Heide Goettner-Abendroth

# Matriarchal Landscape Mythology. Giving some examples

To take into consideration today the sacredness of landscapes in the past is timely and important, as the landscapes we are living in are destroyed step by step by excessive density of settlements and transit routes. We are about to lose our landscapes by changing the faces of Mother Earth in a destructive way.

It might help to change this attitude and to save our landscapes if we devote ourselves to the world view of Neolithic matriarchal peoples, who projected their religious symbolism onto the landscape. In contemporary matriarchal societies, too, a religious relationship with the landscape forms part of their culture; this is why they cannot and do not want to separate from their land.[1] Neolithic people created – with the meaningful emplacements of tombs, stone circles and large earthworks and their cosmological references – not only a symbolic landscape, but turned it into a sacred one.

The landscape was always regarded as a manifestation of Mother Earth who shaped each individual local area by her divine forms and forces. Therefore, Neolithic peoples emphasized by their sacred buildings in a particular arrangement the features of each landscape in the image of Mother Earth. In its most elaborated forms this resulted in the phenomenon of "landscape temples."[2]

I would like to give you some examples:

***Example 1*:** (by Kurt Derungs) The first example is the form of the landscape near Lenzburg (Switzerland), where three hills were seen as a recumbent landscape goddess: the smallest being her head, the middle hill her elongated body and the largest her round, swelling hips (Ill. 1a and 1b).

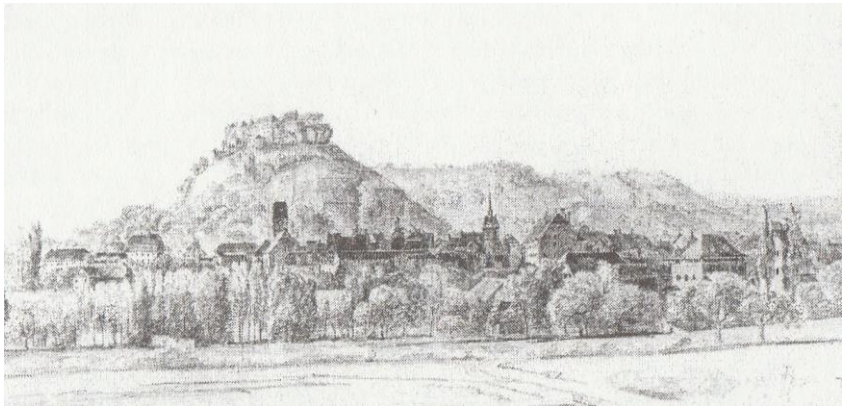

Illustration 1 a

[1] See, for example, the history of the Hopi in Arizona, as well as the history of the Iroquois with their sacred mounds in Ohio (both North America) and of the Khasi with their megalithic structures (Northeast India).

[2] On the phenomenon of "landscape temples" and how to find them, see two examples of Goettner-Abendroth: the Dreisamtal in the Black Forest (South Germany), in: *Matriarchale Landschaftsmythologie*, Stuttgart 2014, Kohlhammer Verlag, Chap. 4, and the Oberhalbsteiner Tal/Surses (East Switzerland), in: *Berggöttinnen der Alpen*, Bozen 2016, Raetia Verlag, Chap. 3.

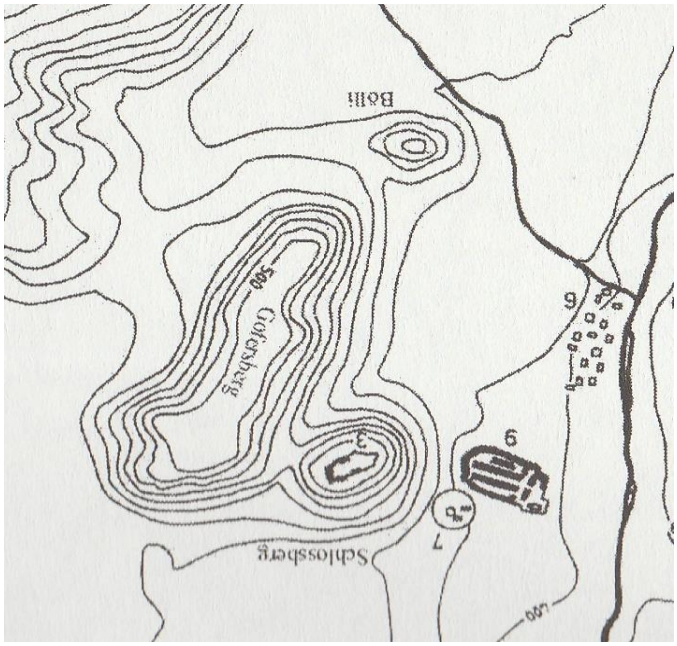


Illustration 1 b

Precisely located in the small valley between the body and hips, a Neolithic cemetery was found with stone cists and burials in the fetal position (starting from 4,200 BCE). According to archaeological estimates, the partially destroyed graveyard once included 500 people, although now only 100 were found. It is easy to see that here the deceased were literally buried in the "lap of the goddess," the Mother Earth in her local form, so that their rebirth was assured.[3]

