


# The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory

Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future

"Fascinating. . . Eller carefully clips every thread from which this matriarchal myth is woven."

—NATALIE ANGIER, *The New York Times Book Review*



Cynthia Eller

Over the last few months, this untaught history had become a lump in my throat, a forgotten piece of my female heart that had begun to beat again. Now here in the stone circle I felt it even more, like a sad, sad sweetness, like a sorrow and a hope melded into one.

—Sue Monk Kidd

The real political question . . . as old as political philosophy . . . [is] when we should endorse the ennobling lie. . . . We . . . need to show not that . . . [these lies] are falsehoods but [that] they are useless falsehoods at best or—at worst—dangerous ones.

—Kwame Anthony Appiah

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## CHAPTER I

# Meeting Matriarchy

Once while I was browsing through *On the Issues*, a feminist magazine, I happened upon an advertisement for a T-shirt: "I Survived Five-Thousand Years of Patriarchal Hierarchies," it proclaimed (see Fig. 1. This same birthday for patriarchy, five thousand years in the past, was mentioned several times in a lecture I attended in 1992 in New York City. I heard this number very frequently in the late 1980s and early 1990s; I was researching the feminist spirituality movement, and five thousand is the most common age spiritual feminists assign to "the patriarchy." Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to hear it yet again. But I was: the speaker was Gloria Steinem, and I hadn't figured her for a partisan of this theory.

As I later learned, Steinem had been speculating about the origins of the patriarchy as early as 1972, when she told the readers of *Wonder Woman* this story:

Once upon a time, the many cultures of this world were all part of the gynocratic age. Paternity had not yet been discovered, and it was thought . . . that women bore fruit like trees—when they were ripe. Childbirth was mysterious. It was vital. And it was envied. Women were worshipped because of it, were considered superior because of it. . . . Men were on the periphery—an interchangeable body of workers for, and worshippers of, the female center, the principle of life.

The discovery of paternity, of sexual cause and childbirth effect, was as cataclysmic for society as, say, the discovery of fire or the shattering of the atom. Gradually, the idea of male ownership of children took hold. . . .

Gynocracy also suffered from the periodic invasions of nomadic

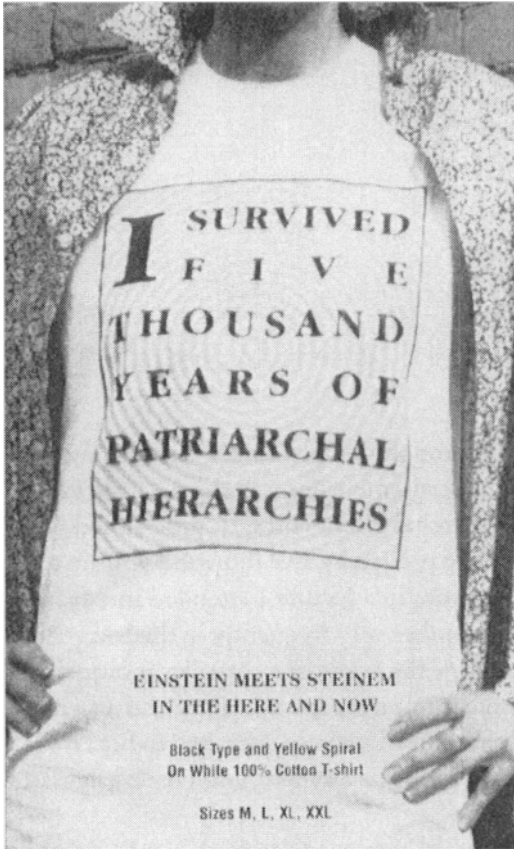


FIG. I. I  
T-shirt dating the  
advent of patriarchy to  
3000 BCE.

tribes. . . . The conflict between the hunters and the growers was really the conflict between male-dominated and female-dominated cultures.

. . . women gradually lost their freedom, mystery, and superior position. For five thousand years or more, the gynocratic age had flowered in peace and productivity. Slowly, in varying stages and in different parts of the world, the social order was painfully reversed. Women became the underclass, marked by their visible differences.'

In 1972, Steinem was a voice in the wilderness with her talk of a past gynocratic age; only a handful of feminists had even broached the topic. The second wave of feminism was young then, but for most feminists the patriarchy was old, unimaginably old.

Too old, some would say. The patriarchy is younger now, thanks to growing feminist acceptance of the idea that human society

was matriarchal—or at least "woman-centered" and goddess-worshipping—from the Paleolithic era, 1.5 to 2 million years ago, until sometime around 3000 BCE. There are almost as many versions of this story as there are storytellers, but these are its basic contours:

- In a time before written records, society was centered around women. Women were revered for their mysterious life-giving powers, honored as incarnations and priestesses of the great goddess. They reared their children to carry on their line, created both art and technology, and made important decisions for their communities.
- Then a great transformation occurred—whether through a sudden cataclysm or a long, drawn-out sea change—and society was thereafter dominated by men. This is the culture and the mindset that we know as "patriarchy," and in which we live today.
- What the future holds is not determined, and indeed depends most heavily on the actions that we take now: particularly as we become aware of our true history. But the pervasive hope is that the future will bring a time of peace, ecological balance, and harmony between the sexes, with women either recovering their past ascendancy, or at last establishing a truly egalitarian society under the aegis of the goddess.

Not everyone who discusses this theory believes that the history of human social life on Earth happened this way. There is substantial dissension. But the story is circulating widely. It is a tale that is told in Sunday school classrooms, at academic conferences, at neopagan festivals, on network television, at feminist political action meetings, and in the pages of everything from populist feminist works to children's books to archaeological tomes. For those with ears to hear it, the noise the theory of matriarchal prehistory makes as we move into a new millennium is deafening.

My first encounter with the theory that prehistory was matriarchal came in 1979 in a class titled "Minoan and Mycenaean Greece." While on site at Knossos, our professor—an archaeologist with the American School of Classical Studies in Athens—noted that the artifactual evidence on the island of Crete pointed toward Minoan society being matriarchal. I don't recall much of what he said in defense of this assertion or what he meant by "matriarchal." All of this is overshadowed in my memory by the reaction of the other members of the class to the professor's statement: they laughed. Some of them ner-

vously, some derisively. One or two expressed doubt. The general sentiment went something like this: "As if women would ever have run things, could ever have run things . . . and if they did, men surely had to put an end to it!" And, as my classmates gleefully noted, men did put an end to it, for it was a matter of historical record, they said, that the civilization of Minoan Crete was displaced by the apparently patriarchal Mycenaeans.

There were only a dozen or so of us there, ranging in age from teens to forties—Greeks, Turks, expatriate Americans—about evenly divided between women and men. The men's reactions held center stage (as men's reactions in college classes tended to do in 1979). I don't know what the other women in the class were thinking; they either laughed along with the men or said nothing. I felt the whole discussion amounted to cruel teasing of the playground variety, and I was annoyed with the professor for bringing it up and then letting it degenerate from archaeological observation to cheap joke. I left that interaction thinking, "Matriarchal? So what?" If a lot of snickering was all that prehistoric matriarchies could get me, who needed them?

Having thus washed my hands of the theory of prehistoric matriarchy, I didn't encounter it again until the early 90s, when I was in graduate school doing research on feminist goddess-worship. I heard the theory constantly then, from everyone I interviewed, and in virtually every book I read that came out of the feminist spirituality movement. This matriarchy was no Cretan peculiarity, but a worldwide phenomenon that stretched back through prehistory to the very origins of the human race. These "matriarchies"—often called by other names—were not crude reversals of patriarchal power, but models of peace, plenty, harmony with nature, and, significantly, sex egalitarianism.

There was an answer here to my late adolescent question, "Matriarchal? So what?"—a thoroughly reasoned and passionately felt answer. Far from meaning nothing, the existence of prehistoric matriarchies meant everything to the women I met through my study of feminist spirituality. In both conversation and literature, I heard the evangelical tone of the converted: the theory of prehistoric matriarchy gave these individuals an understanding of how we came to this juncture in human history and what we could hope for in the future. It underwrote their politics, their ritual, their theology (or understanding of the goddess), and indeed, their entire worldview.

As a student of religion, I was fascinated with this theory, with its power to explain history, to set a feminist and ecological ethical agenda, and incredibly, to change lives. Of course I knew theoretically that this is precisely what myths do—and this narrative of matriarchal utopia and patriarchal takeover was surely a myth, at least in the scholarly sense: it was a tale told repeatedly and reverently, explaining things (namely, the origin of sexism) otherwise thought to be painfully inexplicable. But to see a myth developing and gaining ground before my own eyes—and more significantly, in my own peer group—was a revelation to me. Here was a myth that, however recently created, wielded tremendous psychological and spiritual power.

My phenomenological fascination with what I came to think of as "the myth of matriarchal prehistory" was sincere, and at times dominated my thinking. But it was accompanied by other, multiple fascinations. To begin with, once the memory of the derisive laughter at Knossos faded, I was intrigued with the idea of female rule or female "centeredness" in society. It was a reversal that had a sweet taste of power and revenge. More positively, it allowed me to imagine myself and other women as people whose biological sex did not immediately make the idea of their leadership, creativity, or autonomy either ridiculous or suspect. It provided a vocabulary for dreaming of utopia, and a license to claim that it was not mere fantasy, but a dream rooted in an ancient reality.

In other words, I had no trouble appreciating the myth's appeal. Except for one small problem—and one much larger problem—I might now be writing a book titled *Matriarchal Prehistory: Our Glorious Past and Our Hope for the Future*. But if I was intrigued with the newness and power of the myth, and with its bold gender reversals, I was at least as impressed by the fact that anyone took it seriously as history. Poking holes in the "evidence" for this myth was, to rely on cliché, like shooting fish in a barrel. After a long day of research in the library, I could go out with friends and entertain them with the latest argument I'd read for matriarchal prehistory, made up entirely—I pointed out—of a highly ideological reading of a couple of prehistoric artifacts accompanied by some dubious anthropology, perhaps a little astrology, and a fatuous premise . . . or two or three.

When I picked up my research on feminist spirituality again in the late 1980s and early 1990s,<sup>2</sup> I got to know many women involved in



the movement, and I felt largely sympathetic toward their struggles to create a more female-friendly religion. But I continued to be appalled by the sheer credulousness they demonstrated toward their very dubious version of what happened in Western prehistory. The evidence available to us regarding gender relations in prehistory is sketchy and ambiguous, and always subject to the interpretation of biased individuals. But even with these limitations, what evidence we *do* have from prehistory cannot support the weight laid upon it by the matriarchal thesis. Theoretically, prehistory could have been matriarchal, but it probably wasn't, and nothing offered up in support of the matriarchal thesis is especially persuasive.

However, a myth does not need to be true—or even necessarily be *believed* to be true—to be powerful, to make a difference in how people think and live, and in what people value. Yet even as I tried to put aside the question of the myth's historicity, I remained uncomfortable with it. It exerted a magnetic appeal for me, but an even stronger magnetic repulsion. Eventually I had to admit that something was behind my constant bickering about the myth's historicity, something more than a lofty notion of intellectual honesty and the integrity of historical method. For certainly there are other myths that I have never felt driven to dispute: White lotus flowers blossomed in the footsteps of the newly born Shakyamuni? Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments carved into two stone tablets? Personally, I doubt that either of these things happened, but I would never waste my breath arguing these points with the faithful. Truth claims seem beside the point to me: what matters is why the story is told, the uses to which it is put and by whom.

I have been a close observer of the myth of matriarchal prehistory for fifteen years now and have watched as it has moved from its somewhat parochial home in the feminist spirituality movement out into the feminist and cultural mainstream. But I haven't been able to cheer at the myth's increasing acceptance. My irritation with the historical claims made by the myth's partisans masks a deeper discontent with the myth's assumptions. There is a theory of sex and gender embedded in the myth of matriarchal prehistory, and it is neither original nor revolutionary. Women are defined quite narrowly as those who give birth and nurture, who identify themselves in terms of their relationships, and who are closely allied with the body, nature, and sex

usually for unavoidable reasons of their biological makeup. This image of women is drastically revalued in feminist matriarchal myth, such that it is not a mark of shame or subordination, but of pride and power. But this image is nevertheless quite conventional and, at least up until now, it has done an excellent job of serving patriarchal interests.

Indeed, the myth of matriarchal prehistory is not a feminist creation, in spite of the aggressively feminist spin it has carried over the past twenty-five years. Since the myth was revived from classical Greek sources in 1861 by Johann Jakob Bachofen, it has had—at best—a very mixed record where feminism is concerned. The majority of men who championed the myth of matriarchal prehistory during its first century (and they have mostly been men) have regarded patriarchy as an evolutionary advance over prehistoric matriarchies, in spite of some lingering nostalgia for women's equality or beneficent rule.<sup>1</sup> Feminists of the latter half of the twentieth century are not the first to find in the myth of matriarchal prehistory a manifesto for feminist social change, but this has not been the dominant meaning attached to the myth of matriarchal prehistory, only the most recent.

Though there is nothing inherently feminist in matriarchal myth, this is no reason to disqualify it for feminist purposes. If the myth now functions in a feminist way, its antifeminist past can become merely a curious historical footnote. And it *does* function in a feminist way now, at least at a psychological level: there are ample testimonies to that. Many women—and some men too—have experienced the story of our matriarchal past as profoundly empowering, and as a firm foundation from which to call for, and believe in, a better future for us all.

Why then take the time and trouble to critique this myth, especially since it means running the risk of splitting feminist ranks, which are thin enough as it is? Simply put, it is my feminist movement too, and when I see it going down a road which, however inviting, looks like the wrong way to me, I feel an obligation to speak up. Whatever positive effects this myth has on individual women, they must be balanced against the historical and archaeological evidence the myth ignores or misinterprets and the sexist assumptions it leaves undisturbed. The myth of matriarchal prehistory postures as "documented fact," as "to date the most scientifically plausible account of

the available information." <sup>a</sup> These claims can be—and will be here—shown to be false. Relying on matriarchal myth in the face of the evidence that challenges its veracity leaves feminists open to charges of vacuousness and irrelevance that we cannot afford to court. And the gendered stereotypes upon which matriarchal myth rests persistently work to flatten out differences among women; to exaggerate differences between women and men; and to hand women an identity that is symbolic, timeless, and archetypal, instead of giving them the freedom to craft identities that suit their individual temperaments, skills, preferences, and moral and political commitments.

In the course of my critique of feminist matriarchal myth, I do not intend to offer a substitute account of what happened between women and men in prehistoric times, or to determine whether patriarchy is a human universal or a recent historical phenomenon. These are questions that are hard to escape—feminist matriarchal myth was created largely in response to them—and intriguing to speculate upon. But the stories we spin out and the evidence we amass about the origins of sexism are fundamentally academic. They are not capable of telling us whether or how we might put an end to sexism. As I argue at the end of this book, these are moral and political questions; not scientific or historical ones.

The enemies of feminism have long posed issues of patriarchy and sexism in pseudoscientific and historical terms. It is not in feminist interests to join them at this game, especially when it is so (relatively) easy to undermine the ground rules. We know enough about biological sex differences to know that they are neither so striking nor so uniform that we either need to or ought to make our policy decisions in reference to them. And we know that cultures worldwide have demonstrated tremendous variability in constructing and regulating gender, indicating that we have significant freedom in making our own choices about what gender will mean for us. Certainly recent history, both technological and social, proves that innovation is possible: we are not forever condemned to find our future in our past. Discovering—or more to the point, inventing—prehistoric ages in which women and men lived in harmony and equality is a burden that feminists need not, and should not bear. Clinging to shopworn notions of gender and promoting a demonstrably fictional past can only hurt us over the long run as we work to create a future that helps all women, children, and men flourish.

In spite of overwhelming drawbacks, the myth of matriarchal prehistory continues to thrive. Any adequate critique of this myth must be based on a proper understanding of it: who promotes it and what they stand to gain by doing so; how it has evolved and where and how it is being disseminated; and exactly what this story claims for our past and our future. It is to this descriptive task that the next two chapters are devoted.



## CHAPTER 2

# Popularizing the Past

Many different types of women are attracted to the idea that prehistoric societies were goddess-worshipping and woman-honoring. Among the myth's adherents are academics and artists, career-minded women and stay-at-home moms, longtime feminists and young women just beginning to entertain the idea that they are living in a man's world. Generalizations one might want to make about feminist matriarchalists almost always fail: most are white, but not all; most are middle class, but some are working class or poor; many are well educated, but some are not; most were raised as Christians, but then most Americans are. They are married, single, lesbian, bisexual, and straight, with no one status dominating. The way in which the myth of matriarchal prehistory extols motherhood is clearly attractive to mothers of young children who feel they do not get the respect they deserve,' but then some of the myth's most vocal partisans are childless. Many feminist matriarchalists are religiously inclined, especially those who are affiliated with the feminist spirituality movement, where feminist matriarchal myth first came to be articulated in the early 1970s. But other feminist matriarchalists are quite secular: they see religion playing a key role in the past but they themselves remain religiously unaffiliated and spiritually inactive. Demographically, feminist matriarchalists run the gamut. Still, it is fair to say that the myth is most at home in white, middle-class, well-educated circles, and particularly among women who are interested in religion and spirituality.

Matriarchal myth is primarily a Western phenomenon, most popular in the United States, England, Germany, and, to a lesser extent,

Italy. The story itself is almost always centered on European prehistory, but there are exceptions: for example, Riane Eisler has recently inspired a search for matriarchal prehistory in China, which has resulted in the publication of a substantial anthology titled *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture*.'

This study is based almost entirely on texts produced by those who champion the myth of matriarchal prehistory. This is a rich and varied literature ranging from glossy art books to novels to poetry, and including paintings, conference talks, performance art, music, and even email. In general, I make no distinction between the tenured professor examining cuneiform tablets, the novelist spinning out imaginative fantasies of prehistoric Europe, and the New Age practitioner writing impassioned letters to spiritual feminist publications about her past lives as a priestess in Neolithic Europe. Once one is immersed in this literature, it becomes clear that the distinctions between these women are not so great as they at first seem. Underneath their variety lies a clear and consistent narrative that no amount of archaeological research, fictional imagination, or recovery of past lives changes very much. Indeed, what substantive differences there are between feminist matriarchalists rarely cause much internal dispute. Those who enunciate the most peculiar theories—that men evolved from extraterrestrials or that human females reproduced parthenogenetically for most of the history of the species—are more often the object of benign neglect than vitriolic attack. The only reason then that I give greater authority to one voice over another is because it best captures the most popular version of feminist matriarchal myth, not because the professional status of the author demands any special respect.

There are undoubted differences in the importance this story has for the various women who tell it. Because this book relies on those who invest significant time in telling the myth of matriarchal prehistory in prose, poetry, art, or song, it focuses mainly on the myth's enthusiasts: women whose experiences with matriarchal myth have been deep and profound, sometimes leading them to rethink their most basic life choices, if not to spend years studying archaeological artifacts and ancient Sumerian texts. Feminist matriarchal myth reaches well beyond the inner circle of its devotees, however. This more mainstream audience holds the myth a good deal more lightly,

though at the same time giving it a cultural prominence it would not otherwise have.

None of the women who champion this version of Western history call themselves "feminist matriarchalists," and none refer to the story they tell as "the myth of matriarchal prehistory." The terms "feminist" and "prehistory" would probably not raise many eyebrows, but "matriarchy" and "myth" are much more controversial.

The term matriarchy has had a tortured history. As classicist Eva Cantarella points out, those using the term have meant everything from the political rule of women to matrilineal marriage to the worship of female divinities. And that is just those who have *used* the term. Those who have been *accused* of talking about "matriarchy" cut an even wider swath. Partisans of the myth usually resist the term because of its connotations of "rule by women"—a mirror image of patriarchy. As Mary Daly puts it succinctly, matriarchy "was not patriarchy spelled with an 'm.'" Most feminist matriarchalists are quick to explain that matriarchy should be understood instead as "the ascendancy of the Mother's way," or as "a realm where female things are valued and where power is exerted in non-possessive, noncontrolling, and organic ways that are harmonious with nature."

Substitute terms are frequently offered ("gylany," "gynocracy," "matricentric," "gynocentric," "matristic," "gynolatric," "partnership," "gynosociety," and "matrifocal" have all been proposed), and they are intended to capture various shades of meaning: that prehistory was a time when mothers were the hub of society; or that women were powerful whether or not they had children; or that women and men shared power. But none of these substitute terms has attained common currency. The term prepatriarchal has been advanced recently,<sup>4</sup> but it is too vague to capture the specificity of the prehistoric societies feminist matriarchalists imagine. These societies are not just whatever happened to exist before patriarchy arrived on the scene. Even if sexually egalitarian, they are said to have been characterized by strongly differentiated sex roles. And however "female" and "male," "feminine" and "masculine" are defined for prehistoric societies, whatever is female or feminine has pride of place. A few partisans of matriarchal myth have complained about the imprecision and unfortunate connotations of the term "matriarchy" but have used it anyway, and I follow their lead here.' "Matriarchal" can be thought of

then as a shorthand description for any society in which women's power is equal or superior to men's and in which the culture centers around values and life events described as "feminine."

The term myth is even more difficult to reinterpret to suit feminist matriarchalists' self-understandings. Probably the most commonly intended meaning of "myth," at least when it is used casually, is "not true." (For example, if a women's magazine promises on its cover to reveal "six myths about male sexuality," what you will learn when you look inside is that what you thought you knew about male sexuality is false.) But the theory that prehistory was matriarchal and goddess-worshipping is presented as fact, not fiction. It is only omitted from standard history texts, feminist matriarchalists say, because academics are trapped in a patriarchal worldview, suffering the consequences of a huge cover-up of matriarchy that started with the patriarchal revolution and has continued right up to the present.' Given these views, it would seem more accurate to call matriarchal prehistory a "hypothesis" or "theory." However, some feminist matriarchalists back away from the stronger truth claims suggested by these terms. As Anne Carson remarks, "Let it be myth then. . . . Whether the Golden Age of Matriarchy ever existed in history is not important: what is important is that the myth exists *now*, that there is a story being passed from woman to woman, from mother to daughter, of a time in which we were strong and free and could see ourselves in the Divine, when we lived in dignity and in peace."

This suggests another layer to feminist matriarchal thought: that the story is sufficiently important to some feminists that they are unwilling to discard it simply because its status as historical truth is insecure. Mara Lynn Keller illustrates this by laying out the matriarchalist vision of prehistory and an "androcratic" one and asking, "which would be the more truthful, reliable, morally valuable and wise theory to choose?" "Truth" is thus only one consideration among others. Besides, "metaphoric truth," says Donna Wilshire, which "speaks to such a deep core of our common humanity and the meaning of life" is "more *real than factual reality* [her emphasis]."

In other words, feminist matriarchalists know how badly they want their myth to be true—badly enough that they are willing to continue to believe it (or at least make use of it) even if the evidence does not really support it. But they also typically believe that it *is* true,



and that they don't need to engage in any deceit to promote it as such.' This is a level of historical truth that is very characteristic of myth in the contemporary West. For us, myth seems to work best if we can at least provisionally believe it to be true. For example, the vast majority of practicing Christians believe that a man named Jesus lived, was crucified by the Roman authorities, and rose from the dead. Most Christians do not demand historical documentation of these events because it is the promises the Passion narrative makes about God's forgiving love that make the story valuable. But the story *could* be historically true, and those who find it useful generally believe it to be so, even if they must resort to faith rather than evidence. Similarly, the majority of practicing Jews, while not necessarily swearing by every boil and frog and locust in the Exodus story, nevertheless believe that the Jewish people were in captivity in Egypt and were led out by Moses into their own land. This story is generally told to illustrate the steadfastness of God's covenant with the Jewish people—not to establish the factual nature of this historic migration. But it *could* be true, and again, it is believed to be true by most of those who relate the story.

Going on these examples, contemporary myths need not have the sort of ontological certainty that we assign to things like gravity or mathematical formulae, but to carry the sort of psychic weight they are asked to bear in people's lives, they must be, at the least, plausible.

In theory, the golden era of prehistoric matriarchy may have happened just as feminist matriarchalists say. The scattered remains left to us from prehistoric times are open to a variety of interpretations, and there is simply no evidence that can *definitively* prove the matriarchal hypothesis wrong. But is the myth of matriarchal prehistory plausible to those not already ardently hoping that it is true? I will argue that it is not. It does not represent historical truth; it is not a story built or argued from solid evidence, and it presents a scenario for prehistory that, if not demonstrably false, is at least highly unlikely. But to stop at this is to miss a much deeper truth about the *kind* of story that feminist matriarchalists are constructing. Scholars of religion are more apt to think of myths as stories that impart profoundly value-laden messages in dense, image-rich language. And by this definition too, the myth of matriarchal prehistory is myth. It is a narrative designed to grasp hold of an audience's consciousness and thereby fulfill certain social and psychological functions: in this case, feminist functions.'

## FEMINIST FUNCTIONS OF MATRIARCHAL MYTH

Women who respond enthusiastically to matriarchal myth do so at least in part because it offers them a new, vastly improved self-image. It teaches them about their "innate goodness," their "own natural majesty." It has, says Charlene Spretnak, "reframed our conceptualization of femaleness" and given us "the gift of ourselves." This basic message of female self-respect is brought home again and again in feminist matriarchalist art and literature. Martha Ann and Dorothy Myers Imel set it out as the dedication to their massive reference work, *Goddesses in World Mythology*:

*To all the women in the world who were unaware of their heritage.  
You are descended from a long line of sacred females  
who have been respected and honored for thousands of years.*

*Remember and make it so.'*

In encountering the goddess of prehistoric times, women are said to be given "imagery and permission to see the divine within . . . as a woman."<sup>13</sup>

This has been a key function of feminist matriarchal myth from the outset: to redeem and revalue "the feminine," a task that seemed particularly timely since liberal feminism, associated with the early women's liberation movement of the 1960s, spared little attention for the special qualities of women. Liberal feminism focused on winning women the same rights that men were already believed to have: to pursue and succeed within a full range of careers, to combine work with childrearing, to have full legal rights; in short, to be recognized as citizens of the democratic state, heirs to the promise of equal opportunity for all. For many feminists, this agenda did not go nearly far enough. And so deeper analyses were ventured from at least two quarters: radical feminism and cultural feminism."

Radical feminists, many of them fresh from the male-dominated New Left movements of the 1960s, were dismayed at the prospect of women attempting to assume roles equal to men's within late industrial capitalism. This, in their thinking, would merely lend more support to an economy and government that was poisoned at its roots, not only in terms of race and class—issues with which the New Left was already engaged—but in terms of sex. What emerged from radi-

cal feminist analyses was the assertion that hatred, exploitation, and brutalization of women were not mere epiphenomena in patriarchal capitalist society—easily cured by admitting women into the ranks of the powerful—but were the very foundations upon which the system was built. Radical feminists like Ti-Grace Atkinson, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, Andrea Dworkin, and Mary Daly zeroed in on issues of misogyny and sexual violence as the bottom line of patriarchal society and counseled that a feminist revolution could never be won simply by putting women in factory lines and boardrooms alongside men.

In the course of making this analysis, radical feminists reflected at length on how women were placed in society vis-a-vis men, and how specifically female roles in sex and reproduction were implicated in and incorporated into structures of male dominance. But it was cultural feminists who turned most forcefully to the question of who women *are*. Like radical feminists, cultural feminists were appalled at the thought of women inadvertently buying into patriarchal culture by taking on men's traditional roles. But the key source of their distress was the fear that women would be distanced from their true, female selves. The consequences of this loss were not only personal, but deeply communal, and therefore political. Femininity, traditionally defined, was simply *better* than masculinity. It was the morally preferable alternative to be followed in creating a new social order. And women, as the carriers—whether by biology or history or both—of these "feminine" values, had a vital role to play in forging a more peaceful, harmonious, beneficent world.'

