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MATRIARCHY IN BRONZE AGE CRETE: A PERSPECTIVE
BASED ON THE WORK OF HEIDE GOETTNER-ABENDROTH
AND MODERN MATRIARCHAL STUDIES

I feel very privileged to be a part of this conference honoring the life and work of Dr. Heide Goettner-Abendroth on the occasion of her 80th birthday. Thank you, Heide and Cecile for inviting me to participate!

I first heard Heide speak in 1998 at the Women and Earth Conference in Istanbul. At that conference she walked across almost the whole width of a vast stage at the front of the auditorium, stopped, and said: “This distance represents the length of time that humans lived in matriarchal societies.” Then she took a few steps to the end of the stage and said: “This represents the length of time humans have lived under patriarchy.”

The difference between the two periods—in terms of her steps across the stage—was huge. I had never seen human history and historical time periods portrayed in such a graphic and physical/embodied way. I was stunned.

Heide then went on to say that we must reclaim the word matriarchy, and we must define it. She then proceeded to give us her definition of what constitutes a matriarchal society. I was surprised. I had never heard matriarchy defined as anything other than the opposite of patriarchy—power over.

Heide concluded her talk with her research and film on the matriarchal society of the Mosuo.

While I was grateful for Heide’s precise definition of matriarchy, I wished she wouldn’t insist on using the term matriarchy. However, very soon I came round to her way of thinking. Yes, I realized, we must reclaim the word matriarchy; reclaim it and define it with a very precise definition as Heide has done.

I began to study her work and was fortunate enough to be part of an English-speaking seminar she offered where I was able to delve further into her

scholarship, and ask questions of her. I was also able to attend the Matriarchal Studies conference in Switzerland.

When it came time to choose a dissertation topic, I turned to Heide and Modern Matriarchal Studies to elucidate what I saw in my 20-year study of Crete, but the academic literature totally ignored: a matriarchal Bronze Age (c. 3000-1450 BCE) Crete. Several archaeologists, including the famous excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, had postulated matriarchy for Crete. However, the idea has been generally dismissed in recent decades—without the term even being defined. I felt that with the use of Heide's definition of matriarchy, along with Marija Gimbutas' methodology of archaeomythology, and her concept of Old Europe, I might write a work that would change the way academics viewed Bronze Age Crete, or at least persuade them to consider an alternative view.

So, that is what I did. Using archaeomythology as my methodology, the discipline pioneered by Marija Gimbutas, which combines the fields of archaeology, history, mythology, folklore, and linguistics to understand the spiritual, as well as the material realities of ancient societies; in addition to taking into account Gimbutas' understanding that Bronze Age Crete was a part of Old Europe—a true civilization in the best sense of the word, peaceful, egalitarian, matrilineal and artistic; I looked at the facets of Heide's definition of a matriarchal society to see if I could make a plausible case for a matriarchal Bronze Age Crete. I say *plausible* because we do not have definitively deciphered written records for the time period, c. 3000-1450 BCE, to make a definite determination.

I looked first at the precept that matriarchal societies have a Female Divine at their center, or in Heide's words: are: "sacred societies as cultures of the Goddess or Divine Feminine;" and was able to show that there is overwhelming archaeological evidence for a Triple Goddess, who was one with Nature, a Life-Giver, Death-Wielder, and Regeneratrix, at the center of Bronze Age Cretan religion. Indeed, archaeologists of Crete are generally agreed that a Female Divine was at the center of the religion. I show some examples of the iconography of the Cretan Goddess here that I believe you might be familiar with.

To turn to the social level of Heide's definition of matriarchy, she writes that in matriarchal societies: people live in large kinship groups that follow the principle of matriliney; they are matrilineal, and they are non-hierarchical.

In my work, I cited archaeological evidence for clan-size dwellings in Bronze Age Crete, indicators of matrilineal societies, mythological evidence, from the slightly

later Mycenaean Age, to illustrate the strong possibility that matrilinearity existed during the Bronze Age, and historical evidence from the Classical period, the Law Code of Gortyn, which shows that during the classical age in Crete, property, including land, was often at the disposal of women, that women could divorce ‘at their pleasure,’ and that a women’s brother figured prominently in the raising of her children. Given the conservative nature of law, which changes very slowly over time, I maintained that such a situation could certainly have existed in the Cretan Bronze Age as well.

