

# The Pomegranate

## Reader's Forum

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*Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas.*

*Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition.*

*Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended by one or two issues.*

**Mara Keller writes:**

Dear Pomegranate Readers,

I am grateful for the thoughtful responses to my article defending Marija Gimbutas' theory on the cultural origins of Europe, as I see some progress in the debate of issues around whether or not Europeans have ancestors who were goddess- and god-revering, relatively sex-egalitarian, without exploitative economic class hierarchies, matristic, and relatively peaceful. When I was in college in the 1960s, the very idea of this was dismissed as a joke beneath discussion. Now, while it is faddish in academia to dismiss Gimbutas with ridicule and vehemence, at least some of her opponents are coming forward with detailed criticism, which I welcome. I believe the on-going dialogue is very important. I want to respond to readers' interesting charges of gendered essentialism, incompatibility with postmodern criticism, manipulation of data to fit the theory, and "feel-good" epistemology.

To start, I want to dispel some misconceptions. Neither Gimbutas nor I claim there

were matriarchies in Old Europe where women dominated men and artists produced art for art's sake; nor that because the cultures were relatively peaceful, there was no inter-human violence. Some critics extrapolate her views to the Near and Middle East and inappropriately challenge her theory with data from those other regions. Others grossly oversimplify the complexity of her theory as if they had never read it to begin with. The warfare, fortifications, mass graves, economic stratification and male dominance that coincided with the appearance of Proto-Indo-Europeans in Old Europe did not totally destroy but dominated and subsumed the more peaceful, egalitarian and primarily goddess-revering matrifocal cultures that preceded their arrival. European history can be read as the dynamic conflict and wary, wearying accommodations of these two cultures up until this day.

Gimbutas' interdisciplinary methodology of archaeomythology develops a cogent explanation of the internal coherence of symbols expressed in the material cultural database of Old Europe. While not brand new, her emphasis on combining archaeological science with the disciplines of mythology, history of religion, folklore, linguistics, and other disciplines is a very significant contribution. It came forward in 1974 at a time when the field of archaeology was dominated by the overly empiricist school of New Archaeology that emerged in reaction to what was seen as the overly speculative approach preceding it. The New Archaeology way has paid theoretical lip service to understanding religious ideology, but in practice was far more interested in material culture. Gimbutas not only took the religious life of Old Europe seriously when it was unfashionable to do so, she also took

seriously the flourishing expression of female imagery she thought was best characterized as representing ideas of divinity. Some of her critics seem especially disturbed by the idea of the sacredness of female imagery.

I see Gimbutas' interdisciplinary methodology as more subtle and multi-dimensional than that of the empiricist school, more engendered than that of the cognitive school, and more interested in the roles of women and goddesses as symbolic of sacred feminine energies of the universe than the emerging feminist school of archaeology, where the works of some of her younger feminist colleagues are fortunately taking up the slow and arduous task of engendering their male-dominated discipline. I laud current attempts toward an engendered archaeology that seriously considers the probable mental and spiritual beliefs of European prehistoric societies. However, I want to emphasize that this has only come to the fore in the 1990s. Gimbutas was already pioneering this approach in the 1970s and 1980s (albeit without a formal feminist theory). While her colleagues are revising the history of archaeology, why is Gimbutas not given the credit she deserves for bringing the issue of gender center stage and stimulating the renewed consideration of religion? It seems to me that the engendering of archaeology or the interpretation of religious symbolism is only accorded professional respect if it doesn't ruffle the feathers of putative male superiority.

If honoring "sacred feminine" and "sacred masculine" energies in the universe—as sometimes appear in experiences of sexual love and pleasure or sexual procreation—makes me a gender-essentialist, then I am happy to say I do not object to the

label. I do see significant biological and hormonal differences between men and women, but I do not think they are absolutely dichotomous, eternal or unchanging. Gimbutas discusses the long tradition of bi-valent sculptures in Old Europe combining male and female sexual attributes, and interprets them as the artists' expression of human wholeness. I would like to shift the rather stagnant feminist debate of social constructionism v. essentialism to a more fruitful plane, and assert there is some truth in both views; moreover, the self-aware self plays an important role as a third actor. In addition to on-going debates about "masculine" v. "feminine," nature v. nurture, and biological determinism v. cultural constructionism, there are also the random-chance-darwinism v. absolute-male-god-ism, and scientism v. holy-warrior-mysticism debates. I hope these will become leavened with more nature-based, goddess- and god-balanced, animistic/pantheistic/pan-entheistic spiritual-religious perspectives, along with more scientific human self-consciousness involving intuitive insight and even mystical understanding—to liven up the conversations.

The implications of Gimbutas' theory of European origins are synergistic with reconstructive (not merely deconstructive) postmodern thought. My understanding of postmodern discourse is (to simplify) that on the one hand it wants to challenge, deconstruct, and unfound any and all assumptions or assertions as

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