Feminist matriarchalists have their deepest kinship with cultural feminism (also called "difference feminism" owing to its analytical reliance on differences between women and men). In the tradition of first-wave feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (who all also referred to a past age of gynocentrism), feminist matriarchalists believe that the values and dispositions associated with women—if not women themselves—need to play a key role in reforming society.' Much of feminist matriarchal myth is given over to identifying and celebrating "the feminine" and searching for ways in which women can more fully be it and model it for society. Prominent among the arenas where "feminine" values are supposed to restore proper balance is environmental policy. Like other ecofeminists (some of whom, it must be noted, are

hostile to matriarchal myth), feminist matriarchalists draw parallels between the treatment of women and the treatment of the environment, an analogy that is underlined by the contrast between prehistoric matriarchal societies, which lived in harmony with nature, and patriarchal societies, which exploit natural resources, in effect "raping the earth."<sup>17</sup>

But feminist matriarchalists have roots in radical feminism as well.' Interest in matriarchal prehistory was in part a direct outgrowth of radical feminism. And over the past three decades, feminist matriarchalists have retained a lively concern with issues at the heart of radical feminism—sexual harassment and violence toward women (rape, child abuse, wife battering)—and have been comparatively less interested in issues of equal employment, government-subsidized day care, or legal nondiscrimination, matters more closely tied to liberal feminism.

Messages of female specialness, appealing in the early 1970s, are perhaps especially appealing now, in an era of feminist stocktaking. Many of the basic demands of liberal feminism have either been met or acknowledged as valid concerns. Women are employed outside the home in steadily increasing numbers; they have been admitted to previously all-male colleges and are making significant inroads into previously male professions such as medicine and law. "Sameness feminism," that which argues that the only thing women require is equal treatment with men, has achieved a knee-jerk acceptance in many quarters of the popular media: "Look," television commercials seem to proclaim, "girls can wear cleats, women can carry briefcases! It is a brave new world!" The other side of the coin remains pertinent though: the same popular media that champion women's athleticism and economic success continually run talk shows and made-for-television movies about female victims of incest, rape, and spousal abuse. And cleats and briefcases aside, women are still relentlessly judged—by themselves as much as or more than by anyone else—against ideals of femininity and motherhood. In such an environment, "equality with men" seems neither attainable nor especially desirable. Liberal feminism is then easily regarded by many feminists as a failure (though, in fairness, it has had little time in which to prove itself). Now, as we begin a new millennium, women are still women, and men are still men. Arguably then, feminists need a way to recognize inequities between women and men and recommend policies to

rectify them within the highly gendered universe we continue to occupy.

This is just what feminist matriarchal myth does in assigning to male values a troubling interlude of violence and abuse of women, and to female values a long, prosperous era of peace and harmony with nature and a glorious coming era of the goddess's return. The myth provides an analysis of sexism, a social agenda, and a mechanism for social change that is not nearly so beset with failure and frustration as political activism. Feminist matriarchalists certainly engage in political activism, usually individually rather than as a group; the key exception being their use of what might be called "spiritual activism." This spiritual activism is enacted effortlessly every time the story of matriarchal prehistory is told, every time the name of the goddess is spoken. For the aspect of prehistoric matriarchies that feminist matriarchalists are most seeking to reinstate in the present is their value system, embodied in goddess religion, which honors women and nature as sacred. In contrast, patriarchal religions are held accountable, more than any other single factor, for instituting a social order oppressive to women and nature.

That religion should have had such an impact in making both matriarchies and patriarchies what they were (and are) is no accident. This is simply the nature of religion, feminist matriarchalists say, which is deeper and more basic than other social institutions.<sup>19</sup> Though on one level this is frightening (religion seals the triumph of the patriarchy), it is also encouraging. One could scarcely ask for a better ally in the feminist revolution: without guns or seats in Congress, feminist matriarchalists can hope to change the world; and not just superficially, but profoundly.

The note of hope sounded here points to what is probably the central function of the myth of matriarchal prehistory. It takes a situation that invites despair—patriarchy is here, it's always been here, it's inevitable—and transforms it into a surpassing optimism: patriarchy is recent and fallible, it was preceded by something much better, and it can be overthrown in the near future.

In this way, matriarchal myth provides a solution for a problem that radical feminism, to some extent, created. In radical feminist analyses, patriarchy was not simply the practice of sex discrimination or male dominance. Instead "patriarchy" became the one-word alias for an entire system of thinking, living, and being, of which the op-

pression of women was only the tip of the iceberg. Patriarchy, it turned out, was also about racism and heterosexism and capitalism; it was about technological excess, the irresponsible use of natural resources, and the exploitation of the Third World. This was on the macro level. On the micro level, patriarchy ran even deeper. It infected the way people thought and felt, discouraging intimacy and sensitivity in favor of logic and rationality.

This vision of "the patriarchy" is truly horrific. Patriarchy is monolithic, it is universal, it permeates everything. Clearly, one needs to juxtapose something equally large and solid against it if there is to be any hope of dislodging it.

For feminist matriarchalists, that something is matriarchal prehistory. The long era of matriarchal peace and plenty is the bulwark feminists can rest upon as they regard the patriarchal present and hope for a new age. It roots feminism "in the nature of being" and declares that "inevitable warfare and man's famous inhumanity to men, women, children, and everything else on this planet is not our only heritage." This connection between past precedent and future possibility is stated explicitly in narrations of the myth of matriarchal prehistory. If no precedent is available, feminist matriarchalists tend to conclude that the "feminist onslaught on the fortress of 'It has always been so' " is doomed to failure.'

As precedents go, the one offered by the myth of matriarchal prehistory is remarkable. It does not say that in the very distant past, there was a small group of people who were able for a short time to construct a society that gave women status and freedom and did not make war on other people or the natural world. Quite the contrary: according to feminist matriarchal myth, matriarchy was universal, it endured for all the millennia in which we were human, and was only supplanted very recently. It positively dwarfs the patriarchy, which is, in contrast, a "relatively short, albeit melodramatic, period." 21

This is the preeminent way in which feminist matriarchalists combat the terrible strength of the patriarchy: they set it alongside the matriarchal era and comment on its diminutive size. Heide Giittner-Abendroth, author of a four-volume opus on matriarchal prehistory, imagines a timeline of human history two meters long, on which "man's rule" occupies only the last millimeter. As if the disproportion in matriarchy's favor weren't already commanding enough, feminist matriarchalists seem to experience an unstoppable desire to expand it

even farther. In their voluminous work *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor tell us on page 46 that "the mysteries of female biology dominated human religious and artistic thought, as well as social organization, for at least the first 200,000 years of human life on earth." By page 235, "the original Goddess religion" is said to have "dominated human thought and feeling for at least 300,000 years." On page 424, as they arrive at the end of their recounting of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, this number has increased to 500,000 years. Some feminist matriarchalists go even farther. Diane Stein says the matriarchal era began on the lost continent of Mu, when "people began incarnating on the earthplane ten and a half million years ago." Meanwhile, Matthew Fox contrasts the "original blessing" of the 18 billion years of the cosmos's existence as over against the appearance of sin "with the rise of the patriarchy some four thousand to six thousand years ago." Patriarchy is thus reduced to a veritable blip on the radar screen, inspiring in feminists great hope for its future overthrow.

#### INTO THE CULTURAL MAINSTREAM

Feminist matriarchalists get this encouraging word out in a variety of ways, from ostensibly dispassionate popularizations of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas's findings to much more impressionistic means.

Art plays a special role in tellings of the myth of matriarchal prehistory. This is in part because the most compelling evidence of matriarchal prehistory for contemporary feminist observers is that of prehistoric female figurines. But art is attractive for reasons beyond its evidentiary power. It is an excellent medium for communicating mythic themes, and for reaching larger audiences. With this in mind, matriarchal myth has become the subject of museum exhibits, slide shows, glossy art books, and even "goddess cards" intended for divination or meditation.' Some of these media draw on feminist art of the past thirty years, in addition to the more typical fare of prehistoric "goddess" figures. This feminist art is itself a way in which matriarchal prehistory is communicated to a contemporary audience. For example, Monica Sjoo's painting *God Giving Birth*, first exhibited in London in 1968, consists of a large woman, face half-black and half-white, in the act of childbirth, her child's head emerging from between her legs. This painting initially touched off a storm of controversy, which only encouraged the production of art pieces expressing



FIG. 2.1 Helene de Beauvoir's *Second Encounter with the Great Goddess*, 1982.

similar themes. Increasingly, this art has incorporated images from archaeological sites believed to date to matriarchal times. This trend was already evident in 1982, when Helene de Beauvoir painted her *Second Encounter with the Great Goddess*, in which a naked woman holding a snake in each hand is positioned alongside the prehistoric Minoan "snake goddess" (see Fig. 2.1). More recently, Ursula Kavanagh, an Irish artist, has created a series titled *Matriarchal Listings* based on her travels to "ancient Goddess sites" in Ireland, England, Italy, Sardinia, Malta, and Sicily.'

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is also communicated in performance art. The most notable example of this is Mary Beth Edelson's *Your Five Thousand Years Are Up* (premiered in La Jolla, California, in 1977), in which eight shrouded female figures circled a ring of fire, chanting about women's rebirth and the end of patriarchy. A more recent example is Donna Wilshire's *Virgin Mother Crone*, still being performed and now published in book form. In this piece, Wilshire assumes three personas of the ancient goddess. Singing, dancing with scarves, and playing drums and rattles, she invokes a prepatriarchal world into which she invites her audience.'

Though visual art predominates, there are other artistic renderings of matriarchal myth as well. Roberta Kosse's oratorio, "The Re-




turn of the Great Mother," composed for women's chorus and chamber orchestra (released on the Ars Pro Femina label in 1978), tells the story of matriarchal prehistory musically. Drummer Layne Redmond and her New York-based group the Mob of Angels find inspiration in ancient images of women playing drums, women they believe to have been priestesses of the goddess performing a vital function for cultures that respected women's power. Matriarchal myth has even entered the alternative rock world through two albums by the band Helium: *Pirate Prude* and *The Dirt of Luck*.'

More common than musical renditions of matriarchal myth are poetic ones, some of epic length, and fictional tellings such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, set in Arthurian Britain, and June Rachuy Brindel's *Ariadne*, set in Minoan Crete.' The most ambitious fictional telling of matriarchal myth is Mary Mackey's *Earthsong* trilogy, consisting of *The Year the Horses Came* (1993), *The Horses at the Gate* (1995), and *The Fires of Spring* (1998). In these novels, based on Marija Gimbutas's work, goddess civilizations carpet Neolithic Europe, living in peace and harmony with nature, only to collapse under the violent onslaughts of nomadic horse-riding invaders (the "beastmen") from the Russian steppes (the "Sea of Grass"). Like other fictional accounts, Mackey's trilogy focuses on the moment of culture contact, when the matriarchal civilizations find themselves under attack (not surprising when one considers that there is no plot to the myth of matriarchal prehistory until there is trouble in paradise). Marrah, a young girl descended from a matrilineage of priestesses, and newly initiated into womanhood, becomes attached to Stavan, son of a great chief from the Sea of Grass. She quickly converts Stavan to the ways of the goddess people (great sex proves an excellent teacher), and together they struggle to keep the patriarchal nomads from invading the goddess lands.'

Another potent vehicle for matriarchal mythology is the "goddess pilgrimage." Some feminist matriarchalists have crafted their own itineraries for these trips, no longer a heroic task with the publication of *Goddess Sites: Europe*, a travel guide offering "breathtaking descriptions of hundreds of sacred sites . . . complete with maps, photos, and detailed travel instructions." In addition, there is now a mini-industry of pre-packaged tours led by experts in matriarchal myth such as Donna Henes, Joan Marler, Vicki Noble, Willow LaMonte, and Carol Christ (see Fig. 2.2). The Spring 1997 issue of *Goddessing Re-*

**TURKEY**  
*Home of the Great Goddess*



Sacred Sites in:  
Istanbul  
Cappadocia  
Troy  
Ephesus  
Aphrodisias  
Catal Hdybk  
and more...

Encounter the Great Goddess in her ancient homes.  
Experience the riches of Anatolia.  
Visit Konya's Sufi center.  
Four Star Hotels.  
August and December departures

*Dr. Rashid Ergener lecturer/guide*

**AnaTours-Mythic Travel.**  
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831-438-3031  
**Visit our website**  
[www.anatours.com](http://www.anatours.com)  
email: [info@anatours.com](mailto:info@anatours.com)

FIG. 2.2  
Sample advertisement for a  
"goddess pilgrimage" from  
AnaTours.

*generated* lists twenty-seven separate "goddess tours" for 1997 and 1998. Favorite sites are Malta, Crete, Turkey, England, and Ireland, though there are also tours to Hawaii and Latin America. Tours are mainly led by American women, though there is also at least one German-led tour to Crete and Malta.' Not all women who embark on these adventures are committed matriarchalists, but few return from their summer vacations as agnostic toward prehistoric matriarchies as they may have been when they left.

Those without the money or time to make such pilgrimages can go along in spirit by watching *Goddess Remembered*, a video recounting the myth of matriarchal prehistory through conversations with prominent feminist matriarchalists and footage of sites in Malta, England, and Crete. This video, sponsored by the National

Film Board of Canada, is one of its most popular ever and continues to be featured as a part of pledge campaigns. Study guides are also available to introduce newcomers to the myth of matriarchal prehistory. *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, a curriculum originally developed under the auspices of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has spread to many more mainstream churches. Like *The Partnership Way*, developed as a study guide for Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, *Cakes* familiarizes participants with matriarchal mythology through slides, art projects, meditations, rituals, and discussions.' Those who want to incorporate their newfound knowledge of goddesses and matriarchal myth into their daily lives can choose from a number of illustrated journals, appointment books, and calendars, or subscribe to periodicals such as *Metis*, *Goddessing Regenerated*, or *Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network Newsletter*. Goddess reproductions are also quite popular and available from a number of sources (see Fig. 2.3). For some users, these no doubt carry a spiritual significance unrelated to matriarchal mythology, but for most they are tangible representations of a time when all women were held in high esteem.'

If most of these books, videos, pilgrimages, and so forth seem to cater to a group of insiders, it is important to note that they all include an element of outreach. And certainly there is evidence that these efforts have borne fruit in more mainstream social locations. For example, *Megatrends for Women*, published in 1992, proclaims "The Goddess Reawakening" to be one "megatrend" and recites the basics of matriarchal myth in the relevant chapter. The National Organization for Women (NOW) has gotten in on the act as well, producing a pamphlet titled "Goddess Cultural Beliefs," which includes assertions about prehistoric women's control of "religious, social, political and legal institutions," their work as priestesses, their sexual freedom, and their close connection "to nature, its cycles, power and beauty." As recently as March 1999, the Lexington, Massachusetts NOW chapter celebrated Women's History Month with a presentation titled "Unearthing Pandora's Treasure: Voices of Women Proclaiming Our Sacred Past," which aimed to show how "feminist scholars in archeology, history and theology [have] reviewed the ancient past to find evidence of a time when god was a woman." "

One of the most fascinating populist feminist works advancing the myth of matriarchal prehistory is Judy Mann's *The Difference*:



**LILITH**

*Goddess of the Underworld*

This fearless and winged Goddess is approximately 4,000 years old. As the "Nigh Owl" she represents chthonic wisdom and death as a natural cycle of life. Exquisitely carved and detailed.

Hand Colored, Tan. 8" x 10" x 1/2". Ready to Hang. Gypsum.

Original: (Terra Cotta. Found in Sumer. Private Collection.)

\$42.00

**NILE RIVER GODDESS**

*Goddess of Renewal*



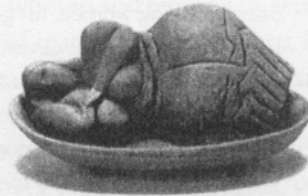
This Egyptian Bird or Serpent Headed River Goddess is approximately 5,000 years old. She is associated with life-giving, renewing waters.

Tan in Color. 7" in Height. Gypsum.

Original: (Predynastic, Egypt. Brooklyn Museum.)

\$25.00

Finely handcrafted walnut and brass stand available for Nile River Goddess. Add \$12.00



**ENTHRONED GODDESS**

*Earth Mother*

This seated Goddess embodies the fecundity of the earth. Her incised throne-like body powerfully represents the pregnant Goddess. She is approximately 4,500 years old.

Light Brown Earth Tones. 7 1/2" in Height. Gypsum.

Original: (Clay. Found in Thrace [Bulgaria]. Neolithic. Sofia Museum.)

\$39.00

**DREAMING GODDESS**

*Goddess of Inspiration*

This Deaming Goddess is approximately 6,000 years old. She was found in the Hypogeum Temple on the Island of Malta in the Mediterranean. She portrays a monumental presence.

Terra Cotta in Color. 7 1/2" x 4" x 4". Gypsum.

Original: (Clay. Neolithic. Valletta Museum, Malta.)

\$35.00



*creativity*

*"Your Goddesses are gorgeous! The Dreaming Goddess from Malta is one I've never seen before -- especially evocative."*

FIG. 2.3 A page from the Star River Productions catalogue showing a range of goddess reproductions.

*Growing Up Female in America*. Mann, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, undertook the task of investigating girlhood in America when she became concerned about the effect adolescence might have on her daughter (the much-discussed "Ophelia" syndrome, in which previously confident and brave little girls become timid and insecure teenagers)." Mann tells the story of her investigation as a series of encounters with theories and experts, focusing mainly on how girls are treated in educational settings. But Mann is restless to get to the root of the problem, and this drives her straight to prehistory. As she explains:

It took a year of research before I learned this: If I really wanted to know why girls come out feeling second best, if I really wanted to know what makes it possible for rock musicians to make fortunes writing songs about dismembering women, for girls to be ignored in classrooms, in churches, in medical schools, in governments, I had to go backward in time to the dim memories that lurk on the borders of human beginnings. As I kept going further back into history, into antiquity, and finally into prehistory, I began to find out how things once were between men and women, and where and how men rose to dominance over women.'

The urge to return to roots is what drives many feminist commentators into the arms of matriarchal myth, almost in spite of themselves. If an author wants to give a sweeping chronological account of her topic, the first chapter is logically about prehistory: and the reigning feminist story these days is that prehistoric societies were goddess-worshipping and matriarchal. Thus Rosalind Miles's *Women's History of the World* tracks feminist political gains in terms of suffrage, divorce laws, and so forth, but begins "In the Beginning," with chapters on "The First Women," "The Great Goddess," and "The Rise of the Phallus." Nickie Roberts's *Whores in History* documents the history of prostitution in the West but starts with "sacred prostitution" in goddess-worshipping cultures. Shari Thurer's *The Myths of Motherhood* seeks to decenter current views of motherhood by showing how mothers have been regarded at other times in Western history, but she too begins with "the beginning of time," when "woman was an awesome being" who "seemed to swell and spew forth a child by her own law." "

Matriarchal myth is even making its way into school curricula. While it is true that one can go through twelve years of primary and

secondary education, or even a college or graduate school career without being taught that prehistory was matriarchal (particularly if one majors in, say, engineering), the academic world is far from immune to the enticements of matriarchal mythology. Young women have told me that the myth of matriarchal prehistory has been presented to them as historic truth in high school classes in world history, religion, and women's studies. *Women's Roots*, by June Stephenson, now in its fourth edition, is a rendition of matriarchal prehistory designed to be read by high school students. At the college level, courses are offered about or with the premise of matriarchal prehistory, with titles like "Reclaiming the Goddess," "Herstory of the Goddess," and "The Goddess and the Matriarchy Controversy." A 1995 text, *Women and Religion* by Marianne Ferguson, purporting to cover the broad terrain of interactions between women and religion, is actually a straightforward telling of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, from the mother goddesses of prehistory to the father gods of patriarchy.

Increasingly, matriarchal myth is being given some credence in college texts. For example, Rita Gross critiques the myth of matriarchal prehistory in her religion textbook, *Feminism and Religion*, viewing it as "extreme" and not well grounded in archaeological evidence. Yet she comes quite a distance to meet its partisans, arguing that it is reasonable "to conclude both that women were less dominated than in later societies and that female sacredness was more commonly venerated" in prehistoric times.<sup>1</sup> Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy*, though not strictly a textbook, is widely read in college courses. Lerner spends very little time discussing the nature of prehistoric societies, and she cannot, in fairness, be counted as a champion of matriarchal myth, since she explicitly disclaims a former stage of patriarchy. And yet it is impressive how even this careful and scholarly study ends up endorsing most of the major points of feminist matriarchal myth:

- patriarchy didn't always exist;
- unless we are aware of this fact, we cannot effectively combat it;
- patriarchy is now ending as a result of the planetary crisis to which it has brought us;
- the future is not determined, and could bring either improvement or disaster;
- women's involvement is crucial to lead the future in a more positive direction.<sup>1</sup>

The myth of matriarchal prehistory has not been adopted as the one true account of human history, taught to first graders and graduate students alike. But it is nevertheless making itself felt, and, especially in feminist circles, it is hard to avoid. It earns new converts every day, especially among a younger generation of girls and women not formerly exposed to it. There are even dedicated resources available to teach the myth of matriarchal prehistory to younger girls. For example, Jyotsna Sreenivasan's *The Moon Over Crete* is a novel for young readers that relates the story of eleven-year-old Lily and her flute teacher, Mrs. Zinn, who takes Lily 3,500 years back in time to ancient Crete where "Lily finds out what it's like for girls to be *important*." In *Why Great to Be a Girl*, Jacqueline Shannon offers fifty points of comparison between women and men in which women emerge superior: Point number 8 is that "anthropologists and archeologists credit females with the 'civilization' of humankind"; point number *so* is that "only females can give birth." Though Shannon does not explicitly invoke matriarchal myth, she asserts two of its familiar themes—women's invention of civilization and the female monopoly on childbirth—and quotes one of its earliest feminist proponents (Elizabeth Gould Davis) to support the first of these points."

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is not without its critics. Some populist feminists have included critiques of matriarchal myth in recent books, and a number of more academic critiques have been included in books, articles, or reviews. Archaeologists and students of ancient history, long silent on this topic, have recently spoken out more frequently about matriarchal myth, almost always negatively. Matriarchal myth is also refuted on the Internet, in broadsides delivered mainly by a pair of self-appointed defenders of the universal patriarchy thesis: Steven Goldberg, author of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, and Robert Sheaffer. Goldberg systematically addresses any and all purported exceptions to patriarchal social relations as they surface; Sheaffer, in his turn, suggests that "the Goddess promoters" are "suffering from a case of False Memory Syndrome."

But criticism of matriarchal myth has, for the most part, been restrained. It has not felt this way to the myth's proponents, of course; in 1991, Vicki Noble lamented the fact that though feminists have been uncovering "the ancient matriarchal past" for twenty years, "even fairly recently the *New York Times* was still able to find a female profes-

sor of history who would ridicule rather than review Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, making her position sound like a fantasy rather than documented fact." A recent festschrift for Marija Gimbutas is full of defensive reactions to criticisms of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, both perceived and real. Feminist matriarchalists worry that there is "a not-so-subtle backlash" against the work of Gimbutas, and that in due time "her name will be deliberately 'disappeared' in the quagmire of academic 'scholarly' discussion."

Matriarchal myth is a source of some controversy then, but it is also a cultural resource that is tapped into by many who are not feminists, or not primarily feminists. This use of matriarchal myth is especially prominent among environmentalists. It can be found in books like Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*, Jim Mason's *An Unnatural Order*, and even in Vice President Al Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance: Healing the Global Environment*.<sup>1</sup> Some Afrocentrists claim that Africa was not only the source of ancient Mediterranean culture, but also of the matriarchal social order that was eventually obliterated by patriarchal Europeans.<sup>2</sup> The most recent appropriation of feminist matriarchal myth is Leonard Shlain's *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, which argues that it was literacy—the development of written language—that led to matriarchy's demise. By requiring greater effort from the left brain, which Shlain terms "masculine," language undercut the work of the image-oriented, "feminine" right brain, which had produced matriarchal, goddess-worshipping civilizations.

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is proudly proclaimed by some feminists, tacitly acknowledged by others, and studiously ignored by probably the majority, who may not find it plausible or appealing but don't wish to break feminist ranks. Given that this story has become (if mainly by default) *the* feminist account of prehistory, and given too its increasing currency among environmentalists, Afrocentrists, and even cultural theorists like Shlain, it is imperative that we take the time to see how this story developed and found its way into feminist circles, and to examine the picture feminist matriarchalists paint of prehistory, the explanations they offer for its demise, and the hopes they hold out for the future.



## The Story They Tell

The myth of matriarchal prehistory speaks to what seems to be an extremely common human need to trace the origin of important, and sometimes controversial, social institutions.' Feminist matriarchalists are not the first to seek an origin story to account for the principal institutions of male dominance—government, religion, marriage. They were anticipated in this by at least five generations of matriarchalists before them. The story of women's glorious past, it turns out, has a past of its own, a rich, ambiguous, multilayered past that in its broadest contours dates back to classical Greece, and in its more recent genealogy reaches back through a 140-year-old conversation about the respective roles of women and men in prehistoric times.

When I began my research, I was under the impression that while there had been a few nineteenth-century scholars who broached the subject of matriarchy, the myth was really a late-twentieth-century feminist invention, heavily indebted to archaeological finds that nineteenth-century scholars knew nothing about. What I found was that the story preceded the archaeology—and the feminism—to a surprising extent. Furthermore, an enormous array of individuals turned out to have spent some time—or a lot of time—with matriarchal myth. There were names I knew: J. J. Bachofen, Friedrich Engels, E. B. Tylor, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, Robert Graves. And there were names I had to learn: Julius Lippert, Lothar Dargun, August Bebel, Alfred Balmier, Uberto Pestalozza, Iu. I. Semenov. From the shadowy background of matriarchal myth in medieval cartographers' efforts to sketch presumed matriarchal lands onto their maps, through

to late-twentieth-century feminist workshops on the sacred symbols of prehistoric goddess religions, stretches a vast territory of conservatism and radicalism, archaeology and poetry, economic determinism and mystical goddess worship, all embodied in a recognizably single myth. The myth of matriarchal prehistory has found adherents among socialists, anthropologists, communists, fascists, psychoanalysts, sexologists, folklorists, religionists, and a whole host of other notable characters. It has been used to justify patriarchy and to overthrow it, to hustle women back to hearth and home and to place them at the helm of the ship carrying us into the future.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST MATRIARCHAL MYTH

Until the late nineteenth century in Western Europe, matriarchy served more as an occasional literary trope than a purported history. All this changed in 1861 with the publication of Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (*Motherright*). Drawing on classical Greek sources (which, as we will later see, were full of references to women's rule), Bachofen postulated an era of matriarchy ending in classical times with the rise of men and the "male principle." He was quickly joined by a whole group of scholars pioneering the new discipline of anthropology along evolutionary lines (including John Ferguson McLennan, William Robertson Smith, Sir John Lubbock, Herbert Spencer, Lewis Henry Morgan, and E. B. Tylor, among others). Here matriarchal myth attained a status of cultural dogma for thirty years or so in the late nineteenth century, a status that it did not again approximate until its adoption by feminists one hundred years later. With little need to protect themselves from outside criticism, evolutionary anthropologists were free to concentrate on such burning questions as whether fraternal polyandry *preceded* patriarchy and whether the Omaha-Crow system of kinship terminology indicated group marriage. So firmly did the myth of matriarchal prehistory grip late nineteenth-century European and American intellectual life that even someone like Sigmund Freud—whose origin myths are primarily a fantasy of fathers, sons, and brothers murdering, cannibalizing, and repressing knowledge about one another—felt compelled to find a place for matriarchy, sandwiching it somewhere in between the "brother horde" and the patriarchy.'

