” a seminar in honor of the life and work of Marija Gimbutas, sponsored by the Archaeological Institute, University of Bergen, and the Bryggen Museum, Bergen, Norway, March 28–29, 1995. I am grateful to Irmerlin Munch and Birger Overlander of Norway for early encouragement, and to Carol P. Christ, Thandeka and Joan Marler for insightful editing.

2 I use “(pre)history” to begin to collapse the distinction between “prehistory” and “history,” as I think scholars should expand the framework of history to include the Neolithic era, when the invention of agriculture allowed for the development of settled village life and eventually large cities of several thousands, with an advance in arts and crafts, the expansion of trade and the development of sacred inscriptions used as proto-writing. See Gimbutas 1989; Haarman 1996; Christ 1991:75–94; and Stone 1979:19–20, who proposes a new dating system that proceeds forward from the beginning of the Neolithic, some 10,000 years ago.

3 In this oft-cited text, Sumer’s development into an imperial, slave-based, male-dominant class society is not viewed by Kramer as problematic. In his later work, Kramer begins to explore more sensitively the issue of gender relations in ancient Sumer (see Kramer 1979:71; Wolkstein and Kramer 1983).
A similar cultural pattern has been documented by scholars in regard to the (pre)history of India: Aryan invaders on horseback entered the Indus Valley from the Eurasian steppes c. 2000–900 BCE, overwhelming, subordinating and partly assimilating the indigenous peoples of the agrarian cultures of the Harappan civilization (see, e.g., Fisher 1991:62–68; Carmody and Carmody 1981:72–80).

The phrase “Gimbutas paradigm” was coined by Lee Gilmore in “The Gimbutas Paradigm: Myths, Meanings and Means” (unpublished), written for the Goddess of Pre-History course taught by Joan Marler and myself for the Women’s Spirituality MA Program, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California.

This new term was coined by Riane Eisler (1987) to express the linking of the female (Greek gynè ‘woman’) with the male (andros ‘man’), in partnership rather than dominator societies.

See Christ 1987:53–76 for her deconstruction of the “ethos of objectivity.” In its place she offers an “ethos of eros and empathy as a model for scholarship” which she applies to a re-visioning of the religious canons of God, time and text. Compare Keller’s (1983) discussion of the Nobel-prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock and her unorthodox methodology that included a “feeling for the organism” (see also Thandeka 1995; Wilshire 1989).

A more scientific emphasis in archaeology appeared in the 1960s and 1970s to correct for what seemed to be an overly speculative analysis of ancient cultures. This was first called “New Archaeology” and later “processual archaeology.”

Ehrenberg traces the ascendancy of patrialocality, patriline and patriarchy to the final stages of the Neolithic era, when the animal-drawn plough, the keeping of large herds of animals and the increasing engagement of women’s time with the new inventions of spinning and weaving changed the agricultural division of labor and contributed to a change in the relation of the sexes.


I recommend that mythology, history of religion and folklore be combined into a single, more comprehensive history of religions, for all three basically study spiritual symbol systems and practices during human cultural evolution. The more narrowly defined history of religion is now accorded higher status academically than mythology and folklore, which study the religious beliefs of defeated and/or subordinated cultures. See Stone (1979:7–8); and Eliade (1957; 1960:23), who challenges “Christian polemics against the pagan world” in order to see myth as “sacred history... a transhuman revelation...”

Renfrew and Zubrow refer to the work of archaeologists subsequent to Gimbutas who found “balanced, complementary cognitive oppositions between male and female” for the Neolithic in Italy, c. 6000–3000 BCE, (John Robb, cited in Renfrew and Zubrow 1996:470) and found that “the extant figurines of this period are dominated by female images.” Like Gimbutas, they conclude that “although gender distinctions were important in Neolithic society, gender hierarchy was not present... The balanced gender oppositions of the Neolithic were transformed in the Copper and Bronze Ages (after 3000 BC) into a gender hierarchy which valued male above female. The main evidence for this change is drawn from art.” They then begin to describe the male iconography of the Bronze Age in more detail. Earlier in the same text, they refer to the female figurines of the European Neolithic simply as “portable art.”

For further reading see Baring and Cashford 1991; Capra 1982; Christ 1977; Eisler 1987, 1995; Metzner 1994; Spretnak 1997; Reszak 1993.

For the New Science see Capra 1975; Bohn 1980; Keller 1985; Swimme 1996; and Weber 1986. The new biology created during the past two decades, and based largely on the work of the cell biologist Lynn Margulis, challenges the Darwinian view of biological evolution with a new theory called “cooperative co-evolution” (see, e.g., Lovelock 1988 and Sahtouris 1989).

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