

A VISION FOR THE WORLD: THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARIJA GIMBUTAS

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In June of 1993 Marija Gimbutas made her last visit to her motherland, Lithuania. From the moment she emerged from passport control the T.V. cameras were rolling, press cameras were clicking and a throng of family and friends swept her into their embrace.

That evening the television news exclaimed that Marija Gimbutienė had arrived - and throughout the two and a half weeks of her visit, there were daily articles in the press, television coverage of her lectures and interviews, documentary filmings and meetings with scholars, students, family and friends. Marija Gimbutas had returned as a world class scholar to receive an honorary doctorate at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas where fifty-five years earlier she began her study of archaeology. Now she was personally honored by president Brazauskas in a splendid ceremony that was reported to the nation.

Afterwards she flew to Germany for the opening of a magnificent exhibition SPRACHE DER GÖTTIN at the Frauen Museum in Wiesbaden that was entirely inspired by her book *The Language of the Goddess* (Harper, 1989). Hundreds of people arrived from all over Europe for the opening to celebrate the importance of this work. Thousands more traveled great distances to visit the exhibition in Germany before it traveled to Norway.

In 1991 more than nine hundred people converged at a church in Santa Monica, California to celebrate enthusiastically the publication of Dr. Gimbutas' last book *The Civilization of the Goddess* (Harper, 1991).

Although she was frail from years of struggling with cancer, the enormous love and respect Marija Gimbutas received from these, and thousands of other admirers throughout the world, sustained her until her death in Los Angeles on February 2, 1994.

Who was this woman, this diminutive scientist, whose prodigious accomplishments include the publication of over three hundred articles and more than twenty books on European prehistory, republished in numerous languages? How is it possible that such esoteric research could inspire the creative lives of countless individuals throughout the world while simultaneously creating a storm of controversy within her own field of archaeology?¹

Joseph Campbell compared Gimbutas' work with Champollion's decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics² and Princeton author Ashley Montagu considers her findings as important as Schliemann's excavation of Troy. He writes:

"Marija Gimbutas has given us a veritable Rosetta Stone of the greatest heuristic value for future work in the hermeneutics of archaeology and anthropology."³ At the same time, certain colleagues within her field are much more restrained.

EARLY LIFE

Marija Gimbutas lived an intensely creative life devoted to scientific achievement. She was sustained throughout her life by a complex stream of cultural, intellectual and spiritual influences that are deeply rooted in her identity as a Lithuanian.

During the nineteenth century in Lithuania, a vigorous intelligentsia arose from the peasant class of farmers, stimulated by the systematic destruction of national culture during a century of Czarist rule. Since the Lithuanian language was banned, Marija's mother's family became "book carriers" who risked imprisonment or deportation by smuggling Lithuanian books over the borders to be distributed through an underground network. Education was embraced as essential for cultural and political liberation.

Marija's parents, Veronika Janulaityté Alseikiené and Danielius Alseika, were both medical doctors and active revolutionaries who established the first Lithuanian hospital in Vilnius in 1918. This was the first year of independence from Russia. By the time Marija Birute Alseikaité was born on January 23, 1921, the Vilnius area was tormented by Polish occupation.

Marija's childhood home was an important center for political resistance and the preservation of Lithuanian culture. Dr. Alseika was not only a physician, but an historian and publisher of a newspaper and cultural journals. He was also a respected leader in the struggle for independence from Poland.⁴

Dr. Alseikiené was considered a "miracle worker" who restored people's sight through cataract operations. She was also a cultural activist who supported the preservation of Lithuanian folk arts. The finest traditional and contemporary artists, musicians and writers met frequently in their home.

When Marija was ready for formal education, she attended a liberal school with the children of other Lithuanian intellectuals. It was unthinkable for these children to attend Catholic or Polish schools. Marija also received private tutelage in music and languages and was nurtured by an extended family that included her brother Vytautas, her cousin Meilé and beloved aunt Julija, also a physician, who was like a second mother. The vital intensity of that environment promoted a devotion to political and aesthetic freedom, intellectual achievement and a tenacious originality.

From the very beginning the children had total freedom. We were free to create our own individualities although work for our nation and education always came

first. We went to the theater and to concerts as a natural way of life. Without that we couldn't live from the earliest years.⁵

Lithuania was the last European country to be Christianized and many ancient traditions were still alive into the twentieth century. Marija's exposure to this rich but vanishing heritage was encouraged from an early age.

In our house were the Fates... of a continuous pagan tradition. All my servants believed in them. They were real - spinning the thread of human life...⁶

Although Lithuanian is one of the most conservative Indo-European languages, related to Sanskrit, the folklore and mythological imagery that Marija absorbed as a child reflected, not only the Indo-European pantheon of sky gods, but a much earlier bond with the Earth and her mysterious cycles that was still alive in the Lithuanian countryside:

The rivers were sacred, the forest and trees were sacred, the hills were sacred. The earth was kissed and prayers were said every morning, every evening...

