

Marija Gimbutas 100

A ‘Grande Dame’ of Twentieth-Century Prehistory and Her Connections with Hungarian Archaeology

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Prehistoric archaeologist and cultural anthropologist Marija Gimbutas was born exactly a century ago. Although she left us over a quarter of a century ago (she passed away in 1994), her person and her still controversial ideas continue to attract considerable interest, reflected both by the acclaim and the harsh critique that her work and theories have received and continue to receive. In light of recent archaeogenetic findings and their interpretation, the debate has even intensified over the past few years. Despite the storm of controversy around her, she was undoubtedly one of the most influential archaeologists of her time in both Europe and North America. Her life and work have been remembered on countless occasions and in many studies. However, few of the authors of these recollections appear to have been aware of her long-standing professional and personal relationship with Hungary. Since I had the good fortune of meeting her a few times in Budapest and elsewhere in Europe, this short commemorative piece will also cover these aspects of Marija Gimbutas’ life.

She was born in Vilnius as Marija Birutė Alsekaitė; she started to study archaeology at Kaunas University, partaking in prehistoric excavations from the very beginning of her studies (Figure 1). She continued her studies at Vilnius University until World War II engulfed Lithuania, with all its consequences, which no doubt played a role in her early graduation in 1941. Freshly married and with a baby girl, she managed to flee, still during the war, across Austria to Germany. She defended her PhD thesis at Tübingen University¹ under the Lithuanian version of her maiden and married name: Marija Alsekaitė Gimbutienė. A few years later, when publishing her book, *The Balts*, in London, she changed her name to Gimbutas, the neutral western variant.

1 Gimbutas, “Die Bestattung.”

In 1949, the young family received permission to settle down in the United States. The move to New York marked the first step in Marija Gimbutas' remarkable career in the New World. Soon after their arrival, Gimbutas began working for the Department of Anthropology of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in Boston/Cambridge, where she spent the next fifteen years. Although it must have been difficult to navigate the male-dominated acropolis of the Ivy League, especially for a woman with a



Figure 1 Maria Gimbutas 100
(a stamp from Lithuania)

strong Eastern European accent, her time there has been vividly remembered by later professors like Clifford Charles Lamberg-Karlovsky and Ofer Bar-Yosef, who mentioned her impact on the department even as late as 2008 when I was a Fulbright visiting scholar there for a semester. They particularly highlighted her commitment to combining the Baltic and Eastern European cultural heritage with prehistoric Europe (or, to use the term she coined, Old Europe, covering Southeast Europe and the Carpathian Basin), and with the professional network of the West.

Gimbutas' sky-rocketing career took off when she was invited to California and started to work as professor of European archaeology and Indo-European studies at UCLA. As if this combination was not unusual enough, she also gave courses of lectures on subjects other than the Neolithic and Bronze Age of Europe, such as Eastern European (Baltic and Slavic) mythology. She referred to Lithuanian, her mother tongue, as being the most archaic living Indo-European language, closely related to Sanskrit, ancient Greek, and the language of the Avesta. She drew from ancient mythology and its surviving elements in Lithuanian folklore in her interpretations of the prehistoric world.² This phase of her career marked the beginning of her acclaim as an archaeologist, a researcher *sensu stricto* in the academic world—as well as an imaginative story-teller, poised halfway between hard evidence and fanciful visions based on early beliefs, myths, ritual practices, and religion that survived from the Neolithic to later times.³ But first, let us focus on Marija Gimbutas, the erudite and prodigious prehistoric archaeologist.

2 Gimbutas, *The Balts*.

3 Until as late as the twentieth century AD according to some of her texts: cf. Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, 318–21.