The following examples and many others can be found in my two books on matriarchal landscape mythology:

[3] Kurt Derungs: *Landschaften der Göttin,* Bern 2000, Edition Amalia, 11-16, 24-29.

***Example 2:*** Another example is the two "Gleichberge" or twin hills near Roemhild (in Thuringia, Germany). Like other equally shaped twin hills, they were considered to be the "breasts of Mother Earth" (Ill. 2). There exist numerous such "breast hills," and prehistoric places of worship regularly refer to them.[4]

Illustration 2

Here another example: the "Paps of Jura," meaning the "Breasts of Jura," at Cnoc Seanndda in Scotland (Ill 3).

Illustration 3

Interestingly, close to the twin hills near Roemhild in Germany, an area called "Grave Field" is situated, a zone that is almost covered with graves from the 3rd-2nd millennium, being considered the largest archaeological ground monument in Germany. The deceased literally rest on the bosom of the goddess who nourishes them in the afterlife until they would return to life.[5]

***Example 3:*** Here is an example of what is called a "landscape temple" in matriarchal landscape mythology: the Dreisamtal near Freiburg in the Black Forest (Ill. 4).

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[4] Additional examples are: the "Paps D'Anu," meaning the "Breasts of Dana," near Killarney in Ireland; the "Breasts of the Mother of God," the twin summits of the Osser mountain in Bavaria/Germany.
[5] Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchale Landschaftsmythologie,* 87-89.

