

Who's Afraid of the Goddess? Leopard's Tails, Menopausal Syndrome: Terms of Debate within Archaeology

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Članek predstavlja vpogled v arheološke diskusije o ženskih neolitskih figurinah in začenja z zgodovinskim pregledom glavnih akademskih interpretacij figurin. Poleg tega uvaja feministične pristope v arheologiji, povezane s figurinami, ter prikazuje, kako je androcentrična pristranskost vplivala na teorije in metodologije. Študija primera Çatalhöyük služi kot primer kontrastnih naracij. Članek trdi, da lahko akademsko razvrednotenje dela Marije Gimbutas v okviru sodobne arheologije štejemo za lakmusov test, ki kaže na razširjenost spolne pristranskosti na tem disciplinarnem področju. Med posebnimi argumenti proti Gimbutasovim teorijam so: sindrom menopavze, ginocentrična agenda in obrnjeni seksizem, ki vsi kažejo, kako so se arheologi osredotočili na osebne napade in ne na resno akademsko razpravo. Na koncu so vse te retorične strategije preusmerile pozornost znanstvenikov z glavnega vprašanja, ki se redko obravnava: zakaj v neolitiku prevladujejo ženske figurine?

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KLJUČNE BESEDE: neolitik, ženske figurine, boginje, Gimbutas, feministična arheologija in arheologija spola, arheološke diskusije.

This article presents an insight into archaeological disputes around female Neolithic figurines, starting with a historical overview of main academic interpretations of the figurines. Furthermore, it introduces feminist approaches in archaeology related to figurines, showing how androcentric bias has undermined theories and methodologies. Çatalhöyük case-study serves as an example of contrasting narratives. The article argues that academic devaluation of Marija Gimbutas' work within contemporary archaeology can be considered a litmus test which show the pervasiveness of gender bias in this disciplinary field. Among peculiar arguments against Gimbutas' theories, there are: menopause syndrome, gynocentric agenda, and reverse sexism, all of which show how the archaeologists have focused on personal attacks rather than on serious academic discussion. In the end, all those rhetoric strategies have shifted scholars' attention from the main issue which is rarely addressed: why is it that the Neolithic period is dominated by female figurines?

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KEYWORDS: Neolithic, female figurines, goddesses, Gimbutas, feminist and gender archaeology, archaeological disputes.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of female Neolithic figurines has constituted a controversial debate within the archaeological discipline, especially when related to Goddesses. This paper explores a range of academic positions on this disputed topic. Starting from a historical overview of fundamental hypothesis regarding prehistoric Goddesses, my argument will consist in showing that the acceptance or refusal of the theories of Marija Gimbutas could be understood as a litmus test of charged discussions within the mainstream of the discipline of archaeology but also of their intersections with feminist and gender approaches to archaeology.

The discourse on prehistoric divinities has a long history as it was theorized in different contexts by numerous scholars, predominantly the historians of religion. At the end of the 19th century, historian, lawyer, and anthropologist Johann Jacob Bachofen ([1891] 1988) claimed that the human species had developed in two main phases: prehistory dominated by the cult of female Goddesses, resulting from a matriarchal society (characterized by the rule of women, which he also defined as “gynocracy”), which then progressed towards a (superior) patriarchal society, dominated by male gods. At the turn of the 20th century, during the fifties, there was a growing number of scholars interested in the topic.

The anthropologist and historian of religion James Frazer ([1951] 2014) has elaborated several theories concerning the influence of matriarchy on religions, drawing on various ethnographic cases of rituals devoted to the feminine principle. Bachofen and Frazer shared a view that exalted progress characterized by male superiority. The expert of Greek mythology Robert Graves ([1948] 1992) in his essay *The White Goddess* analyzes numerous historical and mythological resources that testify a strong matriarchal imprint of pre-Christian Europe.

Another important essay, this time in the field of psychology, by Erich Neumann ([1955] 1981), inserts the discourse on mother Goddess into that of psychological archetypes, referring to the archaeological and mythological evidence from Anatolia, especially regarding the cult of Cybele.

The anthropologist and historian of religion E. O. James (1960) dedicates a long chapter of his essay to a discussion of Mother Goddess and her successors, relating the paleolithic “venuses” to the cult of a primigenial Mother Goddess. Following James, the “venuses” would later develop into Middle Eastern goddesses such as Mesopotamian Inanna-Ishtar, Egyptian Isis-Hathor, while in the Syrian and Palestinian regions there would be Astarte-Anat.

Also, the philosopher Bertrand Russel ([1946]1991), in his *History of Western Philosophy*, thinks that at the origins of antique civilizations there had existed a figure of a Mother Goddess that got transformed subsequently into the Goddesses of Asia Minor and of Greece, Ishtar and Artemis.

Furthermore, in the recently republished collective works of the American historian of religion Joseph Campbell, we find an interpretation of protohistoric religiosity that is influenced by Gimbutas, in which Campbell asserts that the figurines of the Paleolithic, in their nudity, represent female Goddesses (Campbell 2013: 10-11).

THE APPLE OF DISCORD: ÇATALHÖYÜK

Within the discipline of archaeology, up until the first half of the 20th century and for a while afterwards, there had been an implicit agreement around the understanding of the cult of Mother Goddess, according to which the Paleolithic and Neolithic figurines were considered its material proof (Renaud 1929; Evans 1935; Childe 1951; Nilsson 1971; Atzeni 1978; Cauvin 1997; Lilliu 1999). The more common interpretation was the one that related female Goddesses to the cult of fertility, explained through the emphasis given to the representation of breasts and vulva of the figurines. This interpretation reached one of its peaks with the discoveries by James Mellaart in his excavations at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia. During the excavations, the archaeologist uncovered dozens of bas-reliefs representing women in the act of giving birth. Among numerous finds at this archaeological site, the one that subsequently became famous as its emblem represents the statue of a woman seated on the throne with two leopards¹ (other figurines, showing sculpted spotted animals, have been identified as “goddesses with leopards” (Mellaart 1967: 141, 182).

According to Mellaart, at the site there used to exist a city devoted to the cult of the Mother Goddess. Several years later, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas not only confirmed Mellaart's hypothesis, but she also conducted multidisciplinary research of female figurines and related symbols. Gimbutas affirmed that during the Neolithic period, in the “Old Europe”, there existed a cult of numerous Goddesses (or alternatively, of one single Great Goddess, presented in many forms). Her theories have generated strong reactions in academia, both positive and negative, especially within the field of archeology.



Fig. 1: Mellaart's Goddess with leopards. The figurine is currently located at the archeological museum of Ankara. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seated_Woman_of_Çatalhöyük, Photos' property: Nevit Dilmen)



Fig. 2: Reconstructed drawing after Mellaart (1967: 138).

¹ Mellaart (1967) describes this figurine as “goddess supported by two felines giving birth to a child” (Mellaart 1967:138).