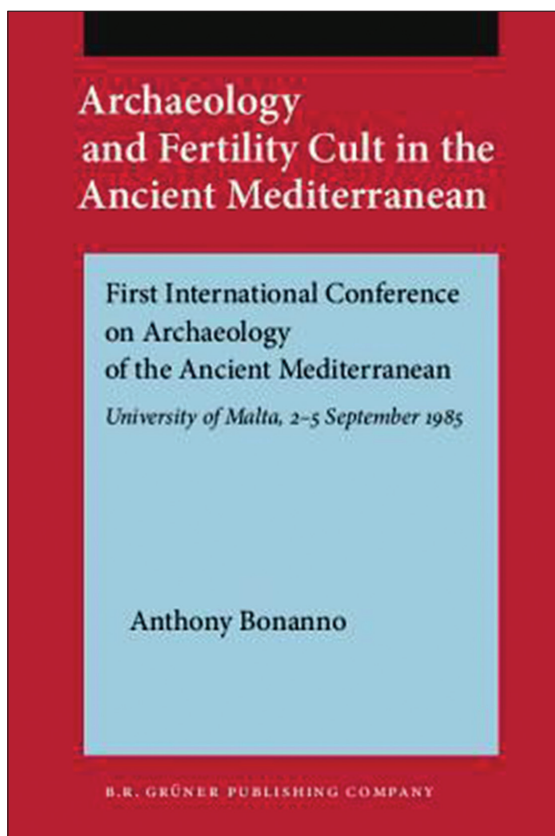


Figure 2 The Malta conference announcement in 1985 (author's private collection)

The first large excavation project followed after discussions with the renowned Yugoslavian archaeologist Alojz Benac, a devoted scholar who represented traditional German-style archaeology and museology in Sarajevo. In the Yugoslavia of the 1960s, the fact that the city was Bosnia's capital was no more than a minor, interesting historical detail. The excavation of the Obre site stemmed from these connections. This was Gimbutas' first encounter with Hungarian specialists: namely, János Nemeskéri and Imre Lengyel, who were responsible for analysing and assessing the human skeletal remains, and Sándor Bökönyi, the first Hungarian archaeozoologist, then based at the Hungarian National Museum, who analysed the faunal assemblages. Gimbutas and Bökönyi had met not long before the excavation at UCLA, where

Bökönyi had spent an academic year on a Ford fellowship. Other meaningful names who played a long-standing role in Marija Gimbutas' network also appeared in the final excavation report: Michael Herity from Dublin, Ernestine Elster from UCLA, as well as Jane and Colin Renfrew. Her visit to the Sitagroi site, whose excavation was directed by Colin Renfrew, led to fruitful cooperation between them—their mutual respect lasted for quite a long time.

The next challenge for Gimbutas was the Anza/Anzabegovo site, located in the southeast of Yugoslavia at the time, whose occupation began around 6500 BC, centuries earlier than Obre, and was promising in terms of potential pre-Neolithic occupation layers, an oft-discussed subject at the time, and a moot point and the subject of heated debate between the Greek Dimitrios Theokharis and the Serbian-German Vladimir Miložičić.⁴ Gimbutas was correct in claiming that there was no archaeological

4 Reingruber, *Die Argissa Magula*, with further literature.

evidence for anything other than a fully sedentary life based on agricultural subsistence. The different views on the ‘preceramic’ Neolithic were undoubtedly one of the many reasons for Miložić’s furious reaction to the monographic publication of the Anza site.⁵ In his long and vituperous book review, he mocked Gimbutas’ excavation method as ‘tourist archaeology’ and even went as far as to claim that the word *Anza* meant ‘dumb’ in Turkish (which hardly seems to be the case).⁶ Her UCLA team at Anza included, among other people, Judith Rasson, who became a long-time and devoted fellow of the Central European University in Budapest, and Charles A. Schwartz, who participated in the excavation of Hungarian Neolithic tell sites such as Öcsöd-Kováshalom and in the 1980s defended his PhD thesis on faunal remains in Budapest.⁷ The effort to involve several experts specialising in lithic, botanical, and faunal assemblages despite the small datasets proved to be a pioneering initiative that eventually became standard practice in later excavation reports. The fieldwork at Anzabegovo ultimately came to an end due to the lack of amicable cooperation with Milutin and Draga Garašanin, but also for logistical reasons. This gave Gimbutas the opportunity to turn her attention to Achilleion in Thessaly. She started the project with Theocharis in the early 1970s: the site yielded not only additional evidence on the Early and Middle Neolithic but also a rich assemblage of female figurines that she later published.⁸ All in all, the variety of excavations, the visits to countless sites, and the discussions with archaeologists based or working in South-East Europe proved to be highly instrumental in shaping her vision of ‘Old Europe.’

