

Archaeomythology Spring 2007

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This course is an investigation of the meanings and usages of “archaeomythology,” a word coined to describe the brilliant interdisciplinary methodology developed by Lithuanian archaeologist [Marija Gimbutas](#) whose revolutionary work brought to light the Goddess civilizations of Old Europe. We honor Marija Gimbutas’s work as the basis for better understanding Western prehistory and history, including especially the much-overlooked fact of a transition that took place from “matristic” or matriarchal culture to patriarchy (male-dominance). Rather than staying with the obsolete (but entrenched) notion that modern civilization developed in a linear way since the Stone Age (“progress”), Gimbutas discovered and documented the distinct changes that occurred as a response to invasions, migrations, and assimilations between two different cultural approaches to social organization. This “collision of cultures” can be seen consistently in the archaeological strata of the various sites, as well as the art forms and folk traditions that have continued as a “substratum” underneath the foreground patriarchal culture in Europe since the transition occurred.

Dualism is the most persistent and pervasive feature of patriarchal culture. Sky over earth, spirit versus matter, light over dark, white over black, male over female—we are used to living inside of these hierarchical categories and taking them for granted. These rigid rankings stem from when the transition occurred from female-centered social organization to male-dominance—a transition which is so often overlooked and denied in our culture today, making it difficult to pinpoint the cause of, let alone solve, our current problems. The female gives birth to both boys and girls and loves them equally; matriarchy is innately egalitarian, and this egalitarianism can be recognized in forms and artifacts found in cultures that are not patriarchal. Naturally people understood and experienced the fluctuating (“yin-yang”) realities of light and dark, sky and earth, winter and summer, life and death—but as we shall see, they did not valorize or privilege one over the other. It would be more accurate to say that they “processed” through the circles and seasons, appreciating and responding to each in turn.

Women’s monthly bipolar menstrual cycle, synchronized with the moon in the sky, is the universal template within which all other cycles were understood by ancient people: the circle of birth, death, and rebirth; the seasonal cycle of winter, spring, summer, and fall; the lunar cycle from New (Dark) Moon to Full Moon each month; the apparent beginnings and endings of all kinds that circle around like a snake biting its own tail. The most important understanding for students to take away from this course is that of *cyclic reality*. Life is revered as a circle or a spiral inside of which we (and everything else that exists) are contained. A web of interconnectedness is the structure—the very nature of reality—and every single thing is animated; nothing and no one is ever actually separated from all that is. There is no beginning and no end, only an Eternal Return. Over time, patriarchy obliterated the knowledge of this universal web illuminated by the cyclic reality that is enacted through the female body each month in synchrony with the moon. The marvel of women’s ability to bleed without a wound—to die and be reborn each month and to create and sustain life from this magical blood—lies at the root of the human evolutionary “leap” from the primate family tree.

It is my belief that Gimbutas’s work can be used as a template for our research and investigation into other cultures and civilizations around the world, no matter where we look. Not that we want to overlay a Eurocentric focus in our research, but rather that her methodology as an

interdisciplinary investigator can be a model for us of how to approach the study of history and prehistory anywhere, as well as how to look at women-centered reality in contemporary times inside of patriarchy or male-dominance. In my thirty years of research, I have found that the transition from female-centered social organization to male-dominance took place everywhere in the world—not always at the same time or in the same way, but like a virus replicating itself or a contagious microbe spreading everywhere. The pockets of human culture that have remained “matriarchal” are the fascinating exceptions to this rule of male-dominance, and these contemporary remnants of ancient female-centered civilization will be one important focus of our investigation.

Now that contemporary science has proven that all of humanity arose, developed and migrated “out of Africa,” we will honor and investigate the original matriarch, the African “Dark Mother,” as the matrix for any honest narrative about human physical and cultural evolution. Our racial memory links all of us—everywhere in the world and through all time—to this Dark Mother and our prehistoric African origins. The apparent “revolution” that took place in terms of human tool-making and artistic development seen in Europe during the Paleolithic period, documented by amazing cave and rock art, lunar calendars, and the famous “Venus” figurines found across Europe and Russia, is clearly rooted in an African archetype and the migrations that scattered humanity across the continents and back again. Recent DNA research show us that the diversity of races and cultures that can be found around the world is no more or less than a complex and creative externalization of this original ancestral matrix.

Another area of our focus will be the “substratum” of women’s culture and religion that since the Stone Age has continued to exist below the foreground level in folk art, ritual and ceremonial life, bridal customs, and women’s secret languages, scripts, and coded knowledge found in weaving, embroidery, pottery, house-painting, and other so-called “arts and crafts.” Women’s reproductive technologies, funerary customs, herbal medicine, sacred and magical practices are part of this ancient and irrepressible “women’s business” that is frequently overlooked and made obscure by its trivialization or outright dismissal in academic scholarship. And of course, the instinctual and potentially ecstatic expression of the female body in dance, movement, and sexuality belongs at the center of matriarchal culture but has been made taboo and/or relegated to peripheral arenas in modern times; whereas it was inherently sacred, now the (female) body is polarized against “religion.”

Through our scholarly investigation of these important areas—1) the calendric or seasonal cycles of life (and subsequent cosmologies) modeled after the lunar menstrual cycle, 2) the origins of human life going back the ancestral Great Mother in Africa, and 3) the continuous substratum of women’s reality existing behind the patriarchal foreground all over the world—we will undoubtedly be transformed experientially, along with our intellectual understanding. I hope that students will allow time for integration of the course content, perhaps setting aside regular time for reading, contemplation, dreaming, musing, and reflecting on what is read, heard, seen, discussed, and realized during our four-month curriculum. There is a reason why this theoretical framework (“archaeomythology”) has not been readily accepted and integrated by our Western patriarchal culture: It is revolutionary to the core and threatens to upset the very basis of understanding of civilization. The seismic shift that could take place within a person who realizes the corrective truth of this way of looking at history is comparable to a big earthquake, followed by lots of little aftershocks. Second-wave feminists defined this kind of realization as a “big click” or “aha” experience, after which a person’s life is never again the same. Similarly, transformative educators describe this kind of accelerated learning as an “epochal” insight (“sudden, dramatic, reorienting”).

For this reason, I will ask you for short “check-in” reports as you go along in the course. I want to know that you are keeping up with the reading as we go, as well as assimilating lectures and presentations from class, and that you have thought about what you are learning and have reflected on what it means to you at each point. If you feel your foundation shaking, I won’t be surprised—and if immersing in this material catalyzes visionary and spiritual experiences outside of your previous repertoire, that won’t surprise me either. We are entering into the study of our own human evolutionary development—including what I believe to be a recent “detour” into the aberrational “patriarchal experiment” so vividly enacted on the public stage in our own lifetime. And while you are entirely free to disagree with me on all this, if you find that any of this turns out to be true for you, then this realization will most likely rock your foundation in some way. In that case, you will probably begin to understand the force of necessity that compelled Marija Gimbutas to break with the established order of archaeology and prehistory in which she was highly respected, in order to put forth her iconoclastic view of human civilization as unearthed in what she named “Old Europe.” For the last thirty years of her life, as she refined and articulated this radical vision of human evolution, she endured hardline resistance, censure, and ridicule from many of her colleagues. She never lost faith in what she had discovered, and the text we are using in this course, *The Living Goddesses*, is the final expression of her thoughts, ideas, and understandings about what she had uncovered.