In the late nineteenth century, the myth attracted not only an-

thropologists, but also others with less mainstream political agendas: specifically, socialists and feminists. Karl Marx had become interested in anthropology in the last few years of his life and was apparently, at the time of his death, working his way toward his own view of prehistory. His fragmentary notes were taken up by Friedrich Engels, and between these notes and a wholesale adoption of Morgan's earlier *Ancient Society*, Engels produced *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.<sup>4</sup> This, along with a handful of other works, served to institutionalize the myth of matriarchal prehistory as a socialist origin story. Soon after, first-wave feminists began to see the myth's potential to dislodge the idea that patriarchy was universal and inevitable, and several European and American women—most influentially, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman—wrote their own accounts of matriarchal myth, based on the anthropological treatises of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Anthropologists dropped the idea of matriarchy rather abruptly around the turn of the century (with the important exception of Soviet anthropologists, who stuck close to matriarchal myth—in the tradition established by Engels—until at least the 1950s<sup>5</sup>). The matriarchal thesis was discredited not through attacks on the evidence underlying it (though there were some), but through challenges to its assumptions. The universalizing premises of evolutionary anthropology came under fire, and the armchair anthropology upon which the matriarchal thesis relied was rejected in favor of a new emphasis on fieldwork. But when anthropologists dropped matriarchal myth, there were others waiting to pick it up. Between 1900 and 1970, the myth found some interesting champions. Within the academy, classicists such as Jane Ellen Harrison and George Thomson found echoes of a prior matriarchal time in Greek myth and ritual; archaeologists and art historians (including some very prominent ones like O. G. S. Crawford) discovered the footprints of matriarchy and goddess worship in the artifacts they studied; and a few maverick anthropologists, particularly E. S. Hartland and Robert Briffault, refused to let go of matriarchal theories, in spite of the jeers of most of their colleagues. Sir James George Frazer's wildly popular study of comparative mythology, *The Golden Bough*, included in its later editions much speculation on prehistoric goddess worship. Meanwhile, psychoanalysts studiously wove matriarchal threads into their emerging theories.

Erich Fromm used matriarchal myth to argue against the inevitability of violence, aggression, and war; Wilhelm Reich used it to buttress his claim that sexual freedom, even promiscuity, would result in more peaceful and harmonious, less repressed and patriarchal societies; and in the Jungian wing of psychology, Erich Neumann (*The Great Mother*) and others added even more layers of archetypal symbology (beyond those already provided by Bachofen) to the supposed prehistoric transfer of power from goddesses to gods. Well-known poet Robert Graves sang the praises of the "White Goddess" and foresaw an apocalypse in which patriarchal repression and rampant industrialization would give way to a return of the prehistoric goddess.' Most of this use of matriarchal myth came from the political left or center, but those on the extreme right invoked it also. Neo-romantic philosophers and protofascists in Germany, working from 1900 to 1930 (and even through the years of the Third Reich), spoke of the matriarch and the goddess, steeped in blood and soil, and yearned for their return.'

This was a relatively quieter time for matriarchal myth than what preceded and followed it. There were many pockets of interest in matriarchal myth, but no entire disciplines given over to its seductive power. And yet it is impressive to note the tenacity with which matriarchal myth clung to thinking about human prehistory during these years. Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*, a standard reference work in print for more than two decades (from the 1930s to the 1950s) restated themes that most anthropologists had dispensed with by 1905: "Since it was the mother who fulfilled most of the functions," Durant argued, "the family was at first (so far as we can pierce the mists of history) organized on the assumption that the position of the man in the family was superficial and incidental, while that of the woman was fundamental and supreme." Like matriarchalists before and since, Durant gave women credit for inventing agriculture, weaving, basketry, pottery, woodworking, building, and trade, and claimed that "it was she who developed the home, slowly adding man to the list of her domesticated animals, and training him in those social dispositions and amenities which are the psychological basis and cement of civilization."

In 1963, a multivolume *History of Mankind* was even more outspoken about the possibility of prehistoric matriarchy. In her chapter on

Paleolithic and Mesolithic society, Jacquetta Hawkes admitted that "today it is unfashionable to talk about former more matriarchal orders of society," but in her chapter on the Neolithic, Hawkes claimed that "there is every reason to suppose that under the conditions of the primary Neolithic way of life mother-right and the clan system were still dominant. . . . Indeed, it is tempting to be convinced that the earliest Neolithic societies throughout their range in time and space gave woman the highest status she has ever known..The way of life and its values, the skills demanded, were ideally suited to her."

Matriarchal myth emerged with new vigor in the early 1970s, as second-wave feminists began to take it over in earnest, engineering a decisive shift in its meaning in the process. Prior to this, most matriarchalists regarded the patriarchal revolution as either a signal improvement over patriarchy, or at least a necessary, if regrettable, step toward the progressive civilization of humankind. But by the mid 1980s, the myth of matriarchy had definitively become a myth of regress, of paradise lost. These days it is virtually impossible to speak of ancient matriarchies and their overthrow by invading patriarchs without drawing feminist, or at least quasi-feminist lessons from the story.<sup>1°</sup>

The contemporary feminist version of matriarchal myth was not adopted wholesale from earlier sources. As matriarchal myth was disseminated within and outside the feminist community in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was tweaked and prodded, growing through trial and error, assertion and retraction. Some of the earlier feminist matriarchal narratives appear, from the vantage point of the late 1990s, distinctly quirky. For example, Elizabeth Fisher, writing in 1979, used the early Neolithic site of CatalhOyak to illustrate patriarchy's gradual encroachment into human society. Today every matriarchalist "knows" that CatalhOyiik is one of the very best exemplars of prehistoric matriarchal society. Likewise, Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex*, published in 1971, named Mycenaean Greece as matriarchal, a claim that no one has made in the past twenty years." The rough consensus that now reigns—the consensus that, for example, names CatalhOyiik matriarchal and Mycenaean Greece patriarchal—took on its characteristic form under the pressure of three key developments: (1) the steadfast rejection of matriarchal myth by most feminist anthropologists; (2) a burgeoning feminist spirituality movement intent on placing goddess worship in prehistory; and (3) the pioneering archaeological work of Marija Gimbutas.

The first of these developments prevented anthropological versions of matriarchal myth from gaining anything more than a toehold in academia, and indeed had a chilling effect on matriarchal myth in the mainstream women's movement as well. As early feminists looked hopefully to other, "primitive" cultures for signs of matriarchy, they asked for corroboration from their anthropologist sisters. In the main, they didn't get it. Around the same time that Elizabeth Gould Davis was enticing readers with her descriptions of the great women-ruled empires of prehistory, Sherry Ortner, in her highly influential article "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" was calling women's secondary status "one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact," and asserting that "the search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture, has proven fruitless." Anthropological denials of matriarchy extended as well to prehistory. "Males are dominant among primates," a group of feminist anthropologists noted in 1971, "and at the 'lowest' level of human social evolution now extant, males are still dominant. There is no reason to assume that in the intervening stages of human evolution the same situation did not prevail."

If this was anthropological dogma, it was not anthropological consensus. A small group of socialist feminist anthropologists were diligently at work throughout the 1970s and 1980s developing a matriarchal myth of their own by updating the work of Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.<sup>7</sup> But this version of matriarchal myth was, in the final analysis, far too tepid to feed appetites whetted by the early women's movement. The best these anthropologists could serve up was the notion that human beings in small-scale "band" societies treated women and men equally, until property ownership, an incipient state, agricultural technologies, or even intergroup trade came into existence. Such a matriarchy was thin to begin with and easily gave way before the smallest signs of what we have come to think of as social progress.

The feminist spirituality movement offered something far more attractive. The position spiritual feminists envisioned for women in prehistory was not the "relative equality" stipulated by socialist feminist anthropologists. On the contrary, prehistoric woman was said to have been respected for her special feminine contributions to the human economy, if not positively revered as an embodiment of the great goddess.

The beginnings of the feminist spirituality movement roughly

coincided with the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist spirituality's organizational flexibility and its hostility toward any and all religious dogma defy attempts to define the movement or count its membership." There are no "average" spiritual feminists, but when they gather together, it is most often to celebrate solstices and equinoxes; to perform rituals centering on self-empowerment, nature, and the worship (or embodiment of) goddesses from cultures around the world; to assist one another in divination, healing, magic, and guided meditations; and to teach one another the movement's "sacred history": the myth of matriarchal prehistory.

The centrality of this last activity should not be underestimated. In much the way the Exodus and Passion narratives serve as synecdoches of Judaism and Christianity, matriarchal myth holds together the otherwise extremely diverse feminist spirituality movement. Not every spiritual feminist believes that matriarchal societies once existed, but then there are Christians—some of them influential theologians—who regard the historicity of Jesus's life, crucifixion, and resurrection as immaterial to the true meaning of Christianity. Exceptions notwithstanding, the myth of matriarchal prehistory is foundational for feminist spirituality. Goddess worship itself is sometimes taken as a shorthand for matriarchal myth: goddesses are proof of matriarchy, reminders of it, and calls to recreate it.'

Introducing religion into the matriarchal equation, as spiritual feminists did, freed up an enormous amount of imaginative energy for feminist matriarchal myth. The idea that a great mother goddess was our ancestors' first object of veneration had been proposed by archaeologists and historians of religion long before spiritual feminists began to speak of her.' Neopagans already believed themselves to be reviving this religion. But spiritual feminists drew new conclusions from ancient goddess worship: first, they argued that it was enormously beneficial to women, who were her priestesses; second, they insisted that the goddess had been worshipped to the near exclusion of gods (on which point they departed from other neopagans); and third, they claimed that the clearest sign of patriarchy's triumph was the end of this exclusive goddess worship.

Merlin Stone was the first to assemble these pieces of the prehistoric puzzle in a convincing fashion. In her 1976 book, *The Paradise*

*Papers* (later retitled *When God Was a Woman*), Stone explained that the many names given to goddesses in ancient myths should not obscure the point that "the female deity in the Near and Middle East was revered as Goddess—much as people today think of God." She reasoned that "a religion in which the deity was female, and revered as wise, valiant, powerful and just" would provide "very different images of womanhood" from those of patriarchy; and she pondered at the close of her book "to what degree the suppression of women's rites has actually been the suppression of women's rights." '7

Now this was a matriarchal myth worthy of feminist attention. But one link was missing: credibility. Stone aimed to provide this; she did extensive research, but since she did so as an art historian, some doubted the veracity of her conclusions. Real archaeological confirmation, enough to satisfy feminists eager to apply the stamp of authenticity to matriarchal myth, remained a scarce commodity until spiritual feminists discovered and adopted the work of Marija Gimbutas—who in turn adopted them.

Born in Lithuania, Marija Gimbutas did her graduate work in folklore and archaeology in Lithuania and Germany in the 1940s, and in 1949 immigrated to the United States. Unemployed for a time, she eventually found work translating Eastern European archaeological publications for Harvard University's Peabody Museum. By dint of hard work, tenacity, and undeniable talent, Gimbutas finally began to be recognized as an archaeologist in her own right. She received numerous grants, published lengthy works on Central and Eastern European archaeology, and directed her own excavations there. In 1963, she accepted a professorship at the University of California at Los Angeles which she kept until her retirement in 1989.<sup>18</sup>

Relatively late in her career, Gimbutas began to talk about the goddess, and to describe her reign as an unusually peaceful and harmonious time in which women enjoyed prominence and power. Gimbutas made her way toward these conclusions through her longstanding interest in Indo-European origins, a topic that was very much in vogue in Europe when her intellectual interests were first forming. While working in the United States, Gimbutas began again to ponder the location of the Indo-European "homeland"—the presumptive place from which speakers of Indo-European languages spread out to conquer many lands (linguistically, if not militarily).



She almost couldn't help tackling these issues: she had tremendous linguistic expertise—she read twenty different languages—and the sort of encyclopedic knowledge of Central and Eastern European archaeological sites that permitted her to speculate effectively on "big picture" questions.'

Working on Indo-European origins led Gimbutas to wonder what Europe was like before the process of "Indo-Europeanization," and excavations she directed in southeastern Europe began to provide clues. Among the artifacts that these and other excavations uncovered were a wealth of female figurines which Gimbutas identified as goddesses. Her first book-length attempt to interpret these artifacts was published in 1974 under the title *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*. Although this work predated Merlin Stone's; it went virtually unnoticed by spiritual feminists, probably because Gimbutas did not write about prehistoric goddesses from a feminist point of view. "I was not a feminist," Gimbutas said of herself, "and I had never any thought I would be helping feminists."

However, it would be disingenuous to suggest that once feminists *did* begin to support Gimbutas (as they did with the republication of *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* in 1982, under the reversed title *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*), it did not affect the course of her work. Her later books, *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess*, went further and further to meet the ambitions of spiritual feminists in search of a prehistoric golden age for women.' Gimbutas is now routinely hailed by feminist matriarchalists as the brilliant polymath who has scientifically proven the claim that prehistoric societies were woman-centered and goddess-worshipping, and destroyed only recently. She is, Vicki Noble says, the "archeological Grandmother of feminist scholarship." Feminist matriarchalists cite Gimbutas, thank Gimbutas, and intimate that they would be nowhere without her work. Judy Grahn, a feminist poet, reports that she sometimes places one of Gimbutas's books on her home altar and whispers, "Marija, may we understand where you were going as quickly as possible."

It is hard to overestimate the significance of Gimbutas and her work to the contemporary feminist myth of matriarchal prehistory. Gimbutas loaned her impressive archaeological credentials to the myth at a time when other academic archaeologists were steadfastly

unwilling to do so. Though there are many intelligent and well-read partisans of the myth, Gimbutas is the only one who is an archaeologist. Her very existence—to say nothing of her work—has done much to enhance the credibility of feminist matriarchal myth in the eyes of the more mainstream audiences that feminist matriarchalists have been diligently endeavoring to win. As some have put it, in parody of a Christian bumpersticker, "Marija said it, I believe it, that settles it." 23

#### THE MATRIARCHY

Just when and where do feminist matriarchalists believe that matrilineal societies flourished? The standard answers to these questions are "since the beginning of time" and "everywhere." Some feminist matriarchalists assert that society itself—the grouping together of human beings on an ongoing basis—was a female invention, built up around women and their children, with men playing little or no role.<sup>24</sup>

Claims to universality aside, however, the story feminist matriarchalists tell of prehistoric matriarchy is much narrower in scope. Some feminist matriarchalists find hopeful glimpses of protomatriarchy among nonhuman primates, and from there make the claim that all species situated evolutionarily between our primate ancestors and modern human beings (australopithecenes, *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, and so on) had a gynocentric social orientation.<sup>1</sup> Others suggest that the so-called Acheulean hand axes (teardrops of quartz or flint) produced in great numbers by *Homo erectus* from roughly 1.5 million years ago to 200,000 BCE were actually goddess images rather than the stone tools archaeologists typically take them to be. One Acheulean artifact has generated special interest: found in the Golan Heights region of contemporary Israel, it dates somewhere between 800,000 and 200,000 BCE, was probably made by an archaic *Homo sapiens*, and is said by feminist matriarchalists to be an image of "the divine feminine, the Blessed Mother." 26

In general though, feminist matriarchalists find little in this long era of human beginnings to interest them. They are not envisioning bands of near-chimps when they imagine matriarchal prehistory, but rather people like us, creating stable and prosperous societies with women at their center. As a result, feminist matriarchalists typically

claim human origins as matricentric, but then fast-forward to the European Upper Paleolithic (beginning around 40,000 BCE), when quite suddenly far more extensive archaeological remains appear, including carved and painted images of women. It is in the Neolithic era, however—after the development of farming, but before the development of advanced metallurgy, between roughly 8000 and 3000 BCE—that matriarchalists most often locate the height of matriarchal culture.

Geographically, in its actual tell ings, the myth of matriarchal prehistory almost always confines itself to Old (southeastern) Europe, the Near East, and the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Old Europe, though painstakingly treated site by site in Marija Gimbutas's work, generally becomes an amorphous mass in the work of other feminist matriarchalists. In the Near East, several sites are mentioned, but there is only one of any consequence, and that is CatalhOytik, dating to roughly 6500 BCE and located in Anatolia (present-day Turkey). Finally, the Mediterranean yields up the jewel of matriarchal culture, Minoan Crete, and also Malta, which is increasingly being adopted as another matriarchal homeland. On the infrequent occasions when the myth of matriarchal prehistory moves off this familiar turf, it is most often to Western Europe, especially England and Ireland. The only other place that is mentioned consistently is India, which is said to have been invaded by the same patriarchal tribes that destroyed the goddess-worshipping matriarchies of Old Europe.

It is easy to see the ethnocentrism in these choices: most of the narrators of the myth of matriarchal prehistory are Europeans or Americans of European extraction, and these are the lands they came from or that they regard as their proper cultural origin. Feminist matriarchalists have been self-conscious about their ethnocentrism, but they have rarely endeavored to broaden their scope beyond the lands that most white people think of as their cultural and ancestral home.<sup>1</sup> Most efforts in this direction have been undertaken by those with non-European cultural roots: Latinas and Native Americans have searched the literature on preconquest America for evidence of matriarchy; African Americans have looked to Africa; Asian Americans have explored Asian prehistory; Indians have investigated their own archaeological sites and religious customs for remnants of matriarchal culture.<sup>1</sup> The most significant attempt to expand the myth of matri-

archal prehistory beyond its home in the so-called cradle of Western civilization has been undertaken by a melange of matriarchalists all devoted to including Africa within the scope of matriarchal prehistory—or, more often, to making Africa matriarchy's original home.'

Though narrowed somewhat in practice by the chronological and geographical choices that feminist matriarchalists have made, prehistory is still a huge, and, as I will later argue, largely blank canvas. Thus incredibly diverse scenarios can be painted upon it, depending on the predilections of individual thinkers. Amid this diversity, however, a number of themes appear repeatedly in feminist descriptions of prehistoric matriarchal societies: peace, prosperity, harmony with nature, appropriate use of technology, sexual freedom (including reproductive freedom), and just and equitable roles for women and men. These are all thought to be the products of values engendered by the religion of the goddess. Some matriarchalists refer unapologetically to this era as a "utopia" or the "golden age."<sup>31</sup> However, feminist matriarchalists are intent on bringing prehistoric peoples closer to themselves in imagination, so our ancestors are said to have had problems—there were "temper tantrums and . . . tribal scores had to be settled"<sup>32</sup>—but they did not have *our* problems, which are overwhelming. In a poem titled "Tea with Marija," Starr Goode recounts an afternoon spent in conversation with Gimbutas at her home in Topanga Canyon, and closes with the lines:

I ask—what were they, our ancestors?  
Marija says—they were like us, only  
happy."

The one feature of matriarchal society that is noted more often than anything apart from goddess worship is the harmony that existed between people and nature. Matriarchal peoples were "attuned to the seasons and to the earth"; they were able to "live together harmoniously, in meaningful and exciting intercommunication with all the creatures of earth, earth<sup>34</sup> herself, and the energy-beings of moon, sun, planets, and the stars." This is sometimes conceptualized as a sort of psychic unity, but usually it is described more prosaically as a responsible relationship between people and the natural resources upon which they depended, expressed in the use of sustainable technologies.

It is crucial to feminist matriarchal myth that these technologies (weaving, architecture, mathematics, and so on) arose in societies that did not discriminate against women. As Vicki Noble explains, "without class stratification, centralized government, taxation, technology, warfare, or slavery, these early Goddess-loving people were able to invent everything we consider relevant today (except plastic and toxic chemicals)." Frequently, the invention of these technologies (including that of written language) is credited specifically to women.'

The most important thing women are said to have invented during matriarchal times is agriculture. The standard lore is that women were gatherers (as opposed to hunters) in preagricultural societies, and that through their familiarity with plant life, they "conceived the idea of sowing and harvesting seeds and figured out how to do it successfully where they wanted to." In 1978, Merlin Stone advocated that feminists adopt a new dating system, according to which 1978 was actually 9978 ADA—After the Development of Agriculture—emphasizing the fact that, as Charlene Spretnak puts it, "it was women who developed agriculture . . . leading all of humankind . . . into the Neolithic Era of stable agricultural settlements."

One thing we usually associate with advanced technologies is said to have been lacking in matriarchal societies: private property. Feminist matriarchalists are not unanimous on this point,' but the picture they paint of prehistory is one of groups of people pooling most of their resources together. Perhaps more important to feminist matriarchalists is the belief that people pooled their children together. As June Stephenson asserts, "All children were protected and nourished by all women, and all women were therefore mothers to all children." There was "no sharp division . . . between home life and societal life," says Jane Alpert.' In other words, the distinction between public and private, which many late-twentieth-century feminists have considered a central characteristic of (if not a precondition for) the oppression of women, was utterly lacking in prehistory.

Having friends to help share the burden of work and child care is certainly an appealing vision for many feminist matriarchalists. What is probably more universally appealing is how people had sex in prehistory: which is to say, a lot, with whomever they wanted, and with no harm to their reputation. Sex in the matriarchies was for young and old women alike, and sexuality and motherhood were not re-

garded as antithetical to one another. If marriage existed, it did not require sexual fidelity to a single partner. Orgasms—for women, at least—were multiple and intense, and attained, at times, religious heights.' Lesbianism was as easily accepted as heterosexuality, sometimes more so.<sup>40</sup> Certainly rape and sexual abuse were unknown.

Like matriarchal women, the goddess herself was worshipped as a sexual being. Sex is sometimes imagined as having been akin to a positive religious duty in matriarchal societies, institutionalized in the form of "sacred prostitution." As Merlin Stone enthuses, "among these people the act of sex was considered to be so sacred, so holy and precious that it was enacted within the house of the Creatress of heaven, earth and all life."<sup>41</sup> All this sex—much of it heterosexual—was remarkably free of the usual consequence. Women bore children, but not constantly or unwillingly.

Just as sex was sacred, so were all other aspects of daily life in matriarchal societies. "Secular and sacred life in those days were one and indivisible," according to Gimbutas. People walked about "filled with awe by the mystery of nature," and "every aspect of the daily domestic routine was considered holy and imbued with ritual intent." This sense of sacrality was concentrated in the figure of the goddess. The goddess had many roles, but she is identified most often as mother. She is the divine creatrix, she who gives birth to the universe and everything in it. Interestingly, she is also linked strongly to death: she is "the wielder of the destructive powers of nature.' When Ariadne embodies the goddess during a spring ritual in June Rachuy Brindel's novel, she recites this poem, which sums up the picture of the goddess held by most feminist matriarchalists:

I am She that is Mother of all things  
 The waters and the earth, the sky and the wind,  
 The power of life and the power of death;  
 The fires of heaven and earth, the sun, the moon  
 And all the stars are My progeny,  
 Women and men, cattle, eagles, serpents,  
 Wrathful lion and gentle dove. At My will  
 All things grow and fill the universe,  
 die and are renewed. Within my bounds  
 All beings arise and die, are good and evil,  
 Merciful and wrathful. All are within my womb.<sup>43</sup>

Since the goddess and human women shared the capacity to give birth, it was only natural that women would hold roles as religious functionaries in prehistoric matriarchies. Feminist matriarchalists imagine women serving as "priestesses, healers, and wisewomen," as "female elders," as "diviners, midwives, poets . . . and singers of songs of power": they were "custodians of the spiritual life" of their cultures.<sup>44</sup> Whether or not these exclusively female religious roles were complemented by exclusively female political roles is a matter of some debate among feminist matriarchalists. Most downplay the issue of political leadership altogether, seeming to suggest that these cultures functioned so smoothly that they did not require specially appointed leaders. However, if prehistoric societies were not truly "matriarchal"—ruled by women—then what was women's status, and how did it differ from men's?

The standard answer to this question goes back again to the issue of motherhood. Matriarchal societies are typically portrayed as being centered around mothers, with households consisting first of a mother and her children, and then possibly extending to include her brothers or her husband. Children took their mother's name and kinship status (matriliny); husbands went to live with their wives or mothers-in-law (matrilocality); women owned or controlled their family's property, insofar as it existed. This is not simply a description of prehistoric social arrangements: it is a statement about what matriarchal societies valued. Matriarchal power is different from patriarchal power, feminist matriarchalists say, because it is based on a natural (as opposed to an arbitrary) kind of power, that of motherhood. "The mother cares for the baby until it is able to move about easily by itself, find food, and protect itself without her," Marilyn French explains. "The mother 'rules' by greater experience, knowledge, and ability, but the intention of her 'rule' is to free the child, to make it independent."<sup>45</sup> This is finally the answer to who had social power in prehistoric matriarchies: mothers did; and because they were *mothers*, it was power handled ably, delicately, and benevolently.

Where did this leave men in matriarchal societies? As Phyllis Chesler puts it, "There are two kinds of people: mothers and their children." Men could never become mothers in matriarchal society (or anywhere else, for that matter), so they would then seem to be forever the second kind of person: children. But since, as we have already seen, the women of prehistoric matriarchies were well disposed

toward their children, these societies are said to have been good places for men. As Heide GÖtner-Abendroth explains, "In the matriarchal world the man is at once son, husband, and hero and completely embedded in the universe of women, who lovingly direct everything."<sup>46</sup>

Men were not necessarily infantilized in matriarchal societies. Different versions of the myth of matriarchal prehistory give men greater or lesser roles to play as adults. Men are thought to have had important male-specific roles in matriarchal societies: usually hunting, trade, and herding. Some matriarchalists suggest that women's and men's worlds were largely separate. They had separate duties, separate social networks, separate religious activities, and sometimes even separate living quarters." But other matriarchalists fantasize a culture in which women and men interacted constantly and harmoniously. Mary Mackey's characters in *The Year the Horses Came* rarely perform sex-segregated tasks; even trade and hunting are conducted in mixed-sex groups. Crucially, however, men in prehistoric matriarchies are rarely imagined as having any substantive structural power within the family; certainly nothing that could rival the authority of women as mothers.

One of the most common (and longest-lived) explanations for why prehistory was matriarchal is the notion that prehistoric people—or at least prehistoric men—were not aware of a male role in reproduction. With no connection drawn between sexual intercourse and conception, matriarchalists argue, children would have appeared to be the miraculous product of women alone." This central attention to the fact of childbirth is the hallmark of virtually all feminist reconstructions of matriarchal society. "Woman, as her name implies," writes Janet Balaskas, "is the human with a womb." When feminist matriarchalists describe women's ability to bear children, they speak of "mystery," "miracle," "magic," and the "awe" and "reverence" that this inspired in prehistoric peoples. Feminist matriarchalists expand this to a more generalized reverence for all the sex-specific functions of the female body, including menstruation, lactation, and female sexual response. Menstruation is "bleeding without injury"; it is "primeval dragontime blood," a "shamanic death and rebirth every month" which indicates women's "intimate relationship with the mysteries of the universe," especially "the swelling and ebbing of the moon."<sup>49</sup> This rhapsody to the female body offered by Riane Eisler is fairly typical:



Our Paleolithic and early Neolithic ancestors imaged woman's body as a magical vessel. They must have observed how it bleeds in rhythm with the moon and how it miraculously produces people. They must also have marveled that it provides sustenance by snaking milk for the young. Add to this woman's seemingly magical power to cause man's sexual organ to rise and the extraordinary capacity of woman's body for sexual pleasure—both to experience it and to give it—and it is not surprising that our ancestors should have been awed by woman's sexual power."

Together, women and the goddess, each the reflection of the other, are thought to have formed a "mysterious female universe" that reached out to encompass nature—which, feminist matriarchalists note, also brings forth life. Out of this synergy, say feminist matriarchalists, a culture and a religion were born, the finest the world has ever seen.