An interesting in-depth perspective on the connections between Gimbutas and Hungarian prehistorians can be obtained from her long correspondence with Sándor Bökönyi. The archive of the (former Academic) Institute of Archaeology in Budapest hosts thirty-eight letters written by Bökönyi between 1968 and 1987,⁹ which clearly reveal how intensive their working relations were, and how many faunal assemblages Bökönyi evaluated from her excavations across South-East Europe. This correspondence also offers insight into the broad and impressive academic network Gimbutas created and maintained with Bökönyi, Colin Renfrew, and the Italian Maurizio Tosi, a mutual friend, as well as many other colleagues in the former Yugoslavia. Further connections between Gimbutas and the Hungarian archaeologists of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s are also apparent from the letters. Bökönyi regularly updated Gimbutas about the colleagues she knew: on the death of László Vértes and

5 Gimbutas, ed., *Neolithic Macedonia*.

6 Miložić, “Rezension zu Marija Gimbutas,” 548.

7 Schwartz, “Beginnings of Cattle Keeping.”

8 Gimbutas, Winn, and Shimabuku, *Achilleion*.

9 I would like to express my gratitude to Gabriella Kulcsár, director of the Institute of Archaeology, for kindly providing access to Bökönyi’s correspondence in the Archives of the Institute.



Figure 3 Malta, 1985: Maria Gimbutas and the author (author's private collection)

Gyula Gazdapusztai; on the course of the excavations conducted by Ottó Trogmayer, Nándor Kalicz, and János Makkay; on Ida Kutzián's resignation as the head of the Interdisciplinary Department; and also on his own career. The personal tone of these letters, which also contain events from his private life, reflects how their relationship went beyond work and that Gimbutas was not only a colleague but a close friend, with deep ties to Hungarian archaeology for three decades.

Aside from inviting various specialists to participate in the assessment of the finds from her excavations, Gimbutas was also open to novel methods such as dendrochronology and radiocarbon-based absolute dating. With hindsight, it must have been difficult to advocate these

methods of 'New Archaeology' that came under persistent attack (among others, by Vladimir Milojčić and the Hungarian János Makkay) at a time when the radiocarbon method was still undergoing its birth pangs, lacking the refining techniques that enable precise dating in the twenty-first century. However, her firm belief in combining traditional cultural historical methods with the natural sciences was truly pioneering, pointing forward to a far wider perspective than existed at the time of the 'New (Processual) Archaeology'.

With her profound knowledge of Eastern European sites, archaeological collections, and publications, Gimbutas was an outstanding figure in the Anglo-Saxon academic community. She arrived in Germany and the United States with sound knowledge that she enriched by several study trips to the Soviet Union, making her virtually the only scholar in the West who was personally familiar with the prehistoric finds that fill the museum storerooms of the smallest towns. Moreover, she was able to read all the journal articles and small excavation reports published in Russian, Belarussian, Ukrainian and the Baltic languages. These capabilities were coupled with her unique visual memory: she was able to describe, for example, the decoration of figurines and models of houses down to the tiniest detail, even many years

after onsite visits—I greatly enjoyed our talks about inaccessible finds that she brought alive through her descriptions. She published comprehensive overviews of Eastern European prehistory in which she made this barely accessible knowledge available to others: her first monograph¹⁰ was published during her years at Harvard; a few years later, she wrote her next book.¹¹

This overarching knowledge of both the Central and the Eastern European Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Bronze Age coupled with her linguistic expertise about Lithuanian shaped her interest in the origin of the Proto-Indo-European population: she linked the emergence of these groups, which established the Germanic, Slavic, Baltic and Celtic languages in Europe, to the massive westward migration of the Kurgan people from the southern Russian and Ukrainian steppe regions. The kurgans are burial mounds, representing a mortuary custom that mainly existed among the local communities. Her studies on the Eastern European Corded Ware culture (*Schnurkeramik*) also fit into this concept. At UCLA, she held lecture courses on the above themes and was also one of the founding editors of the *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, a special issue of which featured all her studies on the Kurgan theory after her death, collected and edited by two of her former students.¹²

Newly analysed aDNA samples,¹³ which appear to have fully vindicated Gimbutas' Kurgan theory, evoked opposing reactions among the archaeologists of the early twenty-first century: some saw the genetic results as finally doing justice to Kurgan theory, no matter how late in coming, while others fiercely rejected the implications of the DNA analyses and hurled accusations of 'diffusionism' and called them 'Gimbutas kind of rubbish' (for example, in the EAA 2013 section in Pilsen). Recent discussions have shed more light on the differences between the genetic