The balance of male and female powers expressed in the folk material had its correspondence in people's daily lives:

Officially the patriarchal system is clearly dominating, but in reality, there is an inheritance from Old Europe in which the woman is the center. In some areas the matrilineal system really exists, such as in my family. I don't see that the sons were more important.

In 1931, Marija's parents separated and she moved to Kaunas with her mother and brother. To be parted from her father and from Vilnius was her first great sadness. When she was fifteen her beloved father suddenly died, which was a tremendous shock. Afterwards, she turned inward and vowed to continue her father's life.

All of a sudden I had to think what I shall be, what I shall do with my life. I had been so reckless in sports - swimming for miles, skating, bicycle riding. I changed completely and began to read...

At this point, Marija's life as a dedicated scholar began. The death of her father kindled a deep desire to investigate all that could be known about ancient origins, especially beliefs concerning death and prehistoric burial rites.

Her mother had a small farm near Kaunas where Marija spent blissful summers with the plants and animals. Right nearby people still did their work in traditional ways.

The old women used sickles and sang while they worked. The songs were very authentic, very ancient. At that moment I fell in love with what is ancient because it was a deep communication and oneness with Earth. I was completely captivated. This was the beginning of my interest in folklore.

Marija poured over the work of Dr. Jonas Basanavičius, her, "adopted grandfather," whose folklore collections were treasures of a vanishing Lithuanian heritage. She was motivated by the knowledge that such important research was part of her personal lineage. Therefore, she participated, at ages sixteen and seventeen, in ethnographic expeditions to southeastern Lithuania, as the youngest member and the only girl, to make her own contributions to the preservation of this precious material. While the boys collected tools, she recorded folklore and songs. By the time she fled Lithuania as a refugee in 1944, Marija Gimbutiene had collected thousands of folk songs and stories which are preserved in the Vilnius folklore archive.

After graduating from high school with honors in 1938, Marija began studying at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. In the meantime, enormous political forces were roiling. The agonizing tourniquet of Polish occupation was removed after the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and Vilnius was liberated. Marija immediately enrolled in the University of Vilnius and became part of a spontaneous outpouring of cultural and educational reform by the citizenry and the new government.

Encouraged by Prof. Jonas Puzinas to study archaeology in both Kaunas and Vilnius, Marija began to develop a complex, philosophical approach to archaeology and Baltic prehistory that was highly interdisciplinary. She studied ethnology with Jonas Balys, linguistics with Pranas Skarkzius and history with Antanas Salys, among others. She also spent several months on her own recording folklore from the refugees of Byelorussia who were flooding into Vilnius. She understood the necessity to create her own interdisciplinary path.

This was my own university; this was how I trained myself.

The pioneer spirit of the young generation could not prevent the devastation brought by the Soviet invasion of 1940. All that they had worked to create was destroyed; the Lithuanian government was deposed, the universities were taken over by Stalinists, books were burned and thousands of people were deported to Siberia. As soon as the deportations began, Marija returned to Kaunas and hid in the forest with her mother near their summer house. Many members of her own family and close friends were tortured, deported or killed.

Marija joined the underground resistance movement and took part in the Lithuanian Uprising of 1941 that helped to push out the Soviet forces. She was

nearly killed several times. Soon afterwards the horrors of the German occupation began. In the midst of this chaos Marija married her fiance Jurgis Gimbutas.

In June of 1942, Marija Gimbutienė completed her master's studies in archaeology at the University of Vilnius, with secondary studies in folklore and comparative philology. Portions of her dissertation, "Life after Death in the Beliefs of Prehistoric Lithuania," were published in the Kaunas journal *Gimtasai Krastas*. She also became pregnant.

During the next year of illness and life with a new infant living under occupation, Marija published eleven articles on the Balts and prehistoric burial rituals in Lithuania. Her cousin, Dr. Meilė Lukšienė, describes Marija during this period: "She was writing her first book about burial practices with one hand and rocking her first daughter Danutė with the other hand. Marija was a person of incredible will and organization. This was a phenomenon which continued throughout her entire life."

That clearly kept me sane. I had something like a double life. I was happy doing my work; that was why I existed. Life just twisted me like a little plant, but my work was continuous in one direction.

THE ROAD OF TRIALS

While the Soviet front advanced for the second time on Lithuania in 1944, Marija, Jurgis and baby Danutė took refuge once again with her mother at the summer house near Kaunas. They were also hiding two Jewish ladies knowing that Lithuanians found sheltering Jews were being executed in public.⁷

When Marija and Jurgis ran for the crowded barge on the Nemunas River to escape on July 8, 1944, she held her dissertation under one arm and Danutė in the other. Marija Gimbutienė was twenty-three years old.

