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OLD EUROPE IN LIGHT OF MODERN MATRIARCHAL STUDIES

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Warmest greetings and gratitude to Heide, Cecile, and to all of the international scholars who are contributing to this memorable event in honor of our dear friend and colleague Heide Goettner-Abendroth. I am particularly pleased to be here in recognition of our decades of friendship and to share my focus on the life-long scholarship of the Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas. In this brief presentation, in recognition of Heide's pioneering studies - I will speak about "Old Europe in light of Modern Matriarchal Studies."

But first I would like to say that I profoundly appreciate the depth and elegance of Heide's life's work. Her systematic redefinition of matriarchy based upon scientific principles is a great and enduring gift to all of us, which opens new dimensions of our understanding of its significance for recognizing past and present matriarchal societies.

Heide began her investigation of matriarchy and the history of cultures as a European philosopher by investigating "the social and mythological patterns of pre-patriarchal societies in the early history of Europe, the Mediterranean region, and the Middle East." Everywhere she looked, pre-patriarchal cultures had been destroyed leaving only fragments and distortions. Anthropological sources throughout the world were also distorted by patriarchal assumptions. The work of Henry Lewis Morgan (1851), who founded anthropology as a social science, was riddled with racism and sexism. Even the founder of Matriarchal research, Johann Bachofen, reflects the patriarchal views of the mid-19th century, which continue today. It became necessary for Heide to develop a deep critique of patriarchy and to respectfully learn as much as possible about non-patriarchal cultural patterns from Indigenous scholars in order to proceed with her investigations.

Marija also sought to understand the pre-patriarchal societies of Europe as an archaeologist and one who was profoundly influenced by the earth-based spirituality of the folk culture from her lineage as a Lithuanian.

After earning her doctorate in archaeology at Tuebingen University after the end of WWII, she emigrated to the United States with her husband and two young daughters in 1949. As a prehistorian, she spent 13 years at Harvard University where she became a Research Fellow of the Peabody Museum. There she completed three monographs - *The Prehistory of Eastern* (1956), *Ancient Symbolism in Lithuanian Folk Art* (1958), and the enormous tome - *Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* (1965). In *Ancient Symbolism* she recognized that Lithuanian folk symbolism, which can be traced to the lifeways of the earliest agriculturalists,

was richly preserved in the oral tradition of Lithuanian village people through songs, stories, and verbal, as well as visual, metaphors. In this monograph, Gimbutas wrote: “Symbols in folk art ... were elements in a well-ordered system, not spontaneous, unconnected inspirations.” This insight later informed her interpretations of the symbolism of the Neolithic societies of Old Europe.¹ This book focuses primarily on the beautifully ornamented wooden poles, erected throughout the Lithuanian landscape, containing ancient symbols expressing people’s beliefs in the sacredness of life. As Marija writes in her Introduction, these Lithuanian monuments “rose from the earth, as the folksong had risen, as various customs had risen, out of religious beliefs that challenged definition through artistic creation.” In her view, these ancient symbols belong to a single religious system “expressing the spirit of a folk which was drawing its elixir of life from roots firmly set in the soil.”²

In 1963 Marija Gimbutas became a full professor of European Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Although she was known and respected worldwide as a Bronze Age scholar, she turned her attention to the earlier Neolithic period of Europe to find out why it was so peaceful and filled with beautiful ceramics and thousands of female sculptures, completely unlike the Bronze Age that followed.

Over thirteen years, from 1967-1980, Marija was project director of five major excavations of Neolithic sites in southeastern Europe. In 1973, when Heide published her first insights on matriarchy, Marija began to excavate the Neolithic Sesklo culture settlement site of Achilleion in Thessaly, Greece. She had the site carefully radiocarbon and dendrochronologically dated. The resulting calibrated dates, 6400-5600 BCE, became the chronological yardstick for the Early Neolithic in Greece, which had not been previously determined.³

As project director, Marija required her workers to find and save every figurine, even fragments, and to carefully record their contexts - which was typically not of interest to previous directors. Due to her focused attention, the remains of more than two hundred realistic, schematic, and zoomorphic sculptures, mostly female, in various postures were discovered, many wearing masks and some with costumes and body adornments.