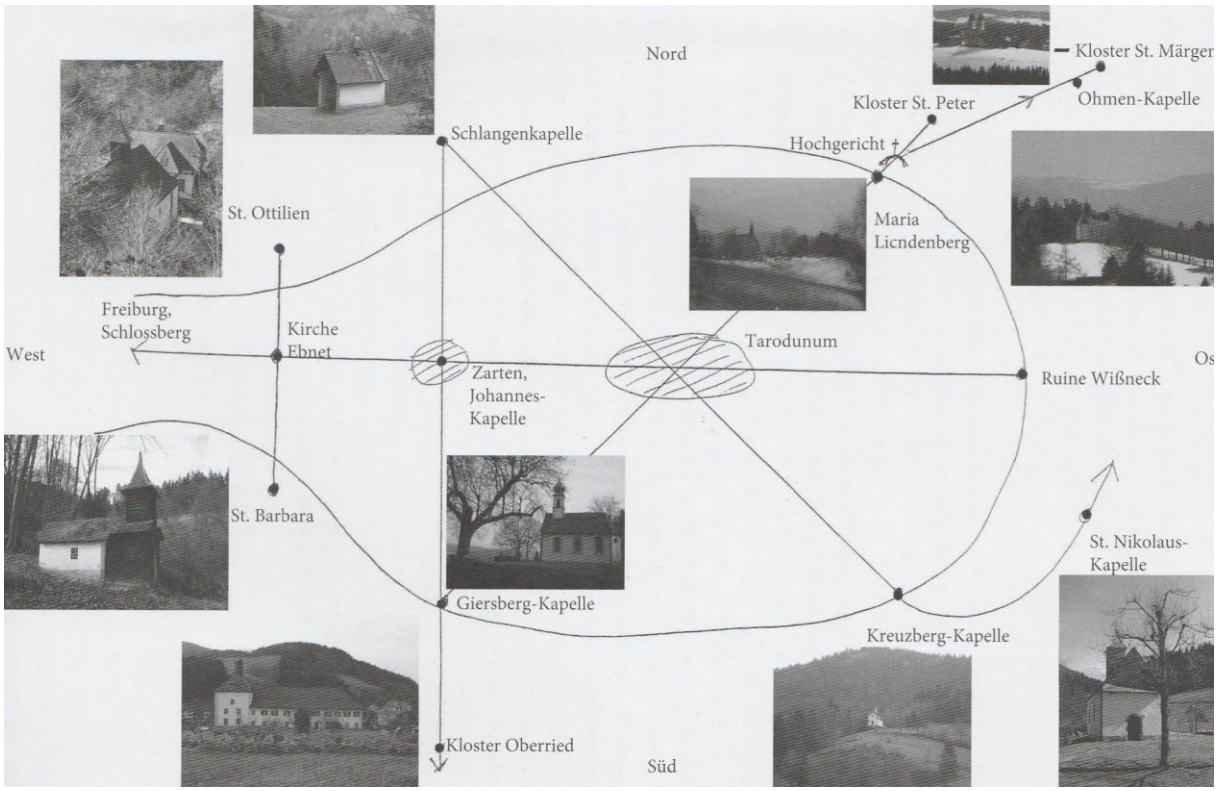



Illustration 4

This valley is shaped like a uterus, and is precisely oriented from east to west. At its center lies an archaeological site, the Celtic settlement of Tarodunum, the roots of which date back to Neolithic times. The valley is surrounded by chapels on ancient, sacred hills interconnected by sight lines. These chapels are in the exact position of all the cardinal points in the valley.

The east-west axis is indicated by two castles, both are ruins so that no symbolism can be found any longer. But if such ruined castled are places of legends, their cases are becoming interesting: Here the ruined castle in the east is combined with the legend of a luminous or light White Lady, who appears at daylight. As in matriarchal thought, East is the direction of light and life, this place must once have been dedicated to a white goddess. In the west lies the "Schlossberg" (castle-hill) of Freiburg, whose legend tells of a wise old woman living in the depths with a large bunch of keys. West is regarded as the direction of darkness and death, so this place once was the abode of a black goddess.

The sacred hills around the valley have been Christianized, and the chapels are dedicated exclusively to Mary and female saints. But their symbolism still alludes to their former significance that means to the ancient goddesses hidden behind the Christian figures. Thus, in the north – the direction of the night – there are dark sacred women: St. Odile in a black cloak and in the "snake chapel" a Madonna in black with a snake. In the opposite direction, the south – the direction of noon – there are light sacred women: St. Barbara as a sky woman and a white Madonna. These four chapels are directly connected by the two north-south sight lines.

In addition, the southern chapels face north-east along the "summer line" diagonal, because at the summer solstice the sun rises in the north-east. There, enthroned in the chapel, is a golden Madonna with a halo of rays, reminiscent of an earlier sun goddess. The northern chapels, on the other hand, point along the "winter line" diagonal to the south-east, where the

sun rises at the winter solstice. The hill there is still called “Winterberg” (winter hill) and, in the chapel, a Madonna in a dark cloak can be seen, bending and weeping over her dead son, replacing an earlier black goddess of death.

These brief references must suffice here to demonstrate that the entire valley was once a sacred landscape. It was occupied by goddesses around all the points of the compass, making it a beautiful and readily observable landscape temple with its cultic lines and sacred paths.[6]

***Example 4:*** (by Michael Dames) The most magnificent example is the Avebury complex in South England. It encloses with its two curved stone avenues, in broad arches, the extraordinary Silbury Hill which was built at the same time and is situated exactly south of it (Ill. 5).[7] With its spaciousness, this complex turns the area into a vast landscape temple, a symbolic image of Mother Earth.

