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Matriarchy, Gimbutas and figurines. Entanglements with the Goddess

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This paper by Sabina Cveček offers much food for thought in a subject area that is both archaeologically complex and politically charged. I have chosen to focus on three areas of this rich and interesting paper: terminology, especially 'matriarchy'; the reception of Gimbutas's work and ideas within scholarship; and the still-problematic deployment of figurines in discussions of female-centred and goddess-centred past societies. The careful reconsideration of terminology is very welcome, and the author rightly notes the variation and slippage in meaning (and confusions) in the deployment of distinct anthropological categories such as matrilocal, matrilineal and matriarchal within archaeology, not to mention other newer coinings such as matristic and gylanic, which try to characterize and frame gender relations and societal power structures from fresh perspectives using different language.

The term 'matriarchy' [literally, 'mother-rule', from the Greek roots *meter* (mother) and *arche* (rule)], has, in particular, provoked strong reactions within academia and beyond. It is useful to recall that, in its modern historical formulation as a hypothesized, early societal form in which women, or more precisely, mothers ruled, it was considered to be decidedly 'primitive' (along with the associated concept of the universal Mother or Great Goddess); thus, while matriarchy and

patriarchy were, in one sense, considered direct mirrors of one another, the former was viewed with disdain, while the latter was understood to be more evolved by the Western male scholars who developed and applied these ideas. The attribution of a more positive value to this hypothesized, female-centred past appeared only later within feminist-informed writings about politics, history and religion, where models of past female power offered inspiration for contemporary struggles; however, this line of thinking is often dismissed as a 'past as wished for' rather than one that can be substantiated through material evidence.

As the author notes, matriarchal studies have taken on a new lease of life and indeed new directions, moving away from the Western colonialist lens and seeking to redefine 'matriarchy' not in terms of dominance but rather as gender-egalitarian and consensus-based, typically with distinctive domains of power for men and women. One might wonder whether it would make more sense to retire (or dethrone?) the term rather than to argue for a new and substantively different meaning – will this not serve simply to create more layers of terminological confusion? But, at least within the circle of relevant scholarship, it would seem that this ship has sailed and that, for many, matriarchy has come to mean something rather different. This is the position adopted by the author, citing with approval this approach as exemplified by Peggy Sanday in her influential 2002 book, *Women at the centre. Life in a modern matriarchy*, on the Minangkabau of Indonesia. In the same vein, gender-equality, not female dominance, is at the heart of the discipline of 'modern matriarchal studies' developed by Heide Goettner-Abendroth. Although some of the relevant publications foreground modern (non-Western) societies as the core evidence, archaeology is also incorporated into the discussion, often with a highly selective citation of scholarship, for example, characterizing Bronze Age Crete as 'egalitarian' with only limited attention to cultural changes within this highly complex palatial society over time (Goettner-Abendroth 2022).

Turning to consider the work of Marija Gimbutas, it is striking that she does not use the term 'matriarchy' in her reconstructions of a female-centred Old Europe, preferring instead terms such as 'matristic' and also 'gylanic' (the latter adopted from Riane Eisler). I do have some sympathy for the view expressed by Cveček that Gimbutas's work has been dismissed in a way that it is truly difficult to envisage were this a male archaeologist; it is often not only the critiques themselves but the tone that gives pause for thought: some are hostile and dismissive, and others seemingly born of frustration (Meskell 1995; Tringham and Conkey 1998). Unlike the author, though, I do see more variation, softening of tone and positive re-evaluation over time – including in some of the papers delivered at the 2021 conference in Lithuania, which is cited – although I agree that there is a (perhaps unbridgeable) chasm of understanding between the archaeologists and the archaeomythographers. I would note, for example, a paper by Ernestine Elsner, who worked with Gimbutas, which strikes me as thoughtful and appreciative of her considerable and pioneering achievements as an archaeologist (2007); the short interviews with archaeologists Colin Renfrew (also a collaborator in the field), Ruth Tringham and Meg Conkey, in the evocative (yet largely hagiographic) film about her life, *Signs out of time. The life of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas* (Belili Films 2004); and, most recently, a lecture by Colin Renfrew in which he describes her 'Kurgan hypothesis' as 'magnificently vindicated' by recent DNA work (Renfrew 2018).