The rest of the war years were spent in Austria and Germany in desperate conditions. Immediately after the war Marija enrolled at Tübingen University and received her Doctor of Philosophy degree in archaeology in 1946 with emphases in prehistory, ethnology and the history of religions. Her thesis, which she translated into German, *Die Bestattung in Litauen in der vorgeschichtlichen Zeit*, was published in Tübingen the same year.

In 1947 the second daughter Zivilė was born. Although forced into refugee camps, Marija continued independent research at Tübingen and managed to do postgraduate work at Heidelberg and Munich universities. Jurgis completed his doctorate in engineering at the University of Stuttgart and taught engineering in Munich between 1946 and 1948 through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

By the time the Gimbutas family emigrated to America on March 21,

1949, Marija had published nearly thirty articles on Lithuanian prehistory and had completed the research for *Ancient Symbolism of Lithuanian Folk Art* which was published in Philadelphia in 1958. An interdisciplinary approach was already evident in this work since mythology was used to decipher early religious symbolism.

Ironically, this, and other books by Marija Gimbutas, were banned in Lithuania during the Soviet period. *Ancient Symbolism* was passed around secretly for decades. It was finally translated and published in Lithuania in 1994.

LIFE IN THE NEW WORLD

The first years in America were difficult although Jurgis was immediately employed in Boston as an engineer. His mother, Elena, came with them and took care of the children while Marija worked as a maid and at other menial jobs.

In the fall of 1949 Marija presented herself at Harvard University. Recognized for her linguistic abilities, she was engaged to translate eastern European archaeological publications and, soon afterwards, to write texts on European prehistory.

I had such a strong determination that I started right away to do research. For 3 years, I wasn't given any money. I felt like a drowning person.

Marija eventually received support from the Bollingen and Wenner-Gren Foundations for the preparation of *Prehistory of Eastern Europe* (Harvard, 1956), which allowed her to give up the night jobs that were draining her strength. This was the beginning of a series of fellowships and prestigious awards that supported her ongoing research.

To produce texts for Harvard University on the prehistory of Eastern and Central Europe, Marija had to have a working knowledge of most Eastern and Western European languages including Romanian. During thirteen years of intensive research she studied every archaeological report, in the original, that came into the Peabody Library, "the best library for archaeologists in the world." In 1954 the third daughter Rasa was born and in 1955 Dr. Gimbutas was named a Research Fellow of Harvard's Peabody Museum, a lifetime honor.

The annual report to the president of Harvard on the activities of the Peabody Museum for 1954-55 states: "Dr. Marija Gimbutas, Research Fellow for the Archaeology of Eastern Europe, has completed the first volume of her definitive work on the prehistory of that region. Her study of the prehistory of European Russia and the lands along the shore of the Baltic will be a classic which will stand for many years as an outstanding reference work. ... No such synthesis has ever been attempted, even by the Russians, and the whole subject

is known to prehistorians in the rest of Europe only in a fragmentary and confused state... Dr. Gimbutas has also published, in the 1955 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, an article on the 'Balts,' which is the most definitive exposition of the... Baltic regions that has ever appeared in print."

THE FRUITFUL YEARS

Most archaeologists are specialists of a specific region, are rarely trained as linguists and often cannot read archaeological reports in languages other than their own. Marija Gimbutas was, therefore, in a unique position to develop an encyclopedic overview of European archaeology.

The question of the origins of the Indo-Europeans was always in my mind. This was inherited from my early studies in Lithuania. Writing about the East European Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Ages - between the Black Sea, Baltic Sea and the Urals - this was my area. I probably read all the nineteenth and twentieth century literature that existed ...

Since she was also thoroughly knowledgeable about the linguistic search for the ethnogenesis of Proto-Indo-European speakers, Marija Gimbutas was the first scholar to link linguistic research with available archaeological data to identify the homeland of the patriarchal people she called "Kurgans" and to trace their infiltrations into Europe.

Linguists were talking about the Indo-European origins and this influenced me, of course. The origin had to be the steppe region. This was the first linguistic solution.

An early version of her "Kurgan Hypothesis" was presented at the International Congress of Ethnological Sciences in Philadelphia in 1956, which established a substantial point of departure for all continued research in both fields.⁸ A further development of her hypothesis, with a revised chronology, was presented ten years later at the Third Indo-European Conference, also in Philadelphia. After decades of scholarly debate, Marija Gimbutas' thesis of the Kurgan invasions, and the subsequent hybridization of the indigenous European population, has been verified by the independent research of Stanford geneticist Dr. L.Luca Cavalli-Sforza.