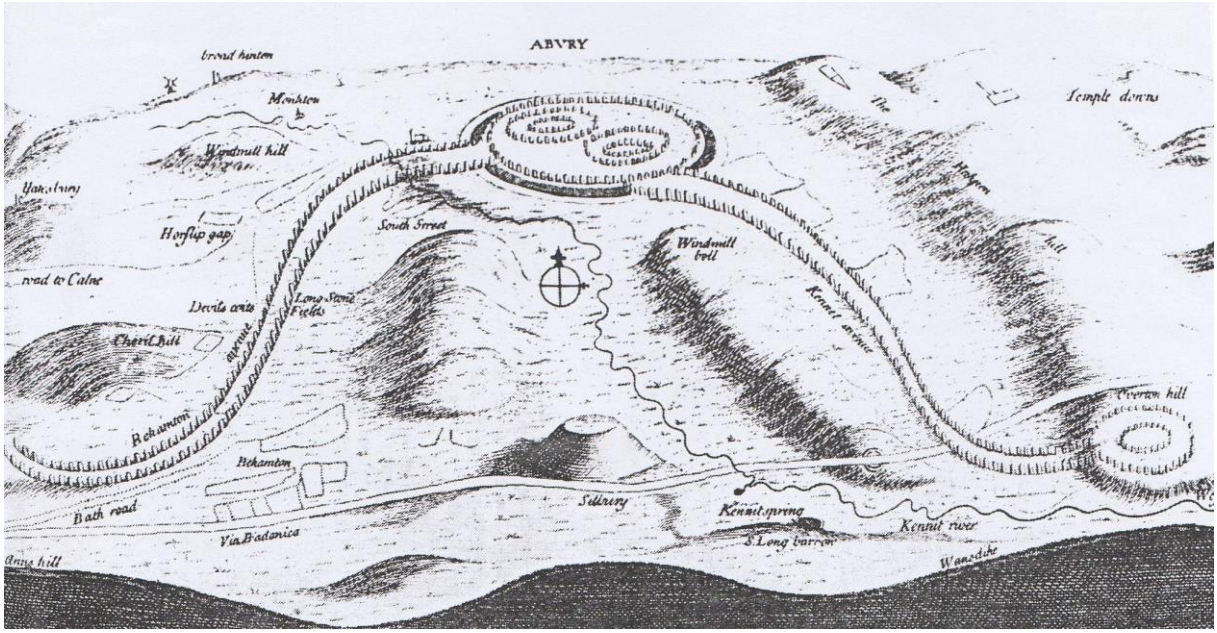


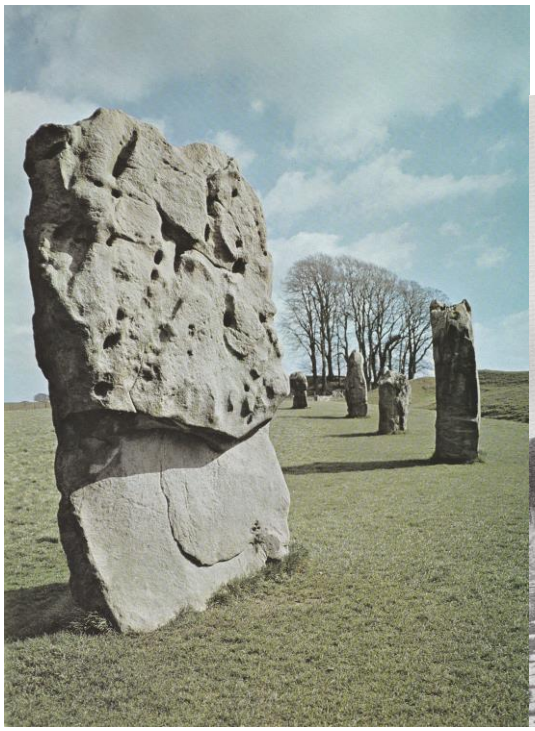

Illustration 5

Various interpretations are possible. Seen from the south from Silbury Hill, Avebury Henge could be the abstract image of a being with two breasts, whose arms or legs are widely spread, the latter representing the birthing posture. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Silbury Hill is a burial place, so that here the idea of rebirth out of the Earth Mother is represented on a large scale. On the other hand, looking at Avebury Henge from the north, it looks like a big-eyed head with two beautifully curved horns, the image of the bull or cow horns so common in the Neolithic period. Since the Palaeolithic era, “woman” and “horns” belong together, and this symbolic combination continued in the Neolithic Age. Even in the millennia thereafter, we find it again as a divine bull or cow horn crown, for example in the Egyptian Hathor, in the Sumerian Inanna as a triple horn crown, as well as in very early African rock carvings.[8] It is the ancient, symbolic combination of woman and moon (the

[6] Op. cit., 138-185.
[7] Avebury Henge also refers to the much older long barrow tomb of West Kennet which lies exactly in southern direction, too.
[8] For example, the “White Lady,” rock painting in the Tassili Mountains (Algeria), with huge horns.

horns referring to crescents of the moon), of eternal change in time, from life to death and the return from death to life.[9]

The pronounced twin principle at the Avebury Henge is also noteworthy: two inner stone circles, the northern and southern, surrounded by the vast outer stone circle; two stone avenues, the southwestern "Beckhampton Avenue" and the southeastern "West Kennet Avenue," both ending in two circular buildings. Two types of standing stones (menhirs), the narrow "male" stones and the broad "female" stones in rhombus or diamond shape, are found in the outer circle and in the inner stone circles (Ill. 6 and Ill. 7).