To comprehend the motivation behind such strong reactions, it is necessary to dissect the controversial points around the discourse of female Goddesses in the field of archaeology, their connection to the female figurines and the link to the women's role in society. After Mellaart, another archaeologist, Ian Hodder, who is considered a founder of the post-processual archaeology, had worked at the archaeological site of Çatalhöyük. In 20 years of further excavations and analysis, he noticed that not only women but also many animals were represented in the remains at the site, especially felines and bulls/cows. Based on this discovery (which was, moreover, highlighted also by Mellaart and Gimbutas who both used the formulation "mistress of animals"), Hodder then refocused his research on the fauna. Reversing the previous interpretations, he published an essay entitled *The Leopard's Tail: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatalhöyük*, in which the focus is on the animals' tails instead on the aspects of the divine feminine. The same archaeologist, consistently negating the strong presence of female symbology, insists to affirm that "we can talk about the violence, sex and death of the imagery at Çatalhöyük simply in terms of male prowess" (Hodder 2006: 203). This argument *curiously* mirrors the claims developed by Peter Ucko in which the scholar complained that "the male figurines are rejected as a Male God of prowess (Ucko 1962: 42)". Similarly, Michael Balter in his essay, *The Goddess and the Bull*, also devoted to the same contested archaeological site, claims that Gimbutas suffers from "nostalgia for a lost egalitarian paradise, where women were empowered rather than trodden underfoot"² (Balter 2016: 40). This (recently published) text implies, in a not too subtle way, that the female gender is not only constantly discriminated against and humiliated but also that an egalitarian society is unimaginable, or at least, relegated to the realm of fantasy.

I would argue that the rhetorical discursive moves frequently used in debates in the field of archaeology consist in a certain deliberate denigration and/or rendering invisible of women, counterbalanced by the constant emphasis on presumed male prowess. This phenomenon is so pervasive and evident that even two paleontologists who certainly are not feminists such as Lewis-Williams and Pearce, find it necessary to ask the following: "who saw the process of domestication as a metaphor for the control of women: the people of Çatalhöyük themselves, or the archaeologists who study them?" (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 138). They also provide a remarkably interesting interpretation of the figurine of a woman seated on/between two leopards. The two paleontologists, experts in the topic of shamanism, state that "around the world, large and physically powerful animals, such as bears and felines, are associated with shamans" (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 145). In other words, if in mainstream archaeological discourse it seems impossible to admit that this figurine could represent a Goddess, recognizing her status as that of a shaman could represent an important step ahead in the debates in the field. In my opinion, it is important as well to pay attention to the headpiece which the woman seems to be wearing, ascribable to *polos* that is characteristic of the iconography of Middle Eastern Goddesses such as Cybele and Artemis, among others.

² My emphasis.

FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGY: AN ONGOING DEBATE

In the meantime, women archaeologists, after decades of a subordinate position within academia³, became increasingly articulate in turning their attention to the question of the role of women in the era under research. To understand the context in which Gimbutas and other women archeologists were working, it is useful to recall the analysis advanced by the archaeologist Joan Gero, according to whom it used to be considered common sense that women archaeologists could only work in closed spaces such as laboratories or museums where they could catalogue the materials and finds courageously discovered by their male colleagues. To describe this situation, Gero coined the term “woman-at-home-ideology” (Gero 1985: 342). Indeed, the exceptionality and rarity of the fact that the supervision over the international excavation project was entrusted to Marija Gimbutas, should be noted.

It is also important to acknowledge that Gimbutas was not the only female archaeologist to have reached important position within the academy. In the British context Dorothy Garrod (1892-1968), the first archaeologist to obtain a professorship in Cambridge, was an important point of reference in Neanderthal research, while Kathleen Kenyon (1906-1978) dealt with the Neolithic in the fertile crescent, becoming famous for the excavations in Jericho and Jerusalem, with her work translated in various languages. In the Slovenian context, Tatjana Bregant (1932-2002) is known for her interdisciplinary research on the Neolithic, while the Serbian archaeologist Draga Garašanin (1921-1997) distinguished herself for her study of the Dacian necropolis in the Danube area. These are important examples that unfortunately must be considered as exceptions.

In recent years there have been some major improvements within academia that have made women increasingly visible as members of prehistoric societies. For this reason, in our precise academic cultural moment, there is less of an immediate urgency to argue a case for their presence in prehistory since they have been included in the interpretations of recent decades. However, even as recently as 2020, a book has been published that clarifies how even today we cannot take for granted the need to research the role of women in prehistory. French paleontologist Marylène Patou-Mathis, director of the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research), authored a book with a provocative but meaningful title: *L'homme préhistorique est aussi une femme: Une histoire de l'invisibilité des femmes* (Prehistoric man is also a woman, a history of women's invisibility). Patou-Mathis (2020) analyzes and denounces androcentric foundations of archaeology as an academic discipline. She shows through various examples how the interpretations of prehistoric finds are still centered around the idea that it is men who are the inventors as well as responsible for technological progress, while women seem to occupy a secondary position, subordinate and without prestige. There are numerous other examples of research by feminist (women) archaeologists that denounce sexism, misogyny and gender-related stereotyping. One “classic”, edited by Frances Dahlberg, titled *Woman the gatherer* (1981) collects several contributions of women anthropologists focusing on the

³ The difficult position of women scholars in the discipline of archaeology is thoroughly discussed in the essay *Excavating women: a history of women in European archaeology* (Díaz-Andreu and Stig Sorensen 2005).

socio-economic role of women. This volume is thought of as a response to the book *Man the Hunter*, by DeVore and Lee (1968), one more book that celebrates primitive men as brave hunters and tribal leaders. Other important contributions are by Gero and Conkey (1991), as well as by Roberta Gilchrist (1991, 2012), which all deal with the need and urgency to develop a feminist approach to archaeology, given the unequal power relations between men and women in archaeological theory and practice. Despite these scholarly endeavors, it remains necessary nowadays to keep advancing this same egalitarian project.

Furthermore, different examples, much discussed among feminist scholars, help in testifying to the need to include the category of gender as fundamental to the methodology, analysis, and elaboration of theory in the field of archaeology. Of interest here is the work of Bettina Arnold, scholar of the Iron Age, who had frequently criticized the androcentrism of the establishment in the field of archaeology, affirming that the interpretations regarding women in positions of power in prehistory had “ranged from benign neglect to active sabotage, particularly with regard to the interpretation of the wealthy inhumation burials” (Arnold 1991: 366). Omitting here numerous (and futile) discussions on differences between feminist archaeology and gender archaeology, it is more important to emphasize the main schools of thought that insist on taking into account gender as the methodological basis for analysis. The first approach consists in simply insisting on considering the existence of women in the period under analysis, the second focuses on gender as a category of analysis that problematizes gender roles. Both approaches will make it possible to analyze the written work in archaeology that encourages gender stereotyping by reproducing (more or less) unconsciously an androcentric version of the past of human societies.

As already mentioned, numerous women archaeologists had criticized androcentric biases of the discipline, invoking the necessity of a serious re-examination of the finds in the light of gender research (in French context see also Cohen 2003, 2018). At international level, according to Arnold and Wicker, gender theories have had a difficult time to achieve recognition within the discipline of archaeology for various reasons:

one of them is undoubtedly the androcentric nature of the discipline, historically primarily focused on, and practiced by men. Another is the widespread assumption that patriarchal systems like those that dominate the world today have always existed and reflect biological imperatives as much as cultural influences. This has resulted in the naturalization of the male-centered reconstruction of the past that has dominated the discipline since its inception as a profession in the nineteenth century (Arnold and Wicker 2001: vii).

