ARCHAEOMYTHOLOGY AS ACADEMIC FIELD AND METHODOLOGY: BRIDGING SCIENCE AND RELIGION, EMPIRICISM AND SPIRITUALITY

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The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas investigated the material culture of Neolithic Europe and discovered a mythic spiritual culture created by the indigenous peoples of Neolithic Europe. Gimbutas identified settlement patterns, household goods, burials and ritual equipment of the place and time she named Old Europe, which developed from ca. 7,500 to 3,500 BCE. From this empirical base in archaeology, she was able to decipher symbols used for spiritual communication. She interpreted the patterns of symbols in Old Europe as a goddess-centered mythology that represented powers of nature and the cosmos. Gimbutas named the research work she was doing archaeo-mythology, designating both a field of academic inquiry and a methodological approach, connecting scientific archaeology with the humanistic study of mythology. For further support for her mythological interpretations, she drew upon knowledge gleaned from the fields of linguistics, the history of religion and folklore.

As the next generations of researchers employ complex epistemological approaches and practical methodologies to infer sacred symbols and mythic narratives from the material artifacts of ancient peoples, we will benefit from clarifying our understanding of this relatively new academic field and its distinctive methodology. I first provide an introduction to Gimbutas’s archaeomythology as academic field and methodology. Second, I discuss the underlying assumptions of archaeomythology as articulated by the archaeomythology scholar Joan Marler, and I survey
the growth of archaeomythology since Gimbutas’s death in 1994. Third, I provide an elaboration of the methodology of archaeomythology, noting its overlap with spiritual feminist hermeneutics. I close with some comments on the usefulness of archaeomythology for scholars of goddess studies, women’s spirituality, and religious studies, which are my primary areas of research.¹

I. Gimbutas and the Creation of Archaeomythology

Marija Gimbutas founded the academic field of archaeomythology in the latter part of the 20th century with a series of books published between 1974 and 1999: The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, The Language of the Goddess, The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe, and The Living Goddesses. Her discoveries continue to inspire the work of many scholars today.² After completing extensive work on the Bronze Age cultures of the Baltic region, Gimbutas began to excavate the cultural remains of Neolithic Europe.

To her surprise, and in sharp contrast to her earlier study of Eastern European Bronze Age societies, with their proliferation of bronze weapons and warfare, Gimbutas found in the Neolithic settlements of southeastern Europe a lack of weapons used for war and a preponderance of female figures decorated with enigmatic markings. Once the more scientific labors of archaeological survey, excavation, restoration, dating and assemblage had been completed, she turned to the task of deciphering the symbolic signs carved, painted or incised on the archaeological artifacts.

Gimbutas’s publication in 1974 of The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000–3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images³ broke new ground for post-World War II archaeology, inferring from the archaeological record the mythologies and cosmological orientations of Old European and early Indo-European societies. Marler, a colleague, friend and biographer of Gimbutas, noted that, Gimbutas first “began to develop a multidisciplinary approach to the study of prehistory during her student years in Lithuania” for her Master’s thesis on Baltic prehistory (written 1940–1942) and that Gimbutas drew upon “archaeology, linguistics, mythology, ethnography, and the study of historical sources.” At that time, and into the 1980s, combining the sciences and humanities was largely shunned by elite academics as not being serious.
Gimbutas’s next book meticulously analyzed the signs and symbols on the figurines, pottery, house models and grave goods of Old European peoples, symbols that were repeated over and again through generations and across millennia, in patterns related to their usage. From her careful analysis of these signs and symbols, Gimbutas argued that she had discovered a proto-language of symbolic communication that she called “the language of the Goddess.”

Given the disciplinary limitations of archaeology in the United States and England at that time, Gimbutas decided to name her multidisciplinary approach archaeomythology. In the introduction to The Language of the Goddess, published in 1989, she asserted, “This volume is a study in archaeomythology, a field that includes archaeology, comparative mythology and folklore.”

In The Language of the Goddess, Gimbutas summarized her process for understanding the Neolithic symbolism as a complex system of meaning. The symbols “constitute a complex system in which every unit is interlocked with every other in what appear to be specific categories. No symbol can be treated in isolation; understanding the parts leads to understanding the whole, which in turn leads to identifying more of the parts.” The symbols are hieroglyphic or abstract (shaped, for example, like M, V, X, Y, tri-lines, triangles and meanders) or representational (for example, stylized breasts, pregnant bellies, vulvas, phalluses, water birds, snakes and bears).