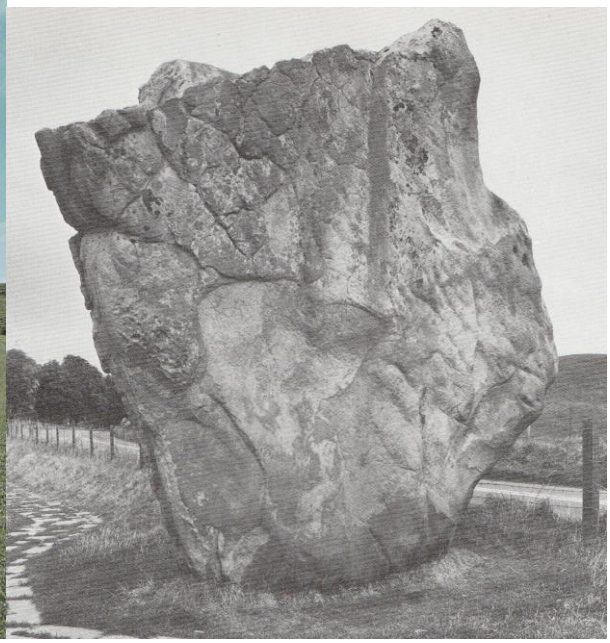


Illustration 6 Illustration 7

This refers to the polarity of the world, as the Neolithic people see it. Besides many other poles, it is represented in the human sphere as the female-male polarity, but with the two sides always being in balance. This "polar cosmology" is a fundamental principle in the matriarchal way of thinking, which is reflected in the megalithic architecture. The stone settings in the middle of the two inner circles show this polarity particularly well (Ill. 8).

[9] Another interpretation of the bull or cow horn symbolism is as an anatomical analogy with the woman's birth organs: uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries, that is, the female fertile womb. See Dorothy Cameron: *Symbols of Birth and Death in the Neolithic Era,* London 1981, Kenyon-Deane.

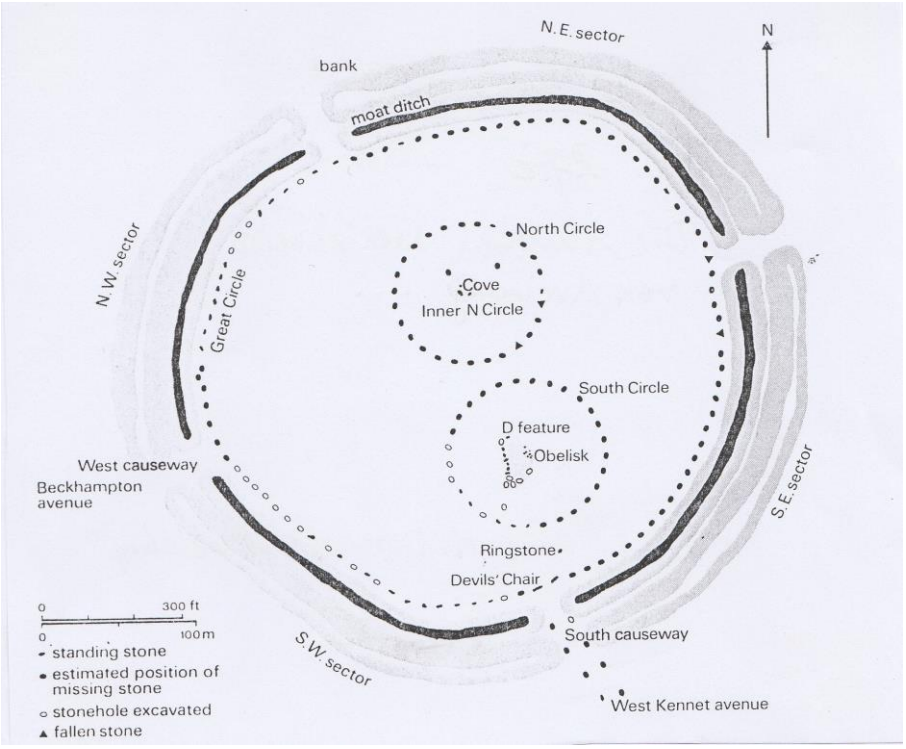



Illustration 8

In the center of the southern inner ring there is a presumedly female D-shape of smaller stones, combined to the largest one single menhir here, the phallic "obelisk" (no longer present). In the northern inner ring there was a large stone chamber, "The Cove," which collapsed in the eighteenth century, leaving two huge stones that clearly show the male and female forms (Ill. 9).