According to Arnold and Wicker, the consequence of such attitudes in archaeology is the ghettoization of gender analysis, as if it did not represent a vital element for the study of the past. A problem encountered also in contemporary archaeology is that even when it dialogues with gender theory, what still seems to be missing is the use of adequate methodological approaches (Arnold and Wicker 2001: vii-viii). The issue of methodological approaches is, as will be explored in detail, a key issue to understand

both the reactions to the theories of Gimbutas, and the particularity of gender approach in post-processual archaeology. As the scholars point out, the results obtained can vary according to the parameters of analysis, especially when the interpretation of the data include the gender variable (Arnold and Wicker 2001: xiii–xiv). Their example is the interpretative context where the weapons are considered of high symbolic value because associated with masculinity, while the value attributed to the activities considered feminine, such as gathering, weaving, pottery-making etc., are given secondary importance. After all, as they affirm, “you find what you look for (or, in the case of gender structures, you don’t find what you don’t look for)” (Arnold and Wicker 2001: xi).

GENDER STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY: “ADD GENDER AND STIR”?

Throughout this article, it is important to keep in mind a basic definition of sex and gender: while “sex” refers to genitals with which a person is born, “gender” refers to socially constructed identity of masculine or feminine. Up until 1970s and 1980s, feminist archaeology has been mainly interested in uncovering androcentrism of the discipline that assumed the transparency of the categories of “woman” and “man” without questioning them. In contrast, most men and women scholars using gender approaches as a part of post-processual archaeology emphasize the cultural construction of identities, considered fluid, without clear boundaries, and above all, culturally and socially determined. Thus, on the one hand, there are many feminist scholars dealing with the socio-economic roles, status, and cults regarding women in prehistory, who accuse archeologists such as Gimbutas of essentialism. On the other hand, there are numerous women and men archaeologists, adhering to gender approaches used in post-processualism, who often use a methodology, which Conkey and Tringham efficiently defines as the method of “add gender and stir” (Conkey and Tringham 1995: 204; see also Knapp 2003: 665). Recently several books devoted to this issue have been published, such as *Gender archaeology* by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen (2013), as well as *In pursuit of gender: worldwide archaeological approaches* edited by Sarah Nelson and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (2001), and *A companion to gender prehistory* edited by Diane Bolger (2012). In general, upon examining the works approaching this topic, it is possible to individuate a certain tension in confronting the problem of defining the categories of man/woman, leading to confusion in reasoning, instead of clarity or increased complexity.

In the first book under consideration, Sørensen (2013)⁴ addresses the issue of theoretical and methodological approaches to gender in researching prehistory, in relation to recent theories of philosopher Judith Butler (1996, 2011) that understand gender identity as fluid and constructed through performative acts which literally create bodies. In general, Sørensen’s focus is on the interaction of material culture and gender. In the second book, women archaeologists Nelson e Rosen-Ayalon (2001) start the introduction with a

⁴ Archaeologist who is also the author of the section on “feminist archaeology” in the manual of Renfrew and Bahn (2013).

complaint that gender archaeology suffers due to disagreements and endless debates on definitions, aims and methodologies. After the initial phase in which feminist scholars were “finding women”⁵ of past civilizations, fortunately an awareness was reached that women can assume infinite roles and status. On a theoretical level, the outdated concepts informed by essentialism were thus (finally) abandoned (Nelson e Rosen-Ayalon 2001: 1–8). Also Bolger, in the introduction to her chapter, explores the main theories and methods in research on gender in prehistory, underlining the “tensions and debates which at times seem to divide its practitioners into intractable, opposing ‘camps’” (Bolger 2012: 1). According to the scholar, the focus of theory of archaeology shifted from researching monolithic concepts such as society and culture to studying individuals, their personal and social identities. She maintains that while the difficulties in fully accepting gender theories within mainstream archaeology depend both on discrimination against women archaeologists in comparison to their male colleagues and on the fact that “the uncritical acceptance of sex and gender as natural and unchanging phenomena continues to shape much of the research in prehistoric archaeology today” (Bolger 2012: 4). Bolger explains that the passage from the Second Wave to the Third Wave of feminist theory operating within postmodernist framework has allowed the acceptance of “ambiguous and multiple genders” (Bolger 2012: 6).

Despite their differences, the common aspect of all these texts is an approach in which different theories, instead of coexisting, overtake each other in a way in which the “old” ones turn out to be wrong, while new theories turn out to be good. Such an approach paradoxically, although the result of purely humanistic debates, reflects a positivist-scientific approach in which the old is outdated while the latest discoveries would be more truthful. In an epistemological debate biased by such premises, Gimbutas’ work is perceived as not very current and certainly essentialist, because she does not focus on the ambiguity and fluidity of genders. Instead, in assuming a society characterized by a binary division (man/woman), the scholar is perceived as engaged in essentialist hypothesizing that women in the Neolithic period had a fundamental role expressed by the cult of Goddesses. That feminist claims have disavowed this hypothesis to uncritically embrace discourses of gender fluidity that result in queer theory applied to prehistory, seems paradoxical to me.

It is certainly true that gender categories can (and in some cases should) be problematized. On the other hand, what all feminist archaeologists or those involved in gender studies agree upon is that the countless examples of sexist stereotypes that deeply affect methodologies, analyses, and related archaeological theories should be an object of investigation. It follows that it is still necessary and timely to deal with the discourse of femininity in archaeology. Here this task is approached through analyzing the reception of the theories of Gimbutas. Though they should certainly be contextualized by highlighting the inconsistencies (at times methodological, at times theoretical), the contribution of this scholar cannot be deleted, especially by scholars who claim to be feminists. The paradox lies in the fact that while Gimbutas is barely mentioned in texts that deal with feminist or gender archaeology, it is precisely the term feminist that is used as an insult against her.

⁵ Point often cited also by Ruth Whitehouse (2002, 2013).

THE SEX OF FIGURINES AND THE FEMALE DIVINITIES

In archaeology, the link between the sex of the figurines and the recognition of the existence of female divinities is firmly intertwined with issues of power and status of women from prehistoric times until today. Therefore, we are witnessing what I would term continuous academic boycott implemented by scholars who do not want to acknowledge the enormous richness and variety of finds that can be associated with the female sphere during the Neolithic (a period that lasted several millennia), adopting certain rather questionable rhetorical strategies.

At the end of the 1960s, when archaeology was in the process of consolidation as a scientific field, the British archaeologist Peter Ucko, exponent of the “new archaeology”, in an attempt to legitimize the discipline, created a new categorization of the figurines that established that one could define as “female” only those with explicit sexual organs or breast and vulva clearly defined - the others would end up in the category “sexless” (Ucko 1962). This new criterion, assumed by many archeologists even today, has removed from consideration most of the plastic female representations, so that, at the moment, it is virtually impossible to perform an exact count of the figurines based on the category of sex. In fact, if you want to know the number of Neolithic female figurines in Italy, for example, the number varies a lot depending on the source (for an interesting discussion, see Soffer and Adovasio 2000).

The next theoretical phase, post-processual archaeology, turns out to be as against the recognition of an elevated status of figurines as the previous approaches. The main tensions can be illustrated by analyzing the writings of one of its exponents, the archaeologist John Robb whose academic focus is allegedly located within the discipline of gender studies.⁶ In a recent publication devoted to Neolithic Europe, he states that the fact that female figurines were found in the Neolithic is *a coincidence*, while in the fourth millennium B.C. it was hunting that was the fundamental activity that can really tell us something useful about gender (Robb 2015). The same scholar is also responsible, several years after that, for the interpretation of prehistoric figurines according to which “they may have provided gendered representations that helped develop women’s subjectivity about their own bodies” (Robb and Harris 2017: 7). Two important implications should be noted:

a) it is assumed, without any archaeological basis, that the figurines were used only by women;

b) it is argued that these figurines were objects that served to confirm and/or strengthen the female identity (which the scholar evidently presumed to had been rather weak). Later the same scholar states that both the “fat ladies” from Malta and “Sardinian volumetric figurines” were considered female only because fat (Robb and Harris 2017: 7),⁷ thus erasing decades of archaeological analysis that was based on the comparison of the statuary carried out through iconographic elements.