#### THE PATRIARCHAL REVOLUTION

The narrative of matriarchal myth wheels around abruptly to unmitigated disaster with the rise of the patriarchy, as catastrophic an event as one could imagine. Obviously, the difficult question is the simplest one: Why? Why did this golden age fall, only to see the world plunged into barbarism and misery? Feminist matriarchalists offer two basic types of explanations for what caused the patriarchal revolution: internal and external. In the first model, critical things—economy, the family—changed within matriarchal cultures, giving rise to male dominance. In the second model, matriarchal cultures were attacked and eventually defeated by patriarchal invaders, who then substituted their own social institutions for those of the cultures they conquered. These models are often mixed—certain factors predisposed matriarchal peoples toward patriarchy, but armed attack by patriarchal invaders tipped the balance. In either case, the patriarchal revolution is dated to roughly the same time: 3000 BCE.<sup>51</sup>

Among internal explanations for the patriarchal revolution, one reigns supreme: the idea that men discovered, fairly late in the game, that they played a role in human reproduction. Knowledge came, some say, when humans began to domesticate animals and observed a cause-and-effect relationship between sexual intercourse and conception.<sup>1</sup> Men, who had long envied the "body mysteries" of women, took this opportunity to seize control of those aspects of re-

production which they could control—namely, the paternity of individual children—and debase those aspects they could not control (such as menstruation).

Male discontent—in this particular explanation for the patriarchal revolution—turns out to be a bit of a worm in the apple, since men were supposed to be content with their lot in matriarchal societies. Men *were* happy in matriarchal societies, feminist matriarchalists say, but they were also besieged with a nagging sense of their own dispensability. They felt "marginal" or "empty," like outsiders; they lacked "the rich sense of herself that women had in those early times, because she was the childbearer"; they suffered a "primal jealousy" of "a woman's total commitment to her infant"; they "felt themselves to be essentially different" from women, not quite "flesh of the mothers' flesh, after all"; and they envied women's ability to menstruate, since it was associated with heightened "psychic awareness and inner vision." Under matriarchal conditions, feminist matriarchalists say, men's sense of inadequacy was carefully contained. As an old woman explains to Ariadne in June Brindel's novel of Minoan Crete, "in the old time, they were in awe and could be gentled." But now, she says, "they are all killers." In the most dangerous mimicry of menstruation, men develop warfare as a "parody of women's monthly bloodshed." "

The other leading internal explanation for the patriarchal revolution attributes it to the changeover from small-scale farming techniques (horticulture or "hoe agriculture") to large-scale agriculture ("plow agriculture") and herding. Plow agriculture generally required the use of irrigation systems and domesticated animals to pull plows, and, so the story goes, the superior upper-body strength of men. With the means of production thus effectively placed in men's hands, and farming raised to a level where surpluses could be produced and traded, all the conditions for patriarchal revolution were in place.' Then all that was required was for men to acquire the will to amass property and social power, use both to their advantage, and pass them to their own progeny. In this department, men were not lacking, though again it is not clear what prompted their avarice.

Animal husbandry has a particularly insidious role to play in this version of the patriarchal revolution. Not only is it sometimes credited with revealing the truth about paternity (especially to men, who

are usually—though not always—said to have developed animal husbandry), but it is also thought to have advanced patriarchy by allowing men to practice techniques of oppression on animals that they would later perfect on women. Things previously unthinkable—forced labor, forced reproduction, confinement—became not only thinkable but doable once they had been done to animals. Further, by observing animals men saw that it was possible for one male to dominate an entire herd, an observation that they then transferred to human society.

All internal explanations for the patriarchal revolution tend to find fault with men. Of course, the myth of matriarchal prehistory is a highly gendered story, and the transition from "good" prehistory to "bad" history is, in its most unadorned formulations, a change from the peaceful, harmonious world of women to the awful, wicked world of men. And yet narrators of the myth are generally reluctant to blame men—at least not all men, or men as a class—for the patriarchal revolution, if only to leave room for a future which will include men without allowing them to dominate. Ironically, when faced with this dilemma, feminist matriarchalists most often turn to external explanations for the patriarchal revolution, particularly invasion theories, in which villains abound.

When it comes to patriarchal invaders, none can rival the popularity of the Kurgans from the Russian steppes (the term Kurgan was coined by Marija Gimbutas to name the invading patriarchs, and is drawn from a form of burial which Gimbutas takes to be the archaeological signature of the group"). This was the group situated to wipe out the matriarchal societies most favored in matriarchal myth: those in Old Europe, the Near East, and the Mediterranean. Two key characteristics of the Kurgans (apart from the obvious, that they were male-dominated) are usually mentioned: they were pastoralists, and they were nomads. The tension between the sedentary agricultural economy of the south (the matriarchies) and the nomadic pastoral economy of the north (the patriarchy) is constantly reinforced in tellings of the myth. So are other oppositions, including that the Kurgans were large, blue-eyed, and blond-haired, while the people of the matriarchies were smaller and darker.' Another, somewhat curious opposition is that between matriarchal women and Kurgan men. Though there were clearly men in the matriarchal societies, it was women who were central, whereas in Kurgan society, at least as it is

narrated by feminist matriarchalists, women rarely surface at all.' Once these contrasting cultures come into contact, the result is predictable: the patriarchs "sweep down" on matriarchal cultures in "huge hordes" and "overrun" them, riding in on horses, animals which matriarchal peoples had never seen before.

This story, in its bare outlines, raises several obvious questions, ones which feminist matriarchalists strive—with varying degrees of success—to answer: Where did the Kurgans come from? How did they come to be patriarchal? What inspired them to invade the matriarchal cultures? How did they carry out their nefarious mission? How were they able to overwhelm the matriarchal peoples not just for a generation or two, but for all time up to the present day?

The question of where the Kurgans came from has a rote answer: the Russian steppes. Gimbutas has brought great precision to questions of the Kurgan homeland. She centers it in southwestern Russia where the Don and Volga rivers approach one another most closely, extending downward from there toward the northern shores of the Black Sea and eastward toward Kazakhstan and the northern shores of the Caspian Sea.' Rhetorically speaking—apart from any archaeological data confirming or disconfirming this theory—this is a terrific place to locate the patriarchal homeland. What is required is a territory big enough to be home to a largish population of marauding warriors; a place from which one can, without crossing enormous geographical barriers (such as oceans) reach Europe and the Near East; a region whose prehistory is neither noble nor well documented; and, finally, since no one wants to come from the place where patriarchy began, a land that is sparsely populated today. On all counts, the Russian steppes—"no man's land"—fit the profile.' Indeed, there is little evidence that most narrators of the myth of matriarchal prehistory know where the Russian steppes are. Maps are rare in feminist matriarchalist literature, and identifying geographical features are typically vague when given at all.' This is a notable omission in works whose entire premise hinges on the existence and spread of a group of conquering warriors hailing from a specific location. Furthermore, peaceful prehistoric matriarchies seem to have been everywhere, including Russia, and even, according to some matriarchalists, "on the vast steppes of Russia." Perhaps truer to the spirit of the myth of matriarchal prehistory is Riane Eisler's frequent insistence that the

patriarchal invaders came from "the barren fringes of the globe,' a place securely off the map of anywhere we might want to call home.

One cannot point to a map or invoke a stock phrase to explain how the Kurgans came to be patriarchal. This more complex question is given a variety of answers, including that herding animals or living in a harsh climate brought out the worst in men. But most frequently, there is no answer at all (which is not to say that feminist matriarchalists do not regard it as a valid question; on the contrary, they consistently state that *something* must have caused the Kurgans to become patriarchal, since all human societies were originally matriarchal"). As Merlin Stone notes, why the Kurgans became patriarchal is "a moot question," since they only come "to our attention" after they arrive "in the Goddess-worshipping communities of the Near and Middle East." Similarly, Gimbutas does not believe it correct to speak of "Kurgan people" until "they conquered the steppe region north of the Black Sea around 4500 B.c."—in other words, only after they were already launched on the path of patriarchal conquest."

The Kurgans are the star players in invasion theories, but they did not have to patriarchalize the world all by themselves. They had help, occasionally from nameless nomads in other parts of the world, but most often from the Semites; specifically, the Hebrews. As Elizabeth Gould Davis explains, "it was these people, cultureless and semicivilized, who first upset civilization in the ancient East by overthrowing the city states and later by dethroning the ancient goddess and enthroning male strife in the form of Yahweh." Feminist matriarchalists speculate that the Hebrews, like the Kurgans, suffered the ill effects of nomadic pastoralism and a harsh climate. But they also accuse the Hebrews of having taken especially cruel steps to destroy goddess religion. The anti-Semitism implicit in this thesis—"blaming the Jews for the death of the Goddess"—has been much commented upon, but the belief that Semitic invaders helped to crush matriarchal cultures is still very much a part of the myth of matriarchal prehistory."

There are a few remaining explanations feminist matriarchalists give for the patriarchal revolution. Matriarchal culture is sometimes said to have fallen apart owing to "famine, disease, [and] natural cataclysm," when "a series of violent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tidal waves rocked the Mediterranean world." Men, with their superior physical strength, took on a new importance as economic scarcity

produced intertribal warfare. A few feminist matriarchalists offer astrological explanations: patriarchy arises in the martial age of Aries and flourishes in the Piscean Age (which is "concerned with duality"), or else patriarchy is nothing more than the "dark moon phase of the Goddess," who in the immediate past five-thousand-year "lunation cycle" withdrew herself and all "feminine energies" from humanity. Another theory, offered rarely, and more in desperation than in earnestness, is that extraterrestrials landed on Earth in 3000 BCE. They either taught us all how to behave badly, or else joined us, becoming the males of the human species. More common, though still unusual, is the theory that men—or at least men as they are presently constituted—are the result of an unfortunate genetic mutation. This theory generally has little explanatory power for the patriarchal revolution because the mutations which created men are thought to have occurred well before 3000 BCE. However, Kristie Neslen, author of *The Origin*, offers an alternative mutation theory linked directly to the patriarchal revolution: Kurgan men, she suggests, mutated toward "a higher level of androgen and androgen sensitivity" and became more violent and aggressive than the men in the matriarchal cultures to the south, whom they were thus able to defeat with ease.'

Part of the problem is that behind the "historical" question of when and why patriarchy arose lies another, more fundamental and disturbing question: How could something as horrible as patriarchy come to exist in the first place and then continue to thrive? This question stems from a deep (and very common) need to explain evil in such a way that it does not swallow up all the good in the world. Feminist matriarchalists face this challenge in a variety of ways. Some claim that the patriarchal revolution was, quite simply, an accident: a very big, very bad accident. The foremost proponent of this viewpoint is Riane Eisler, who consistently refers to the patriarchy as "a bloody five-thousand-year dominator detour" from "the original partnership direction of Western culture." Since then, patriarchy has persisted largely through tradition. People are socialized to accept it as normal, and so they do. The solution is simple: in Eisler's words, we "allow our cultural evolution to resume its interrupted course." 66

That humanity could descend to such depths of depravity and stay there for five thousand years by accident alone, however, is an inadequate answer for most. So feminist matriarchalists often struggle to

find some way of comprehending the patriarchy that makes it, while terrible, nevertheless necessary or useful. One such way is to imagine the switch from matriarchy to patriarchy as a cycle which, over the long span of human history, is relatively benign. Another response is to argue that patriarchy had some redeeming features. Generally, these redeeming features are not specified; rather, there is simply the reassurance that patriarchal institutions "served their purposes, or they wouldn't have lasted as long as they did." More often, the whole question of how—and why—the patriarchy came to be is put off as mysterious or irrelevant. Indeed, some claim that dwelling on this question is a diversion, one that serves patriarchal interests. Feminist matriarchalists encourage their readers to stick to the point. As Kristie Neslen says, "Alas, each possible explanation for how patriarchy arose only seems to bring up more questions. Ultimately the 'why' does not matter as much as the 'how.'"<sup>67</sup>

The "how" of the patriarchal revolution is very similar across different versions of the myth of matriarchal prehistory. Once the patriarchal revolution was under way, it proceeded by means of warfare, slavery (including sexual slavery), and religion, through which the patriarchy consolidated its power and staked a claim in Western consciousness that is still deeply ingrained five thousand years later.

What guaranteed short-term victory for the Kurgans was the monopoly of force they commanded. According to feminist matriarchal myth, matriarchal peoples did not manufacture weapons of war; their villages and towns were undefended; and, perhaps most critical, they did not have the moral will to wage war: it went against everything in their value system. When (and if) they learned to fight back and defend themselves, say feminist matriarchalists, they were starting from too far back in the game. Some add that once the matriarchal peoples learned the arts of war, they were no longer what they had been: the virus of violence and male domination had entered them, and it was only a question of time before they became indistinguishable from their patriarchal enemies."

With warfare comes slavery, and with slavery, a more perfect means of oppression. According to Gerda Lerner, when large-scale warfare first began, men who were caught in war were killed, while women, who were easier to control and who could be used to breed children, were enslaved.' Gradually, this basic form of relation-

ship—that of master and slave—came to infect all relationships between men and women. As men discovered their role in conception, they wished to ensure that their property would go to their biological offspring. But in order to determine paternity with certainty, men had to restrict women's sexual behavior. Once a woman's sexuality "belonged" to one man (or in the case of prostitutes, to whichever man purchased it for the moment), she became, in a real if limited sense, his property.

The final mechanism for perpetrating a patriarchal revolution was religion. Patriarchal religion developed in two directions: the construction of a male-dominated pantheon and worship of a single male god. Feminist matriarchalists sometimes see this as an evolutionary development—first the patriarchs sapped female deities of their power, then later eradicated them—but these two types of patriarchal religion are related rather transparently to the two purported sources of patriarchal invasions: the Kurgans and the Hebrews. The Kurgans insinuated their propaganda into the psyches of matriarchal peoples by splitting the matriarchal great goddess into dozens of goddesses, each with her own "department." These goddesses were then married to Kurgan sky gods (or raped by them) to form a dual-gendered, male-dominated pantheon. The Semitic solution (documented, say feminist matriarchalists, in the Bible) was to erect a single male god called "Father" in the place of the great goddess of matriarchal times. Ultimately, this god takes more heat from feminist matriarchalists than do the Kurgan sky gods. It was not until "we began to worship one male god," some feminist matriarchalists say, that we truly "became patriarchal." 70

#### PATRIARCHY AND BEYOND

How do women and men fare in patriarchy? In a word, poorly. Women's victimization is systemic. But men are banished from the garden as well, according to feminist matriarchal myth. No longer the cherished sons of the goddess, men are subject to cruel hierarchies of status among themselves, alienation from women and nature, and a painfully limited range of role choices.'

Feminist matriarchal myth does not imagine much change over time and place in the structure of patriarchy. Women's status has fluctuated over the past five thousand years but has never changed sub-



stantially from that established by the patriarchal revolution. However, under this smooth patriarchal exterior lies a subterranean river of goddess religion which emerges in folklore and nonelite religious practices, and even surfaces—albeit in disguise—in the patriarchal religions of the West (particularly in the person of the Virgin Mary). Matriarchal myth is replete with accounts of churches built on top of old goddess shrines, Catholic saints who are goddesses in disguise, and Christian holidays that are mere adaptations of pagan festivals."

Most feminist matriarchalists regard the return of goddess-worshipping matriarchal cultures (in one form or another) to be a possibility, and some—though not many—regard it as a foregone conclusion. There is a very strong apocalyptic strain in feminist matriarchal myth that shows itself in dire comments about the possible death of the planet. But there is also some confidence that "patriarchal structures are cracking at the seams," that we are reaching "an evolutionary dead end." As Hallie Iglehart Austen tells us, "The world is more ready for her [the Goddess] than it has been for millennia and more in need of her than it has been for all of human existence." "It is an exciting and awful time to be alive.

It is often thought that women will play a special role in bringing about this enormous social revolution. They will balance out men's tendencies to be "aggressive, competitive, and possessive," and allow a new, more cooperative social order to emerge.<sup>1</sup> Others, however, suggest that the solution to the present predicament lies equally with men: either with their ability to recognize the damage they have done and to step aside and let women repair it, or, more positively, to follow in women's footsteps by adopting "feminine" ways of being, working in concert with women for social regeneration. The "rediscovery" of matriarchal prehistory is itself sometimes seen as a sign that the patriarchy will soon collapse and make way for something new.<sup>1</sup>

There is no single vision of what the future will be, but interestingly, there is near unanimity that it will not be a simple recreation of our prehistoric matriarchal past. If nothing else, our "much larger population" and "greater technological complexity" make it impossible, say feminist matriarchalists, to reproduce prehistoric matriarchies in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Pragmatic considerations are not the only ones operative here; some feminist matriarchalists do not wish to return to prehistoric matriarchies because they regard them as being

"out of balance" in a feminine direction, just as patriarchy is imbalanced in a masculine direction. Matriarchy and patriarchy are thought to represent extremes, while the future has the potential of bringing a new, superior synthesis.

Most feminist matriarchalists, however, are unwilling to count the matriarchies as flawed. Certainly they are not as flawed as the patriarchy that followed. The future feminist matriarchalists seek is most commonly a recreation of prehistoric matriarchy on a "higher," more technologically advanced level: completing a circle back to matriarchy, as Barbara Mor and Monica SA5 describe it, but at the same time, as on a spiral, revolving to "a larger circle." Just where women will stand in these future societies ranges from equality with men to special respect for women to being "dominant and listened to" under a form of government described as "a socialist matriarchy." Some feminist matriarchalists indulge in involved fantasies of what a future matriarchal utopia would include; others never look too far beyond "the matriarchal counterrevolution that is the only hope for the survival of the human race."

This, then, is the story that has given many feminists today an enhanced sense of self-confidence and pride in their femaleness, and a deep hope for the future of us all. With benefits like these, it is no surprise that the myth of matriarchal prehistory has attracted a substantial and enthusiastic following. But before we risk advancing it as either a desirable account of human history or a true one, it is important to explore the myth's gendered assumptions.

## The Eternal Feminine

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is a univernalizing story: once things were good, everywhere; now they are bad. And since the operative terms in matriarchal myth are gendered ones, what emerges by way of explanation is a robust, universal theory of sex difference. Matriarchalist assumptions about how sex determines personality, preferences, and values are sometimes only implicit, but they are always present. Though some interpreters earnestly attempt to avoid these implications of matriarchal myth, the myth continues to feed off of a very reductive notion of who women—and by extension, men—are.

### SEX DIFFERENCES IN MATRIARCHAL MYTH

Feminist matriarchalist assessments of femininity and masculinity are rooted most strongly in a particular vision of female embodiedness. Feminist matriarchalists frequently refer to their bodies as a source of insight, knowledge, and power, a source more reliable than "what a woman might know with her mind." This embodiedness does not stop with the individual; women's bodies are said to be the "only true microcosm" of the universe. Female bodies are thus the vehicle through which we are supposed to recognize the value of the earth and of nature.' With near unanimity, feminist matriarchalists assert that these connections between women, bodies, and nature are not simply poetic metaphors or politically savvy conceptualizations, but a fact of life, based primarily on women's ability to reproduce.'

Reproduction, as we have seen, is perceived as miraculous by feminist matriarchalists. It is also thought to teach women an important spiritual lesson that is less available to men. When pregnant,

women have "an Other inside." As the boundary between "me" and "not-me" becomes blurred, women come to appreciate that "everything is intimately connected, everything is oneness." Beyond pregnancy, discussion of the skills and traits that mothers must develop to deal effectively with infants and children sometimes makes its way into matriarchalist discourse. Jane Alpert, for example, draws attention to qualities she sees issuing from the practice of motherhood, including "empathy, intuitiveness, adaptability, awareness of growth as a process rather than as goal-ended; inventiveness, protective feelings toward others, and a capacity to respond emotionally as well as rationally." More commonly, however, the emphasis is on childbirth itself. For example, when Marrah gives birth to twins in Mary Mackey's novel *The Horses at the Gate*, the first three years of the children's lives pass in less than twenty pages. Most of these pages concern the plottings of Marrah's enemies. All we learn of Marrah's first three years as a mother is that "the twins grew fat on Marrah's milk" and that she and her lover Stavan were occupied with training horses.' Clearly the actual work of motherhood takes a distant backseat to the miracle of reproduction.

This focus on childbirth has been troublesome to many feminists, even to those who are strongly attached to the myth of matriarchal prehistory. At one level it seems to suggest that unless and until women give birth, they are excluded from this most essential of female "mysteries." This has the potential to become quite a problem, since many feminist matriarchalists—probably more than the national average—are childless.' As a consequence, much effort is devoted to assuring women that the actual bearing of children is not necessary in order to express feminine creativity, fertility, and closeness to nature. As Meinrad Craighead explains, "whether or not a woman does conceive, she carries the germinative ocean within her, and the essential eggs." Whatever women create, be it "tissue in the womb or pictures in the imagination," it is created "out of our bodies."

Since a female identity centered on childbearing is problematic, feminist matriarchalists have at times attempted to center it elsewhere, typically on menstruation. As Anne Carson explains, menstruation is "one feature of our bodies that all women can share and celebrate, whether we are heterosexual or lesbian, mothers or childless." But

the focus does come back unerringly to childbirth, probably because producing menstrual blood is simply not as impressive as producing a human being. Furthermore, childbirth is one of the few remaining fortresses of femaleness in a time when most of the accoutrements of female sex can be purchased for the price of hormones and a surgical operation. The ability to bear children is the only thing of great value that women have that "men could never take from them"<sup>8</sup>—or at least that they haven't taken yet.

Built on this foundation of childbirth is a larger structure of femaleness which concentrates on such traditional "feminine" virtues as nurturance and compassion. Women "tend to cluster," says Maurreen Murdock. They "like being related, helpful, connected." In essence—and I choose that word with care—feminist matriarchalists portray women as naturally good, kind, loving human beings. Women "do not use their power to dominate or to subordinate," but rather "to increase the well-being of their environment." They "are naturally inclined to assume responsibility for the welfare of others," and they prefer "a more securely ordered, fruitful, lawful, ethical, and spiritual way of life."

If this is what women are like, what should we expect from men? Mostly, it turns out, the opposite. Charlene Spretnak (drawing on the work of "neuropsychologists") says that men "excel at many visual-spatial tasks, daylight vision, and gross motor movements," but that "when it comes to grasping oneness and at-large bonding (i.e., active empathy with people beyond one's circle), most men are simply not playing with a full deck." Elizabeth Gould Davis puts it more bluntly: "Man is the enemy of nature: to kill, to root up, to level off, to pollute, to destroy are his instinctive reactions to the unmanufactured phenomena of nature, which he basically fears and distrusts." Aggressiveness, possessiveness, and competitiveness are all said to be male traits. Men are as capable of thought as women are, but what distinguishes them from women is that their rationality is the "cold, divisive, or killing calculation of logic."<sup>10</sup>

One matriarchalist vision of men puts them in the role of wild little boys who, under matriarchal control, would become harmless and amusing. Merlin Stone suggests that through goddess spirituality, women are saying to men, "Stop this pretense of glory and importance, and look at the mess you've made!" Barbara Walker imagines

that without the monotheistic male God standing behind men, women would "simply laugh at male posturings of self-validation and assertiveness" and would respond to them "with nothing more than her ancient, casual 'Yes, dear, that's nice, run along now.'" Another matriarchalist vision casts men in a considerably more sinister role. In this view, men have no "energy" of their own and so must pirate it from women. They "literally and figuratively plug into" women, casting women in the role of "batteries" or "the Vampire's energy source."

One wonders how women and men ever could have lived happily together, especially when what is wrong with men often seems to be quite permanent. Some feminist matriarchalists have described men as mutants whose "small and twisted Y chromosome" is "a genetic error" resulting from, perhaps, "disease or a radiation bombardment from the sun."<sup>12</sup> Other feminist matriarchalists find men's eternal secondariness illustrated in the development of human embryos. Claiming that all human embryos "are anatomically female during the early stages of fetal life," they conclude, with Rosalind Miles, that women are "the original, the first sex, the biological norm from which males are only a deviation." No wonder a T-shirt proclaims "T.G.I.F. (Thank Goddess I'm Female)," for who would voluntarily choose to be male?'

Feminist matriarchalist thought is not always characterized by these excesses of misandry. There are other, more prominent strains in matriarchal myth that take a far more accommodating attitude toward men (though not ultimately ones that put men on an equal footing with women). Many feminist matriarchalists emphasize the point that women—and also the goddess—give birth to males as well as females. When pregnant with boys, women contain maleness within themselves, and this is taken as a metaphor for the ultimate inclusion of men within a female universe. Men are embedded within nature, just as women are, though owing to the natural limitations of their bodies—their lack of firsthand experience of menstruation or childbirth—it is more difficult for them to achieve this insight."

Some feminist matriarchalists try to provide—or at least allow for the existence of—positive male role models, the sort of men who might have lived and flourished in prehistoric times. The Motherpeace tarot deck, created by Vicki Noble and Karen Vogel, includes

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"Sons" in each of the four suits who "represent positive male energy" and who can "help a person imagine positive ways of being male in a culture where 'male supremacy' has all but destroyed manhood." Just what these "positive ways of being male" are Noble does not say, though she remarks that it is "ugly and gross to equate masculinity with murder and rape, pillage, greed, and a mindless ransacking of the planet," and she articulates the hope that "some other manifestation of the Masculine" is "waiting to be revealed to us." As Monica Sjoö remarks, "boy children are not born patriarchs, nor is it through a natural process that men become such." In other words, according to most feminist matriarchalists, men are not beyond hope.

In fact, many feminist matriarchalists do not regard maleness as a problem at all. In its place, "masculinity" is as important and valuable as "femininity"; the key is that the two must be in balance, not only in society as a whole, but in individual human beings as well, some say. All "creative and inspirational thinking, all nurturing, mothering and gestating, all passion, desire and sexuality, all urges towards connectedness, social cohesion, union and communion, all merging and fusion as well as impulses to absorb, to destroy, to reproduce, and to replicate" are included in the "universal archetype of the feminine," say Jennifer and Roger Woolger, but this does not mean that these qualities are closed off to men. Feminist matriarchalists sometimes invite men to encounter their "feminine side" or the "feminine within." Likewise they suggest that women have a "masculine side" with which they are more or less closely in touch.' "Masculine" and "feminine" thus become congeries of characteristics which, while arranged under gendered labels, have nothing to do with the potentialities of either gender or with physical sex.

Or so the theory goes. But it is very difficult to disconnect terms like masculine and feminine from male and female persons. When feminists were fighting the battle against the use of generic male terms, they pointed out, quite rightly, that so long as the same term was used to mean both male-specific and person-general, people would continue to "see" the normative person as male and woman as "other." Surely the same is true of the adjectives "feminine" and "masculine": apologetics aside, hearers will always call up mental pictures of the requisite sex when these words are in use. If feminist matriarchalists were truly eager to make the point that the characteristics

we have labeled "feminine" and "masculine" were erroneously attached to sexed persons when they are actually the property of all regardless of sex, then one would think that they would simply dispense with the terms. The reason they do not is because they are *not* eager to lose the gendered connotations of the terms (in spite of occasional protestations to the contrary), and it is worth asking why.

In fairness, some feminist matriarchalists have made earnest attempts to discard the terminology of "the feminine." Starhawk, for example, has increasingly resisted the use of such terms, telling Mary Beth Edelson in 1989 that "'feminine principle' doesn't mean much—it's one of the many terms that makes us *think* we know what we're talking about when we don't. I think we should declare a moratorium on its use."<sup>17</sup> But most feminist matriarchalists do not want to sacrifice their special access to "the feminine" on the altar of gender neutrality; at least not yet. So they grope around for alternative terms (*never very successfully*), *hedge themselves about with disclaimers*, and then *wade right back into the morass of gender* stereotypes they profess some interest in escaping.