Illustration 9

This explicit polarity has led to the interpretation that the Avebury complex was a temple for the celebration of sacred marriage ("*hieros gamos*").[10] The sacred marriage was an

[10] For this interpretation and other presumed ceremonies, see Michael Dames: *The Avebury Cycle*, London 1977, 1996, Thames and Hudson.

ancient, magical ceremony with the purpose of keeping the female-male polarity in balance and, with this, keeping the human world in balance and at the same time the whole universe. The two serpentine stone avenues are said to have been the processional paths of the groups from two different directions towards the sacred, central place. Before the procession began, they prepared for the encounter in the covered, sacred round buildings at the beginning of the stone avenues.[11] After arriving at the two inner stone circles of the Henge, the festival took place with great ceremony.[12]

***Example 5:*** One interesting example is the composite image of the divine Earth Woman, which is formed by connecting the 27 Neolithic places of worship within the wider surroundings of the sacred Avebury complex (Ill. 10). Avebury Henge and Silbury Hill, together with the West Kennet long barrow tomb, are located in the lap of this giant landscape goddess.[13] It is very plausible that these connections between places of worship, which are within short distances of each other, were relevant in the Neolithic as they also offered lines of sight and communication and pilgrimage paths.

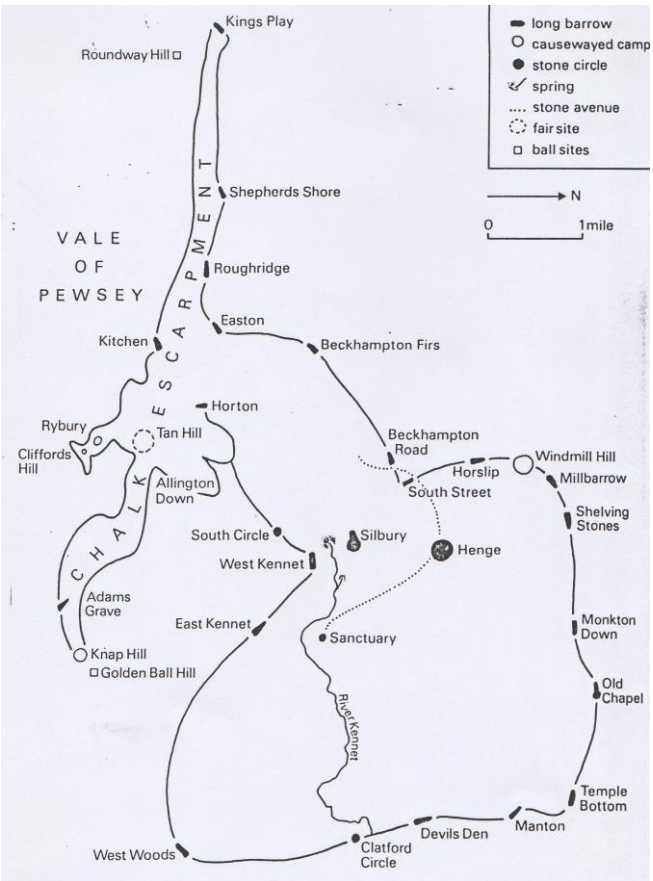



Illustration 10

As you can see by these examples, the principles and methods of matriarchal landscape mythology can help us to rediscover the indigenous matriarchal roots of Europe, which have been buried under thick layers of patriarchalization. Until now, this symbolic relationship

[11] One of these round buildings is the "Sanctuary," which could be reconstructed from the post holes, while the other round building has been lost. The "Sanctuary" was built with several rings of wooden pillars, not of stone, and had a conical roof. The contemporaneous, archaeologically well-researched round building of Durrington Walls (South England) served as a comparison.

[12] See the principle of balance in the worldview of contemporary matriarchal peoples, exemplary in the traditional culture of the Iroquois. Barbara Alice Mann: *Spirits of Blood, Spirits of Breath. The Twinned Cosmos of Indigenous America*, New York 2016, Oxford University Press.

[13] Dames: *The Avebury Cycle*, 185-218.

between ancient sacred monuments and the landscape has not been taken into consideration in archaeology because of the ideology that “male elites were taking over and possessing the land”, in the sense of conquest and wielding power over the land.

It was Marija Gimbutas, who opened the door to a spiritual and mother-centered understanding of Europe’s past by her research. By combining archaeology and mythology, she created a new method to promote this understanding. By using the matriarchal landscape mythology, we still go a step further by including the landscapes where Neolithic peoples lived, so that the effective combination of archaeology, mythology and symbolic analysis of landscapes might help us to find the whole picture. –