These were found in association with specific contexts: inside and outside houses, near hearths, ovens or work areas, on built platforms or in pits. These contextual finds made it possible for Marija to signify categories of sculptures in connection with practical activities as well as ritual actions for the first time. For instance, sculptures of a masked, pregnant woman sitting on a throne (the “Pregnant Goddess”) were positioned on altars in courtyards between houses where grain was ground into flour and baked into bread. Such evidence of communal ritual activity was found on all levels of the site's stratigraphy for 800 years, accompanied by associated symbolic

¹ The term “Old Europe” was coined by Marija Gimbutas in 1968 to refer to the peaceful, egalitarian, non-Indo-European societies of Europe before the incursions into Europe of warlike, patriarchal nomads from the Pontic-Caspian steppes.

² Gimbutas 1958.

³ Gimbutas et al. 1989: 23-31.

items implying a seamless unity over time between practical work and spiritual communion.⁴

Hybrid images, such as female sculptures with bird masks and women depicted with snake-like arms and legs—possibly indicating a shared consciousness between animal and woman—were venerated on special platforms in house shrines, never in areas of food production. They were sometimes found with the remains of offering bowls, libation vessels, zoomorphic pots, clay spoons, bone tubes (presumed to be musical pipes) and other ritual objects. In a later phase at Achilleion, Bird and Snake Goddesses were found on a bench-like altar in a two-room temple, with implements for weaving and spinning found nearby.

It's important to consider the coordinated efforts of the entire population of the site engaged in all aspects of preparing the soil for planting the seeds, protecting and cultivating the plants all through their growing season, harvesting, drying, threshing, preserving the precious seeds in order to bring them to the courtyards where they would be ground into flour, made into dough, and baked into bread. Each outdoor oven, resembled a pregnant belly where the dough would bake to nurture the population. (Even to this day there is a saying that a pregnant woman has a "bun in the oven".) Each aspect of this process was attended by ceremony as evidenced by an abundance of ritual items. Sculptures of the Pregnant Goddesses seemed to be overseeing these activities as though encouraging the nurturing necessary at every step. Each bowl of seeds brought in to be processed represented a triumph of successful coordination and sacred intention by the year-long activities of the larger community. As always, enough seed had to be saved for next year's planting.

This focus on communal coordination extended throughout the entire Sesklo culture area occupied by numerous settlement sites within the plain of Thessaly. People from different villages depended upon each other for help in building projects, constructing and repairing irrigation systems, and other community wide necessities. Attitudes of sharing for mutual wellbeing as well as the participation in seasonal celebrations contributed to the sustainability of the interconnected communities and the sustainability of the fertility of the land.

As settlements gradually spread north into the Balkan region and further into the entire area designated by Marija as non-Indo-European / non-patriarchal Old Europe, this basic attitude of sharing and the cultivation of mutual benefit continued.

Marija was so inspired by her discoveries at Achilleion that she immediately began to write *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974). She wanted to put Goddesses first in the title because most of the sculptures were female, but her publisher refused, saying it would be improper to do so. In 1982, the book was reissued as *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. In both books she used the term "matriarchy" to describe the culture system. With Goddesses first in the title, she was accused of promoting the rule of women to the detriment of men. She no

⁴ Gimbutas et al. 1989: 171-221; Marler 2018.

longer used the term matriarchy in her subsequent publications and addressed the situation in this way:

(1991: 324) "A serious and continuous obstacle in the study of ancient societies is the indolent assumption that they must have resembled our own. ... The difficulty with the term matriarchy in 20th century anthropological scholarship is that it is assumed to represent a complete mirror image of patriarchy or androcracy - that is to say, a hierarchical structure with women ruling by force in the place of men. This is far from the reality of Old Europe. Indeed, we do not find in Old Europe, nor in all of the Old World, a system of autocratic rule by women with an equivalent suppression of men. Rather we find a structure in which the sexes are more or less on equal footing, a society that could be termed a *gylany* ... a term coined by Riane Eisler (from *gyne*, referring to woman, and *andros*, man, linked by the letter *l* for *lyein*, to resolve, or *lyo*, to set free). *Gylany* implies that the sexes are "linked" rather than hierarchically "ranked." I use the term *matristic* simply to avoid the term *matriarchy*, with the understanding that it incorporates *matriliny*."

Even though Marija did not continue to use the term matriarchy to name the social structure of Old Europe, because she did not want to be misunderstood, she was continually accused of doing so in terms of the 19th century patriarchal notion of women dominating men. A decade after Marija's death, Ian Hodder, declared in a high-profile Scientific American article that his "discovery" that Chatalhöyük was egalitarian proved Marija wrong because she (supposedly) believed it was a matriarchy.