It is useful to recall the wider context within which Gimbutas's work is situated, taking her ideas about Goddesses (which form an integral element in her vision of Old Europe) as a focal point. As Talalay (2000: 790) has aptly noted, the general field of Goddess studies (and we might expand that here to include matriarchal studies) is 'politically inflected', occupying two different worlds: the materiality of archaeology and the spirituality of the Goddess movement, as well as the politics of gender. Gimbutas's archaeological work has, of course, been enthusiastically adopted by such groups, which regard any critique of her work as a kind of orchestrated, patriarchal attack (Spretnak 1996; 2011).

Interaction between these 'worlds' has, on the whole, been characterized by strong disagreements both about the interpretation of the past itself and the role a reconstructed past can or should play in the present and future. These 'worlds' have also become highly polarized; in reality, neither archaeologists nor those involved in feminist Goddess spirituality are homogeneous

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groups, and what might be intended as a general description (say, by an archaeologist writing about the Goddess movement) is often taken as misleading caricature rather than as fair characterization. The reverse, of course, is also true.

A related issue, and one which demands careful reflection, is the extent to which the entanglement of Marija Gimbutas's work with feminist, archaeomythological and Goddess thinking has continued to negatively shape some archaeological attitudes and interpretation. One can only speculate as to what the scholarly landscape might look like in the absence of this particular dynamic, but there can be little doubt it would be quite different. As an archaeologist doing research in this area, I am conscious that some academics do not regard it as a serious realm of study, compared, for example, with the study of pottery, landscape or warfare. Fear of not being taken seriously in one's profession or discomfort with being dismissed as 'new agey' should not, however, be underestimated as factors in shaping what we decide to study and how we then study it. It is much harder to reflect on what influences our own scholarly practices than to dissect those of our predecessors, but it can be argued that the heady mixture of rejecting (and dethroning) an older universalizing model (of the Mother Goddess) combined with the ensuing challenge of the emergence of the Goddess movement has created a degree of archaeological discomfort with reading the feminine divine into the material record.

Figurines from her numerous excavations were central to Gimbutas's ideas both of human social structures and their conceptualization of the divine. As frequently observed, Gimbutas over-privileged imagery she regarded as female, thus contributing to the 'enthroning' of a goddess, as had numerous scholars before her (see Goodison and Morris 1998; 2013). It was Peter Ucko's work on Neolithic Aegean and Egyptian figurines which prompted a shift away from these overarching readings of figurines across a wide geographical area (Ucko 1968). It is all too easy to forget that this was a radical, and politicized, rejection of the views of the existing archaeological establishment (Hutton 1998: 97), yet it is a view that continues to hold sway outside archaeology and where Gimbutas's readings of the figurine material remain influential. Archaeologists now agree, with Ucko, that figurines could represent and symbolize many things: for example, deities, teaching devices, toys, talismans and human votaries (Talalay 1993; Lesure 2002). Yet, I would also observe there seems to be a real reluctance in much archaeological scholarship to keep goddesses or the feminine divine in active service ('rethroning') as part of that list of possibilities – and this is surely, in part, a reaction to the modern and highly charged biographies for the Goddess in the contemporary world.

Alongside Gimbutas, another high-profile 'reader' of figurines as goddesses was the first excavator of the Neolithic site of Catal Hüyük, James Mellaart, who proclaimed the 'cult of the Mother Goddess as the basis of our civilisation' (Mellaart 1965: 77). Interestingly, current work at the site by Ian Hodder and his team offers clear support for the kind of egalitarian mode of living envisioned by Gimbutas, and as argued for in the new matriarchal studies. At the same time, detailed work on newer figurine finds from Catal Hüyük, often with well-documented contexts, has focused on identifying them in terms of human society, arguing that this 'thoroughly undermines' any narratives of female-centred symbolism (Hodder and Meskell 2010); instead attention is drawn more to the possible status of older living women and less on generalized ideas of fertility or goddesses (Nakamura and Meskell 2009). Interesting work by anthropologist Kathryn Rountree (2007) with the Catal Hüyük team makes it clear that archaeologists and goddess-oriented feminists are 'talking past one another' and at this Neolithic site at least, goddesses remain firmly 'dethroned' in the archaeological narrative.

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Matrilineal kinship in Aegean prehistory: not a game of thrones

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Abstract
In response to the article written by Sabina Cveček, it is argued that the view expressed by the author that matrilineal kinship has been 'throned' and 're-throned' in Aegean prehistory has resulted from a poor understanding of anthropological terms. It is also proposed that archaeological perspectives on matrilineal kinship cannot be 'streamlined' through the contribution of social anthropology and ethnography as both fields are plagued by their own limitations.

Keywords: Kinship; matriliny; gender; evolutionism; Archaeology; Anthropology