As she studied the symbolic imagery of Old Europe, Gimbutas came to understand that these markings were connected to nature and to the people’s sense of the divine within nature. “Symbols are seldom abstract in any genuine sense,” she explained. “Their ties with nature persist, to be discovered through the study of context and association. In this way we can hope to decipher the mythical thought which is the raison d’être of this art and basis of its form.”

Gimbutas proposed that the Old European symbols represented the forces and functions of nature embedded in the lives of women and men, in plants and animals and insects, in mountain, forest, sea, sun, moon, stars and all the myriad elements of nature and the cosmos. She interpreted the religious symbolism of Neolithic Old Europe as implying spiritual beliefs in a goddess or goddesses of birth and nurture, death and
regeneration, and in a god or gods as consort and life-giving stimulus to the life-giving powers of the goddess(es).

About the connections of Old European symbols to the term Goddess, the ecofeminist philosopher, cultural historian, and women’s spirituality scholar Charlene Spretnak explained:

After decades of study of the ritually placed art and artifacts and the symbol system of the pre-Indo-European cultures of southeastern Neolithic Europe, Gimbutas used the term Goddess to refer to the diverse visual and folkloric imagery of metaphor and symbol behind which lies a complex of concepts expressing an awareness of embeddedness, participatory consciousness, and the immanence of the sacred. . . . Encompassing the cosmological drama of the changing seasons, the bounty of the land, and the cycles of endless regeneration, “The Goddess in all her manifestations, [Gimbutas concluded], was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature.”

Gimbutas did not restrict her focus to a single geographical region but kept expanding the scope of her studies. She discovered that the symbols she was studying had “systematic associations in the Near East, southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean area, and in central, western, and northern Europe.” Furthermore, through these cross-regional studies, Gimbutas concluded that the symbols and their associations demonstrated “the extension of the same Goddess religion to all of these regions as a cohesive and persistent ideological system.”

In her magnum opus, The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe, published in 1991 and edited by Marler, Gimbutas noted again that the econometric focus of archaeologists caused them to ignore and miss the significance of the religious dimensions of ancient cultures.

Previous books on Neolithic Europe have focused on habitat, tool kits, pottery, trade, and environmental problems, treating religions as “irrelevant.” This is an incomprehensible omission since secular and sacred life in those days were one and indivisible. By ignoring the religious aspects of Neolithic life, we neglect the totality of culture.
Archaeologists cannot remain scientific materialists forever, neglecting a multidisciplinary approach. ... Neolithic social structure and religion were intertwined and were reflections of each other.\textsuperscript{12}

Again, Gimbutas insisted that a multidisciplinary approach to the religious aspects of ancient culture is indispensable if one hopes to understand an ancient people’s patterns of belief. “A combination of fields—archaeology, mythology, linguistics, and historical data—provides the possibility for apprehending both the material and spiritual realities of prehistoric cultures.”\textsuperscript{13}

But even more controversial than her use of multiple disciplines to study religion implied by the archaeological record was Gimbutas’s claim to have discovered a Goddess-centered civilization in old Europe. Moreover, she claimed this civilization was peaceful, egalitarian, artistic and prosperous.

Archaeologists and historians have assumed that civilization implies a hierarchical political and religious organization, warfare, a class stratification, and a complex division of labor. ... I reject the assumption that civilization refers only to androcratic warrior societies. The generative basis of any civilization lies in its degree of artistic creation, aesthetic achievements, nonmaterial values, and freedom which make life meaningful and enjoyable for all its citizens, as well as a balance of powers between the sexes. Neolithic Europe was not a time “before civilization.” ... It was, instead, a true civilization in the best meaning of the word.\textsuperscript{14}

This was a metanarrative that many of Gimbutas’s colleagues found too extraordinary to accept.\textsuperscript{15} The idea of a Goddess-revering civilization at the root of European culture seemed preposterous to many, and it was mocked by some archaeologists and some religious scholars. Why is unclear. The challenge of the evidence for a peaceful, artistic, matrastic and Goddess-centered civilization in early Europe—which counters the long-prevailing assumption that universal male dominance, primary male gods, warfare and empire-building have always been the dominant ways
of life—was too much for some to acknowledge even as a possibility. While some of us welcomed Gimbutas’s work enthusiastically, others made a concerted effort to distort and dismiss her work, as argued convincingly by Charlene Spretnak in “Anatomy of a Backlash: Concerning the Work of Marija Gimbutas.”16 Perhaps those who feel in harmony with Gimbutas’s theory have internalized more of a pre-Indo-European cultural inheritance while those with an opposing view have internalized more of the Indo-European cultural inheritance. For whatever reasons, this conflict has been surprisingly deep and sharp, echoing what Gimbutas referred to as a “clash between these two ideologies and social and economic structures of cultures.”17

In The Civilization of the Goddess, Gimbutas presented voluminous evidence that supported her claims.