Prehistory of Eastern Europe was well distributed and Dr. Gimbutas was soon recognized internationally as a rising star. As the recipient of numerous fellowships, she began to travel and lecture extensively throughout Western and Eastern Europe. Her magnetic presence and passionate search for meaning

stimulated a vigorous exchange of ideas with colleagues throughout the world. Friendships were formed during those years that continued throughout her life.

Although Marija Gimbutas lived and worked for forty-five years in America, the preservation of Lithuanian heritage was always of central importance. In Boston she helped to establish a Saturday School to teach Lithuanian language and culture, which was attended by all three daughters, and both she and Jurgis were very active in promoting the artistic life of the Lithuanian community. Later, Marija Gimbutas played a leading role in the advancement of Baltic Studies and was on the editorial boards of *Metmenys*, *Ponto-Baltica* and *Comparative Civilizations Review* - as well as other publications. She also contributed to *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, the *Quarterly Review of Archaeology* and was the editor of the Eastern European archaeological section of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The connection with her family in Lithuania was always of great importance. In 1960 Marija Gimbutas lectured at an Orientalist Congress in Moscow in order to see her mother for the first time since 1944. In 1969 she was an exchange professor with the USSR through the American Academy of Sciences and returned to Lithuania on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1981.

In 1960 Marija Gimbutas was awarded the Outstanding New American Award by the World Refugee Committee and Boston Junior Chamber of Commerce. The following year she was chosen from forty top scholars to be in residence at Stanford University in California as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. She spent that glorious year working on the six pound tome *Bronze Age Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe* (Mouton, The Hague, 1965).

My health at Harvard was really not good. I worked much too much and exhausted myself. Coming here I revived.

In 1963, Dr. Gimbutas accepted a position at the University of California at Los Angeles, left her marriage and moved to California with her daughters. In that same year her book *The Balts* appeared in the series *Ancient Peoples and Places* and a parallel work, *The Slavs*, was sponsored by the American Council of Learned Studies.

Marija Gimbutas remained at UCLA as a professor of archaeology until her retirement in 1989. During those exceedingly active years, she collaborated with Dr. Jaan Puhvel to establish the Institute of Archaeology, a program of Indo-European studies, and the Graduate Interdepartmental Program. Dr. Gimbutas served as Chair of European Archaeology, taught Baltic and Slavic studies (including language, mythology, and folklore), Indo-European Studies, and was Curator of Old World Archaeology at the Cultural History Museum at UCLA. She continued to write articles for numerous professional publications

and encyclopedia, acted as editor for the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* and other publications, and attended yearly international conferences and symposia. Most of all, Marija Gimbutas was an inspiring teacher who actively encouraged the budding careers of many young archaeologists and linguists. She insisted that her students develop an interdisciplinary approach which is highly unusual in these fields.

Although Marija Gimbutas was primarily known as a world class scholar of Baltic and Slavic prehistory and of the Indo-European Bronze Age, her experiences as an excavator, between 1967 and 1980, were essential for the detailed development of her research on the neolithic cultures of Europe.

In 1967-1968, Dr. Gimbutas become project director for excavations of neolithic sites in Yugoslavia and Macedonia, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute with a Humanities Endowment Award. This marked an important turning point in her career. She returned home to receive the prestigious *Los Angeles Times* Woman of the Year Award.

During those years of intense travel, excavations, lecturing, research and writing, Marija Gimbutas visited nearly every museum in Eastern Europe. Thousands of artifacts from neolithic excavations spoke of an ancient aesthetic entirely different from the caches of weapons and Bronze Age burials of dominant males described in her earlier books. Although technical reports existed, there was nothing in the literature to explain what she was seeing.

I came to a point when I had to understand what was happening in Europe before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. It was a very gradual process. I did not know then that I would write about neolithic religion or the Goddess. I was only trying to answer this question. During my excavations I became aware that a culture existed that was the opposite of all that was known to be Indo-European. So this led me to coin the new term "Old Europe" in 1968.

Between 1968 and 1980 Marija directed four other major excavations in southeast Europe: 1968-1969 - the Karanovo and Early Bronze Age tell, c. 5000-2000 B.C. at Sitagroi, Greek Macedonia; 1969-1971 - the Starčevo and Vinča settlement, 6300-5000 B.C. at Anza, Macedonia; 1973-1975 - the Sesklo tell at Achilleion, near Farsala, Thessaly, Greece, c. 6500- 5600 B.C.; and 1977-1980 - the Scaloria cave sanctuary near Manfredonia, SE Italy, 5600-5300 B.C.

It became obvious that there was very little investigation by other scholars of the radical changes that took place in Europe after the appearance of Indo-European influences. Therefore, in 1979 Marija organized the first interdisciplinary conference on "The Transformation of European and Anatolian Culture, 4500-2500 B.C." held in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. This conference, and others that followed, were created to stimulate new research on the radical shift of economic, religious and social structures that took place between the fifth and third

millennia B.C. The second international conference took place in Dublin, Ireland in 1989. The third, "The Indo-Europeanization of Northern Europe," was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in honor of Dr. Gimbutas after her death in 1994.