There can be no better exemplar of this phenomenon than Riane Eisler. Eisler has been particularly diligent in instructing her readers not to confuse "femininity" with women, or "masculinity" with men, and to recall that these sexual stereotypes are "socially constructed" rather than corresponding "to any inherent female or male traits."<sup>18</sup> Yet her work is filled with these terms (always carefully enclosed in scare quotes).

The idea that femininity belongs most properly to women, while men are also capable of possessing it, conforms to common usage. (That *is*, "femininity" is the sum of all those characteristics thought to be descriptive of—and appropriate to—women, but men sometimes evince those traits, and when they do, they are called "feminine" or "effeminate.") It is peculiar though that feminist matriarchalists like Eisler should retain this usage, as it is based on a deep dichotomy between women and men, femininity and masculinity. And arranging the world into dualisms (like feminine and masculine) is said by feminist matriarchalists to be a patriarchal practice. Indeed, some feminist matriarchalists claim that this was the key patriarchal innovation that put an end to the matriarchal way of thinking, which was "wholistic" and "deliberately non-dualistic."<sup>19</sup>



In spite of this, the entire premise of feminist matriarchal myth is dualistic: there was a time in the past, associated with women, when people lived and thought one way; now there is a time, associated with men, when people live and think in another way. Furthermore, matriarchy and patriarchy are not simply two ways of being in the world, existing in a complementary balance (the sort of relationship feminist matriarchalists sometimes envision for women and men, "feminine" and "masculine"); they are polar opposites, one good and the other evil. In feminist matriarchal thought, the goddess, who abjures dualisms, is constantly pitted in direct opposition to the patriarchal god of western cultures, whose primary failing is his penchant for separating "us" from "them," "good" from "bad," "mind" from "body," and, of course, "women" from "men." In a remarkable piece of double-think, Elizabeth Judd tells us that "the recognition of rigid gender distinctions is characteristic of males but not females"; and yet here she is, female, marking out rigid gender distinctions upon which her entire theory of human life and history rests.

The hope seems to be that with the one, correct, overarching dualism—whether matriarchy versus patriarchy, partnership versus dominator, goddess versus god—all the other terms will lose their polarizing grip. Eisler says this explicitly: "Through the use of the dominator and partnership models of social organization for the analysis of our present and our potential future, we can . . . begin to transcend the conventional polarities between right and left, capitalism and communism, religion and secularism, and even masculinism and feminism." But in Eisler's work, nothing like this happens. Instead, the oppositional terms proliferate. All manner of human qualities and behaviors are relentlessly assigned to partnership and dominator categories, yielding long lists of dualistic pairs. In *The Partnership Way*, the study resource for *The Chalice and the Blade*, these pairs are presented in table form, with two columns running side by side to help the reader compare and contrast the "two basic alternatives for the organization of human society." There are clear value judgments in this table. No one would have to think too long or hard to decide whether war was preferable to peace, hoarding to sharing, or indoctrination to education.

Where do these differences between female and male, feminine and masculine come from, and how inescapable are they? Feminist

matriarchalists differ on this point. We have already seen that biology, primarily the experience of childbirth and the possession of a uterus, plays a role. Feminist matriarchalists are certainly not above employing (and occasionally even admitting to) biological determinism. For example, Jane Alpert proudly proclaims that "*female biology is the basis of women's power* [her emphasis]," that "biology is . . . the source and not the enemy of feminist revolution." References to "female psyche" and "female soul," to "the spirit, the energy, the frequency, the form of women," indicate that gender differences are not a superficial matter for feminist matriarchalists. Gender differences reach far down into realms where even patriarchal religions have hesitated to find them. Thus while feminist matriarchalists wish for harmony between the genders, they rarely express a hope for nondifferentiation.<sup>22</sup>

But biological determinism does not tell the whole story of how feminist matriarchalists understand gender. There is a cultural component as well, particularly in the insistence that the qualities women evidence today are at least in part the product of the social roles they have occupied over the past several millennia, roles assigned to them by male dominant cultures. Some cite the psychological theories of Nancy Chodorow, suggesting that women's closeness to nature and to others comes from having been parented primarily by their mothers, the parent of the same sex—traits that therefore might change if men became more involved in child care (which is indeed what Chodorow recommends)."

In fact, the myth of matriarchal prehistory could almost be read to say that gender, at least as we know and experience it, is a cultural invention. One of the greatest strengths of matriarchal myth from a feminist perspective—arguably, one of the main reasons it was created—is that it gives historical rather than biological reasons for the dominance of men.' And, at least in theory, matriarchal myth could also give us license to believe that what we think of as femininity and masculinity are not inborn traits but are the cultural constructs of a patriarchal system, and thus are rooted no more deeply than this five-thousand-year-old social organization.

Tellingly, feminist matriarchalists rarely make this move.' Sexism is certainly said to be a historical construct, but femininity—however it is understood—is usually taken to be timeless. Women are seen as a class of people who have predictable attitudes, values, and preferences

almost regardless of their social context. This class of people experiences fortunes and reversals over the span of prehistoric and historic time, but their fundamental nature does not change. Matriarchal myth was conceived in strong reaction to the thesis that human society has always been patriarchal because of biologically determined sex differences, yet its basic approach has been to accept these biologically determined sex differences, while shrugging off the inevitability of their current arrangement.

#### THE PITFALLS OF "DIFFERENCE FEMINISM"

With its celebration of the unique capabilities and attributes of females, feminist matriarchal thought places itself firmly in the camp of "difference feminism," a way of thinking about women's liberation that dates back at least as far as the first wave of American feminism in the nineteenth century. The goal of difference feminism is to see that women's special roles and values are accorded adequate respect, a respect equivalent (or perhaps superior) to that accorded to men's. Difference feminism has been defended on two grounds: first, that it is more effective to appeal to sex differences than to "sameness" between the sexes, whatever the reality; and second, that "difference" is in fact a more accurate reflection of reality. Inevitably though, the two positions drift together. As Kwame Anthony Appiah points out in reference to race, "group identity seems to work only—or, at least, to work best—when it is seen by its members as natural, as 'real.'" Certainly in the case of feminist matriarchal thought, that differences exist between the sexes is almost always believed to be the way things really are. Difference feminism is not a position that feminist matriarchalists adopt only for temporary convenience; rather there is a set of defining features about women and men that are expected to continue indefinitely. Given this, say the proponents of difference feminism, it would be folly to behave as though women and men were fundamentally the same. To do so may even constitute sexual violence toward a group (in this case women) "whose difference is effaced."

Difference feminism has some strengths, especially tactical ones, but it also creates—or at least permits—a wide range of problems that feminist matriarchal thought illustrates especially well. These pitfalls sort themselves into three basic groups: the content of the feminine ideal that feminist matriarchalists uphold; the fact that they uphold a

feminine ideal at all; and finally, the question of how closely this feminine ideal conforms (or does not) to "naturally" occurring sex differences.

The first thing one notices about the matriarchalist vision of femininity is how very familiar it is: nurturance, relationality, embodiedness, and links to the earth and nature are hardly new connotations for femaleness. Surely it is reasonable to want to rehabilitate activities and values habitually defined as—and denigrated as—feminine. But to do so by keeping these activities and values affixed to women is problematic. For one thing, it is not as though this collection of gender stereotypes has never cast women in a positive light before: it is a staple of right-wing antifeminist rhetoric to stress the nurturing, affiliative qualities of women, along with their undoubted ability to give birth and lactate. The valorization of motherhood—as an ideal type separate from individual women's experiences of it—is a tactic that has served patriarchal cultures very well. Even as women's childbearing and childrearing activities have been named as the seat of a higher and purer morality—on the face of it, a very positive move--women have been bracketed off from historical processes, indeed from the entire project of culture. Romantics have hailed "Woman" as the avatar of "nature" for centuries now, as a being that could rescue us all from "the artificiality of civilization."<sup>27</sup> But such views have typically left women firmly in their traditional places, not significantly disrupting the public, patriarchal world or its policies.

It is hard to believe that staying within a patriarchal culture's lexicon of femininity can provide a hardy alternative to the present order. Falling back into the traditional meanings of these stereotypes will be the path of least resistance. This is particularly worrisome when one takes note of the longevity and cross-cultural prominence of associations between women, the body, and nature. These associations reach back through Western history for millennia, but, as Sherry Ortner notes, they are "hardly an invention of 'Western culture.'" According to Ortner, all cultures seek to negotiate the divide between "what humanity can do" and "that which sets limits upon those possibilities." This divide has frequently been linked to gender, with males representing freedom and females constraint, males "culture" and females "nature." There is a natural human tendency to favor possibility, opportunity, and achievement over impotence, restraint, and stasis, and

so long as women are linked with the latter they will be relatively devalued. In Simone de Beauvoir's estimation, a "renewed attempt to pin women down to their traditional role" (which she describes as "woman and her rapport with nature, woman and her maternal instinct, woman and her physical being"), "together with a small effort to meet some of the demands made by women—that's the formula used to try and keep women quiet." 28

Of course, feminist matriarchalists believe that associations between women, the body, and nature are not theirs to adopt or discard at will, because they believe these associations are rooted in a reality they cannot change. You can't buy, bribe, pretend, or achieve your way out of femaleness, feminist matriarchalists say, and they consider it both foolish and morally reprehensible to try. Indeed, feminist matriarchalists have a lively interest in the phenomenon of "pseudomen": women who adopt roles or attitudes that are thought to be traditionally male. They think such women have been sold a bill of goods: sometimes by "the patriarchy," but more often by other feminists. Feminist matriarchalists cast slurs on these women, extend pity to them, and fear becoming them. They relate conversion narratives in which striving, "male-identified" women come to a crisis in their lives that teaches them how important it is to "get in touch with" their femaleness. In one such cautionary tale of male-identification, Jean Shinoda Bolen relates the story of her friend Freya, who accompanies Bolen on a pilgrimage to goddess sites in an attempt "to be more in touch with her feminine energies." Prior to this, Freya had "lived too much in her head and intellect and had spent most of her time with men." Freya's was no idle quest; she had developed cancer of the uterus, and she saw "a meaningful coincidence" between her uterine cancer and the male environment she had called home."

In *The Heroine's Journey*, Maureen Murdock discusses in more general terms the sad fate of "male-identified women." These women adopt the "stereotypical male heroic journey," seeking worldly success and choosing male mentors and role models. But on the very threshold of achievement, these women find themselves exhausted, ill, unhappy, and confused. They develop substance abuse problems, or "they are silent until the lump in their breast or cervical cancer makes them come to terms with the fact that the heroic journey did not take into account the limitations of their physical bodies and the

yearnings of their spirit." These women, Murdock says, have been "injuring their feminine nature." To heal their feminine nature they take up ceramics, cooking, gardening, or massage; they redirect their energy to "giving birth to creative projects, rediscovering the body, and enjoying the company of other women"; they may abandon their careers and seek marriage and motherhood. Though this may look like "dropping out," Murdock argues that what is really happening is that women are finding their true, feminine selves and coming to understand how reckless it is for women to attempt to live by a male

And so feminist matriarchalists set off on a quest for an authentic womanhood which "has been dormant in the underworld—in exile for five thousand years."<sup>31</sup> But in the absence of any sure information regarding what "femininity" is ("into what exactly are we to develop?" asks Kim Chernin, "if we are not . . . taking on masculine attributes, clothes, and qualities?"<sup>32</sup>), feminist matriarchalists typically fall back on the image of femaleness they grew up with: woman as mother, as the tender of children and gardens (and even husbands), as she who lives in the world of emotion and relationships and does not soil herself with the pursuit of money or power. Feminist matriarchalists construct this as an exceptionally strong version of femaleness, a "world-building" one not to be confused with the sentimental Victorian "angel in the house," and yet the two have much in common. In their creation of a "feminist femininity," matriarchalists have done remarkably little to move off the territory of patriarchal femininity.

Even if they did, however, there are difficulties associated with declaring *anything* inherently "feminine." For to the extent that a woman becomes the embodiment of "the feminine," she gains an archetypal identity, but loses a human one. Feminist matriarchalists gaze in at themselves, in the wonder of self-discovery, but what looks back at them is not their individual self, but the eternal feminine. It can be difficult to resist this idealization. As Andrea Dworkin points out, "It is hard for women to refuse the worship of what otherwise is despised: being female." ' But it is dangerous *not* to refuse it. The practical effect of clinging to a single concept of femaleness—whatever its content—is that it becomes not an ideal type that you naturally express, but one that you must live up to, whether or not it fits

with your interests and inclinations. Your only options are to follow the path laid out for you, or to forge off into the underbrush and at best be branded as "inauthentic" and "male-identified," and at worst die of uterine cancer. This is if you happen to belong to the same social classes and ethnic groups as most feminist matriarchalists. If you do not, *your* cultural versions of femaleness are either nothing more than delightful variations on the eternally feminine theme, or they are smokescreens impeding the view of your true femininity. In short, instead of broadening the concept of what women can be, feminist matriarchal thought narrows it, making "femininity" about as inescapable as a pair of leg irons.

Further complicating the matter is that in order to construct femininity, one must construct masculinity too. And dividing human characteristics along gendered lines is an invitation to sexism. Theoretically, it should be possible to make sharp distinctions between classes of people while still valuing each class equally and providing them with equivalent opportunities in life.' In practice, this rarely happens (something the U.S. Supreme Court recognized in *Brown v. Board of Education*, when it ruled that "separate but equal" education could never be truly equal). It might not be a pleasant fact about ourselves, but it seems that human beings have a hard time making a clear distinction without at the same time being tempted to make a differentiation in value. This has long been the case with gender, where distinctions between women and men devolve effortlessly into assertions of superiority and inferiority.' The doctrine of genetic inferiority—which some feminist matriarchalists happily apply to men—has long been employed as a device to subordinate whole groups of people, including nonwhite races, women, and the working classes.<sup>36</sup> Feminist matriarchalists presently lack the means to marginalize and subordinate men on the basis of men's supposed genetic inferiority. Much more important, they lack the motivation. Feminist matriarchalist visions of a matrifocal, gynocentric future almost always include men as active, respected participants. Nevertheless, their frequently veiled, occasionally explicit embrace of the doctrine of genetic inferiority leaves room—in principle if not in practice—for such abuses.

A strong conception of femininity not only encourages sexism, it also encourages racism and classism. Defining femaleness by a few key

biological attributes and their supposed psychological corollaries implicitly trivializes differences across cultures, over time, and between individuals. As Sue Monk Kidd proclaims of women's journeys to discover the goddess and prehistoric matriarchies, "women's differences tend to give way to something more universal . . . we find a deep sameness beneath our dissimilarities. We find we are all women, and down deep we ache for what has been lost to us." With all women thus enfolded within the deep sameness of their femaleness, any other way a woman chooses to (or is forced to) identify herself is arbitrarily rendered secondary by feminist matriarchalists. If, for instance, a working-class woman feels herself to have more in common with working-class men than with upper-class women, she is simply misguided. As with class, so with race.'

Perhaps though, gender is just this determinative, overriding all other identities we might have or take on. Perhaps, as feminist matriarchalists sometimes state, femaleness is written on every cell of our being, and any attempt to deny the absolute centrality of our feminine identity is a flight of fancy that we cannot afford to indulge.

These are not conclusions that sex difference research, for all its flaws, supports. Feminist matriarchalists cite sex difference studies occasionally, but they resolutely fail to note their most important finding: that variations between individuals of the same sex are invariably greater than categorical differences between the two sexes.' In other words, if the distribution of a particular trait forms a bell-shaped curve within each sex, the two curves overlap, usually by quite a lot.

What does this mean in practical terms? To take an example, one sex difference study reported that among a sample of children, is to 20 percent of the boys scored higher on a measure of "rough-and-tumble play" than any of the girls. This is a comparatively large difference, by the standards of sex difference research. But this study also concluded that 80 to 85 percent of the boys were not rougher or more physical in their play than 80 to 85 percent of the girls: an impressive overlap.' Or to take a more intuitively obvious example, one can measure the heights of women and men and conclude quite factually that men are on average taller than women. But one cannot reliably predict an individual's sex by height alone: short men are shorter than most women, and tall women are taller than most men. This also means that if you have work that needs to be done by short people, it



would be decidedly inefficient for you to ask that only women apply, since many women would not fit the job description, and many men would.

In other words, statistically significant sex differences are achieved long before socially significant ones are. And even statistically significant sex differences are less common than the rhetoric of feminist matriarchalists would suggest.

This is especially impressive when one considers that sex difference research—like feminist matriarchal thought—is strongly biased in favor of positive findings (that sex differences exist) over negative findings (that the sexes are similar in important ways). As neurophysiologist Ruth Bleier remarks sarcastically, "there is . . . no field of 'sex similarities.'" Further undermining the credibility of this research is that it cannot be carried out on fully precultural beings, so whatever sex difference it uncovers is potentially a contribution of culture rather than biology. For example, one study of differential mathematical ability in boys and girls proclaimed that it had found an inherent difference between the sexes. But as some of its critics pointed out, "anyone who thinks that seventh graders are free from environmental influences can hardly be living in the real world." In fact, we know that people treat even infant boys and girls differently, which suggests that culture may play a very dramatic role in constructing gender. Researchers playing videotapes of babies dressed in gender-neutral clothing have found that observers will identify a baby's behavior as an expression of "fear" when they are told the baby is a girl and "anger" when they are told the baby is a boy. Mothers playing with infants variously dressed in "gender-appropriate apparel" and "cross-gender apparel" behaved more physically with the "boys" and "responded with soothing and comforting actions" in response to the "girls." Parents have been shown to encourage their daughters, as early as seven weeks of age, "to smile and vocalize more than their sons."<sup>40</sup>

Discussions about sex difference often degenerate into a fruitless argument between those who see women and men as being dramatically different, for biological reasons, and those who assert that no such differences exist. Both positions are untenable. The former, as just noted, has not been supported by sex difference research, even in an environment where *we* know sex differences to be exaggerated by

cultural forces. The latter, even if it has some deep philosophical truth, will simply not wash for people who can spot women and men at a hundred paces and make an accurate identification 95 percent of the time. But also, and more importantly, even if there are significant biological differences between women and men—differences that affect not only reproductive roles, but also aptitudes, values, and preferences—this does not necessarily entail everything feminist matriarchalists assume.

#### NEGOTIATING SEX DIFFERENCE

Suppose for a moment that the behavioral differences feminist matriarchalists identify between women and men are real, and are biologically based. Even so—even if "biology is destiny"—there is still a lot of flexibility built into that equation. People frequently react to the suggestion that we choose anything other than what is most "natural" for women and men as though this were heresy: both psychologically dangerous and morally wrong. And yet we make choices "against nature" all the time, every day. We wear clothes, we drive cars, we heat our homes, we cut our hair; we do everything in our power to live as long as we can, far past what "nature" has allotted to us, even supplying ourselves with prosthetic limbs and artificial hearts if we need them. To act as though we would never be so foolish or presumptuous as to tamper with our biological destiny is the purest hypocrisy. We develop a sudden squeamishness about interfering with our "natural" biological destiny when it comes to gender—which is very convenient for systems of male dominance—but clearly what is most "natural" to us as human beings is the use of culture to adapt our bodies and environments to suit our needs, wishes, and values.'

Steven Goldberg, author of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, notes sarcastically that the differential in male and female strength could be eliminated by making women lift weights and confining men to bed.' Though he regards this as a ridiculous proposition, in fact, he is right: this would undoubtedly be an effective means of reversing biological tendencies, making women generally stronger and men generally weaker. There are other ways of negotiating the tendency of men to be physically stronger than women. Separate athletic competitions can be held for women and men in most sports; girls can be given remedial physical fitness training; physical strength can be taken

advantage of whether it is women or men who exhibit it; and there is, of course, the middle-class Victorian favorite, its echoes still audible today, of exaggerating a biological differential in women's and men's strength by putting men to work and keeping women in their parlors. There is no *a priori* reason, written on our genes, that forecloses any of these options. Some may be more practical or desirable than others—certainly in feminist terms—but these are decisions of culture, not biology.

Nevertheless, biology continues to hold a mystical attraction for most contemporary westerners. It continues to be seen as bedrock, the firm foundation upon which culture is built. This assumption permeates discussions of feminist matriarchal myth, pro and con. For example, scholar of religion Rita Gross concludes that "biological explanations for male dominance, if accurate, would suggest that efforts to eradicate patriarchy are futile?" But if biology is bedrock, it is geologically active, constantly moving and shifting. This is the entire premise behind Darwinian evolution. If humans move to a new environment, their biology gradually adapts, via natural selection. In other words, a cultural choice—to migrate—eventually makes a biological difference. Or to take a classic sociobiological example, if women preferentially select bigger, stronger males as mates—perhaps a sensible choice in a warrior culture, for example—the entire population may gradually become bigger and stronger. Again, culture may be seen to move biology: very slowly, but definitely.

Sociobiologists themselves rarely recognize these as cultural choices. They assume, to take the above example, that human females are biologically programmed to select bigger, stronger males as mates. Yet the enormous variety in how different cultures value different traits would suggest that there is nothing biologically determined about such choices. Genetically altering the human population as a method of producing, say, a gender egalitarian society may not be practicable or morally sound, but it is simply false to insist that our biological makeup is a fixed unchanging essence over which cultural conventions are forever doomed to dance ineffectually.

This leads directly to a logically prior question, however: whether "biology" and "culture" can be productively separated at all, their relative influences pinpointed and quantified. This is a difficult concept to grasp in a world where the nature/nurture game is played out end-

lessly in books, on radio talk shows, and in the conversation of parents trying to fathom why their children behave as they do. But the point is not just that we can be wrong (as we often have been in the past) about what is irreducible human nature and what is the product of cultural learning. Rather it is that the two don't exist independently of one another. Our biological "essences," if we have them, cannot, by definition, have an arena in which to express themselves that will not also inevitably affect the content of that expression. It is impossible to have an organism without an environment. The idea of a biological "essence" to human nature (or to women and men separately) may be a helpful tool for thought, but its existence and character are only stipulated, never demonstrated.

This calls into question the usefulness of the classic feminist distinction between "sex"—which is biologically foreordained—and "gender": that set of role expectations and stereotypes built upon it. This is true first in practice: though "sex" is supposed to be a set of obvious biological facts, these "facts," as science has described them, have changed dramatically over time, typically shifting in response to changing political needs regarding gender. But it is also true in principle: sex—biological sex—is never "outside or before culture," and thus it cannot be distinguished from gender, which is more usually taken to be the site of cultural practice. As Thomas Laqueur says, the actual existence of sexual dimorphism notwithstanding, "almost everything one wants to *say* about sex . . . already has in it a claim about gender." "Rooting sex in biology, then, is not the last word on anything, even though it typically postures as such.

Despite their claims of biological determinism and robust sex difference, feminist matriarchalists recognize the cultural determinants of gender. This is seen most obviously in their frequent exhortation to women that they must *learn* to be women. There is a feminine nature captured within women that is struggling to be free of the cultural doctoring of patriarchy, say feminist matriarchalists, and it is the task of women living now to find out what that nature is. This task can be challenging. As Vicki Noble explains: "Women do not know how to be feminine. We may think we have a corner on the market, since we were born with feminine bodies, but it's just as new to us as if we were men. We have to create the feminine."

What feminist matriarchalists don't tell us is *why* we have to create

the feminine. Why can't we just ignore it and see if it goes away? Surely if sex differences are as strongly determined as feminist matriarchalists suggest, they will continue to bubble up regardless of what we do culturally to change them. In the absence of any gendered expectations, presumably men would continue to grow beards; why would women not as easily continue to evince traits of nurturance and relationality, whatever they were taught to the contrary, if this is in fact our biological nature?

The feminist matriarchalist answer to this is undoubtedly that women *do* evince these traits, over and over again, across all cultures, all the way back to prehistoric times. But if this is so, why can't they leave it at that? Let women become who they naturally are, but don't suggest to any individual woman that she's not doing a good job of being female, and that therefore she must learn to be feminine? On the face of it, it is odd that the same people who are most devoted to the "naturalness" of sex differences—from fundamentalist Christians to feminist matriarchalists—also seem to be afraid that these "natural" sex differences will disappear if we don't constantly reinforce them, sometimes by outright coercion. What nightmare do they imagine awaits us if we stop obsessively labeling characteristics as feminine and masculine? Will we fail to recognize who we need to have sex with to make babies and the entire race will come to an end? (I say this with tongue in cheek, but I also believe that our addiction to labeling everything as masculine or feminine is part and parcel of our heterosexism.)

Why is it that feminist matriarchalists continue to cling to the edifice of gender difference, where women have been walled in for millennia? Perhaps the best explanation is that they see no escape. Whether "femininity" is produced by the possession of two X chromosomes or by a lifetime of cultural indoctrination is beside the point. Either way, gender is a reality against which everyone—but particularly women—must contend. Given this reality, maybe the best we can do is to see how the facts of femaleness can be negotiated to serve women's interests . . . which is precisely what the myth of matriarchal prehistory does. Popular culture shows no sign of ceasing to regard sex differences as important. (The *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* phenomenon is sufficient to prove this.) If anything, the pink and blue blankets have been swaddled ever more

tightly over the past ten to fifteen years in reaction to feminist claims for equality. Feminist matriarchalists are not imagining that sex differences exist; they *do* exist, and they legislate life choices with a sometimes frightening force.

This is something that is easy to overlook if one has spent too much time in the rarefied air of gender studies. Currently popular theories about both sex and gender are that they do not exist outside of culture—a point to which I have already given my enthusiastic assent—and that furthermore they are only able to exist through their constant reiteration in acts and symbols. Gender is, these theories say, “not a fact or an essence, but a set of acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance.” Gender is not embodied, they say, but performed, over and over again.” Whatever the intent of this analysis, the psychological effect of dwelling on the insubstantiality of gender is to make gender appear ephemeral and therefore powerless. If gender is only able to retain its force because we reinforce it today and then again tomorrow, theoretically it will stop dead in its tracks the minute we announce a sit-down strike.

Gender may in fact be nothing more than the effect of a performance (and I obviously have no wish to suggest that it is the unmediated outcome of biological sex difference), but it still has incredible social power which we ignore at our own risk. Biological, cultural, or performed, gender is very, very real.

The closest available parallel to gender in this sense is probably race. Both gender and race are assigned at birth, and people are then “tagged for life by certain phenotypic markers.” Both types of identities are arrayed in hierarchical social systems. And race, like gender, is assumed to make a statement about an individual's true nature that reaches far beyond the “visible morphological characteristics” which are initially used to place an individual in a specific category. Until recently, race was believed to be determinative in exactly the same way as gender: biologically. Though this theory is now in disfavor among biologists and anthropologists (who believe that race “refers to nothing that science should recognize as real”), the fact is that race is still terrifyingly real. As Kwame Anthony Appiah explains, “belief in races”—which has “profound consequences for human social life”—“is real enough to make up for the unreality of races.”

The great advantage to difference feminism is that it takes account

the feminine. Why can't we just ignore it and see if it goes away? Surely if sex differences are as strongly determined as feminist matriarchalists suggest, they will continue to bubble up regardless of what we do culturally to change them. In the absence of any gendered expectations, presumably men would continue to grow beards; why would women not as easily continue to evince traits of nurturance and relationality, whatever they were taught to the contrary, if this is in fact our biological nature?