Old Europeans had towns with a considerable concentration of population, temples several stories high, a sacred script, spacious houses of four or five rooms, professional ceramicists, weavers, copper and gold metallurgists, and other artisans producing a range of sophisticated goods. A flourishing network of trade routes existed that circulated items such as obsidian, shells, marble, copper, and salt over hundreds of kilometers.18

This monumental work was illustrated with hundreds of images depicting dynamic symbols and mostly female and animal figures. Many figurines artfully merge the human female form with animal forms, and therefore are considered supernatural and divine.

Using comparative mythology, Gimbutas was able to discern contrasting symbolic, ideological and social systems for Neolithic Old Europe and Bronze Age Europe. She summarized these differences as follows:

The clash between these two ideologies and social and economic structures led to the drastic transformation of Old Europe. These changes were expressed as the transition from matrilineal to patrilinical 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.\textsuperscript{19}

These conclusions are still very controversial.

Archaeomomythology was again the methodology for Gimbutas’s last work about Old Europe and its cultural survivals, The Living Goddesses. This book discussed links between Old European religion and folkloric survivals in present-day European cultures. Gimbutas died on February 2, 1994. The Living Goddesses was published posthumously in 1999, edited and supplemented by her student and colleague, the linguist Miriam Robbins Dexter, also of the University of California at Los Angeles, where Gimbutas was a professor of archaeology from 1963 until her retirement in 1989. Dexter acknowledged that Gimbutas’s work was controversial, “for she was an original thinker and strong in asserting her hypotheses. . . . She realized that the interpretation and interconnection of data are what lead to understanding and to a deep scientific contribution.”\textsuperscript{20}

Gimbutas’s final four books founded the multidisciplinary academic field and methodology of archaeomomthyology. Although she used the scientific archaeological methods of her day, and whenever possible the most technologically advanced methods for dating artifacts, Gimbutas clearly acknowledged that her methodology was not strictly empiricist but also required interpretation, using intuition and artistic sensibilities. Gimbutas’s research on the Goddess civilization of Neolithic Old Europe documented the “cohesive and persistent” symbol system of a “goddess religion” that stretched from Anatolia to the British Isles. She traced its transformation by the invasions of nomadic Indo-Europeans from northeastern Europe, which resulted in the mixture of these disparate cultures into the hybridized historical societies of Europe.

II. Archaeomomthyology and Its Working Assumptions

Marler conceptualized several of the “working assumptions” of the growing field of archaeomomthyology in her “Introduction to Archaeomomthyology,” published in 2000. Each of these statements is significant, for they elucidate presuppositions that inform the process of archaeomomthyology.
• Sacred cosmologies are central to the cultural fabric of all early societies.

• Beliefs and rituals expressing sacred worldviews are conservative and are not easily changed.

• Many archaic cultural patterns have survived into the historical period as folk motifs and as mythic elements within oral, visual, and ritual traditions.

• Symbols, preserved in cultural artifacts, "represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted."22, 23

Together, these working assumptions provide a doorway and framework for the exploration of the spiritual beliefs and practices of ancient peoples.

In postmodern cultures of today that focus so intently on human constructs and language, it can be difficult for us to comprehend the embeddedness of ancient peoples in nature and their curiosity about the cosmos. But when approaching prehistorical cultures, it is plausible to assume that "sacred cosmologies are central to the cultural fabric of all early societies," as Marler stated in her first point above. Living as an integral part of the fabric of nature, Neolithic peoples were much more in tune with the elements, plants, animals, seasons and celestial sources of light than are urbanized and modernized people today.

Regarding Marler’s second working assumption for the field of archaeomythology, that "beliefs and rituals expressing sacred worldviews are conservative and are not easily changed," we can provide several significant reasons for this. Beliefs and rituals were often created to secure survival. As Jane Ellen Harrison wrote in her 1913 work, Ancient Art and Ritual, "other things may be added to enrich and beautify human life, but, unless these [survival] wants are first satisfied, humanity itself must cease to exist. These two things, therefore, food and children, were what men [sic] chiefly sought to procure by the performance of magical rites."24 Today we realize that rituals also serve the crucial need of creating group bonding, and therefore, again, have staying power. Rituals and beliefs that advance human survival become religious imperatives and are passed from one generation to the next.
This is one of the major reasons why religious conflicts are often so intransigent—they are tied to the differently perceived survival needs of different peoples. People come to explain the world to themselves in ways that become traditions, and then these traditions are sometimes held as if they were absolutely necessary to personal and group identity, to well-being as well as survival, as defined by one’s own family or clan. Scholars of mythology argue, however, that these are not the only reasons why humans have created religious beliefs and practices.