DECIPHERMENT

Although it is considered improper and unscientific in mainstream archaeology to interpret the ideology of prehistoric societies, it became obvious to Dr. Gimbutas that every aspect of the Old European system reflected a sophisticated religious symbolism. She felt it was impossible to understand neolithic cultures without acknowledging this. It was not enough to measure the typology of vessels or to date the layers of stratigraphy. Marija Gimbutas was determined to decipher the intrinsic patterns of mythological imagery that could reveal the inner cohesion of this symbolic system. The long process of decipherment began.

In the beginning I couldn't see anything. Luckily, I started deciphering and from very tiny sherds I began to piece it together. None of the literature could help me. I had to make my own way, little by little. Later on I became passionate to find more.

I noticed that some figurines are winged, some have animal heads, some have special decorations, some were in the nude, some were clothed. By the late sixties I could distinguish certain types as expressed in *Gods and Goddesses*, published in 1974.⁹ At that time the Bird Goddess was quite clear to me because she is so typically anthropomorphic with wings and with beak. The other type which was also symbolically related was the snake woman with snake limbs. That also was not so difficult to recognize. But some of the other types were still a puzzle to me.

At that time regeneration was still not very clear. Now I see that this is one of the most important functions. Even after the revised edition, *Goddesses and Gods* that appeared in 1982, I was still unhappy with my decipherment. I was always questioning myself - what are these symbols, what are these signs engraved or painted on sculptures - not only on figurines but on a variety of models of temples, thrones and hundreds of other items such as seals, stamps and spindle whorls. They had to have a great meaning.

Gods and Goddesses was a result of five years of thinking written in three months, which was too fast. It was a storm birth.

One day in 1974, when I was in the Netherlands at the Institute for Advanced Study at Wassenaar, I was sitting there organizing materials from my excavations in Anza, Macedonia, I decided to start deciphering (the script). So, just like a child, I began copying the signs from the objects.

I began with the Bird Goddess and made a list of signs found on objects associated with her. As much as possible I was checking contexts - how these figurines and objects are found: did they belong together or not and which signs are found together. For instance, is the V or chevron associated with par-

allel lines, or with a certain number of dots or meanders? Finally it became clear that there are groups of symbols that go together which must have certain meanings.

Through this study I started to see that V, or chevron, which is a double or triple V, is almost inseparable from the Bird Goddess. This is her own sign which might indicate her name or insignia. So if a very crude figurine has nothing else but a V, it could represent a Bird Goddess or some *ex voto* figurine dedicated to the Goddess. But in many cases, figurines were richly engraved and you can easily see how this group of symbols goes together. In my next book, *The Language of the Goddess*, I have a whole section on the Bird Goddess and her symbols.

The Bird Goddess could be a spring bird or a bird of prey, associated with the fall or winter aspect. The owl, for instance, appears in bird form and as a hybrid between woman and owl often connected with megalithic tombs. She appears frequently as a Goddess engraved on a slab in passage graves like at Knowth in Ireland. This Goddess of Death and Regeneration is associated with vulva, breasts, necklaces and labyrinthine designs.

Next to be deciphered was the snake and all the other animals associated with the Goddess in both her life-giving and death-wielding aspects. So, you see, it is a long work. I shall never finish, of course. Now, I think I have deciphered at least 2/3 or 3/4. So it's not quite finished.

INTERVIEW

Joan: During the years of decipherment was there anyone with whom you shared your ideas?

Marija: With whom? Human beings? Scholars? Nobody, absolutely nobody. No one was interested in what I was doing. Nobody had any understanding.

Joan: What about mythologists?

Marija: Sometimes, yes, but we talked mostly about Lithuanian mythology, not about archaeology.

Joan: Not with Greimas or Levi-Straus or Eliade?

Marija: I knew them but they had no knowledge of archaeology at all because it was difficult for them to find any information. It was scattered in thousands of little articles with no synthesis. From what books could they learn about symbols or images of goddesses? There were no publications other than catalogues here and there. During the period of my research there was not a single person with whom I discussed this material.

How people are detached from folklore. Mythologists and folklorists of Europe look for analogies in Australia or Africa but to decipher European material the local folklore must be understood.

Joan: You have described how your work with the Bronze Age material was well accepted...

Marija: That was the accepted archaeology. It had nothing to do with religion or symbolism. All archaeologists were describing swords, daggers, axes, horses, graves and all that. So what I was writing about the Bronze Age was clear to every archaeologist: chronology, typology, that's it. The Indo-European problems were also not far away from the thinking of that generation. When my work suddenly appeared about symbolism they didn't know how to react.