⁶ So much so that most of his articles are found in the gender and archaeology readers.

⁷ Consideration shared also by Meskell who, referring to (feminine) Neolithic figurines from Malta, affirms that: “From a purely representational point of view we could be witnessing *obesity* rather than *divinity* (Meskell 1995: 77).

In broader terms, the interpretations of the figurines range from Mother Goddesses, with emphasis on fertility discourse, to erotically charged images, dolls etc.; however, some scholars have denounced the bias of these interpretations and their implicit and unjustified assumptions (Dobres 1992; Soffer 1987; Soffer and Conkey 1997). While the (more or less) bias-laden interpretations can be explained by the great emotional charge that anthropomorphic representations carry (i.e., issues of gender, sexuality, and power), there is no doubt about the enormous numerical difference of female versus male figurines.

As Soffer and Adovasio write, basing their work on the iconographic decipherment work of the Paleolithic “Venus” by Abramova and Gvozdover, the upper Paleolithic figurines of naked or clad women are found all across Eurasia, and “their distribution contrasts sharply with the scarcity of unambiguous depictions of Paleolithic males” (Soffer and Adovasio 2000: 516). In general, according to the scholars, the difference between hundreds of female figurines and few male figurines lies in the richness of detail, hairstyles, or headdresses, so much so that a connection can be made between the high level of elaboration of female statuettes and the value of women (or at least of their work). According to the scholars, in fact, “the exquisite and labor-intensive detailing employed in the depiction of the woven garments worn by one group of Venuses clearly shows that weaving and basket-making skills and their products were valued enough to be transformed into transcendent cultural facts carved into stone, ivory, and bone” (Soffer and Adovasio 2000: 524).

Concerning cultic discourses, Joan Marler and Harald Haarmann (2007), note how after the studies of Gimbutas and Mellart on Neolithic symbolism and ‘religion’, extremely polarized movements have arisen. On the one hand, there are the devotees of Mother Goddess theories. On the other hand, a part of archaeology denies the remotest possibility of inferring any element of spirituality or religiosity from excavations, so much so that even archaeologist Peter Biehl (2007) admits that “many archaeologists react with alarm when their work is associated with alternative religious beliefs”, especially if they mention Gimbutas in their research (in Marler and Haarmann 2007: 50). In fact, based both on my fieldwork and on textual analysis, I have noticed that many women and men archaeologists show rather strong reactions not so much when dealing with religious topics in the traditional sense (read: male), but rather when talking about female gods. Otherwise, we cannot explain the absence of fierce criticism for a paleoethnologist like Leroi-Gourhan who has widely theorized about prehistoric religious practices, without mentioning Goddesses. As well as David Lewis Williams, or the “father” of Sardinian archaeology, Giovanni Lilliu.

Aside from the dispute between proponents and deniers of the divinity of the figurines, one of the most heated archaeological discussions in recent decades, therefore, is establishing the sex of the figurines⁸. Macedonian archaeologist Goce Naumov, on the

⁸ A number of scholars including Nakamura and Meskell (2009), Nanoglou (2006) and Vella Gregory (2007) opt for their asexuality, while the interpretations on their functions are varied and colorful (see Bailey’s sex dolls (Bailey 2005), or Talalay’s childrens’ dolls or educational devices (Talalay 1993) within the American academic discourse). In Italy we have the recent discussions of Borić et al. (2019), Lugliè (2017) Fanni, Sirigu and Soro (2019) that question their cult use. These interpretations will be discussed in detail further ahead.

one hand, confirms that not only “the statistics and ratios of Balkan figurines still confirm the prevalence of female representations” (Naumov 2014: 51), but more importantly he admits that most of the conflicting and varied archaeological theories to date, “still did not offer the most elementary answers to: (i) what and whom the figurines represent; (ii) what was the motive for them to be modeled with definite iconographic features; and finally (iii) what was their actual use” (Naumov 2014: 50).

Another important element that followers of “sexless figurines” approach keep forgetting is the presence of “secondary” gender characteristics such as prominent bellies and hips, the position of arms and hands, as well as a protruding chest (if we don't want to call it breasts), as Naumov (2009, 2014) and Lesure (2011) also point out. According to Naumov in archaeology at the moment, there is neither contrary nor favorable evidence that the figurines were deities (Naumov 2014: 52). In general, after analyzing some ethnographic examples from Macedonia, he repeatedly argues that “figurines did not have singular functions, meanings and purpose” (Naumov 2014: 56), a statement that can certainly be shared but should not prevent one from attempting comparative analyses based on analogies, which many archaeologists avoid.

FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS: “NON-RELIGIOUS” INTERPRETATIONS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

As previously mentioned, within the discipline of archeology there have been various “non-religious” interpretations of the figurines. An influential essay by archaeologist Talalay, entitled *Deities, Dolls & Devices. Neolithic figurines from Franchti Chave, Greece*, analyzes a collection of Neolithic figurines from Greece. Taking a stance against the “Goddess theory” (Talalay 1993: 81–82), and claiming the impossibility to demonstrate their cultic use (ibid.: 40), the archaeologist focuses on the figurines production through a series of research questions: who was the creator? Was it a specific group? What were the reasons for choosing a certain material instead of another? Who owned them?, etc. (Talalay 1993: 29). Throughout the research, the scholar admits that the possession and control of these objects must have been related to power and rites of passage. However, in the end, since basing her assumptions on ethnological studies, Talalay asserts their use as educational devises to teach children about pregnancy (the figurines with the belly) or to cure or use as voodoo dolls or simple toys for children (Ibid.: 41, 43). The scholar, although exploring various hypotheses, does not explain the reason why the majority of the supposed dolls, voodoo or otherwise, are female, as if the male gender could have been absent from voodoo rituals, cure practices or children's toys.

Another sholarly interpretation that invites critical attention is the comparison of Neolithic figurines with contemporary popular culture advance by Douglass Bailey. Douglass Bailey (2005) analyzes Hamagia and Cucuteni figurines from Romania, and Tesseloniki, Greece, with an aim to “deflate the Mother Goddess readings” (Bailey 2005: 19), and so insisting on the sexual features of the figurines, portraying prehistoric bondage sexual practices (2005: 165) and comparing contemporary spread and usage of Barbie dolls

with the Neolithic massive production of female figurines (2005: 73).⁹ Following this line of argument, the archaeologist even discusses the differences between bidimensional or tridimensional representations asserting that the latter can be penetrated: “the doll’s amorous suitor cannot get inside the photograph of the naked women but, literally, he can enter the doll” (Bailey 2005: 40). As a conclusion, the scholar assumes the theories on fertility cults related to figurines as “simpler, safer, more pleasant” (Bailey 2005: 166).

Other scholars’ interpretations referred to figurines as representations of ancestors, especially for those without clear gender features (Naumov 2014: 194; Bernabò Brea and Mazziere 2009: 18).