Some religious beliefs and rituals have been created to respond to and engage with a felt sense of the sacredness and awesomeness of life, the powers of nature and all that is. People tell sacred stories or myths to explain life itself and their place in creation. They invent rituals to make manifest the mythos of divinity within material experience.

Marler’s third point is that “many archaic cultural patterns have survived into the historical period as folk motifs and as mythic elements within oral, visual, and ritual traditions.” This is affirmed by folklorists and historians of religion. We know that archaic cultural patterns persist in popular customs such as Christmas and Halloween, in fairy tales and even astronomy, as well as in the popularity of antiquities internationally. To state this point another way, folk motifs and mythic elements provide us with clues regarding earlier beliefs that have remained alive for long periods of time in popular culture, because of their survival value and also because of their connection to sacred cosmologies and traditions that express and renew people’s spiritual feelings—including intense feelings of love, wonder, fear of the unknown, desires for healing, approaching and reconciling with death, and more.

What of Marler’s fourth working assumption? Archaeomythology holds that “symbols, preserved in cultural artifacts, ‘represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted’ (Gimbutas 1989, xxv)”? This claim is plausible, again, because religious symbols presuppose a spiritual realm of reference and values. The invisible dimension beyond the material realm, for most of human history has been deemed essential to people’s survival, well-being, identity and connection with others, with nature and with the divine. This view was corroborated by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his Interpretation of Cultures. Geertz saw the sacred stories and rituals of religion as infused with a set of cultural symbols
and that "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos—the
tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and
mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in
sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order."

These four working assumptions of Gimbutas’s archaeomythology,
as articulated by Marler, generate a framework that allows for both
material and spiritual aspects of an ancient culture to be perceived and
(to some extent) understood. It opens possibilities for the researcher to
trace both material and spiritual changes from one era to another, from
one place to another.

Eventually, Gimbutas’s work was embraced by the Women’s
Spirituality Movement that emerged from the popular uprisings of the
1960s and 1970s during the era of the Vietnam War. Starr Goode, a
feminist activist in Los Angeles, described the larger cultural context of
the time: The year 1968 was a “tumultuous year, with the assassinations
of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the ongoing slaughter in
Vietnam, [and] the military draft of students.”

[In 1969] the [UCLA] campus became a combat zone of
demonstrations over the War, People’s Park, the near daily
tear gas, the National Guard on street corners, curfews,
mass arrests, a student shot to death. . . . We wanted the
opportunity to learn how to protect ourselves from male
violence. What passion we had, what a totality of commit-
ment to our vision of a better world!"

The LA Goddess Project that Goode initiated with friends produced
special events for the publication of The Language of the Goddess
in 1989 and The Civilization of the Goddess in 1991, which was
documented on video as “Voice of the Goddess: Marija Gimbutas.”
Another documentary of Gimbutas lecturing, this time at the California
Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco in 1990, was produced by
psychologist and cultural historian Ralph Metzner: Marija Gimbutas:
World of the Goddess. Metzner is also the author of The Well of
Remembrance: Rediscovering the Earth Wisdom Myths of Northern
Europe. He drew upon Gimbutas’s theory of Old European societies and
their hybridization with Indo-European tribes to construct his fascinating
discussion of the mythology of northern Europe.

Religious scholar and Goddess theologian Carol P. Christ and reli-
gious scholar Naomi Goldenberg gathered several colleagues together and
edited a collection of articles celebrating and defending Gimbutas and her
work. A special section titled “The Legacy of the Goddess: The Work of
Marija Gimbutas” was published in 1996 in the leading feminist journal
for religious studies, the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion.*

In order to honor Gimbutas’s breadth of scholarship and advance
the development of the field of archaeomythology, Marler edited *From
the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija
Gimbutas*, a Festschrift published in 1997 and to which fifty-six col-
leagues, representing a wide range of disciplines, contributed. To
welcome the publication of this book, Marler and I produced the inter-
national conference, “From the Realm of the Ancestors, Language of the
Goddess,” also sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies,
where I was serving as director of the women’s spirituality, philosophy
and religion graduate program. Other events celebrating the life and
work of Gimbutas and this Festschrift took place, most notably at the
Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