Heide stated that her explication of Matriarchy is much more than a simple definition. It is necessary to recognize the structural patterns of matriarchal societies, which include the **economic, social, political, spiritual and cultural levels.**

From here to the end of this presentation I will contrast Heide's structural patterns of matriarchal societies followed by descriptions of similar descriptions of Old Europe by Marija.

- In Heide's view, it is the **Economic level** in which societies create and maintain a balanced economy, which she calls: *societies of economic mutuality based on the circulation of gifts.*

In: *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991:325) Marija writes: "We do not know much, as yet, of political and economic entities of the earliest Neolithic. It is presumed that each rural community had to control its own productive resources to secure an adequate yield through agriculture, stock breeding, and other means of survival. However, we should not think of earliest farmers in southeastern Europe as primitive. ... They were ... not only food producers, but traders, builders of houses and temples, carvers of stone, bone and wood and ceramicists, ... and they were able to express their religious ideas in sculptural art and painting using a complex symbolism. ...

They were in constant contact with people along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts who were navigators."

- Heide considers the **Social level** to be societies based upon matrilineal kinship and matrilocality within the framework of gender equality, which she calls: *non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship*.

(1991: 324) Marija writes: "The oldest civilizations in the world - were, in all probability, matrilineal 'Goddess civilizations.' Since agriculture was developed by women, the Neolithic period created optimum conditions for the survival of matrilineal, endogamous systems inherited from Paleolithic times. During the early agricultural period, women reached the apex of their influence in farming, arts and crafts, and social functions. The matriclan with collectivist principles continued."

Old European Cemetery Evidence provides the following information:

(1991: 331) "During the 7th and 6th millennia BC, the southeastern European Neolithic cultures of Sesklo, Starčevo, and Karanovo practiced intramural burials in which children, young individuals, and females were interred under floors of houses. This indicates the status bestowed on females and their children and their strong ties with their homes. Burial sites for adult males were conspicuously lacking." ... "Nowhere was there a spatial hierarchy in which rich and poor graves appeared in separate areas."

(1991: 334) "[Cemetery] evidence reveals that elder women, the great clan mothers, received the highest social respect. Similar customs were practiced in other culture groups."

(1991: 336) In northeastern Hungary grave finds show that "the manufacture and decoration of pottery was in women's hands. Pebbles for burnishing and polishing pottery, coloring materials, and stone palettes were found exclusively in female graves."

- Heide considers the **Political level** to represent societies based upon consensus. The clan house is the basis of decision making, both locally and regionally, which she calls *egalitarian societies of consensus*.

(1991: 331) "The settlement evidence of southeast and central Europe speaks for the existence of focal houses, large and better built than the rest, which we surmise were occupied by stem families of matrilineal lineage. Such houses may also have been the loci of gatherings or decision-making councils who organized the surrounding houses, the whole village, or even several villages or districts. Extended families lived in large and medium-sized houses, all on equal footing. Small houses perhaps belonged to offshoots from extended families. ... Temples were integrated within these groups and are distinguished by wall paintings and reliefs and by outstanding ritual ceramics. The absence of weapons of war and hill forts over two millennia, from c. 6500-4500 BC argues for an absence of territorial aggression."

- Heide considers the **Spiritual and cultural level** to represent *sacred societies and cultures of the Feminine Divine*.

(1991:222) Marija writes: "The Great Mother Goddess who gives birth to all creation out of the holy darkness of her womb became a metaphor for Nature herself, the cosmic giver and taker of life, ever able to renew Herself within the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth."

(1991: 342) "The worship of female deities is connected to a mother-kinship system and ancestor worship in which the sexual identity of the head of the family and kin formulated the sexual identity of the supreme deity. In the mother-kinship system, woman as mother is the social center. She is duly venerated and petitioned, with prayer and thank-offerings, as the progenitor of the family and stem."

In: *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) Gimbutas writes: "The Goddess in all her manifestations was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoeic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on Earth."

- In: *Societies of Peace* (2009): Heide writes: "Bringing the world back into balance means creating equilibrium and peace at every level: between the sexes, the generations, and different social groups. This is the chief objective of all efforts to achieve a sustainable society."

In: *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Marija writes: "We must refocus our collective memory. The necessity of this has never been greater as we discover that the path of 'progress' is extinguishing the very conditions of life on Earth."