The feminist matriarchalist answer to this is undoubtedly that women *do* evince these traits, over and over again, across all cultures, all the way back to prehistoric times. But if this is so, why can't they leave it at that? Let women become who they naturally are, but don't suggest to any individual woman that she's not doing a good job of being female, and that therefore she must learn to be feminine? On the face of it, it is odd that the same people who are most devoted to the "naturalness" of sex differences—from fundamentalist Christians to feminist matriarchalists—also seem to be afraid that these "natural" sex differences will disappear if we don't constantly reinforce them, sometimes by outright coercion. What nightmare do they imagine awaits us if we stop obsessively labeling characteristics as feminine and masculine? Will we fail to recognize who we need to have sex with to make babies and the entire race will come to an end? (I say this with tongue in cheek, but I also believe that our addiction to labeling everything as masculine or feminine is part and parcel of our heterosexism.)

Why is it that feminist matriarchalists continue to cling to the edifice of gender difference, where women have been walled in for millennia? Perhaps the best explanation is that they see no escape. Whether "femininity" is produced by the possession of two X chromosomes or by a lifetime of cultural indoctrination is beside the point. Either way, gender is a reality against which everyone—but particularly women—must contend. Given this reality, maybe the best we can do is to see how the facts of femaleness can be negotiated to serve women's interests . . . which is precisely what the myth of matriarchal prehistory does. Popular culture shows no sign of ceasing to regard sex differences as important. (The *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* phenomenon is sufficient to prove this.) If anything, the pink and blue blankets have been swaddled ever more

tightly over the past ten to fifteen years in reaction to feminist claims for equality. Feminist matriarchalists are not imagining that sex differences exist; they *do* exist, and they legislate life choices with a sometimes frightening force.

This is something that is easy to overlook if one has spent too much time in the rarefied air of gender studies. Currently popular theories about both sex and gender are that they do not exist outside of culture—a point to which I have already given my enthusiastic assent—and that furthermore they are only able to exist through their constant reiteration in acts and symbols. Gender is, these theories say, "not a fact or an essence, but a set of acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance." Gender is not embodied, they say, but performed, over and over again." Whatever the intent of this analysis, the psychological effect of dwelling on the insubstantiality of gender is to make gender appear ephemeral and therefore powerless. If gender is only able to retain its force because we reinforce it today and then again tomorrow, theoretically it will stop dead in its tracks the minute we announce a sit-down strike.

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The great advantage to difference feminism is that it takes account



of this reality where gender is concerned. It meets people where they are, in a world where sex determines quite powerfully and completely. This alone goes far toward explaining the appeal of feminist matriarchal myth. Since "femininity," "femaleness," and "womanhood" are categories against which all women are measured—with or without their consent—it is arguably a stroke of psychological genius to *revalue* those categories *such* that they *become* marks of pride rather than discomfort or shame. Basically, if one has to be a woman, with all that implies in terms of opportunities and expectations (or lack thereof), then imaging femaleness as strong, praiseworthy, beautiful, and possibly superior to maleness would seem to have its merits.

Again, the parallel to race is instructive. Construing race as a positive source of identity—instead of as an imposed insult—has historically been one means of dealing with racism. It is the "difference feminism" of racial politics. But while this approach has a definite payoff in terms of enhanced dignity and self-esteem, it does nothing to escape the straitjacket of race itself. And since the categories of race have been from the beginning tools of racism—since this may indeed be their only *raison d'être*—there is something discomfiting about accepting race as a positive identity.

All these drawbacks are present in feminist matriarchal thought as they are in racial politics. Feminist matriarchalists construct femaleness as a positive identity. But both the category of femaleness and its content are to a large degree determined by prior discrimination against the very people who are forced to occupy that category. Difference feminism then, for all its apparent support of women, underwrites the system upon which sexism feeds.

Is there any other option? I like to think that there is, but it is important to appreciate how difficult it is to criticize the way women are perceived and treated and simultaneously insist that there is no such thing as femaleness *per se*. Obviously there is, or it wouldn't be possible to know who we—the mistreated—are. There is a deep and compelling desire among feminists to have it both ways: we are women, and there are things about femaleness that we treasure and want to celebrate; yet we will not be limited in our choices and actions just because we happen to fall into the category you have labeled "woman." Without femaleness—the category of women—feminism "would be lost for an object, despoiled of a fight"; but with this category

firmly in mind, it is too easy to forget that "femaleness" serves sexist interests, was possibly created to do so, and will always threaten to continue to do so."

Fortunately, this dilemma may yield up its own solution. We can begin by acknowledging that within patriarchal cultures, theories of "femaleness" or "femininity," as well as the general division of people into two incommensurate sex categories, serve to rationalize the social domination of one class (women) by another (men). These notions of femininity (and masculinity too) do not correspond to some objective reality, some biological or cultural "really real" gender difference. They are, quite simply, "the mechanism by which women are subordinated to men." Returning to the very overworked language of sex and gender, it is because gender exists—i.e., because the social positions of women and men differ hierarchically—that it becomes worthwhile to take note of biological sex. Gender "naturalizes" male dominance, just as race naturalizes—that is, provides a supposed biological excuse for—racism.<sup>1</sup> As feminist theorist Christine Delphy argues:

No one is denying the anatomical differences between male and female humans or their different parts in producing babies, any more than . . . that some humans have black and some white skins. But since science has thrown out all "biological explanations" of the oppression of the working class and non-whites, one after another, we might have thought that this type of account of *hierarchies* would have been discredited. . . . Why should we, in trying to explain the division of society into hierarchical groups, attach ourselves to the bodily type of the individuals who compose, or are thought to compose, these groups?

If gender exists only (or primarily) as the means through which oppression is achieved, surely there can be no merit in reifying it, as feminist matriarchalists do. The obvious option seems to be, as feminist scholar Denise Riley suggests, "to stand back and announce that there *aren't any* 'women.'" <sup>51</sup> And yet there are. I meet them on the street every day, and they and I both know that they are women and that that has no small effect on what sort of lives they are able to live.

It seems to me that it is more productive to recognize this reality, to call these people women, just as they have been named in the service of a male dominant ideology, but at the same time to insist that

what makes them women is not their genitalia or any sex differences that may or may not follow from their biological sex, but simply their secondary status in a male dominant culture. Women are not then a sex, as we commonly understand the term, or even a gender, but a group of people who have been placed in a sometimes idealized, often despised category. The gendered category in which women have been placed has formed their experience. But they are not the rightful occupiers of this category; they are merely the product of the category's existence. Essentially, this is a stalwart refusal to play the game of gender—which is the game of sexism—while recognizing that its victims (both male and female) are very real. So long as the category exists, and people are placed in it, there will be women, and they will be in need of political action directed toward their liberation.

On the face of it, this approach has the disadvantage of making women seem to be nothing more than their victimization, and of course we are much more than that. But we need not be more than that *as women*; we can simply be more than that, just as all people are arguably more than the categories into which they have been (productively or tragically) placed.

In her book *Women's Mysteries*, Christine Downing discusses her ambivalence regarding female identity: "I want to embrace the word women *and* cast it off," she says. "I would like to say (to myself and others), Choose if you belong and how. Yet I also see that it is not entirely a matter of choice. Even resisting our inclusion in the category seems inevitably to be possible only in the context of having already internalized containment by it." <sup>Sz</sup> I would put it a bit differently: Whatever you think you are choosing, there are plenty of people out there who have already decided where you fit in the scheme of things, and if you think you are going to convince them that you are not female because you personally "resist inclusion in the category," then you are sadly mistaken.

This was brought home to me several years ago when I was being interviewed for an academic job. In the course of this interview, there was a rather heated exchange about sex difference. One of the interviewers responded to a remark of mine with the comment, "If it were appropriate for me to say so, which it isn't, I would tell you that yours is a very male way of thinking." Did this mean I was in some sense a man? Could I decide that I felt more comfortable thinking in this

male way, and as a result, would people recognize that I was "really" a man? This question was answered rather forcefully when I left the interview and walked out into a dark and deserted downtown area in my dress-for-success suit and high heels. Certainly none of the men I encountered on my very nervous walk back to my hotel recognized that I had opted out of femaleness by choosing to think like a man. They saw a woman, and, as I concluded from their stares and catcalls, they saw a target.

This is, I suggest, what femaleness is—the experience of being perceived to be a woman and being treated as women are treated (however it is they are treated in any particular cultural context, whether it is to their personal detriment, or benefit, as it sometimes can be). Femaleness can be other things, of course; it can be defined by the experience of bearing and nurturing children, the claim to a close connection to nature, the cozy community of the kitchen after a family dinner—wherever female individuals or groups find it to be, feminist matriarchalists included. But none of these is femaleness *per se*, nor should they be confused with it. They are pockets of femaleness, experiences of subgroups of women. The only femaleness that is characteristic of all women as a class is the experience of having the label "woman" affixed to one's being.

On the positive side, this understanding of who women are has the potential to enable women to work together across other lines of social difference. Sexism comes at women in very different guises depending on race, class, and other measures, and these different sexismisms must be approached individually. But if the fact of sexism applies to women of many different sorts, this provides an opportunity for making common cause, for building coalitions with one another.

Defining women by the sexism that labels them also does not rule out the possibility of rehabilitating values traditionally dismissed as "feminine." We can work to make the world a place that practices compassion and nurturance, that values relationships and the natural world. In doing so, we can note that these qualities have been attributed to women in recent Western history, and perhaps elsewhere as well. We can even suggest that more women than men embody these values today, since having been given these identities, women to some extent have become them. Insights like these can play a valuable role in the broader context of a feminist movement. They can provide

useful political perspective and increased self-esteem (as they do for proponents of feminist matriarchal myth). But this must not degenerate into universal claims about who "women" really are, what traits they will (or ought to) evidence as a result of their biological sex. These stereotypes can ricochet back on us in potentially disastrous ways. In the inimitable words of Millicent Fawcett, a nineteenth-century British feminist: "We talk about 'women' and `women's suffrage,' we do not talk about Woman with a capital W. That we leave to our enemies." 53

## Finding Gender in Prehistory

Matriarchal myth is problematic on feminist grounds. By organizing itself around "the feminine"—an ideologically strong but politically regressive foundation—feminist matriarchal myth cannot recommend itself to us as a remedy for male dominance. We still have to confront the possibility though that prehistory happened just as matriarchal myth says it did. And if matriarchal utopia and patriarchal revolution are our true heritage, we must find ways to encompass that, even if our understanding of sex and gender and our goals for feminism differ from those of feminist matriarchalists.

As it happens though, matriarchal myth fails completely on historical grounds. Evidence from prehistoric times is comparatively sparse, and hard to interpret conclusively. However, even taking these difficulties into account, what evidence we do have does not support the thesis that prehistory was matriarchal and goddess-worshipping, or even that it was sexually egalitarian.

Probably the greatest challenge for the myth of matriarchal prehistory is, of course, the fact that matriarchies are said to have occurred prehistorically, before written records of any kind. Thus one very important source for reconstructing the human past—texts—is absent.<sup>1</sup> Feminist matriarchalists sometimes claim this is no handicap: they regard the nonliterate record as so rich and deep that written texts are simply not necessary to establish important truths about prehistory. Certainly it is important not to overvalue written texts, or to rely on them to the exclusion of other sorts of evidence. Written sources, just like material sources, must be interpreted, and can be misinterpreted.<sup>2</sup> But even if the availability of written documents is

not considered a watershed in our ability to know the past, it adds dramatically to the sheer volume of evidence at our disposal. Still, a variety of resources can be brought to bear on the task of discovering what gender relations were like in prehistoric times and whether or not they fit the model of peaceful, woman-honoring theocracies that feminist matriarchalists envision.

#### CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND GENDER

Cultural anthropology's contribution to reconstructing prehistory is its documentation, via ethnography, of other cultures. Information about contemporary and historical tribal groups is used both to help interpret the material remains that archaeologists uncover and to speculate about prehistory in the absence of material evidence from the past. The assumption here is that the ethnographic record, as compiled over the past few hundred years, provides data that allows us to observe important correlations in human social life (say, between communal ownership of property and nonhierarchical social relationships); illustrate specific phenomena that may have been relevant in the past (for example, that hunting is generally a male preoccupation); or, most grandly, serve up full-bodied exemplars, living untainted by modernity in remote parts of the globe, of what past human societies "must have been like."

When early anthropologists (and colonialists and missionaries) first encountered other cultures, they used this method extensively. They placed the cultures they documented on a continuum from most primitive to relatively more advanced. This continuum doubled as a timeline, recording the stages of human progress. Primitive peoples—encountered not only in South Sea isles, but even in urban ghettos and among peasant farmers—were "living fossils": they represented "the history and experience of our own remote ancestors when in corresponding conditions." It was further thought that the social practices of prehistory could be inferred from vestiges of those practices incorporated into contemporary cultures: this was the so-called doctrine of "survivals."

These postulates have been roundly criticized by twentieth-century anthropologists. First, even the most "primitive" peoples we know of have been on earth as long as the rest of us "civilized" folk and so have had ample time to develop in a variety of directions away

from our shared deep prehistory. Second, the choice of which cultural characteristics are to count as "survivals" of a prehistoric past and which are more recent inventions is quite arbitrary, based mainly on what one hopes, in advance, to confirm for prehistory.' Most cultural anthropologists today forswear the tendency to draw easy equivalences between the practices of living peoples and our prehistoric ancestors. Even attempts to compare a wide swath of living cultures in search of their common features are increasingly out of fashion among anthropologists.

Still, anthropologists continue to speculate about prehistory through the use of ethnographic material. It is very tempting to do so, and besides, it makes good sense. Without going to the extreme of suggesting that all human societies are blindly marching through a predetermined historical trajectory (with some—conveniently for prehistorians—getting stuck in the early stages), it is still reasonable to hypothesize that there may be certain regularities in human social relations, ones we can uncover by looking at as many different societies as we can. Granted that tribal groups are not fossils from the Stone Age, they nevertheless have more in common with how we believe our prehistoric ancestors lived (namely, in small groups, subsisting by hunting and gathering or horticulture) than we do.' When feminist matriarchalists attempt to make their case for a gynocentric prehistory through ethnographic analogy then, it is not their basic premise that is flawed.

Actually, these days the greatest limitation of ethnographic analogy as a means of reconstructing prehistory is probably not its sloppy application to prehistoric questions, but how the ethnographic record was and is constructed. Though on the face of it, it might seem a straightforward matter to go live with the natives, learn their language, and report on their customs, it is notoriously difficult to give accurate, informative portrayals of human cultures. What is seen has a great deal to do with who is seeing it, and with who is giving the "insider" accounts that ethnographers so often rely upon. Ethnographers face the further problem of choosing between the evidence of their observations and the reports of informants. These do not always agree, even on the most basic matters. For example, I have heard fundamentalist Christians assert that the man is the undisputed head of the household and then watched as fundamentalist women transparently



bulldozed their preferences into family policy. Clearly, both the assertion and the behavior are important, but they are just as clearly contradictory, and for ethnographers eager to be responsible mouthpieces for the people among whom they have lived, navigating their way between these two can be tricky.

These difficulties are only compounded when the attempt is made to gather together these various partial and biased ethnographies in order to hazard guesses about what counts as a general rule of human social life. Existing ethnographies have been composed with a huge variety of agendas in mind, including everything from converting the primitive heathens to Western values to learning from the wise natives how to reform corrupt Western culture. Some groups (unfortunately, many groups) are now gone, and therefore we must rely on whatever existing records we have, no matter how poor, if we wish to learn anything at all from them. But even investigations undertaken now, presumably with a heightened methodological sophistication, must be carried out by many people. No one person could do the fieldwork necessary to have a firsthand appreciation of a large number of peoples. So if the quest is to reconstruct prehistory, armchair anthropology is a necessity. We have to be prepared then to work around its shortcomings.

One attempt to correct its shortcomings has involved setting down in advance what cultural features ethnographers should document. This greatly eases the task of comparison. But collecting data on some predetermined item like cross-cultural religious practices assumes that there is something like "religion," as the researcher defines it, among the people under observation. Looking for religion is a near guarantee that one will find it, even if it's not there. The opposite holds true as well: walking into another society with the expectation that the people there may think about everything from ontology on up in a way completely foreign to you is likely to produce an ethnography full of fascinating exotica accompanied by reflections on the irreducible uniqueness of human cultures and thought systems. Finally, even relatively valid generalizations are likely to fall victim to the Kamchatka syndrome: that there is some place in the world—say, Kamchatka—where the rule doesn't hold.'

This only becomes more complicated once the sensitive topic of gender is tossed into the mix. For quite some time, it was thought that

a full and accurate picture of a group's gender roles could be attained as soon as there were enough female ethnographers in the field, dutifully quizzing female informants. Early male ethnographers rarely asked about women's roles, and when they observed women in other lands, what they saw was influenced by their biases and expectations. On the one hand, if native women seemed to have freedoms that women in their own homeland lacked, the tendency was to give an exaggerated estimation of their autonomy, simply because it appeared unusual by Western standards. On the other hand, many assumed that males were always dominant, foreclosing in advance the possibility of discovering less obvious forms of women's social power.

But the introduction of female fieldworkers into the discipline did not, as expected, suddenly throw a great light upon women's lives. If anything, the opposite occurred. The more cultural anthropologists looked at gender, the less, it seems, they were able to see . . . or at least to agree upon. It turned out to be surprisingly difficult to determine just what women's status was in any one group, not to mention across many cultures.' Perhaps this should not be surprising, when one stops to consider how differently people view the status of women in contemporary American cultures. Feminists are virtually unanimous in believing that women's status is always worse than men's, differing only in how dreadful they assess the situation to be. But there are others who think that women are better off than men, experiencing less pressure to achieve success in the world of work, savoring the deep satisfactions of bearing and caring for children, having emotional lives and networks of support that are far more rewarding than men's, and so forth. Just how women are faring in the United States is not an idle question, for if we are unable to come up with any standard to evaluate women's status at home, what makes us think we can do so abroad, or in the past?

Indeed, the same range of perceptions of women's status that we see in the United States arises when observing cultures not our own. Two ethnographers reporting on the same group can—and sometimes have—come back saying opposite things.' Often it seems to come down to the attitude of the observer: does she want the glass to be half full, or half empty? If half full, she will return with reports of women's separate rituals, the significant amount of productive work women do, and informants' own statements that relations between

the sexes are as they should be. She will tell a story about a savvy woman who worked around formal sex inequality to assure that she got her own way. If half empty, she will return with reports of women's exclusion from male rituals, the undervaluation of their work, and anecdotes of culturally approved beatings of wives by their husbands. She will tell a story about a girl baby left to die during a food shortage while a boy born at the same time was tended carefully.

The greatest divide in ethnographies of gender seems to be between those anthropologists who focus on official ideology and those who are more attuned to behavioral variation and face-to-face interactions. Those anthropologists who have come to the conclusion that women are everywhere subordinate to men are usually looking at ideology, while those who see women as at times equal or dominant are generally drawing their conclusions from behavior. This makes sense: presumably women's power is always there, if you trouble yourself to look for it and aren't too picky about what form it takes. As Sherry Ortner notes, "whatever the hegemonic order of gender relations may be—whether 'egalitarian,' or 'male dominant,' or something else—it never exhausts what is going on"; for "every society/culture has some axes of male prestige and some of female, some of gender equality, and some (sometimes many) axes of prestige that have nothing to do with gender at all."

Whether out of loyalty to their informants or fear of ethnocentrism, many feminist anthropologists have been loath to see and name sexism in other cultures in places where they would find it in their own. Or conversely, they emphasize women's status and autonomy in other cultures in forms they would not recognize as such on their own turf. Anthropologist Alice Schlegel assures us, for example, that corn-grinding by Hopi women is not "the onerous and time-consuming task it would appear to be" since "women sing corn-grinding songs as they work to lighten the task and express its life-giving contribution."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps we should not automatically assume that this is an instance of sexism, but it should at least raise a red flag in our minds. American slaves sang songs too (much to the satisfaction of their masters, who interpreted this as a sign of contentment), but this cannot justify the conclusion that slavery was not really an oppressive institution. Even if we had reports from slaves themselves in which they swore that they considered themselves fortunate in their lot, we

would have to regard those reports with suspicion. Similarly, we should regard with suspicion women's statements from ethnographic contexts that appearances of sexism notwithstanding, they find their lives to their liking. This does not mean that these women are being dishonest; individuals can enjoy and appreciate their lives while still being in structurally disadvantaged positions relative to others.

Given the frustrations inherent in attempting to pin down the status of women, many feminist anthropologists have abandoned the task as such. Some go so far as to argue that women and men do not exist anywhere except as cultures create these categories. Therefore the responsible anthropologist will not even assume that there *are* women and men in a given culture until she has been shown that these are relevant social categories for the groups under study. A current goal in the anthropology of gender are to "favor specific histories, debunk essentializing categories" and turn attention to "the subtleties, complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of gender relations in different contexts." 11

Again, this is not the level at which the myth of matriarchal prehistory operates. It is a very general story, based on generalizing premises. One could, of course, reject the story on that basis alone, and many anthropologists (feminist and otherwise) do. But it seems more fruitful to give feminist matriarchalists the benefit of the doubt, and ask if the ethnographic record, mixed and contradictory as it is, lends support to their claims.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY AND GENDER

Archaeologists look first and foremost at the actual remains of prehistoric cultures: those things that can be dug up out of the ground, held in one's hands, and seen with one's eyes. Material evidence like this could provide an impressive amount of information about prehistory if our ancestors planted their remains to send us a message about their cultures: a sort of time capsule. But what we actually find—"the accidentally surviving durable remnants of material culture" <sup>12</sup>—is more of a scattershot affair and, unfortunately, most remains are not detectably gendered.

This has not stopped archaeologists from reading gender into material evidence from the past, however. Particularly over the past fifteen years, archaeologists have been eagerly playing catch-up, bringing

thirty years of academic and political debate on the topics of sex and gender into their discipline. For a variety of reasons, archaeologists came late to this debate. Inherent difficulties with attributing gender to prehistoric material culture combined with a naive sexism to produce an archaeology that was rarely explicit about gender, ruling it out as a conceptual category while all the time smuggling it in in the form of unquestioned assumptions. The situation has changed altogether since then, as unprecedented archaeological attention is given over to questions of gender, among not only self-described feminists, but archaeologists of all stripes. Great hope is held out that archaeologists can shed light on such questions as "the universality of gender ideologies and gender divisions of labor, how and why gender relations vary, how and why they evolved, whether or not truly egalitarian societies have existed, and the origins of gender inequalities" 13—questions of obvious interest to feminist matriarchalists.

Though almost everyone seems game to find gender in the archaeological record, no one is quite sure how it should be done, or even if it *can* be done. Skeletons can be sexed as male or female (within a margin of error), and then examined in order to draw tentative conclusions about women's and men's diet, life expectancy, and patterns of work based on bone degeneration, tooth wear, and mineral content in the bones themselves. Grave goods, if they differ between female and male skeletons, may also offer clues to prehistoric gender, and some paintings and sculptures give clear evidence of sex. But beyond this, it is impossible (at least without historical or ethnohistorical support) to know which artifacts go with which sexes. Even the most basic questions—who makes those weapons? who uses those grinding stones?—cannot be answered definitively through the preliterate material record alone. And so archaeologists typically rely on ethnographic analogies to other cultures to help them interpret the gendered significance of their material finds. For example, spear points are generally attributed to men, since in most human societies we know of, men are responsible for hunting.

Attributions like this are inevitably controversial. Recently it has even become difficult to make arguments about prehistoric gender based on sexed skeletons, for there is concern that a biological female may have been a social man (or vice versa), or that other gendered categories beyond the standard two existed. These would be impossible

to detect if it were unproblematically assumed that female skeletons are the remains of women, and male skeletons the remains of men. Even this is not the end of the potential ambiguities of prehistoric sex and gender, for as we now know, biological sex itself is not set on a simple male/female switch, but may be composed of a variety of chromosomal and morphological anomalies.'

This difficulty with identifying prehistoric women is probably exaggerated. Ethnographic evidence supports the notion that gender is a cross-cultural phenomenon of impressive universality, and the vast majority of individuals can be—and are—easily differentiated into sex classes on the basis of their genitalia.' Nevertheless, the fact that most archaeologists of gender are taken by the possibility of "third genders" has a decisive impact on the questions they ask of their material evidence, and indeed how they view the entire enterprise of discussing prehistoric gender. Catherine Roberts has distinguished between "the archaeology of gender," which asks that questions of gender be added to the archaeological agenda, and "gendered archaeology," which has the broader ambition of reframing archaeological inquiry altogether. Most feminist archaeologists have been rather contemptuous of "the archaeology of gender," referring to it as the "add gender and stir" approach. "Gendered archaeology" is still developing, but it rests on two basic assumptions: that gender was a pronounced category in prehistory and that it was characterized by "variability, permeability, changeability, and ambiguity," that it was "dynamic and historically specific."<sup>16</sup> This is something quite different than what feminist matriarchalists imagine for the past, for where feminist archaeologists expect variety, feminist matriarchalists expect uniformity.

Indeed, feminist archaeologists have relatively little in common with feminist matriarchalists, in spite of their shared interest in the role of women in prehistory. They operate out of entirely different assumptions, owing mainly to the fact that feminist matriarchalists are greatly indebted to the work of Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas, for all her research on gendered symbols in prehistory, never entered the gender and archaeology discussion. She began her work much earlier than most feminist archaeologists, and like other archaeologists of her generation—especially European archaeologists—Gimbutas was a grand theorist. She was not interested in reconstructing one possible

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account of one particular archaeological site; rather she was intent on telling *the* historical truth about a huge swath of human prehistory.

Gimbutas's defenders have suggested that her work has been dismissed by archaeologists because she portrayed prehistory as goddess-worshipping and matricentric." And yet earlier archaeologists made extensive claims for prehistoric goddess worship—and even for a female priesthood—while retaining a high standing in their field. More likely, Gimbutas's status in archaeology was peripheral because she represented a way of approaching prehistory that her colleagues had repudiated: she was considered passé, embarrassingly so. Like someone's eccentric uncle Henry, Gimbutas was infrequently criticized, and more often stolidly ignored by her archaeological colleagues, who did not wish to disown her but, on the other hand, didn't want to be publicly associated with her. As archaeologist Bernard Wailes reports, "Most of us tend to say, oh my God, here goes Marija again." 18

It would be relatively easy to pit the arguments of feminist matriarchalists against, say, the claims of the archaeological establishment today, but this is ultimately unfair to all parties involved. There is no archaeological consensus, and if there were one, we would still have to question whether or not it were correct. Feminist matriarchalists are seeking a matriarchy in the past, which undoubtedly colors what they find there. But other prehistorians are also "seeking validation in the past" for their own scholarly and political agendas.' No prehistorian can abstract herself away from the sorts of passions—sometimes explicitly political passions—that drive her to study prehistory.

Some feminist matriarchalists have explicitly defended the investigation of prehistory as a political exercise. Eschewing "objectivity" as neither possible nor desirable, they wish to work their "life experiences, histories, values, judgments, and interests" into their research as legitimate interpretive tools. This is not a view limited to feminist matriarchalists. Other prehistorians have enunciated it too, with somewhat different emphases. For example, in *Reading the Past*, archaeologist Ian Hodder notes that each generation asks their own questions of the past, viewing new or altered evidence in novel ways. With these constantly shifting agendas and methods, Hodder claims that "the ultimate aim" of archaeology "can only be self-knowledge. In projecting ourselves into the past, critically, we come to know ourselves better." 20

On the one hand, to say this is merely to state the obvious: history (and prehistory) is authored in the present by human beings, each of whom has interests and is situated within a particular world of meaning. But it is an entirely different thing to suggest that because the past can be known only imperfectly, through the agency of biased individuals, that therefore one account of the past is as good or bad as another. There are dangers associated with this idea, dangers that feminist matriarchalists have no trouble recognizing. Feminist matriarchalists do not wish to claim that all accounts of prehistory are relative, that there is no basis for choosing among competing accounts apart from individual preference and political usefulness, because then they would have to admit that androcratic interpretations of prehistory that stress the inevitability and universality of patriarchy are as valid as their own.