In 1998, Marler launched the Institute of Archaeomythology (IAM).
It has “sponsored numerous international exhibitions, symposia, and
other events on archaeomythological themes in collaboration with uni-
versities, academies, national museums, and other institutions located in
the geographical area of Old Europe and beyond.” Marler, Dexter, the
linguist and cultural scientist Harald Haarmann, and other colleagues of
Gimbutas have continued to grow the field of archaeomythology through
international conferences, books, articles, courses in colleges and uni-
versities, and the open-access, online *Journal of Archaeomythology.*
Marler and Haarmann have written many articles and produced several
books. Haarmann’s most recent work, published in 2014, is titled *Roots
of Ancient Greek Civilization: The Influence of Old Europe.*

The documentary *Signs Out of Time: The Life and Work of Marija
Gimbutas*, created by filmmakers Donna Read and Starhawk, premiered
in 2004. It projected the view that “determined and courageous, Marija
Gimbutas stayed true to what she saw, amidst ridicule, criticism, and
controversy. If her theories are correct, then reverence for the Earth,
peace, and cooperation are the very underpinnings of European civiliza-
tion." Since 2004, the video has been distributed to colleges, universities
and libraries in 48 states plus the District of Columbia in the United
States and to countries on all of the habitable continents of the world.
This is a testimony to the widespread appeal of Gimbutas’s work around
the world.

III. Archaeomythology Methodology and Goddess Studies

In this third section, I discuss the methodology of archaeomytholo-
ogy and how it overlaps with the women’s spirituality methodology
of spiritual feminist hermeneutics. Although I am a serious student of
archaeology, I am not an archaeologist. My academic training has been
in philosophy and religion, and I am primarily a women’s spirituality and
goddess studies scholar. I discuss the methodology of archaeomythology
with a view toward its use in tandem with women’s spirituality, goddess
studies, and religious studies more generally.

In 1999, Joan Marler hosted a conference on the beautiful west-
ern Greek island of Madouri about “Archaeomythology: Taking the
Disciplines Deeper.” We were a gathering of archaeologists, linguists,
religious scholars, folklorists, anthropologists, philosophers, artists, poets
and others who were interested in creating new ways of bringing archa-
emythology as methodology into our own disciplines.

As a woman of European heritage, I am interested in using archa-
emythology research for deepening my knowledge of our Goddess- and
God-revering ancestors. When conducting field research about ancient
myth and religion in Greece and Crete, I visit archaeological sites and
museums repeatedly. I study the pertinent archaeological site reports and
other archaeology texts written by the primary excavators, take relevant
courses in archaeology, and talk with archaeologists in my areas of inter-
est. I combine this archaeological knowledge with studies of mythology,
with attention to linguistics, history of religions, and folklore. I study the
Bronze Age Linear A script of Crete and the Creto-Mycenaean Linear
B script, and also Homeric and Attic Greek. I use the multiple disci-
plines that archaeomythology draws upon, for example, for my studies
of the prepatriarchal, pre-Mycenaean cultures of ancient Crete, as well
as my studies of the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone.
I also teach the methodology of archaeomythology to my students at the California Institute of Integral Studies when teaching my courses on “The Goddesses of Prehistory: An Archaeomythology” and “The Goddess and God Civilization of Ancient Crete.” I have learned much from the archaeomythology research of Gimbutas, Marler, Dexter, Haarmann, and several doctoral students whose dissertation committees I have chaired. A primary example is the dissertation written by Joan Cichon, who applied an archaeomythology methodology in the research for her study, “Matriarchy in Ancient Crete: A Perspective from Archaeomythology and Modern Matriarchal Studies.” She documented that the primary deity in ancient Crete was a Mother Goddess of nature; argued that ancient Crete was a woman-centered society; and correlated her archaeological findings with the definition of matriarchy provided by philosopher Heidi Goettner-Abendroth, the founder of modern matriarchal studies, on the economic, social, political and cultural levels. Cichon concluded that Bronze Age Crete was a matriarchy.

Haarmann’s Interacting with Figurines: Seven Dimensions in the Study of Imagery (2009) is another significant application of archaeomythology methodology to the empirical and mythological study of prehistoric imagery. “Figurines serve as a lingua franca in social interactions that enhance the sustainability of communal life and as an expression of a matrix of established values and beliefs by which people with a similarly tuned mindset are interconnected.” Haarmann is intrigued by the social and symbolic significance of figurines as visual metaphors in cultures past and present. The earliest figurine yet discovered is the “Venus of Hohle Fels” in southwest Germany; it is 35,000 years old.