Similar refusal of acknowledging potential religious status of female figurines is dominant in the discipline at the present moment. Even in the recent and monumental *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines* (Insoll 2017), all archeologists involved in the project, offer various examples of recent archaeological research on figurines which attempt to diversify methodology. All of these scholars, reject the religious interpretations¹⁰. As most of the previous work though, they not only avoid addressing the predominant presence of female figurines but also, as Naumov clearly states: “other artefacts that represent the entire human body or of only some body parts, such as vessels, house and oven models, or ‘altars’ and stamps” (Naumov 2014: 57), that fall within the feminine sphere. While the hypothesis that the “earrings figurines” could be representations of Astarte goddess in Cyprus, is defined “ambiguous” by Knox (2017: 763), the author is more prone to other interpretations such as: figurines depicting the “third gender” or generic “markers of identity” (2017: 767). Another interesting example is offered by Vella Gregory’s discussion on the agency of figurines (Vella Gregory 2017). Analyzing the well-known Sardinian “volumetric stone figurine” from Cuccurru SArriu archeological site, the scholar goes against the “traditional” archaeological literature, based on iconographic comparison, which indubitably assigned female gender to the statuette (see: Atzeni 1978; Lilliu 1999, 2017). The author instead, questions its gender, with the reason that the sexual characteristics are not clearly defined (Vella Gregory 2017: 781).

Even in a recent exhibition “Donna o Dea: le raffigurazioni femminili nella preistoria e protostoria sarda” (Woman or Goddess: female representations in Sardinian prehistory and protohistory) held in the island’s main archaeological museum, in Carlo Lugliè’s¹¹ scientific overview, the statuette is defined as an “antropomorphic figure (*female?*)”¹² (Fanni, Sirigu e Soro 2019, 58).

In the end, as Lesure (2017) states, while in the recent archeological literature, the goddess interpretation has been rejected, being “murdered” i.e. rendered unacceptable

⁹ The scholar is clearly adopting the discursive strategy of affirming something while denying it, widely used by authors who are aware of stating concepts which could bump sensitivities like racist or sexist statements.

¹⁰ They do this in different ways: by emphasizing form, function, context, and miniaturization issues, by stressing the use of small figurines as “personal objects” (see Morris (2017), Renfrew (2017b), as well as by focusing on gender, and on ethnographic comparison with ritual practices, rites of passage, initiations, and gesture analysis.

¹¹ Carlo Lugliè is a full professor of prehistory, at the Cagliari University.

¹² My italic.



Fig. 3: Limestone female figurine from the necropolis of Cuccuru S'Arriu, Sardinia, front view. Bonuighinu culture, 4800-4450 B.C. Cagliari, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. (Source: <https://twitter.com/museoarcheoca/status/1127839593259204608>; Photos' property: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari).



Fig. 4: Limestone female figurine from the necropolis of Cuccuru S'Arriu, Sardinia, side view. Bonuighinu culture, 4800-4450 B.C. Cagliari, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. (Source: <https://twitter.com/museoarcheoca/status/1127839593259204608>; Photos' property: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari).

by most of the scholars¹³, it comes back again and again until prehistorians will be forced to take into serious account a large scale research “open to lively comparison, in which multiple investigators can incrementally contribute to the creation of a new synthesis (Lesure 2017: 58).”

From anthropological perspective, in the first half of the XX century, Margaret Mead (1901-1978), has been one of the first scholars who questioned the assumption that femininity and masculinity were natural and analyzed their cultural construction (Mead 1949). Mary Douglas (1921-2007), in turn, made a great contribution to the study of corporeality in anthropology, differentiating physical and social body, showing how every culture assigns special meanings to body parts and functions. According to Douglas's theories, therefore, the body embodies the culture of the reference society, becoming the terrain on which, the ideas and values of the social structure are negotiated (Douglas [1966] 2003). In the seventies, a groundbreaking work depicting the absence of women's voice within the ethnographic research appeared with Edwin Ardener's essay “Belief and the

¹³ In this article, Lesure uses Agata Christie's novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, as a metaphoric attitude towards Goddess theories.

problem of women” (Ardener 1975). Even though women’s behavior was registered and studied within family relationships, household, etc, their voice was muted, they had no agency, they were “effectively missing in the total analysis or, more precisely, they were there in the same way as were the Nuer’s cows, who were observed but also did not speak” (Ardener 1975:4).

Following Ardeners’ steps, other two studies have been crucial for unraveling sexist biases in academic thought: Rosaldo and Lampere’s edited collection, *Women, Culture and Society* (1974) and Shirley Ardener’s *Perceiving Women* (1975). These two contributions have shown how women’s exclusion as a topic of study has led to biased anthropological accounts, and clearly stated that it would be necessary to reconsider the theoretical and methodological premises in order to bring back women into the picture. In the same period some anthropologists criticized previous studies trying to correct male biases in ethnographic research. One of them, Annette Weiner, went back to Trobriand islands, focusing on a group previously studied by Bronislaw Malinowski. In her study, paying attention to the role of women in funeral ceremonies and using female informants, that were not accounted for previously, the anthropologist overturned the colleague’s findings and offered a different version of women’s role and position in the funeral ceremony that involved the entire population and lasted several months. In her account women played a vital role within the economic and symbolic exchange (Weiner 1979).

As Busoni (2000) argued, androcentrism in past anthropologic research has been based on two apparently opposite mechanisms: invisibility and over-visibility of women. The first denies the active presence of women due to the fact that all informants are men. Moreover, it testifies to the difficulty in seeing forms of social asymmetries both on the part of the researcher and by the protagonists themselves, lack of attention to women regarding topics and activities considered by researchers to be purely male. Invisibilization therefore operates on two levels: observation/description and theorization, where due to various obstacles and forgetfulness, half of the population is not considered within the social and cultural relations of the society. The second process, that of over-visibility, operates at the level of language and classifies women as “more natural” than men. This determines the emphasis on the female biological dimension, obscuring their social side and all the relationships connected to it. Language becomes a tool that hides women’s role as social actors and links them only to the natural dimension. The female sphere becomes a separate universe, distinct from the male one, which is depicted as cultural and more powerful. Highlighting these processes in anthropological writings shows how gender relations, where man dominates woman in an almost natural way, have been distorted in studies undertaken from the androcentric perspective, which, until the 1970s, were prevalent within anthropological research (Busoni 2000: 104–108).

In the end, anthropological reflection has long insisted that the representations and practices relating to bodies are cultural, social, symbolic and, to a great extent arbitrary instead of “natural”, but consistent with other representations, cosmology, religion, system of social relations and hence, power relationships. Social and cultural practices are necessarily inscribed in the bodies that are to be considered both objects and subjects of such practices, in the sense that they reproduce them at the very moment in which

they are interpreted (Foucault 2019, Connell 2002). It could be argued then that the key issue deciding the mode of representation of female bodies, as exemplified by Neolithic figurines, is power and social relations constructed around it.