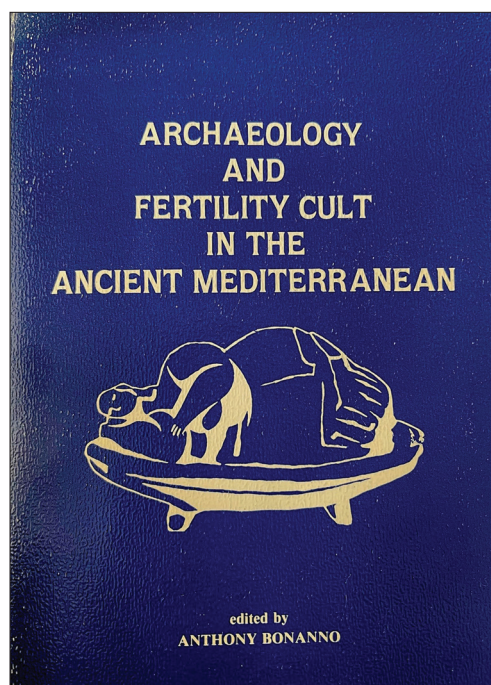


Figure 4 The publication of the conference, in Amsterdam (author)

10 Gimbutas, *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe*.

11 Gimbutas, *Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*.

12 Gimbutas, Dexter, and Jones-Bley, eds, *The Kurgan Culture*.

13 Haak et al., "Massive Migration from the Steppe."

record, providing data on biological roots, but contributing little to issues of culture and group identity or Gimbutas' Kurgan invasion theory, which she believed was connected with the decline of Old Europe ruled by the Great Goddess.

At this point, we have arrived at Marija Gimbutas' other *persona* that existed alongside the rigorous prehistoric archaeologist; the same person who created a self-contained pantheon filled with divine beings, mainly female goddesses, represented by the great variety of small figurines in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic of Old Europe. The notion of Old Europe itself was principally based on her rich field experience in Neolithic Southeast Europe. Her first detailed study on this pantheon was *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*,¹⁴ in the book's next edition, the title was reversed as *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*,¹⁵ and she continued to publish increasingly more elaborate and imaginative presentations of the many forms of the omnipotent Great Goddess. The archaeological finds were vested with her interpretative fantasy and immense knowledge of cultural anthropology and folklore. In her descriptions of various aspects of the Great Goddess, such as the Bird Goddess or the Snake Goddess, she did not follow the strict ladder of inferences demanded by the discipline. The Pantheon, as well as the peaceful, agricultural, flourishing, woman-ruled, and woman-controlled Neolithic and Chalcolithic world that according to Gimbutas was not marred by war or conflict, was nothing short of a paradise. This paradise was lost with the arrival of the mobile, pastoral, male-controlled groups of the Kurgan culture which wielded metal weapons and worshipped an aggressive male god, and who conquered and brought an end to the peaceful millennia of Old Europe and introduced patriarchal societies.

It becomes apparent that there is an immense gap between Marija Gimbutas the erudite scholar with her sharp mind and argumentation on East European prehistory, and the story-teller who elaborated on the pantheon of Old Europe, whose powerful vision simply had to be believed as it was. She consistently ignored male or, more often, sexless Neolithic figurines; she was to all appearances oblivious of fortified settlements, human and animal sacrifices, and signs of conflict. In contrast to her views, social inequality has been attested at many sites, principally mortuary ones: suffice it here to merely reference the Varna burials with their riches of gold jewellery and other precious grave goods accorded to the chosen ones within the community.

Perhaps the most expressive way of describing this epistemology can be found in the last, concluding chapter on the continuity and transformations of the Goddess in the Indo-European and Christian eras in her book, *The Civilisation of the Goddess*:

14 Gimbutas, *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*.

15 Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*.