In light of this breadth and depth of research, I have elaborated the following methods for conducting archaeomythology research in tandem with women’s spirituality and goddess studies. As a methodology, archaeomythology does the following:

- Starts with archaeological survey and discovery of material artifacts, their scientific measurements, material analysis, and determination of dates and chronological sequences.
- Analyzes artifacts with respect to stature, stance, size, placement, sex and gender, class, race, age, costume, gesture, attributes,
symbols, and relationships of persons, animals, plants, deities and/or environments to determine specific characteristics as markers for the probable identity, status and role of each.

- Identifies ritual equipment and practices in local contexts, using specific criteria to identify findspots as primarily religious or nonreligious in function; associations with place; cosmological conjunctions; regional religious customs; and cross-cultural comparisons of religious practices in neighboring regions or countries.

- Distinguishes women, men, and other genders, priestesses and priests, goddesses and gods, mythical creatures, and rituals for birthing, sacred marriage, healing, death and burial, and planting and harvesting.

- Uses linguistics to discover contemporaneous and/or later language terms, inscriptions, and/or literary texts that imply plausible and probable meanings of the artifacts, noting linguistic similarities, survivals, or reversals of meaning from earlier eras and cultures to later ones.

- Compares archaeological data with later historical data, mythologies and folklore, looking for continuities, discontinuities, parallels and differences in ritual practices and spiritual beliefs from one time and place to another.

- Interprets symbols as part of a complex system of meanings and as keys for inferring sacred stories and spiritual meaning, using steps such as those specified by Gimbutas: analysis of the archaeological data, association, seeing the parts and the whole, and engaging intuition and artistic sensibilities to infer symbolic and mythological significance.

- Turns preliminary hypotheses, with sufficient warrant, into theories that interconnect both material culture and spiritual culture.

- Distinguishes different truth claims regarding empirical material data, on the one hand, and mythological, spiritual or religious truth claims, on the other, recognizing that distinct epistemologies are at work in science or religion and in empirical quantitative research or qualitative humanistic research.
- Renders compelling interpretations of the material data that are consistent with the empirical data and are strengthened by the convergence of archaeology and mythology and related disciplines, drawing inferences that are more plausible and probable than competing interpretations that may be more narrowly scientific or more narrowly religious/mythological.

These ten methods within an archaeomythology methodology serve to bridge the epistemological gulf between scientific archaeology and religious mythology. They respect deeply the material evidence provided by scientific methods, and at the same time these methods engage intuition, aesthetics, and perhaps also a spiritual sensibility, in the process of arriving at an interpretation of the empirical data.

The archaeomythology researcher acknowledges her or his own agency in the interpretation of the data. He or she may admit that knowledge is a social construct with political implications in the present.38 And so, she or he will provide, at the outset and along the way, the researcher’s socially situated standpoint, research interests, religious or spiritual biases, and other influences on one’s perceptions of the scientific data. They may consider that interpretations of the archaeological evidence could be enriched by the researcher cultivating a sense of interrelatedness among humans, nature, the cosmos and the source of all life (however that might be understood), especially when dealing with other cultures that seem to express a sense of the interrelatedness of all beings, such as those with more animistic, immanent, and transcendent spiritualities.

Here is where we find a bridge to another methodology, that is, the one I most often use in doing research in religious studies. Goddess studies and women’s spirituality are emergent fields of academic study that overlap with religious studies, women’s studies, ethnic studies, and ecofeminist philosophy and activism. Women’s spirituality seeks a sense of the sacred in ancient and contemporary cultures, especially as created by women, for women, for children and men, for the larger society, and for the larger environment.
IV. Women’s Spirituality, Goddess Studies and Spiritual Feminist Hermeneutics

As a professor of philosophy, religion, and women’s spirituality, I consider what is contributed to the study of a prehistorical era or ancient historical era when it is explored from a primarily spiritual and religious orientation. What if I or others in goddess studies and women’s spirituality use prayers and meditations, dreams and rituals, arts and divination, or the guidance of ancestors or other spirit guides or divinities to engage with the religious practices and spiritual experiences of ancient peoples? Can this more subjective approach be included in the methodology of archaeomythology? I am not sure. Maybe. Probably not. But then, even Einstein acknowledged kinesthetic feelings and dream images that suggested to him ideas for relativity and quantum physics.