All prehistorians are interested in establishing the plausibility of the stories they tell about prehistory; all want to offer coherent accounts based on the available data. What is required then is some way of adjudicating competing truth claims about prehistory, a way of building rigor into accounts of prehistory. In judging the adequacy of feminist matriarchalist accounts of prehistory I will be working from a few simple standards that are not specific to particular archaeological, anthropological, or historical methodologies, but are inherent in all of them. First, an adequate account of the past must offer data in its support. Second, it must seek to interpret all the data, and not merely that which is convenient to or supportive of the theory. Third, it must strive to have conclusions follow evidence, rather than the other way around. And finally, it must be possible to show that an account is wrong or implausible: in other words, it must be falsifiable. This last standard of adequacy for an account of human prehistory is the most important one, and to a large extent subsumes the others. A theory may be interesting and provocative, even true; but if there is no way to tell whether or not it is true—that is, no way to disprove it—it can only be a conversation piece. It is no more likely to be accurate than any of dozens of imaginative and even compelling stories told about prehistory, stories that draw their persuasive power not from what we see in the prehistoric record but from our own culturally limited notions of what we wish or believe prehistory to have been like.'

In light of these basic standards, I will examine those prehistoric



materials that archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, and feminist matriarchalists have relied upon in reconstructing prehistory, particularly those of late Paleolithic and early Neolithic Europe and the Near East, asking if the evidence feminist matriarchalists cite truly supports the story they tell, and if the evidence they *don't* cite tells another story.

# The Case Against Prehistoric Matriarchies I:

*Other Societies, Early Societies*

There are many claims that feminist matriarchalists make for prehistoric societies that can be tested against the ethnographic and archaeological records. For convenience, they can be collected into four broad categories: reproduction and kinship, goddess worship, women's economic roles, and interpersonal violence. The question of whether or not prehistoric cultures practiced extensive goddess worship will be examined in the next chapter, when we turn to prehistoric art and architecture. Here, confining ourselves to ethnographies from contemporary and historical societies and nonrepresentational material evidence from prehistoric societies, we will judge the plausibility of such central feminist matriarchalist claims as men's ignorance of their role in conception, the correlation between goddess worship and women's social status, women's invention of agriculture, and the peacefulness of prehistoric societies.

## REPRODUCTION AND KINSHIP

According to feminist matriarchalists, the miracle of childbirth—especially miraculous when no male role in conception was recognized—caused all women to be viewed with respect and honor. Strong links between mothers and their children led to matrilineal kinship systems and matrilineal residence patterns which placed women in positions of social power.

The idea that prehistoric peoples might not have recognized paternity was first proposed in the nineteenth century. From the comfort of their armchairs, several anthropologists speculated that "primitives" either were so promiscuous that fatherhood could not be

determined or that they were ignorant of the connection between sexual intercourse and conception. This speculation received some grounding in ethnographic evidence when reports filtered back from Australia and Melanesia that certain aboriginal peoples denied that sexual intercourse had anything to do with pregnancy. One of the earliest of these reports came from W. E. Roth in 1903, who said the Tully River Blacks of North Central Queensland believed pregnancy resulted from a woman roasting black bream over a fire, catching a bullfrog, responding to a man's verbal instruction to become pregnant, or dreaming of having a child placed in her womb. Bronislaw Malinowski's reports from the Trobriand Islands engendered even more excitement back home in Europe. As Malinowski stated categorically in 1927, "The views about the process of procreation entertained by these natives . . . affirm, without doubt or limitation for the native mind, that the child is of the same substance as its mother, and that between the father and the child there is no bond of union whatever." I

Most contemporary anthropologists agree that these "proofs" of the ignorance of paternity were actually errors in ethnography. In the Trobriands, even Malinowski's own findings left room for suspicion: he reported that Trobrianders believed sexual intercourse was necessary for pregnancy (a woman's womb had to be "opened" so that a spirit child could enter); that children were thought to resemble their fathers as a result of the father's continued sexual intercourse with the mother; that the children of unmarried women were deemed illegitimate; and that pigs were thought to be conceived through their sexual intercourse with one another. Later ethnographers of the Trobriand Islanders came back with reports that differed from Malinowski's. For example, H. A. Powell was told that conception was a result of semen "coagulating" menstrual blood, clearly indicating the necessity of sexual intercourse. When Powell told his informants that this was different from what Malinowski had been told, they maintained that Trobriand beliefs had not changed, but rather that Malinowski had been listening to "men's talk," reserved for formal situations, whereas "women's and children's talk"—intended to convey helpful information to youngsters—had always maintained a connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

Later ethnographers also cast doubt on the theory that Australian

aborigines did not recognize physiological paternity. They noted that Roth did not spend more than a month among the Tully River Blacks (who even at the time told him that sexual intercourse was the cause of conception in animals), and that Roth neglected the fact that there was a word in their language meaning "to be the male progenitor of," connecting a particular act of copulation to conception. In all cases, it seems that anthropologist Edmund Leach is correct in concluding that these peoples were saying, albeit in different language and with different metaphors, the same things that many contemporary Westerners say about reproduction: that "conception is not predictable in advance but is recognized by certain physiological signs after the event"; that "sex relations are a necessary preliminary to this condition"; and that "the foetal embryo has a soul."

Indeed, what seems to be more often in doubt across the ethnographic record—even in the interesting cases of Australia and the Trobriands—is how or whether *mothers* are related to their own children. Peoples are of course everywhere acquainted with the fact that babies emerge from women's bodies, but in the absence of an avowed role for insemination, women were not thought to reproduce parthenogenetically, magically creating children out of their own substance (the scenario most often envisioned by feminist matriarchalists for prehistoric peoples). Instead it was thought that women were impregnated by "spirit children" and that thereafter the mother "was merely the incubator of a spirit-child."

This should be a familiar theory to Westerners, since it was articulated by no less a light than Aristotle. Aristotle claimed that the form and essence of a child are given by the father and remain uncontaminated by the woman, who merely supplies the material substance for the child and contains it during pregnancy. We tend to think of the equal contribution of mother and father to their children's biological makeup as the truth of the ages, but it is a very recent discovery. The way in which we now understand physiological reproduction—as the result of the joining of ovum and sperm—was not even in place at the time when nineteenth-century anthropologists first began speculating about the ignorance of paternity among prehistoric peoples. Anthropologist Carol Delaney has shown that in present-day Turkey, Aristotelian beliefs about reproduction continue to flourish. As one villager explained, "If you plant wheat, you get wheat. If you plant

barley, you get barley. It is the seed which determines the kind of plant which will grow, while the field nourishes the plant but does not determine the kind. The man gives the seed, and the woman is like the field." Or as one Albanian informant explained the facts of reproduction to ethnographer Rene Grernaux, "The woman is a sack for carrying."

The ethnographic record—like the history of the West—displays varied and contested ideas about human reproduction. The sheer quantity of these ideas suggests that it is possible that people did not always recognize a connection between sexual intercourse and conception. But a notable commonality among all this variety is the insistence that there is a necessary relationship between sexual intercourse and conception. Other events may also be necessary—such as the entrance of a spirit child through the top of the head (in the case of the Trobriand Islanders), or the entrance of a soul into a fertilized egg (in the case of Roman Catholics)—but it is simply not believed that women bear children without any male participation whatsoever. It is also doubtful on commonsense grounds that human beings would be wholly ignorant of paternity. As Edmund Leach points out, "human beings, wherever we meet them, display an almost obsessional interest in matters of sex and kinship," and "presumably this has always been the case." Even evidence from the material record suggests that prehistoric peoples were aware of the relationship between sexual intercourse and conception. Paleolithic cave paintings depict animals mating, pregnant, and giving birth in such a way that these events seem connected. And a plaque from catalhoyuk carved in gray schist shows "two figures in an embrace on the left and a mother and child on the right," an artifact which some—including some feminist matriarchalists—read as a visual text on the results of copulation.'

It seems quite likely then that prehistoric peoples were aware of the male role in reproduction. Some feminist matriarchalists could agree to this quite readily, saying that prehistoric peoples were aware of biological paternity but simply chose not to grant it much significance. This is a hypothesis that cannot be disproven, but there is no ethnographic evidence for it whatsoever. Wherever we have encountered human groups, we have found individual men forming paternal relationships with the children of their wives or other female partners. Additional relationships between particular men and children definitely occur, but that between fathers and their children seems

primary.' Suggesting that there was a time when this was not so raises the thorny question of why men were content to ignore their physiological relationships to particular children (apparently taking a passive, benign interest in children in general) for hundreds of thousands of years, only to begin to care very much about this issue around 3000 BCE.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to recognize that the feminist matriarchalist devaluing of paternity is at the same time a construction of motherhood. As we have seen, feminist matriarchalists routinely imagine childbirth as an occasion for awe, and motherhood as a role and relationship to which men habitually deferred. Why this would have been true prehistorically and not equally true today is not clear. If it is possible for us and for many generations of our ancestors to systematically disadvantage women in spite of (or perhaps *because of*) their unique and essential mothering capabilities, why should it not have been equally possible for our prehistoric ancestors to do the same? In fact, ethnographic evidence suggests that childbirth does not regularly work to women's advantage. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner has noted that women tend to lose rather than gain status when placed in reproductive roles, and to be permitted greater liberties and occupy more powerful public positions when virginal or menopausal.' This is difficult to accept in light of examples we are familiar with in which motherhood is elevated to a divine calling, but as anthropologist Alice Schlegel points out, "a highly valued role will [not] necessarily grant prestige to one who holds it. Motherhood, open only to women, may be highly valued by both men and women without women necessarily receiving prestige as mothers."<sup>10</sup>

Anyway, given what we know of human nature, it would seem doubtful that childbirth would cause men to revere or even respect women in any pure or uncomplicated manner. When one group of people has a monopoly on a much-valued resource, the reaction of the have-not group is not typically one of worshipful awe. More often, the reaction is one of jealousy and resentment, and a wish to gain their own access to the coveted resource. Some feminist matriarchalists acknowledge this, and describe relationships between men and women as being driven first and foremost by men's "womb envy," by men's desire to participate in or control women's childbearing powers."

There is in fact some ethnographic evidence of men trying

to gain some share of women's childbearing and other reproductive functions through ritual efforts, a practice that might be understood as womb envy. L. R. Hiatt describes what he calls "pseudo-procreation" rituals among Australian aboriginal men, rituals used to assert men's "supernatural contribution" to conception, and to "re-birth" boys from men (to symbolically supersede their birth from women) as a part of their initiation into manhood. Similarly, Anna Meigs reports that Hua males (from New Guinea) engage in "rituals of imitation, adulation, and control of female reproductive power" in the confines of the men's house by mimicking menstruation and consuming foods thought to be related to women's fertility. Other customs have sometimes been said to testify to a desire on the part of males to take some part in women's reproductive roles. One of these is *couvade*, in which fathers act out the pain of childbirth and follow the same postpartum taboos as their wives who have just given birth. Another is a ritual in which the underside of the penis is cut open and allowed to bleed, apparently in imitation of menstruation.'

Significantly, however, none of these ethnographic examples of male imitation of female reproductive powers is accompanied by any rise in women's status. Hiatt reports that the Australian aboriginal men who imitate childbirth regard themselves as superior to women and children; Meigs says that Hua women have no political voice and cannot own land or control the products of their own labor. In both these cases women are excluded from the female-imitating rituals themselves, sometimes on pain of death." Feminist matriarchalists typically work around these reports by insisting that such rituals and practices date from a time during or after the patriarchal revolution, when men became intent on coopting women's childbearing powers. But again there is no explanation for why men did not experience womb envy as a source of pain and frustration before then. And going on these particular ethnographic examples, it would seem that if prehistoric men *did* envy women's reproductive abilities, it would have worked to women's detriment.

One also has to ask how much prehistoric peoples valued reproduction. If it were extremely difficult to propagate, if tribes were in constant danger of dying out, it might be the case that fertility and childbirth would be highly valued. But it is doubtful that children were such a scarce commodity in prehistoric times. Prior to the

Neolithic revolution, we have every reason to believe that prehistoric peoples, like contemporary hunting and gathering peoples, were more interested in restricting their fertility than enhancing it. Contraception, abortion, and infanticide are all practiced in hunting and gathering groups, and in horticultural societies as well, with infanticide rates ranging from 15 to 50 percent.<sup>14</sup> Skeletal evidence suggests that childbirth was dangerous for mothers and children alike. Infant mortality rates were high at CatalhOyak, for example, and women there and elsewhere died very young by our standards (on average in their late twenties, earlier than men) in part because of high maternal mortality.' It seems unlikely under these conditions that pregnancy and childbirth were invariably regarded as miraculous and welcomed as the gift of a munificent goddess.

Feminist matriarchalists also argue that motherhood structured social relations, making women the hub of society, the power center around which all others revolved. The most tangible forms this centrality is thought to have taken are matriliney—in which family status, clan membership, and sometimes property are passed through the mother's line—and matrilocality, in which husbands come to live with their wives or their wives' families upon marriage.

The matricentrism of prehistoric societies is said by feminist matriarchalists to be apparent in their "sensitive and careful burial of the dead, irrespective of sex, with a relatively uniform grave wealth." This evidence, if accurate, does not support assertions of matriarchy or even of sex egalitarianism. In their introductory archaeological textbook, Kenneth Feder and Michael Alan Park suggest that "if some future archaeologist were to walk into a twentieth-century graveyard, he or she would almost certainly be provided with some insight into our perspective on life, social system, religion, and, of course, death."<sup>16</sup> But what insight would this future archaeologist get about, say, gender relations in the contemporary United States? I am told by several cemetery directors that it is rare to see any distinctions between male and female burials apart from the type of clothing placed on the corpses. And while it is still common to bury a woman under her husband's name, a future archaeologist who could not decipher our mortuary inscriptions would not be aware of this patronymical custom. Even signs of variations in wealth in U.S. cemeteries—principally in casket materials and plot size and position—are not terribly



large. On the basis of contemporary U.S. cemeteries, we might conclude that twenty-first-century Americans lived in a sexually egalitarian society where there were only minor distinctions of wealth.

Some feminist matriarchalists have ventured to find evidence of matrilineal and matrilocal social structure in the overall layout of prehistoric graveyards. This has been especially true of CatalhOyiik. The people of CatalhOyilk seem to have practiced excarnation, a mortuary practice in which the bodies of the dead were exposed to insects and birds of prey outside the settlement. Once their flesh had been stripped, the skeletons were recovered for burial in the houses under "sleeping platforms." According to James Mellaart, the site's first excavator, men were buried under a small platform whose location was variable, while women were buried under a large platform that was always in a fixed spot in the room. Children were sometimes buried with women under the large platform or under additional platforms, but never with men."

Feminist matriarchalists have suggested that the woman under the large platform was the head of the household, while the man under the small platform was her brother or son.' But there are other equally valid ways of interpreting the burial pattern at CatalhOyiik. If these were sleeping platforms, perhaps women's platforms were larger because women were expected to share their beds with more people (say, their children). Or maybe the dead were not placed under the spot where they customarily slept. Perhaps the large, fixed platforms belonged to the men, and they buried their wives and children under them to feel close to their deceased family members, or even to underscore the fact that in death—as in life—these people were considered their property. In actuality, very few skeletons recovered from catalhoyuk were found complete, and it is possible that individual skeletons were not buried in a single location, but split up and "shared out among various buildings or platforms within a building,"<sup>19</sup> just as some people are cremated today and have their ashes spread in several different locations.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that the evidence from Catalhijytik is apparently not as Mellaart presented it. Though adult men and women do seem to be buried in separate areas, it is now clear that children were sometimes buried with men and that women were buried in other locations besides under the large platform Mellaart

identified as theirs. The current excavators of CatalhOytik are speculating that burials in any one room were those of extended family members, and that buildings were abandoned upon the death of the senior member of that family. Based on the one room that has been fully excavated as part of the new work at CatalhOy0k, principal investigator Ian Hodder concludes that this senior member was probably a man."

Another matter of interest pertaining to the graves at CatalhOytik is the disproportionately high percentage of female skeletons. Some feminist matriarchalists have explained this by saying that men, who were less important to the life of the community, did not always merit burial within the inner sanctum of the home. Archaeologist Naomi Hamilton has made the veiled matriarchalist suggestion that there were fewer men among the skeletons because women were killing male babies to oppose "an ideology of women as mothers and carers [sic] of males" and to create "their own majority" during a time when women's "social power was being eroded." This is a highly implausible scenario without any known ethnographic parallel, and one which presupposes that something detrimental was happening to women's status at CatalhOyUk—something that hadn't already happened under earlier conditions. A rather obvious explanation for the disproportionate number of female skeletons is that men were not dying at home, but elsewhere, and that no one thought to (or was available to) bring their bodies back to the village. We know that the people of CatalhOytik engaged in long-distance trade,' and if men dominated this activity—as men have tended to do in the ethnographic contexts of which we are aware—they had plenty of opportunities to die away from their small sleeping platforms. The evidence of grave patterning does not, by itself, allow us to determine what gender relations the people of Catalithytik had in mind when they buried their dead as they did.

Matriliny and matrilocality certainly could have occurred prehistorically, if not at catalhoyuk, then elsewhere. These kinship and residence patterns are attested ethnographically (though considerably less often than patriliney and patrilocality). However, they are associated with only "modest benefits for women," if any at all.' Indeed, in most societies we know of, matricentric and patricentric customs are mixed together. For example, the matrilineal Nairs "worship only

male ancestors"; the patrilineal Mundurucia settle matrilocally, while the matrilineal Trobrianders settle patrilocally; in Wogeo, New Guinea, potential marriage partners are selected matrilineally, but succession of political office and inheritance of property are patrilineal. We also have reports of adjoining groups who practice different means of reckoning kinship and yet are virtually identical in all other relevant respects (such as religion, means of subsistence, form of habitation, and—significantly—relative gender status). Impressively, kinship can even be matrilineal in groups that insist that women are only passive carriers of men's seed, and patrilineal in groups that swear that men have no procreative role. We also know that matrilineal kinship has been practiced at times simply because it is politically or personally inexpedient to acknowledge paternity (for example, in the slaveholding United States, slave owners imposed a rule of matriliney on the slave community so that the children of slave mothers and white fathers would be counted as slaves). And finally, the feminist matriarchalist assertion that matriliney and matrilocality are the "original" forms of human kinship, dominant all over the world before the patriarchal revolution, is belied by the fact that matrilineal kinship systems are found at all levels of social complexity, not just in groups judged to be most like the social model we conjecture for prehistoric times."

Marriage is another matter of interest to feminist matriarchalists, if only by omission. Some feminist matriarchalists like to imagine that marriage did not exist prehistorically, but some form of marriage is so consistently found cross-culturally that it is extremely likely that prehistoric peoples practiced it. And if the ethnographic record is any guide, marriage was probably not especially beneficial for women. One of the few things we can say with confidence about marriage cross-culturally is that it is overwhelmingly a heterosexual institution. Same-sex marriages have been found in many cultures, but they are rare compared to heterosexual unions, and often (though not always) mimic them. It is within the institution of marriage, then, that women are most clearly defined as women, in opposition to men. For example, among the African Mbuti, terms of address and reference rarely distinguish between male and female. But there is an important exception when discussing partners in a reproductively active marriage: terms for these partners are consistently gendered.<sup>25</sup>

As feminist matriarchalists are quick to point out, distinguishing between the genders does not necessarily mean discriminating against either one, and it may mean discriminating in favor of women. What is key to the feminist matriarchalist vision of prehistoric marriage is not its heterosexuality or lack thereof, but that marriage (if the institution existed) did not restrain women's autonomy, sexually or otherwise. However, one of the things marriage seems to do most efficiently—cross-culturally speaking—is to restrict women's choice in sexual partners (and men's too, though generally to a lesser extent). Within marriage, the demand for female sexual fidelity is quite common, as is the belief that a wife is the sexual property of her husband, who can use or transfer his rights in her as he sees fit. These characteristics are true of both societies that are "sex positive" (which legitimate and promote human sexuality) and "sex negative" (which regard sexuality as sinful or polluting).<sup>26</sup> If one agrees that the ethnographic record provides clues to prehistoric life, we have to assume that marriage in prehistoric societies did not routinely enhance women's sexual freedom.

#### GODDESS WORSHIP AS EVIDENCE OF MATRIARCHY

More even than the ignorance of paternity or the centrality of motherhood in prehistoric cultures, feminist matriarchalists feel that the prevalence of goddess worship in prehistory confirms the gynocentric nature of these societies. As Judy Mann puts it, "if the goddess is female, then females are goddesses."<sup>27</sup>

Several facts confound this interpretation of prehistoric goddess worship. The first is that feminist matriarchalists almost always posit a form of goddess monotheism for prehistory—though it is rarely called that—and what evidence we have seems to cut the other way. Goddess monotheism has not been documented any place on the globe. Historical religions, from classical antiquity to the present day, are home to many different goddesses if they include female deities at all. In classical Greece, for example, the various goddesses had diverse roles and functions. The Greeks did not regard them as "aspects of a unitary goddess."

Another troubling fact about goddesses as we know them ethnographically and historically is that they do not always resemble the image that feminist matriarchalists stipulate for prehistoric cultures:

the loving mother, the giver and taker of life, the embodiment of the natural world. Some goddesses are incredibly violent--and not in a way that suggests the benevolent function of watching over the natural cycles of death and rebirth. For example, an Ugaritic text from 1400 BCE Canaan says of the goddess Anat: "She is filled with joy as she plunges her knees in the blood of heroes." The Sumerian *manna* is also a goddess of war, and, significantly, neither she nor Anat is portrayed as a mother. Shitala, worshipped today in Bengal, "tempts fallible persons, and especially mischievous children, with irresistible delicacies, which then break out on their bodies as horrifying and fatal poxes."

More troublesome than these deviations from the feminist matriarchalist ideal is the fact that goddesses are often known to support patriarchal social customs. Goddesses may have nothing whatsoever to do with women's religious needs, representing instead men's fantasies of "the Eternal Mother, the devoted mate, the loving mistress," or even the fearful nature of women's power (should it be allowed to wriggle out from under strict male control)." Goddesses may be strongly, if ambivalently, distinguished from human women, and the differences between the two repeatedly emphasized: that is, goddesses "accentuate what womanhood is *not*" as often as they reflect a culture's notion of what women are. In her research on goddess worship in India, Cynthia Humes has noted that devotees see important commonalities between goddesses and human women, especially related to their "natural maternal instincts." But devotees also report that there is "an unbridgeable chasm between goddesses and human women, since female bodies are irremediably permeated by evil and pollution." As one male pilgrim told Humes, "the difference between the Goddess and women is like the difference between the stone you worship and the rock on which you defecate." Goddess worship has been reported for societies rife with misogyny, and at times goddesses even seem to provide justification for beliefs and practices that are antiwoman. Contrariwise, the worship of male gods can coincide with relatively greater power for women.' There is simply no one-to-one relationship between goddess worship and high status for women.

Feminist matriarchalists do not deny the phenomenon of patriarchal goddess worship; they suggest that it was pioneered by the Kur-

gan invaders. But what they are proposing for prehistory is something different: goddess worship that is culturewide, exclusive, and consistently supportive of women's power and independence. They thereby put themselves in the very difficult position of arguing for a type of goddess worship that has never been seen, either historically or ethnographically.

The fallback option for feminist matriarchalists is to insist that all the historic and ethnographic knowledge we have cannot tell us for certain what prehistory was like. If a worldwide patriarchal revolution occurred before scribes or ethnographers could (or would) accurately record what preceded it, then prehistory could be a world unto itself, not interpretable in terms of the cultures that followed. This is, however, a very drastic thesis. And as calamitous as the patriarchal revolution is taken to be by feminist matriarchalists, it is rarely seen in terms this grandiose. So the usual tack is to simply keep insisting that there is an important equation between the worship of goddesses and an enhanced status for women, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

Feminist matriarchalists are basically going on instinct in believing goddesses to be positively related to the status of women—and instinct, in this case, does not prove to be a very good guide. They note that male dominance is correlated in recent history with the veneration of a male god or gods and assume that the obverse must also be true because it "seems logical." They imaginatively place themselves in cultures that worship goddesses and cannot believe that "with such a powerful role-model," girls and women would not "naturally consider it their right and duty to fully participate in society and to take the lead in government and religion." Their own experience suggests that this must be true, since they have themselves been empowered by the presence of the goddess in their lives. As Sue Monk Kidd enthuses about the goddess, "believe me, there is no way *this* word, this symbol, can be used to hush women up or get them back in line [her emphasis]."

In fact, so passionate is the desire to believe that goddess worship benefits women that feminist matriarchalists frequently see such benefits in unlikely places. For example, though Jennifer and Roger Woolger admit that for women in Athens "there was little choice between being a homebound matron, a hetaera or high-class prostitute,

or a slave," they nevertheless argue that "the mere existence of the various cults to goddesses as individual as Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, and Athena provided many rich possibilities for women's psychic and spiritual life, many more than were later retained in Christianity or Judaism." Likewise, Gerda Lerner argues that "no matter how degraded and commodified the reproductive and sexual power of women was in real life, her essential equality could not be banished from thought and feeling as long as the goddesses lived and were believed to rule human life." This is a peculiar way of assessing women's status. Women's self-esteem, secured through the worship of something female, may be a valuable commodity under harsh patriarchal conditions, but this is not remotely akin to the amelioration of those conditions via goddess worship. "Free" women in classical Greece were lifelong legal minors who were mostly forbidden to leave their homes and who were not even their husbands' preferred sexual partners. What exactly is the point of celebrating this ancient culture's goddess worship and contrasting it to our own culture's lack of the feminine divine?"

Feminist matriarchalists sometimes retreat to the argument that such societies were "less male-centered than those which worshipped . . . an omnipotent male deity, exclusively," even if they were not absolutely female-centered." But some scholars of religion argue precisely the opposite of this thesis. Indeed, this is what a Marxist analysis of religion would predict: goddess worship would compensate women for what they lack in real economic and social power and would serve to keep women from rebelling against their actual low status. In examining the veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, Ena Campbell notes that although Guadalupe "has eclipsed all other male and female religious figures in Mexico," she is worshipped more by men than women and is used in recompense for women's "actual position in the social scheme." Comparing data from Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, Campbell concludes that "mother goddess worship seems to stand in inverse relationship with high secular female status."<sup>37</sup> Thus, far from being a sign of special respect accorded to women, goddess worship would, in the absence of other evidence, be expected to correlate with a poor state of affairs for women.

It seems more likely that goddess worship can coexist with various

degrees of status for women, high or low. Certainly, ethnography has not uncovered a consistent pattern. In *The Status of Women in Pre-industrial Societies*, anthropologist Martin King Whyte attempted to uncover the determinants of women's status. Of the items he investigates having to do with religion, only one of them—equally elaborate funerals for women and men, as opposed to women having none or less elaborate ones than men—is shown to correlate with women's status at all, and that only weakly. The others, including "sex of gods and spirits," "sex of mythical founders," "sex of shamans," "sex of witches," and "religious ceremony participation" all vary independently of other markers of the status of women (such as menstrual taboos, husbands' authority over wives, and property ownership).<sup>38</sup> It seems that people can worship gods or goddesses, have priests or priestesses, remember ancestresses or ancestors, without it having any particular effect on how ordinary women are treated. There is no warrant for the feminist matriarchalist assumption that prehistoric goddess worship, insofar as it existed, conferred greater respect upon women or insulated them from misogyny or subordination to men.