There were some reviews of *Gods and Goddesses* that were mostly superficial. It was not noticed, at first, that this was a deciphering of the religion - at least the beginning of a deciphering. But it was mentioned (by Colin Renfrew) that this was a very handy collection of images.

When *The Language of the Goddess* appeared there was a much greater reaction, mostly from artists. Archaeologists, after being in this so-called "New Archaeology" where everything has to be based on scientific methods, cannot accept any interpretation of religion. For them, it is not scholarly to say something. They are afraid of the establishment, they are afraid of their own colleagues. So this is a very peculiar situation. It's ridiculous, actually. Now we can just laugh, but on the other hand, there is a very wonderful reaction to my books mostly from artists, from the people who have intuition and who have an interest in spirituality - religious historians and mythologists, like Campbell, or Eliade, or Greimas. They all read my books, but just before their deaths. It's too bad that there was no time to start a discussion. I would love to have talked with them when they had this material in their own hands. But that didn't happen. At least I am grateful to have met Campbell again just before his death. The great scholars of our century were, unfortunately, already old.

Joan: Campbell used to say that if your work had been available earlier, he

would have written some things very differently.

Marija: Yes. He said that he neglected the goddesses because there was no way to find out more about them. And that's true, I understand. I had to spend 30 years to come to that and this was my fate. Since I taught at UCLA I had the chance to excavate in the Balkans and to find myself so many figurines. Because of my background I was always interested in mythology and folklore - it was already there in my heart. It was such a wonderful coincidence to be offered such good conditions. That was it.

Joan: What was it like to dig up these figurines and hold them in your hands?

Marija: I remember noticing that some were inscribed and wondering what that meant - and that another figurine had headgear while another had a skirt or was nude. I was continually wondering about their meaning.

Old Europe was a totally different era. You have to get into another viewpoint to understand the symbols. Then it becomes very interesting. If you don't, these signs are sometimes ugly or puzzles and nothing else.

Joan: In *Goddesses and Gods* you refer to the Earth Goddess of the Indo-Europeans.

Marija: Again, you study Indo-European mythology and Earth Goddess is there everywhere. She was inherited, probably, from the earlier religion.

Joan: At that time, did you understand that she was probably from the Old European layer?

Marija: No, I didn't.

Joan: So your understanding of the difference between the matrifocal Old European and patriarchal Indo-European systems had not yet come into focus at that time.

Marija: Not at that time, no. It was a very gradual development. It needed time

and more data. We do not have evidence of a pure Indo-European religion without the influence from the substratum. What we know in comparative Indo-European mythology are collections of myths from Scandinavian, Celtic, Roman, Greek, and other sources. All of them are mixed. Before my decipherment of the two systems it was impossible to know what is Indo-European and what is not. Now, I would say, of course, Earth Mother is Old European, definitely so.

Joan: What about linguistically? Can you tell...

Marija: For linguists it is not clear. They are confused and it is a very slow process. This is why I organized these Indo-European conferences, especially for that problem - to bring the linguists and archaeologists together to understand what is Old European and what is Indo-European. The best linguists have a good understanding of Old European substratum and Indo-European elements but there is not enough done. Of course, many goddess names are already deciphered. Nobody says that Athena is Indo-European or Artemis is Indo-European.

There are many short articles about that, but no systematic work. I would like to expect that one good scholar will sit down and devote 10 years to discover, in religious terminology, the oldest non-Indo-European terms. Those connected with spinning and weaving, for instance, are not Indo-European. So, it's not so difficult.

Joan: Who were the first people who responded to your work about the Goddess?

Marija: They were either artists, anthropologists, mythologists, but not archaeologists. Some of my good friends just backed out and I lost contact with them. From my colleagues I felt mostly silence.

Joan: Did it bother you that they moved away?

Marija: No, because it's absolutely understandable, you see. They don't think it's possible to speak of religion. "There is no evidence. No evidence. Where is the evidence?" There is such a rich evidence. So, for such people this is unscholarly because how you can prove it? I am not astonished at all by this reaction. It's quite normal.

But I know what I have done is not fantasy and that is my satisfaction. This is the only thing I work for, to come to a moment where everything clicks together from all sides - archaeology, mythology, folklore, linguistics - all are saying the same thing. This is it. What do I care what a person says who has no experience in this field, no preparation, or interest in it.

Joan: *The Civilization of the Goddess* is virtually a summary of your life's work. Have you published all that you wanted to say?

Marija: Of course not. I always feel that the work is unfinished. There is so much more that could be said. Nevertheless, *The Civilization of the Goddess* will be used more and more because there is no replacement. What else can be used if you want to teach the Neolithic of Europe? What? For awhile this will be the only textbook. But it's too heavy, too thick.