I propose that women’s spiritual practices and ways of knowing engage us in a spiritual feminist hermeneutics, a spiritual and political mode of interpretation. It is spiritual because it seeks to connect with a sense of the sacred and the divine. It is spiritual also because it looks to the dimensions of life that can be experienced but not adequately named, dimensions that are mysterious and ineffable but nonetheless offer wellsprings of providence, grace, healing, love and life itself. It is feminist because of its explicit interest in the lives and contributions of women in a more complete and truthful way, in personal and historical perspectives. It seeks to understand gender and gendered relations in societies past and present; it employs standpoint theory; and it seeks to transform social relations to become more equitable and just. Standpoint theory holds that a more complete understanding of an intended reality is possible if the standpoint of the researcher and of the subjects of research are acknowledged. And it is a hermeneutics because it sees the act of interpretation as a dialectic between text or artifact and the researcher. Although hermeneutics seeks to understand the text in its own context (with the help of language studies and historical studies), it also seeks to find its value for the present day.

Women’s spirituality and goddess studies generally foreground the dimension of the researcher’s self. Because in the past women were so often excluded from the creation or focus of research, we emphasize the importance of including oneself explicitly in one’s research. This
approach overlaps with the approach called participatory research, a practice developed in women's studies since its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it is recently becoming more widely adopted in academia, including archaeology. A spiritual feminist hermeneutics is participatory, because the researcher includes herself or himself as an active, self-reflexive agent in the search for knowledge. In participatory research, it is understood that both the researcher and the co-researchers (the subjects of the research) will be influenced and possibly benefited (or perhaps harmed) emotionally, politically and/or spiritually.

Women's spirituality and goddess studies research is usually also transdisciplinary, because these fields draw upon multiple disciplines, the researcher is a pivotal agent in the process of discovery; the researcher's standpoint becomes part of the unfolding research process; and these studies intend that the research may be transformative of self, others and the larger culture. Finally, instead of being intraparadigmatic, transdisciplinary research is meta-paradigmatic, which is to say that, instead of staying within a single discipline of knowledge, it draws upon several disciplines and so must consider how the different disciplines can work together.

What happens when the women's spirituality and goddess studies researcher includes herself or himself explicitly in the design of the research project and the interpretation of its findings? What if the research is undertaken because of the interests of the researcher in the social, political and religious problems of the researcher's culture? Or with the researcher's express desire for discovering something that will be inspiring, empowering, enlightening, healing and/or transformative of self and culture? Here we move beyond the useful constraints of science that work to minimize or exclude researcher bias. Instead, we desire to honor the passion and compassion that connect us to our subject and guides our work. It is research for humanistic, socially just and spiritually illuminating purposes.

A transdisciplinary, participatory, spiritual feminist hermeneutic provides us with a methodology to develop a larger and more accurate picture of past cultures' religious practices and their spiritual significance. It seeks to understand what knowledge and insight they can impart to our lives today. It draws upon multiple disciplines, depending on the topic of inquiry, and can include one's own spiritual beliefs,
practices and non-empirical modes of knowing, such as empathy, intuition and body wisdom.

A transdisciplinary, participatory, spiritual feminist hermeneutics overlaps with archaeomythology. Both seek to understand the subject of the research within its own context. But in addition, a transdisciplinary, participatory, spiritual feminist hermeneutics seeks to understand the research data as filtered through the persona of the interpreter, using reflexive self-awareness. Women's spirituality and goddess studies are informed and shaped by various liberatory movements not only for women and men around the world but also for indigenous, postcolonial, queer, working class, ecological and other movements for social justice at work today. They also intend the possible spiritual and social transformation of the researcher, co-researchers and readers.

All of this methodological complexity comes to bear for me professionally and personally in my study of the religious myth of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis in Greece. I am primarily interested in the role that the myth and religious rites of the Mother and Daughter Goddesses played in the spiritual awakening, integration and transformation of individuals within the larger community. Here, my study of ancient Greek literary works, artworks, religion and politics is complemented by the use of archaeomythology. Yet it would not feel accurate to say that my methodology is archaeomythology alone, because my primary focus and my beginning point is not archaeology.