MARIJA GIMBUTAS: ANATOMY OF AN (ACADEMIC) MURDER

In the archaeological debate, the figure of Gimbutas is emblematic precisely because she found herself at the center of a double academic conflict. On the one hand, she was one of the first female archaeologists to conduct important excavations, occupying a position of great importance in a university world dominated by male figures. On the other hand, although she never joined the feminist movement, she found herself embroiled in the disputes between feminist archaeologists and proponents of gender archaeology, who contested her gender essentialism (see Conkey and Tringham 1995; Eller 2000; Navickaitė 2019) at a time when feminist and gender studies theories were merging within the postmodern archaeological academic debate. If, for example, one reads the 2012 edited volume *A Companion to Gender Archaeology*, not only are Gimbutas's studies sharply criticized (see Goodison and Morris, 2012), but even when dealing explicitly with gender and power in prehistory, the concepts of "ambiguity, contradiction, diversity" are celebrated repeatedly (Hutson, Hanks, and Pyburn 2012: 45), even to the point of arriving to Benjamin Alberti's "queer prehistory" (Alberti 2012).

Gimbutas was the first (and remains one of few archaeologists) who, although not belonging to the feminist movement, had tried (in my opinion successfully) to reread and re-analyze much of the archaeological material culture pertaining to "Old Europe", especially statuary and pottery. She not only searched for "patterns that connect", analogies, symbolic and cultural links but also found thousands of archetypes semantically connected to the feminine that she declined as attributes of the Goddess. Another great merit of Marija Gimbutas has been that of having divulged studies that normally belong only to insiders, to a vast public, even a non-academic one, so much so that the American anthropologist Joseph Campbell, in the introduction to the essay *The Language of the Goddess*, stated that

As Jean-Francois Champollion, a century and a half ago, through his decipherment of the Rosetta Stone was able to establish a glossary of hieroglyphic signs to serve as keys to the whole great treasury of Egyptian religious thought from c. 3200 B.C. to the period of the Ptolemies, so in her assemblage, classification, and descriptive interpretation of some two thousand symbolic artifacts from the earliest Neolithic village sites of Europe, c. 7000 to 3500 B.C., Marija Gimbutas has been able, not only to prepare a fundamental glossary of pictorial motifs as keys to the mythology of that otherwise undocumented era, but also to establish on the basis of these interpreted signs the main lines and themes of a religion in veneration, both of the universe as the living body of a Goddess-Mother Creator (Campbell 1989: xiii).

What I would like to emphasize is precisely Gimbutas' attempt to analyze more than 2000 symbols, attributable to the cult of the female divinity, carried out through research that represents a unicum in an archaeological field that does not accept collaborations with humanistic disciplines (apparently aimed at not going beyond the safe limits of the excavation context). This was also thanks to her linguistic knowledge that allowed her to access the results of excavations from the entire area of Central Europe that had never been translated and were therefore unknown in the international arena. In this regard, even a scholar opposed to her, such as Cynthia Eller, admits "her tremendous linguistic expertise" and her "encyclopedic knowledge of Central and Eastern European archaeological sites that permitted her to speculate effectively on 'big picture' questions" (in Dashu 2005: 192).

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize her truly multidisciplinary approach that drew on her knowledge of linguistics, mythology and folklore, symbolism, archaeology, and anthropology - based on her doctoral studies in prehistoric archaeology, history of religion and ethnology at the University of Tübingen in 1946. Her academic career, developed at Harvard and UCLA Universities in the United States, includes directing international excavations, 20 academic papers, and more than 200 scientific articles translated into several languages. Yet, even today, naming Gimbutas in archaeology raises strong suspicions and hostile reactions. In turn, I argue, that such strong disciplinary aversions constitute themselves important discursive material necessarily open to cultural criticism, as developed throughout this article.

MARIJA GIMBUTAS: A BRIEF EXCURSUS ON HER MAIN THEORIES

Gimbutas' first important essay published in the mid-seventies entitled *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000 to 3500 BC. Myths, Legends and Cult images*¹⁴ dealt with the material culture of the Neolithic from a matrilineal point of view, outlining a society in which, before the arrival of the proto-Indo-Europeans, people lived within an egalitarian society, in harmony with nature "governed" by female divinities. This social order, according to the scholar, was then destroyed by the arrival of the Kurgan, a population of warriors and worshippers of male divinities, in a sense, precursors of both our patriarchal system and the monotheisms of Western society. The main characteristic of these people was also a rigidly hierarchical social structure, quite different from that of the indigenous populations of "Old Europe" in which the two sexes coexisted peacefully on the same level.

Thanks to this essay, the archaeologist acquires a certain notoriety, especially within the "Goddess movement" (started in California at the end of the 1980s) that uses her writings as an academic reference to validate an idea of spirituality centered on the feminine. Her revolutionary thesis is confirmed and expanded in the following works,

¹⁴ Then changed in *The Goddesses and the Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 BC. Myths and Cult Images*, republished in 1974.

listed here in order of publication: *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (1991) and in the last *The Living Goddess* (1999), which seek to demonstrate, through a complex and articulated interdisciplinary analysis, that the culture of Old Europe between 7000 and 3500 B.C. was permeated by the “feminine principle” that allowed women to hold positions of power both socially and culturally, ensuring a balanced relationship between the sexes.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST GIMBUTAS: FROM MENOPAUSAL SYNDROME TO POLITICAL TRAUMA

As mentioned earlier, in the post-processual arena, even archaeologists who call themselves feminists use rather unprofessional arguments in both tone and content when referring to Gimbutas's work. Below is a brief selection: British women archeologists Goodison and Morris, evidently agreeing with Balter, write: “Gimbutas's work has promoted a moral fable in which humanity deteriorated from the innocence and peace of the Neolithic, a utopian society paralleling the biblical Garden of Eden, except that original sin now lay with men, who spoil the party” (Goodison and Morris 2012: 272). In general terms, Goodison and Morris critique the cult of Goddess mother while promoting Ian Hodder to the status of a grand “destroyer of Goddess theories” (Goodison and Morris 2012: 276).

The argument advanced by Goodison and Morris (2012) that would prove the bad faith of Gimbutas, is the fact that she did not mention in her works the figurine of the “lovers of Ain Sakhri”, for fear of disproving her theories. Given the magnitude of this statement, I looked for information on this find so controversial to overturn the theories on the existence of female gods. It is a stone statuette from 9000 B.C. that shows a couple probably in the process of intercourse. My academic perplexity increases as the article proceeds and mentions the disreputable behavior of the followers of the Goddess in Çatalhöyük who marketed the image of the Goddess (the reference is to the straw products with the seated Goddess image by the members of the movement). In the first case she is accused of not having included in her works a statuette out of hundreds analyzed, for fear that it would have contradicted her theories in which there would be only and exclusively female examples. In fact, Gimbutas, in dealing with the topic of “sacred nuptials,” analyzes this precise statuette “representing the union of man and woman” (Gimbutas 2005: 51).

In the second case, methodological planes are mixed with an enviable *nonchalance*: to use as an academic argument a group of women making drinking straws with the image of a statue is at least as bizarre as to foreground the tails of an animal rather than a woman sitting on a throne.¹⁵

It would be difficult to continue claiming that this atypical figurine depicting intercourse could somehow overturn Gimbutas' theories.

¹⁵ The second motif is a clear reference to recognized Goddesses such as the Anatolian Cybele often depicted on a throne pulled by large felines.

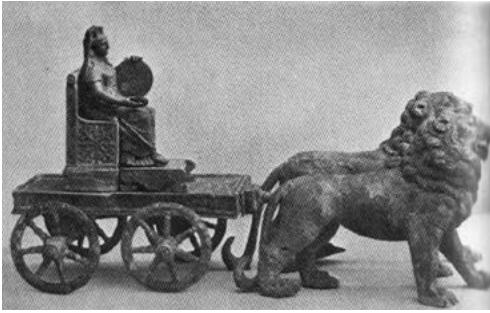


Fig. 5: Cybele with chariot and lions, 2nd century A.D. bronze (Neumann 1981: 55).