Perhaps the most important evidence for a matrilineal, matrilocal Crete is found in the iconography—particularly the preeminence of women in the Cretan frescoes. I show you some examples here you may be familiar with. My work makes a strong case for Crete as a woman-centered society which a society must be if it is to be defined as matrilineal and matrilocal

I also examined the controversy over whether or not Bronze Age Crete had a male ruler, and I found that it is impossible to identify a male ruler in the Cretan archaeological record. On the other hand, what one does find are images of important women. Might this not be seen as indicative of the type of society Heide Goettner-Abendroth has described as matriarchal?

As for the economic aspects of Heide’s definition of what qualifies a society as matriarchal, she writes that they are societies of economic reciprocity; the ideal is distribution not accumulation. Additionally, it is women who are in charge of the distribution of goods.

I pointed out that new archaeological findings, as well as reconsiderations and reinterpretations of previous archaeological findings, are revealing that:

There was no private property in Bronze Age Crete, and that includes land ownership;

The so-called “palaces,” like Knossos, Mallia, Phaistos, were not the homes of a king and his court, but actually ceremonial centers and communal gathering places;

There is archaeological evidence for communal eating and drinking festivities on a large scale at many of the so-called “palaces.”

Thus, I argued that evidence for communal eating and drinking festivities at the so-called “palaces” could well be evidence for festivities held in order to distribute goods among clans, or to celebrate such distribution.

One piece of iconographic evidence for such festivities, and for women being in charge of them, is the Campstool Fresco, in which two women, larger than any of the other figures in the fresco, which are all male, are shown presiding over what appear to be a drinking or toasting ritual. Archaeologists have termed the figures Goddesses or priestesses, but I believe that they could be identified as clan mothers leading a celebration in honor of the distribution or re-distribution of goods among the clans.

At the political level, matriarchal societies are defined by Heide as “egalitarian societies of consensus.” In my work I contend, based on archaeological evidence for clan houses; the communal as well as sacred nature of the so-called “palaces”; the archaeological as well as mythological and iconographical evidence for matrilineality and matrilocality, and finally, the evidence of what I would call “council chambers” at Knossos and Ayia Triadha, that such a political system for Crete is entirely plausible, and is more plausible than the traditional view of a strong centralized hierarchical structure, monarchy, and aristocracy. I want to focus for a moment on several interesting pieces of archaeological/architectural evidence: the council chambers at Knossos and Ayia Triadha, and the so-called “throne” at Knossos.

It has been cogently argued by a number of archaeologists that based on the iconography surrounding the throne, a woman sat on the so-called “throne” at Knossos. I would maintain, however that the woman on the throne, which was perhaps not a throne at all, at Knossos was a clan mother who was an inter-regional leader, and the benches adjacent were for regional delegates to discuss and finally to reach consensus on island-wide issues.

Such benches are also found at Ayia Triadha, a building located near, and associated with the so-called “palace” of Phaistos. I think it could also be another such council chamber.

This is just the briefest summary of the work I have done using as a basis the ground-breaking scholarship of Heide Goettner-Abendroth.

What are the political consequences of Heide’s work? For me, perhaps the most important is that it helps us to view history, especially ancient history, in a whole

new way. I believe that her definition of matriarchy allows us a greater understanding of the society that was Bronze Age Crete than any other scholar has offered.

What is the meaning of my work, in light of the use it makes of Heide's work and that of Modern Matriarchal Studies? I believe my work provides evidence for scholars and the general public alike that will enable them to understand that the theory of the existence of ancient matriarchy, when the term matriarchy is carefully defined, is not simply a fanciful concept, but has a basis in reality. Such knowledge may help people to envision and perhaps work, in a more hopeful way, toward a different sort of world than now exists, one that exhibits equality between the sexes, a balanced economy, peacefulness, and puts the spiritual rather than the material at the center of human concern.

The Austrian-born American historian Gerda Lerner noted that, 'The system of patriarchy is a historical construct; it had a beginning and it will have an end.'¹ My work, based on the scholarship of Heide and Modern Matriarchal Studies, gives some notion of what history might have been like before the historical construct of patriarchy, and of what society's goals and values might be, once it comes to an end.

¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986): 198.