“The dethronement of this truly formidable goddess [...] is marked by blood and is the greatest shame of the Christian Church. [...] This was the beginning of the dangerous convulsion of androcratic rule which [...] reached the peak in Stalin’s East Europe”.¹⁶

The undertones of a ‘paradise lost’ can certainly be felt in this text, underscoring a point made by Sarunas Milisauskas, who explained the pantheon as partly originating from Gimbutas’ roots in ancient Baltic myths.¹⁷

The conference *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean* held in Malta in September 1985 was a milestone in several respects (Figures 2–4). Organised by Anthony Bonanno and hosted by the University of Malta in Valletta, the conference was attended by some one hundred participants, including linguists, anthropologists, and archaeologists, mainly from the United States, but also from several European and African countries. Among them were Colin Renfrew and Marija Gimbutas. By that time, her *The Goddesses and Gods* book had become widely known and was both admired and the target of criticism. Gimbutas was accompanied and surrounded by a large group of feminists, mainly from California, who followed a special esoteric ‘New Age’ religion with the ancient Great Goddess at its centre. These women assisted her and worshipped her, much like a high priestess would be idolised. ‘Skeptics’ were also present, and given that the latter included all the Neolithic specialists, the divide appeared to be between professionals and amateurs. Colin Renfrew delivered his introductory keynote lecture in this rather heated atmosphere: he emphatically aligned himself with Marija Gimbutas, the esteemed and knowledgeable prehistorian, the great visionary, the expert on Eastern European archaeological heritage. Renfrew’s words clearly had a major impact on the audience.¹⁸

In the aftermath of the Malta conference, Gimbutas travelled through Hungary a few times, usually when returning from Greece. On these occasions, first at the request of Sándor Bökönyi, for whom I was working as an assistant and PhD student at the time, and later in my own right, I showed her some of the highlights of Budapest. After she heard about the theme of my dissertation, Neolithic figurines in their archaeological context, she began to increasingly concentrate on this area. Later, based on the PhD I defended, she invited me to the second Indo-European conference she was organising. It was planned to be held in Dubrovnik, but due to the conflict unfolding in Yugoslavia at that time she accepted the invitation of Michael

16 Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, 319.

17 Milisauskas, *European Prehistory*.

18 Cp. Renfrew’s study in the conference volume: Renfrew, “The Prehistoric Maltese Achievement,” 121.



Figure 5 An ultimate photo from Newgrange, 1989 (M. Everson, author's copy)

uments in the Boyne Valley, but I often had to step aside when people wanted to take a photo of her. She suddenly turned to me and said that they were taking the pictures because they thought that they could well be the last photos of her (Figure 5). This was our last meeting. She died after a long-lasting illness in 1994.

Marija Gimbutas came to be an icon of feminist archaeology even within her lifetime and remained one after her passing away, not so much because she was a female scholar, but mainly owing to her 'Great Goddess' theory. Feminist archaeologists, who have been critical both of male dominance and modern western cognition and norms among archaeologists, and have also challenged mainstream views on gender roles and female agency in prehistory, found these to have been major issues in the life and work of Gimbutas. She herself might not have been a feminist archaeologist, but as has been alluded to above, she was perfect for being made into a carefully constructed and symbolic icon. Her views were criticised,²⁰ as was her vision of a stable world with rigid gender roles.²¹ Yet, ultimately, she was a scholar with an unrivalled knowledge of prehistory, despite her controversial views on 'Old

Herity, her old colleague, to move it to Dublin in September 1989. Although a major portion of the presentations were on Indo-European linguistics, the tension between proponents of the arguments for and against Gimbutas' Kurgan theory was palpable. She discussed new finds and her interpretation regarding their place in the Great Goddess pantheon with me, but I could clearly sense her disappointment when I was reluctant to agree. Our silent disagreement took place in a similar way to the more significant debates between Gimbutas and Ernestine Elster, who wrote that she eventually chose flint techniques as the theme of her PhD to avoid a confrontation with Gimbutas, given their different opinions.¹⁹

We talked a lot during an excursion to Newgrange and other megalithic monuments

19 Elster, "Marija Gimbutas."

20 See e.g. Tringham, "The Mesolithic of Southeastern Europe"; Meskell, "Goddesses, Gimbutas."

21 Fagan, "A Sexist View on Prehistory."

Europe' and her fascinating but initially rejected theory on the invasion of Indo-European-speaking groups from the east. A great mind, whose mistakes nevertheless inspired research. Above all, she was a warm and emotional person, always with a friendly smile on her face and a never-fading curiosity.

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