As in the post-processual area, there are contemporary archaeologists who try to discredit Gimbutas not through a serious academic debate, discussions of archaeological theories and methodologies, but rather by taking recourse to questionable discursive strategies. The archaeologist Lynn Meskell, in an article with the provocative title *Goddesses, Gimbutas and 'New Age' archaeology*, while admitting “her recognized academic standing and long history of fieldwork in southeast European sites”, states that the theory of Kurgan warriors invading the peaceful society of Old Europe, comes from the traumatic experience of the Soviet invasion of her homeland (Meskell 1995: 74–79). John Chapman, agreeing on the traumas that would have generated in the troubled mind of Gimbutas an imaginary of war-mongering males, finds in menopause the answer to the theories about the Mother Goddess:

The second point is one perhaps not easily discussed by a male prehistorian. It concerns the personal fertility of Gimbutas and its loss at the time of menopause; this latter can be dated to sometime in the 1960s. It may be no more than coincidence that a woman with strong professional interests in the Mother Goddess, regeneration and fertility begins to write most vividly about fertility symbols at a time when her own personal fertility is disappearing, and her own children leave home. Yet this is a factor which I would be loath to omit from my account (Chapman 1998: 300).

Interestingly, Meskell, who calls herself a feminist, critiques Gimbutas’s theories, moving from the generic “pure fantasy” (Meskell 1995: 83) to “political”, “reverse sexism”, “gynocentric agenda”, and “gynocentric narratives” (Meskell 1995: 83, 76, 84). Moreover, the archaeologist, considered one of the most important exponents of post-processualism, was part of Ian Hodder’s working group at the Çatalhöyük site, unconditionally supporting his interpretations.



Fig 6: Cybele with lions, Istanbul Archaeological Museum 3rd century A.D. (Source: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/ancient-cybele-statue-returns-to-turkey-42327/>; Photos’ property: Istanbul Archaeological Museum).

In general, the arguments of these two archaeologists, far from any adherence to theories and methods of their academic discipline, are based on discursive attacks. Certainly, one of the most well-founded criticisms from a strictly archaeological point of view, expressed by Meskell and taken up by various scholars, is that Gimbutas has elaborated a univocal theory on figurines that belong to different archaeological contexts, different periods and very distant geographical areas (Meskell 1995: 75). But if we consider this analysis in a broader perspective, not only within the context of a single archaeological excavation, but observing incredible similarities between figurines that actually belong to different periods and different contexts, then Gimbutas's theories appear more plausible. Certainly fallible, as majority of scientific hypotheses and theories that are continuously disproved, remodeled, and discussed. Otherwise, reading these articles, one gets the impression that these criticisms are based on "rumors" rather than on a careful reading of the texts. For example, contrary to what Meskell claims (Meskell 1995: 75), Gimbutas does not speak of Mother Goddess as much as Goddess who encompasses both aspects of life and death (see Gimbutas 1982: 152), just as she does not speak of matriarchy, which is another of the "classic" accusations made against her, but of matrilineal society (Gimbutas 1991, 2005, 2008). Whereas, if we are to take seriously the conclusion of the article in which Meskell states: "emphasis on one sex to the exclusion of the other is not only detrimental to serious gender/feminist studies but threatens the interpretive integrity of archaeology" (Meskell 1995: 84), it becomes difficult to rely on methods of traditional archaeological analysis and interpretations that take into account almost exclusively the male sex.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS: MATRIARCHY, MOTHER-GODDESSES, FEMINISM, AND "SCIENCE"

Reading the numerous criticisms against Gimbutas one has the strong impression that their force is not in the strength of argument but in being constantly repeated. Examples of this are the interpretation that Gimbutas imagined a Neolithic era in which women dominate over men (common lay representation of matriarchy),¹⁶ that this society was legitimized by a cult that exalted motherhood, and that this arose from the desires and imagination of a frustrated feminist with little adherence to "scientific" data (for a detailed list of *ad personam* attacks against Gimbutas, see Dashú 2005; Marler and Haarmann 2007; Rigoglioso 2007; Spretnak 2011; Navickaitė 2019). Of course, the critique against androcentrism in archaeology that implicitly pervades her works has helped create the academic myth of Gimbutas as a feminist, so much so that even Goce Naumov, an archaeologist usually not engaging in academic hearsay, falls into the trap and describes her as "one of the most prominent apostles of second wave feminism, endorsing figurines as Mother Goddesses" (Naumov 2014: 49).

Generally speaking, as philosopher and historian of religions Charlene Spretnak points out: "Even the post-processualists, nominally interested in symbols, disdain metanarratives

¹⁶ For an extensive and well-documented account of matriarchy see Goettner-Abendroth (2012).

such as a unifying metaphysical perception that informs a culture” (Spretnak 2011: 37). And it is also on this basis that the latter reject Gimbutas’s “unifying” theories, since on the one hand they are interested in symbols, and on the other hand they are also bound to the specific archaeological context to succeed in having a broader horizon. Another peculiar criticism comes from feminist archaeologists Conkey and Tringham, who object to her use of the terms “cult”, “religion”, “temples” etc., that would separate the sacred from the profane in a Western dualistic manner (Conkey and Tringham 1995). In fact, Gimbutas clearly writes that in the Neolithic cultures she studied there was no dualistic conception. Rather, according to her, the concept of the feminine creative Deity is unifying, and multifaceted in its aspects: “The multiple categories, functions, and symbols used by prehistoric peoples to express the Great Mystery are all aspects of the unbroken unity of one deity, a Goddess who is ultimately Nature herself” (Gimbutas 1991: 223). This is the concept that she repeats also in her last essay that resumes, clarifies, and completes her theory on the symbols and the metaphors used during the Neolithic to represent the female divinity, circles, spirals, meanders, sacred animals etc. (Gimbutas 2005). If anything, what is certainly objectionable is the constant emphasis on the feminine, at times unjustified, as when she insists on associating the horns of the bull (bucranio), very present in the symbolism of the Neolithic in Sardinia for example, to the uterus. In some examples, she cites the Venus of Laussel who holds a horn of bison and some other unconvincing data (Gimbutas 2008: 265).

The accusation that her theory on the Kurgans had no scientific basis was retracted after several decades by one of her greatest detractors, the British archaeologist Colin Renfrew. On the one hand, as Spretnak (2011) states, Renfrew’s paper that was supposed to sweep away Gimbutas’s paleolinguistic theories, entitled *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, has been widely refuted by various scholars. For example, Haarmann (1999)¹⁷ presented abundant evidence that renders Renfrew’s counter-hypothesis impossible (in Spretnak 2011: 30). So much so that, according to Spretnak, though initially presented as a theory, it was subsequently degraded to a hypothesis (Spretnak 2011: 30). On the other hand, Renfrew, after years of academic attacks against Gimbutas, in 2017 spoke at a conference dedicated to her with a reading entitled “Marija Rediviva: DNA and Indo-European Origins” (Renfrew 2017a), in which he supports the Kurgan theories that have since been confirmed by several DNA studies (among others, Haak 2015).