My work can be divided into two parts: research on the patriarchal culture of the Indo-Europeans and an exploration of what was before them - the matrifocal culture of Old Europe. For the latter I have spent twenty-five years and that is not enough. I need much more time. At least I can summarize my knowledge and express myself without hesitation. I used to say "perhaps" and "probably" and now I say what I see. This is my time to produce more books, but the Goddess or God will not allow me this.

Joan: Before you presented your work on Old Europe, prehistory was obscure for most of us. But now that the door is open, filled with life affirming images, it cannot be closed.

Marija: Yes, the doors are now open and I am so happy I lived to be part of this revolutionary period. I am really surprised to see how many people are interested in my work. That is a joy. It is possible to die now. Having this response at the end of my life is a big gift.

Joan: Your work has been identified with the feminist movement. Were you ever trying to find evidence to support feminist theories?

Marija: Never! Never! The only thing for me was to find the truth. I did not do this work because women were supporting me. Not at all. Nobody was supporting me. Just me, myself.

Joan: So you didn't begin with an ideology.

Marija: Absolutely not! It's too bad that now readers are connecting me with the women's movement or with some ideology.

Joan: How would you rather be considered?

Marija: As a scientist. As an archaeologist. Of course, I need the support of women. Their response was a revelation to me. A big surprise. Because to the last moment I was so involved in my work that I didn't realize how strong the feminist movement is. Or receptive. Or how intelligent women are. I actually didn't think much about the reaction. I did my work.

THE CONTROVERSY

There is no doubt that the work of Marija Gimbutas has struck a central nerve within the academic world that has broad implications within and beyond scholarly realms. The intensity of the criticism coming from certain arenas says as much about the bias of the critics as it does about the work in question. A brief overview is offered here.

Anthropologists have long recognized five useful categories for the description of cultures: technology, economy, social organization, religion and symbolism. These were introduced to archaeology by Grahame Clark in his *Archaeology and Society* (1939) and simplified to economy, sociology and ideology by Gordon Childe in *Piecing Together the Past* (1956). These categories represent "hierarchies of difficulty" in which ideological interpretations of religion and symbolic culture are considered problematic, if not inappropriate for scientific consideration.

The "New Archaeology," which came into focus in the 1960's, narrowed the acceptable interpretative range to socio-economic concerns as dictated by an assumed "objectivity" and scientific materialism. When Marija Gimbutas chose to investigate neolithic symbolism as a way of understanding Old European cultures she broke the prevailing taboo against ideological interpretation. She also did not hide her passion for the subject, an attitude which is typically considered womanly and decidedly "non-scientific."¹⁰ By refusing to work within the established models, she is accused of having "no methodology."

The broad, interpretive approach of Marija Gimbutas is eyed with skepticism within a discipline that has become increasingly specialized - whose adher-

ents insist upon "looking through the telescope backwards."¹¹ According to her, "interdisciplinary research requires the scholar to view the problem with an entirely different mental focus, which means learning to assemble the data with a goal of seeing all details at once, in situ."¹²

"Marija did not merely preach multidisciplinary she practiced it" recalls Martin Huld, a linguist who studied with Dr. Gimbutas at UCLA. "While she was disdainful of the sterility of the 'New Archaeology' when it truly was new, that was not because she was uncomfortable with hard science; it was because laboratory techniques in themselves could not tell the whole story... Marija's multidisciplinary approach is the only sound way to deal with the problems of prehistory."¹³

According to archaeologist Michael Herity, most archaeologists approach methodology with "a set of pigeon holes... a formal layout of evidence and a limited deduction characterized by the normal monograph." He describes many researchers as "sheep on their knees" staying well within the fold. "Of course Marija has a methodology," he adds, "but not a pigeon hole method."¹⁴

Marija Gimbutas was both an excavator, which requires tremendous patience for detail, and a synthesist. One of her great accomplishments was to absorb the data from thousands of monographs to present an overview, for the first time, of the art, religious symbolism and social structure of Neolithic Europe. The very breadth of this vision required a shorthand, a summary of a summary, that made it impossible to describe each step toward a particular conclusion. This is a common point of criticism. An enormous work of synthesis, such as *The Civilization of the Goddess*, cannot have the detail characteristic of a monograph - which is, by definition, narrow in scope. Marija Gimbutas' prodigious outpouring of over three hundred articles, however, numbering nearly two thousand pages of scholarly text, reveals an encyclopedic mastery of a vast amount of material that provides a detailed expression of her developing ideas.

Researchers are often reluctant to venture beyond the zone of acceptability since new ideas must stand the inevitable scrutiny of unsympathetic judges. It is treacherous to risk originality, but innovation never comes from the repetition of accepted formulas.