I begin with the myth of Demeter and Persephone as recorded in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter of archaic Greece, and I move from there to an exploration of temples, shrines, other archaeological artifacts, epigrapha (texts engraved in stone), linguistics, literature, cultural history and art history to discover how the mythos of the Mother and Daughter Goddesses, their separation and reunion, was re-enacted at Eleusis. Finally, I re-enact the nine-day rite of initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. As Joseph Campbell stated, "A ritual is the enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth." My feeling for the myth is generated primarily by its resonance with my own life story and how it brings insight and healing. This has been my guiding thread and my inspiration—along with the love I experienced in my relationship with my mother, whom I choose to honor with this work. I hope my interpretations will have both material and spiritual value for other
women and men and for our world today and the future. My research into
goddess religions of the past converges with the rituals I cocreate with
others in my own time and place, to invite us to open more fully to the
mysteries of birth, sexuality, death and rebirth.

Mine is a personal and communal spiritual approach, an embodied
spiritual feminist approach that is transdisciplinary, participatory and
interpretive. It engages the sciences and social sciences to assist my reli-
gious studies. I want my research to find as much relatively objective
scientific data as possible, and I want to interpret the empirical data
in a way that honors the integrity of the past and that also speaks to
me deeply, in ways that are relatively subjective. My epistemology
addresses the challenge of interfacing science and religion by seeing
objectivity and subjectivity along an epistemological continuum, with
some knowledge being relatively objective (like counting fingers and
measuring rainfall) and some knowledge being relatively subjective
(like dreaming, remembering and loving), with the purely material/
objective pole and the purely energy/subjective (nonmaterial, ideational
or ideal) pole of the spectrum as vanishing boundary points in human
knowledge. A spiritual feminist hermeneutic can bridge the gulf between
science and religion, empiricism and spirituality.

I embrace archaeomythology as both field and methodology as an
invaluable dimension of my work in women’s spirituality and goddess
studies. It is part of my spiritual feminist hermeneutics methodology.

One of the reasons Gimbutas’s work has such power for me and
others today is that her analysis provides a window into a prepatriarchal
egalitarian Goddess and God civilization that I can honor. And it explains
what happened when indigenous Old Europeans were colonized by Indo-
Europeans, resulting in the hybridization of the Old European culture
and the Indo-European culture during the Neolithic and early Bronze
Ages in Europe. It also proffers an important perspective on the cultural
dynamics of our own era.

Today we see ongoing struggles between the value systems of a
more egalitarian, matristic, partnership ethos and a more hierarchical,
patriarchal, dominator ethos; between the goals of sexual egalitarian-
ism and sexual hierarchy; between earth-honoring religions and sky- or
heaven-oriented religions; between peaceable cultures and militaristic
cultures. In many ways, the political struggles within the world today
reflect the desire among diverse populations for decolonization from the
dominator values of many of the Indo-European and other colonizers of
the globe, with their traditional cultural constructs of male dominance,
monotheistic male gods and militarism. Many of us hope and work for a
genuinely postcolonial, postpatriarchal world.

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Endnotes

I I delivered an earlier version of this article for the panel on "Archaeomythology in Theoretical Elaborations and Multi-Cultural Applications" at the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology

2 The publisher had insisted that Gods needed to come first in the title, even though Gimbutas explained there were many more Goddesses compared to Gods in the archaeological record of Old Europe.


5 Ibid., xv.

6 Ibid., xviii. See also Joan Marler, “Archaeomythology in Theoretical and Multi-Cultural Contexts” for the panel on “Archaeomythology: Theoretical Elaborations and Multi-Cultural Applications” at the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology conference on “Creating the Chalice: Imagination and Integrity in Goddess Studies,” in San Francisco, California, May 12, 2012; in this volume.


12 Ibid., viii; see also 396–401.

13 Ibid., viii.

14 Ibid., viii.
15 Ibid., viii, 401; 396–401.


20 Ibid., 10.


22 Ibid., 12.

23 Ibid., 16.

24 Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson. Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 240.


37 Ibid., viii.


41 Joan Marler, “Introduction to Archaeomythology,” ReVision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation 23, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 2. I have reconfigured these working assumptions into a list, so the ideas can more easily be considered individually and as a group.


45 Marija Gimbutas with Ralph Metzner, The World of the Goddess (video from videocassette [VHS], 1993). www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMutw5CNiRQ.


49 See Reclaiming Quarterly. www.reclaimingquarterly.org/web/gimbutas/gimbutas1.html. As director of the Women’s Spirituality graduate program of the California Institute of Integral Studies, I produced the West Coast Premiere gala for Signs out of Time: The Story of Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (Video, 2004), by Donna Read and Starhawk, narrated by Olympia Dukakis. It can also be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=whfGbPFAY4w.


58 I use this term to contrast the global North West (the United States, Canada and Europe) with the global South or global East (Asia).
MYTHS
Shattered and Restored

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