The archaeologist Ernestine Elster (2007) also affirms that one of Gimbutas’s greatest merits was that of proposing a coherent analysis concerning the Neolithic of ancient Europe, succeeding in interpreting a fundamental part of the material culture, the figurines, and their symbols, which before her were considered uninterpretable. Furthermore, she did it by combining an exquisitely scientific methodology with the skills of a great popularizer when, “Even though it was about excavation, and she always used hard data (C14 dates, paleozoology, etc.), the prehistoric world was presented in a powerful narrative, complete

¹⁷ Haarmann (1999) noted the colleague’s “relative ignorance of linguistics” that “not only muddles him but dampens his flair for imaginative innovation” (in Spretnak 2011: 30).

and unquestionable” (Elster 2007: 104). Unlike many scholars who contest it, Gimbutas’ areas of *expertise* go far beyond archaeology and have served to enable the elaboration of a theory that, in many ways, remains valid and coherent.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have analyzed how the theories of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, in some ways well-grounded in the discipline but in others willing to engage in extensive interdisciplinary work, reveal strong tensions (methodological, interpretative and theoretical) inherent in the discipline of archaeology. On the one hand, the age-old question of the exclusive adherence to the archaeological context can prevent the elaboration of hypotheses and theories that go beyond the single excavation. As the philosopher and anthropologist Martino Doni points out in the introduction to the Italian edition of Gimbutas’s *Living Goddesses*, “the findings should not simply be collected, they should be interpreted, that is, placed side by side to build a coherence” (Doni 2005: 6). While a profound methodological problem that distinguishes archaeological rhetoric,

is to repeat to oneself and to the so-called scientific community that up to here one can arrive, because there is certain evidence, after which it is only conjecture, or worse still, fantasy. There are countless archaeological and paleontological publications that adopt this strategy. But without the hazard of interpretation [...] the accumulation of findings, risks becoming a dogmatic excuse for games of accounting and archival antiquarianism (Doni 2005: 12–13).

Certainly, Gimbutas has dared to go further and has evidently suffered the consequences both by being attacked by the “mainstream” archaeology and by archaeologists who call themselves feminists or adhere to gender archaeology. If we use the concept of gender fluidity and performativity that has characterized the postmodern currents that are often cited in archaeology (especially Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, including the concept of queer),¹⁸ we risk, by distorting the very premises of feminist and gender studies, materially and metaphorically erasing women. And if, as Conkey and Gero argue “feminist scholarship in archaeology, demanding fundamental alterations in basic assumptions, first requires a painstaking retooling of definitions, data sets, textual sources, and functional assignments” (Conkey and Gero 1991: 7), the central issue in archaeology remains the question of the modality of achieving this scope.

Becoming willing, within the discipline, to consider the academic merits of Gimbutas, could be a road that leads in a valid direction, from the scientific point of view, while continuing to wage academic wars damages serious academic discourse and is certainly not useful for the feminist claims.

¹⁸ In short, fluid identity of those who do not identify with any one gender.

The implicit or explicit accusation of “gender essentialism”, “gynocentric agenda” etc., brought forward by a group of feminist archaeologists, hides the central issue: to admit the androcentric *bias*, to recognize a narrative that still analyzes prehistory in terms of hierarchical relationships in which women occupy subordinate positions.

I think it is more useful and necessary to ask why the European Neolithic is littered with female figurines. Specifically, Sardinian’s Neolithic produced more than half of the female statuettes found throughout Italy, while the male ones predominate in the Bronze Age. This drastic change must have had profound reasons caused by a social and cultural change that is reflected in the creation of (cult) objects. In addition, assuming that the European Neolithic produced thousands of female statuettes, Gimbutas’s hypotheses appear more plausible. I argue that continuing to claim that this phenomenon is just a coincidence could be critiqued as insisting on applying an unscientific and uncritical attitude. The phenomenon of female statuettes is indisputable and has precise characteristics of pervasiveness and longevity (approximately three millennia in most of the European territory) and precisely because of these reasons, it cannot be understood by limiting itself to the single archaeological context. Rather, connecting patterns and linking similarities could allow us to achieve an alternative reconstruction of a history instead of persisting on manipulating or denying material finds.

In conclusion, what would happen if archaeological theories admitted that there was a long period of prehistory dominated by female depictions, many of which were found in cultic settings? Who is afraid of the Goddess? And who is afraid of Gimbutas?

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CHI HA PAURA DELLA DEA? CODE DI LEOPARDO, SINDROME DA MENOPAUSA: TERMINI DI UN DIBATTITO ARCHEOLOGICO

ARIANNA CARTA



Il presente articolo intende esplorare le controverse ipotesi all'interno del dibattito archeologico sulle statuette neolitiche femminili e le associazioni delle stesse con le divinità. Partendo da un excursus storico sulle principali ipotesi che riguardano statuette e dee preistoriche, ho mostrato come l'accoglienza o l'ostracizzazione delle teorie di Gimbutas, possa essere letta come cartina tornasole delle dispute ideologiche all'interno dell'archeologia mainstream alla quale si intersecano quelle di matrice femminista e di genere. Il discorso delle divinità protostoriche ha radici lontane ed è stato teorizzato in vari ambiti da numerosi studiosi, tra gli altri: Bachofen, Frazer, James, Neumann e Russel. Anche in ambito archeologico, fino alla prima metà del '900, a livello internazionale esisteva un (implicito) accordo sul culto della Dea madre di cui le statuette del Paleolitico e del Neolitico erano considerate la prova materiale di questa divinità. L'interpretazione più comune era quella che collegava la divinità femminile al culto della fertilità, che si esplicava nell'enfasi data a seni e vulva delle statuette. Mentre in campo archeologico si sono susseguite scoperte di statuette femminili che sono state studiate limitandosi allo specifico contesto, gli studi di Gimbutas hanno offerto un lavoro che in ambito archeologico non era mai stato intrapreso: l'analisi comparativa di migliaia

di simboli legati alla sfera femminile e presenti nella cultura materiale di tutta l'Europa antica. Come ho cercato di dimostrare nell'articolo, questo lavoro rivoluzionario ha scatenato una serie di reazioni avverse sia all'interno dell'archeologia mainstream, che, paradossalmente, nell'archeologia femminista e di genere. Le motivazioni sono complesse e varie ma di base riflettono una disciplina che, sia nella teoria che nei metodi, poggia saldamente su pregiudizi androcentrici in cui anche l'approccio di genere si può riassumere nella definizione: "add gender and stir". Nell'articolo offro svariati esempi di bizzarre interpretazioni sulle statuette neolitiche che da un lato sono state considerate asessuate, dall'altro assimilate a bambole gonfiabili attraverso strategie retoriche che le priva del sesso oppure le ipersessualizza. Marija Gimbutas in questo dibattito risulta un prezioso indicatore perché è proprio attraverso gli attacchi che la studiosa subisce nel corso della sua carriera che si possono comprendere alcune strategie denigratorie poco consone ad un dibattito accademico costruttivo. Accusata di soffrire di sindrome da menopausa, traumi psicologici, di essere una "sessista al contrario" o di avere troppa fantasia, sono diversi gli archeologi e le archeologhe che sferrano attacchi *ad personam* piuttosto che muovere critiche costruttive relative alle sue interpretazioni. Nella conclusione, auspico che la portata di un lavoro interdisciplinare come quello che Gimbutas ha svolto sulle divinità femminili venga riconosciuto e che l'archeologia superi il limite angusto del contesto archeologico e abbandoni la pretesa di oggettività, incompatibile con il concetto stesso di interpretazione di culture anche se "materiali".

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