Many attempts have been made to categorize and dismiss Dr. Gimbutas' work as post-Childean, feminist, or part of the establishment old guard - therefore not feminist enough. Her work has even been called "sexist" by Brian Fagan in his review of *The Civilization of the Goddess in Archaeology* (March/April 1992). This article provoked an outpouring of indignant responses from a number of prominent scholars who rejected his accusations as more vituperative than illuminating.

The most common form of dismissal is erasure. After a lifetime of major contributions to archaeological literature, Marija Gimbutas is not mentioned once in Bruce Trigger's ambitious text, *A History of Archaeological*

Thought (1989).

Archaeologist Kristina Berggren from the Istituto Svedese di Studi Classici in Rome offered these comments: "It is sound scientific practice to consider an interpretation valid until it is falsified and substituted by a new and better one. The critics of Marija Gimbutas have not done this. Instead, the opposition against her has been very emotional and often very violent. ...Her interpretation of the prehistoric symbolic language is still as valid as ever and places her among the true scientists. My work would not have been possible without hers."¹⁵

In a review of *Civilization* published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 122 (1994), Michael Herity wrote: "Archaeology is today enjoying some reaction against the more extreme scepticism of the New Archaeology. We might look with some hope towards an emerging Cognitive Archaeology; if Positivism drives, it will creep; if scientific optimism, it will run or even soar. In a liberal world, truly interested in a broad range of ideas about humanity, this book will be widely read. ...it is bound to be influential in the Humanities and may help to bring the debate about the nature of prehistory to a new level of maturity."

Marija Gimbutas was acutely aware that the potential for knowledge is vast and whatever an individual can comprehend and contribute in one lifetime is extremely limited. She possessed a "humility in the face of the evidence"¹⁶ which caused her to continually revise her own conclusions based upon the most current data. She perceived her work as a beginning, not an end, and knew that many younger scholars would stand on her shoulders. As Colin Renfrew wrote in his obituary for Marija Gimbutas published in *The Independent*, Cambridge, England: "She was a figure of extraordinary energy and talent. The study and the wider understanding of European prehistory is much richer for her life's work."

Marija Gimbutas is deeply missed by all who knew and loved her. As her colleague Edgar C. Polome wrote in her 1987 *festschrift*, "There are no words to describe the profoundness of the feelings that link this great scholar to her disciples and this great woman to her numerous friends and admirers."¹⁷

Endnotes:

1. This is a reference to the article by Peter Steinfels, "Idyllic Theory Creates Storm," published in *The New York Times* Science Times section, February 13, 1990.
2. Foreword by Joseph Campbell to *The Language of the Goddess* by Marija Gimbutas (Harper, 1989), p. xiii.
3. Letter to Joan Marler from Ashley Montagu, November 28, 1993.
4. The Secretary General of the League of Nations intervened in 1924 to prevent Danielius Alseika from being expelled from the Vilnius area by the forces of the Polish occupation.
5. All quotations by Marija Gimbutas that appear in this article are drawn from interviews recorded by Joan Marler between 1987 and 1993.
6. Marija's parents were sophisticated intellectuals who valued folkloric material without being "believers." For the servants, who told Marija hundreds of stories, the pagan deities were real.
7. Conversation with Jurgis Gimbutas, September 23, 1994.
8. See Forward by Edgar C. Polomé in *Proto-Indo-European: The Archaeology of a Linguistic Problem - Studies in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, edited by Susan Nacev Skomal and Edgar C. Polomé. Institute for the Study of Man, Washington, D.C., 1987: 10-11.
9. In the first edition of this book, Thames and Hudson refused to allow Goddesses to be first in the title. The second edition, published in 1982, reflected Marija's original title: *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*.
10. See "Feminist Scholarship in the Sciences: Where Are We Now and When Can We Expect a Theoretical Breakthrough" by Sue V. Rosser in *Feminism and Science* edited by Nancy Tuana, Indiana University Press, 1989: 3-11.
11. Comment by Andrew Sherratt recorded by Joan Marler Dublin, Ireland, September, 1989.
12. "Introductory Remarks" by Marija Gimbutas from the Proceedings of the Second Conference on The Transformation of European and Anatolian Culture 4500-2500 B.C., Dublin, Ireland, September 15-19, 1989. Published in *The*

Journal of Indo-European Studies, Fall/Winter 1989:194.

13. From a letter from Martin Huld to Joan Marler, September 20, 1994.

14. Conversation with Michael Herity recorded by Joan Marler March 15, 1992.

15. From "Beware of the Mother!" by Kristina Berggren, article for *From the Realm of the Ancestors: Essays in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, edited by Joan Marler (Knowledge, Ideas & Trends, Inc. 1996).

16. Michael Herity, Op. cit.

17. From "Marija Gimbutas, A Biographical Sketch" by Edgar C. Polome from *Proto-Indo-European: 377-378*.