#### WORK AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Feminist matriarchalists often suggest that woman-favoring social systems arose prehistorically partly in response to women's important economic roles. In foraging societies, they say, men do all or most of the hunting, but it is women's gathering work that usually provides most of the group's diet. And once agriculture was invented—by women—their added labor is said to have enhanced women's status further, giving them control over the group's produce and property. It is not until men seized control of agriculture by making more intensive use of land through plows and draft animals that feminist matriarchalists see women's economic power decreasing dramatically.

Virtually all societies of which we are aware do stipulate different work for individuals based on their sex or gender, usually along the lines that feminist matriarchalists note: in foraging societies, men hunt and women gather; in horticultural societies, men continue to hunt or fish, but also clear and prepare land for farming, while women tend fields, carry wood and water, and care for children; in more intensive agricultural economies, the same pattern continues, with men doing proportionately more farm work and less hunting and fishing.



Children are typically inducted into their gender-specific roles at a young age.' In all these different types of economies, women tend to work closer to home, performing tasks that have to be done daily, while men are more inclined to travel and perform tasks that vary. Grave goods provide some support for the notion that these same divisions existed prehistorically. Generalizing for the Middle Neolithic in Europe (Gimbutas's "Old Europe"), Sarunas Milisauskas describes the contents of men's graves as "flint tools, weapons, animal bones, and copper tools" while women's included mostly pottery and jewelry.'

A notable fact about the sexed division of labor is that it is fairly arbitrary. Broad patterns aside, there is considerable variation in how different groups assign different tasks by sex: women's work is not everywhere the same, nor is men's, and cultures do not hold to preassigned roles with equal rigidity. One culture may demand that men make pottery, while another says that only women can do so. But even the general patterns can be regarded as arbitrary from the point of view of physiological capability. As James Faris notes, "even game hunting . . . depends far more on organization than on superordinate strength"; likewise, gathering, cooking, and child care (after weaning) are not dependent on female-specific attributes. Yet these patterns recur frequently, and anthropologists typically explain them in terms of what they say is a nearly universal desire to have women's work be compatible with caring for small children: women should perform only "tasks that are not dangerous, do not require distant travel, and are interruptible." 41

Another notable fact about the sexed division of labor among humans is that it is always characterized by some degree of reciprocity: the sexes perform different tasks and then engage in exchange with one another. One might expect that this mutual dependence would lead to mutual respect.' This is the hope upon which feminist matriarchalists hang their vision of prehistory, for they almost never challenge the idea that women in matriarchal societies were gatherers and horticulturalists who provisioned men with vegetable foods while in turn accepting the products of men's labor. But the ethnographic record shows that the vital labor women provide in foraging and horticultural economies does not usually give them social power comparable to men's.

Foraging societies are often said by cultural anthropologists to be "egalitarian," so this looks like a hopeful place for feminist matriarchalists to begin. However, anthropologists mean something by the term egalitarianism that turns out, oddly enough, to be compatible with the most virulent misogyny and sexism. Egalitarian societies are defined by anthropologists as small groups which lack any elaborate political hierarchy. Individuals are free to come and go as they please; they have immediate access to resources and can exert influence over other individuals in their group. There are pecking orders in egalitarian societies, but they depend "more upon personal qualities and skills than upon inherited wealth or status at birth." But among the "personal qualities" most frequently used to determine status in so-called egalitarian societies are "age, sex, and personal characteristics." Now age and sex are not earned. An individual's age changes, inexorably, and *in* this sense can be regarded as a kind of achieved status. But this is not so for sex, which is "ascribed for life." Thus arises the irony of speaking of societies which systematically discriminate against one sex in preference to the other as "egalitarian." Such discrimination can be relatively minor, as it is among the Mbuti and San of Africa, where men are slightly more likely to participate in collective decision-making, but there are also many glaring examples of male authority, dominance, and disproportionate prestige in foraging societies. Even in societies that lack class systems or political leadership, one can find fathers giving away their daughters, husbands beating their wives or having legitimate control over them sexually, men raping women without penalty, and men claiming a monopoly on the most significant forms of ritual power."

Foraging peoples do rely more, calorically speaking, on women's gathering than on men's hunting, with foods contributed by women typically making up 60 to 80 percent of the group's diet. Women in horticultural societies also frequently contribute a greater share to the group's subsistence and spend more hours at their appointed tasks than men do at theirs. But whatever women's work is, however valuable—even crucial—it may be to the local economy, there is simply no correlation between the type, value, or quantity of women's work and women's social status.'

We do not need to look beyond ethnographic analogies to our own history to suspect that this would be the case. Who provided the

labor that made the economic engine of the antebellum South run? Enslaved Africans. Did social power, authority, and respect accrue to them as a result? Hardly. Prehistoric economies were drastically different from the antebellum South, of course. Social groups were much smaller and economies aimed to produce little more than what subsistence required. But the basic relationship does seem to hold for horticultural societies just as it does for later slave societies: those who hold power make others work for them. Economically speaking, the quickest index to social power would seem to be who is working least, not who is working most.' The fact that women work harder in horticultural societies should, if anything, arouse our suspicion that these cultures are dominated by men.

Furthermore, men's work—whatever it is—tends to be more valued than that of women in foraging and horticultural societies. Hunting, for example, is generally a high-prestige activity. Men also tend to win greater prestige even when they engage in work identical to women's. For example, among the Trobriand Islanders, both men and women cultivate yams, but only men's yams are used as an object of exchange. In other words, while the content of men's work can vary, it seems to carry with it a characteristically male level of prestige. Women's work, in contrast, is more often viewed as routine and pedestrian.' This is not to say that women's work is never a source of prestige, or that men's always is; the ethnographic record is nothing if not variable on this point. But it is at least clear that the vision feminist matriarchalists paint of hard-working women standing as the economic pillars of their communities, respected as tribal mothers by all, is not very plausible in light of what we know of contemporary foraging and horticultural societies.

Some cultural anthropologists have suggested that the crucial question is not what kind of work—or how much of it—women do, but whether or not women can own or control the distribution of resources. Women, especially in horticultural societies, often own land. In these societies, however, this is rarely a significant category of wealth. Land is quickly exhausted, and new land must be cleared. Thus the sense in which we tend to think of land—as valuable, transferrable property—has little to do with how most horticulturalists think of it: as a temporarily useful commodity, "owned"—for whatever it's worth, which isn't much—by those who cultivate it. Even fe-

male control over a group's principal economic resources does not correlate with a high social status for women. Among the Mundurucia of the Amazonian jungle, the principal horticultural product, farinha, is entirely under women's control; moreover, men give all the game they kill to women, who then decide to whom it will be distributed. And yet this is a group with gender relations that no feminist in her right mind could either envy or endure: women are expected to keep their eyes lowered and their mouths covered when in the company of men; they cannot venture outside the village alone without consenting—in effect—to being raped; decisions affecting the community are made in the men's house with no women present; men hold the monopoly on religious ritual, and any invasion of their domain is punished by gang rape (as are other infractions); and the dominant ideology is that women must be subordinate."

In feminist matriarchal myth it is said that women enhanced their already high status in prehistoric times even further by inventing agriculture in the first place, extending their knowledge of plants to the deliberate cultivation of them.' There is no way to prove that women invented agriculture, and as speculative arguments go, this one is relatively weak. Men in foraging societies gather too—in order to feed themselves when on long hunting expeditions, if not on a more regular basis—so it seems likely that men had as much opportunity to familiarize themselves with plant life cycles as women did. And given that women and men in small foraging societies interact with each other a great deal, it seems unlikely that women would not have shared with men any potentially helpful information about securing food sources as soon as it arose. More likely, the sexes worked together to introduce and perfect this technology.' Indeed, agriculture has never been the preserve of women to the extent that hunting has been the preserve of men.

When the technology of deliberate cultivation arose, its effect on women seems to have been variable. The severity and location of degenerative joint disease (arthritis) among Native Americans as agricultural technologies were adopted tells us something of women's and men's differential work patterns. These patterns vary from site to site, with women showing the scars of a heavier workload in some locations, while at others, men appear to have borne the brunt of the new technology." In terms of raw measures of skeletal health, the

change to agriculture was sometimes beneficial for women and sometimes not.

The move to intensive agriculture (as opposed to horticulture) was an enormous transition for human societies, one that is generally said to have been unfavorable for women. Intensive agriculture made unprecedented population densities possible. In hunting and gathering societies, population density is generally quite low, and local groups are rarely much larger than baboon troops. With the introduction of agriculture, babies could be weaned earlier (to be fed with agricultural foodstuffs), so women could conceive again more quickly. And once babies no longer needed to be carried from place to place, it was possible for women to care for more young children at one time. Under these conditions, human societies have been known to increase very quickly, as fast as 3 percent each year (which yields a doubling of the population in only twenty-three years)."

With the increased population density made possible by intensive agriculture came greater levels of social stratification. Unlike "egalitarian" societies, divided on lines of age and sex, these "complex" societies could be divided along class lines too: aristocrats and slaves, royalty and commoners, natives and foreigners, and so on. Given that one of the most common axes of inequality in so-called egalitarian societies is sex, one might expect that it would persist, and perhaps become exaggerated, under conditions of heightened stratification, such as that experienced with the rise of state-level societies. However, the effect of social stratification on women is not all negative; or rather, it is not negative for all women, since one of the groups state-level societies stratify is women. Although a woman may not outrank a man of her class, she may—and frequently does—outrank men in lower classes.<sup>1</sup> It becomes increasingly difficult under such conditions to talk about *the* status of women (and it was never easy, as we have seen). Women of the upper classes may have access to economic and political power that would have been unimaginable to men in simpler societies; on the other hand, women of the lower classes may be subordinated more completely than they ever could have been in "egalitarian" societies.

What, then, does the ethnographic evidence tell us about women's status in relation to the economies and technologies that we can safely assume applied in prehistoric times? It tells us most basically that there

is no reliable connection between forms of subsistence and women's status.' If there is one broad pattern regarding women's status, it is that it is lower than men's, whatever the prevailing economy or women's specific place in it. Within this generalization, however, there is a staggering amount of variation, from vague nuances of differential personal autonomy or authority to unmistakable sexual slavery. If ethnographic reports are any indication, then women's status prehistorically was variable, not uniform; in some places it was probably very good, while in other places it was probably horrific.

#### WAR AND PEACE

Feminist matriarchalists also claim that prehistoric human societies were peaceful, a claim that is doubtful on both ethnographic and archaeological grounds. Warfare is common in ethnographic contexts at all levels of technological sophistication. And violent death—probably not the result of accident—is archaeologically attested for many prehistoric populations dating to the purported matriarchal era. For example, Steven J. Mithen notes that numerous skeletons from Mesolithic cemeteries dating thousands of years earlier than any proposed patriarchal revolution "have injuries caused by projectile points." Brian Hayden reports on mass graves from the European Neolithic containing as many as seven hundred skeletons, some with arrowheads embedded in their bones. Some archaeologists have even theorized that certain skeletal features from Minoan Crete indicate human sacrifice.'

Weapons have been discovered in many Paleolithic and Neolithic graves in Europe and the Near East, particularly in those of men. Gimbutas repeatedly insists that "no weapons except implements for hunting are found among [the] grave goods" in Old European burials; at times she goes further to say that "there were no weapons produced at all" by Old Europeans, or at least no "lethal weapons." But if the technology exists to hunt deer and pigs—and to slaughter domesticated sheep, goats, and cattle—then the technology exists to kill human beings, who are merely large mammals like the rest. In addition, maces are present among Neolithic grave goods from CatalhOyuk to the Balkans, which, according to archaeologist David Anthony, are specialized "anti-personnel" weapons, of little use in hunting or splitting wood, but very effective at bashing in the skulls of other

human beings.' Finds of daggers and arrowheads are not as conclusive in proving the presence of warfare as armor or shields might be, but the latter are made of metal, and metallurgic technologies did not exist in most of the times and places feminist matriarchalists deem matriarchal. This raises the possibility that Old Europeans and other putatively matriarchal peoples had forms of weaponry and other technologies of warfare that have not survived in the material record. The Nantucket Whaling Museum in Massachusetts has an exhibition of weapons of war from the South Pacific, clearly identified as such by the people who brought them back to the United States. They are mostly enormous wooden clubs which would rot away in the earth long before we could dig them up. Some are inlaid with rows of sharks' teeth to better inflict injury. Such a weapon could well end up hundreds of years later as nothing more than a handful of sharks' teeth, which the unwitting archaeologist might interpret as jewelry or as a means of exchange.

Larger settlement patterns also point to greater interpersonal and intertribal violence than feminist matriarchalists imagine for prehistory. Feminist matriarchalists often claim that Neolithic villages in Europe had no defensive fortifications. For example, Gimbutas argues that the "occasional V-shaped ditches and retaining walls" surrounding Old European villages were "structurally necessary." But other archaeologists, looking at the same or additional evidence, are quite certain that many of these settlements were designed to fend off attack from outside. David Anthony reports the use of deep ditches in Neolithic Europe, "backed by multiple lines of palisade walls with elaborate gate-like constructions," and dismisses the argument that they were "peaceful flood-control devices." Indeed, some of these ditches are filled with mass graves.'

Even if there were no evidence of fortifications in Old Europe, this would not mean there was no war. Defensive fortifications would not have been necessary for groups that conducted their warfare on other people's territory. Marvin Harris suggests that Minoan Crete, for example, may have been warlike, but if "military activities were focused on naval encounters"—which one might expect for an island society—there would be little material evidence of warfare on their home territory. A New World example helps make this clear. The Mayas, whose cities were completely unfortified, were long thought

to be "an unusually gentle, peaceful people living in a relatively benign theocracy." But as the Mayan writing system began to be deciphered and as new excavations were undertaken, a different picture emerged. Archaeologists found depictions of severed heads and bound captives and unearthed dismembered skeletons of sacrificial victims under public buildings. As archaeologist Arthur Demarest concludes on the basis of this new evidence, "the Maya were one of the most violent state-level societies in the New World." "

Of course, feminist matriarchalists are in a difficult position when confronting ethnographic and archaeological evidence. What they most want to find in prehistory is the absence of things with which we are all too familiar—sexism, warfare, and environmental degradation, among others—and it is much harder to prove the absence of something than its presence. If feminist matriarchalists were in search of the dominating power of women, one could imagine archaeological finds that might validate this: for example, burials with murdered men interred beside a richly equipped female,<sup>9</sup> or wealthy grave goods allocated to women and poor ones to men. But sexual egalitarianism, peace, and harmony with nature—the qualities most feminist matriarchalists seek—are more elusive. Digging up comfortable homes, material prosperity, even bodies free of disease or spared untimely death (all things we might reasonably want) still does not mean that we have excavated a society free of sexual oppression. What then (other than texts, which are not available for this period) might speak of matriarchy, as feminist matriarchalists envision it? To this, feminist matriarchalists have a ready answer: pictures . . . which, as the old adage goes, are worth a thousand words.



## The Case Against Prehistoric Matriarchies II:

*Prehistoric Art and Architecture*

The promise representational art holds forth is to tell us how prehistoric peoples saw themselves and their world. Our own representational art is often said to fulfill this function, graphically displaying who we are and what we value. For example, Christian iconography is rich in symbolic portrayals of Christian theology and ethics; images in advertising are thought to speak volumes about who Americans want to be. In theory, prehistoric art is similarly a window onto the subjective experiences of our ancestors, one not provided by the amount of strontium in their fossilized bones or the varying shapes of their flint blades.

What we lack for prehistory, however, is a trained observer, an insider who could translate prehistoric art for us. We effortlessly and accurately read most of the images we stumble across in everyday life, but we may forget how much we had to learn to attain this interpretive mastery. Years of enculturation lie behind our ability to decipher the visual images we encounter. When images are divorced from most other markers of culture (such as language and behavior), as they are for prehistoric societies, accurate interpretation becomes extremely difficult.

If we know anything about artistic conventions, it is that they are *conventions*, and as such they may have only an oblique link to "real life." Some things rarely experienced are frequently imaged, and vice versa. As Andre Leroi-Gourhan has noted, European heraldry is full of lions and eagles, though in the ordinary run of their lives, Europeans were vastly more likely to encounter cows and pigs; likewise, if women's magazines were my sole record of American culture, I might

conclude that there were no fat people in twenty-first-century America. Cultures may neglect to represent all kinds of quotidian realities for a variety of reasons: they may consider these realities too banal to be worth portraying in art; they may wish to deny certain unpleasant realities about their lives and cultures; or they may think some matters too special or sacred to commit to a visual symbol. And even things that are routinely represented are open to misinterpretation by observers who lack the relevant knowledge to read it correctly. Carl Jung tells the story of a man who returned to India after a visit to England and told his friends that the English worshipped animals, because he had seen eagles, lions, and oxen portrayed in churches.'

One of the central problems in interpreting prehistoric images is that the material itself—pictures and statues of human beings and animals—looks disarmingly familiar, so it often seems that inferences about the meaning of this art have more to do with an individual observer's imaginative, empathic, and intuitive abilities than with any archaeological credentials. A person who "sits in the ruins and catches the vibes," as Philip Davis disparagingly puts it, may feel herself to know as much about prehistoric peoples as those who work with spades, sieves, and brushes. No one is immune to the powerful reactions that this art can elicit, from the archaeologist who digs it up to the casual consumer of glossy reproductions of artifacts on the other side of the coffee table. Patricia Reis, author of *Through the Goddess*, remembers stumbling across pictures of Paleolithic Venus figurines in an art book at a university library. As she recalls, "My body became electrified. . . . These objects held a haunting mystery filled with sacredness."<sup>2</sup> It is hard to believe that any reaction that comes with such force and conviction could be simply mistaken, at least for the person experiencing it (strength of passion being notoriously easy to confuse with acuity of insight). This misplaced confidence has plagued both archaeological and feminist matriarchalist interpretations of prehistoric art.

The conflicting interpretations offered for prehistoric visual images gives us sufficient reason to be suspicious of anyone's claim to have finally decoded them. The tendency among archaeologists today is to feel that, if anything, prehistoric art is *less* illuminating and more open to misinterpretation than other forms of prehistoric material evidence, particularly when it comes to the sensitive issues of gender

and religion.' Feminist matriarchalists, in contrast, believe they have a method which provides consistent, reliable, and indeed rather obvious interpretations of prehistoric art. To resist these interpretations, they often suggest, requires a willful blindness.

#### READING SYMBOLS

In interpreting prehistoric art, feminist matriarchalists make liberal use of the assumption that a relatively stable set of cross-cultural meanings are attached to femaleness, and in turn to the symbols thought to represent it. This symbolic approach to prehistoric art allows feminist matriarchalists to accomplish two important tasks: first, they are able to extract broad, clear meanings from long-dead societies; and second, they have a warrant not only to construe female anthropomorphic figurines—the prime suspects for "goddesses" in prehistoric art—but also everything from wavy lines to crosses as "a kind of universal female symbolism."

This symbolic code leads feminist matriarchalists to speak as though there were no relevant differences between the essential focus of religion in Siberia in 27,000 BCE and Crete in 1500 BCE. They usually treat all of prehistoric Europe and the Near East as if it were a single cultural complex, viewing cultural variations as an epiphany of the multiplicity of the goddess rather than as evidence of distinctive religious beliefs or systems of social organization.' This is a very long time and a very large area for a single religion to dominate. The repetition of a few symbols in the imagery of these different cultures cannot by itself support the notion that these cultures progressively, and in concert with one another, developed an iconography of a single deity. In fact, the cultures from which feminist matriarchalists draw their symbolic examples of goddess religion do not overlap either chronologically or geographically. The material evidence itself illustrates this. There is a dramatic difference, for example, between "the figurine and clay-rich archaeological record of Neolithic Southeast Europe" and the several millennia during which the British Neolithic apparently failed to produce a single female figurine.'

Feminist matriarchalists are usually forthcoming with explanations, however questionable, for why everything they list qualifies as a goddess symbol, in spite of the geographic and chronological distance that sometimes separates them. Some symbols are chosen for their

supposed analogy to portions of the female anatomy: the chalice, as a container, is said to stand for the womb; the mouth of a cave for the goddess's vagina. Others, such as lions, are determined to be goddess symbols because they are repeatedly (or sometimes only once) seen partnered with female figures in prehistoric art.' The list of symbols that are supposed to make us suspect "that a matristic consciousness was operative in a culture if they are found in that people's relics" is alarmingly long. It includes:

bears	phalli	zigzags
lions	women	spirals
bulls	eggs	parallel lines
bison	trees	meanders
deer	lush vegetation	tri-lines
horses	pomegranates	Xs
goats	apples	Vs
pigs	the moon	hooks
dogs	the sun	crosses
hedgehogs	stones	chevrons
birds (hawks, owls)	shells	swastikas
snakes	caves	lozenges
toads	storehouses	halved lozenges
turtles	pillars	hooked lozenges
fish	labyrinths	ovals
bees	wells	triangles
butterflies	cauldrons	circles
snails	chalices	dots'
eyes	nets	
hands	rings	

This proliferation of purported goddess symbols makes it possible to find evidence of goddess worship in virtually every scrap of prehistoric art. Even the simplest of signs can shout "goddess." Gimbutas, for example, relishes the fact that the stamp seals of Old Europe are "almost all . . . engraved with either straight lines, wavy lines or zigzags," which she interprets as a water and rain symbolism attributable to goddess religion. Reaching even farther, Rachel Pollack claims that "the oldest carefully marked object," an ox rib found in France dating to 200,000 to 300,000 BCE, about six inches long and incised with "a pair of curved parallel lines" (visible under a microscope),

is "precisely that image" that appears repeatedly in "later Goddess art." "

But if straight lines and wavy lines are both symbols of the goddess, is it possible to draw a line another way, or to use it to mean something else? Rachel Pollack notes that there are goddess images "that are almost universal, such as the cross or the spiral,"<sup>12</sup> but she never points out the obvious: that these are very simple images to draw. They may mean nothing—prehistoric doodles—or they may mean very different things in different cultures. Even more importantly, symbols may have no analogical link at all to that which they are supposed to symbolize, just as the numeral 7 means seven, though there is nothing in the shape of the numeral itself to suggest the number seven. In some cases, we cannot even be sure what the symbols we find in prehistoric art are supposed to be (if anything), let alone what meanings they may carry. For example, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford display a series of "Neolithic images of the moon" in their chapter on "the Neolithic Great Goddess of Sky, Earth and Waters." None look like what I see up in the sky on a clear night, though several bear a powerful resemblance to snowflakes (see Fig. 7.1).

Flow then do feminist matriarchalists know that every animal and geometrical symbol found in prehistoric art is a representation of the goddess or one of her qualities? Only by believing, before they look, that the art is religious art, and in particular, an iconography of a prehistoric goddess. Though I will not attempt the exercise here, I feel certain that if I were looking for evidence of the prehistoric worship of "the masculine principle," I could find it as readily as feminist matriarchalists uncover goddess symbology. Perhaps I could also "discover" that the implements of war are present in cleverly disguised—symbolized—form. In the absence of a prehistoric Rosetta stone translating prehistoric symbols into some language we can understand today, we are of course welcome to pore over the art of prehistoric cultures looking for internal patterns, just as Gimbutas has done. We may find things of interest, but none that can stand as the conclusive interpretation of these images.

#### *Paleolithic Cave Art*

Apart from Gimbutas's detailed work on symbols from the Neolithic period in Old Europe, the most elaborated argument for goddess

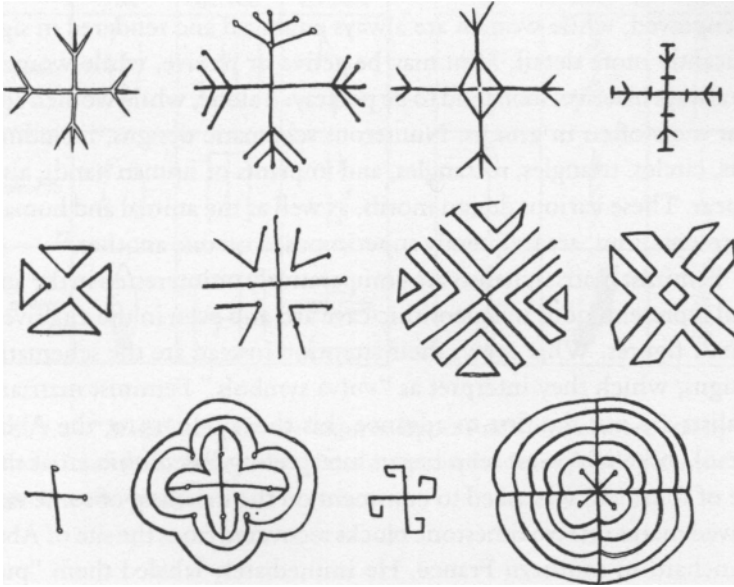


FIG. 7. 1 Images incised on Neolithic pottery from sites in Bohemia, from the end of the sixth to the early fifth millennium BCE, interpreted as "Neolithic images of the moon."

symbology is that offered for Paleolithic cave art. Cave art is restricted to a few neighboring locations in southern France and northern Spain (though caves that are seemingly equally suitable for painting are available elsewhere on the continent) and dates from roughly 30,000 to 10,000 BCE, with the majority being produced after 20,000 BCE." Archaeologists theorize that the Franco-Cantabrian caves were preferred as sites for art because they were in the most southerly region of open tundra during the last glaciation. Animals were plentiful, and as a result, so were humans: tribes may have gathered together to hunt there during seasonal migrations. The subjects of the paintings are almost exclusively animals, both species that were routinely hunted, such as reindeer and mammoth, and ones that were not, such as wolf and lion. Representations of humans are comparatively rare, though present. Men and women never appear in proximity to one another.

Men are typically portrayed as simple stick figures, whether painted or engraved, while women are always engraved and rendered in significantly more detail. Men may be active or passive, while women are always inactive; men tend to be portrayed alone, while women appear most often in groups. Numerous schematic designs, including dots, circles, triangles, rectangles, and imprints of human hands, also appear. These various design motifs, as well as the animal and human representations, are frequently superimposed on one another.'

Feminist matriarchalists are comparatively uninterested in the animal representations in Paleolithic cave art, and even in the engraved female figures. What draws their attention instead are the schematic designs, which they interpret as "vulva symbols." Feminist matriarchalists are not the first to advance this theory. In 1910, the Abbe Breuil, a French priest who began interpreting Paleolithic art at the age of fourteen, was asked to comment on the meaning of some engraved marks on two limestone blocks recovered from the site of Abri Blanchard in southern France. He immediately labeled them "pudendum muliebre." Indeed, an early observer, L. Didon, describes Breuil as having "recognized vulvas without hesitation," operating "with the completely unique skill in deciphering prehistoric mysteries characteristic of him." Most archaeologists in the twentieth century followed Breuil's lead, finding vulvas everywhere in Paleolithic art. This vulva-finding expedition at times went to rather remarkable extremes. Not only were triangular or horseshoe-shaped designs termed vulvas; so were a myriad of other shapes, denoted by terms like "squared vulva," "bell-shaped vulva," "broken, double vulva," and "atypical vulva." Vulvas have even been discovered in a single straight line ("an isolated vulvar cleft"), and at least one excavator, convinced that some symbols must have been intended to be vulvas, felt free to occasionally draw in the "missing" lines.'

An even more ambitious reading of these "vulva" symbols has been offered by French archaeologist Andre Leroi-Gourhan, who divided up the totality of the schematic markings found in Paleolithic caves into "male" and "female" symbols, so classified because of their putative resemblance to human genitalia. The "male" symbols are straight lines, barbed lines, and rows of dots (the "narrow signs"); the "female" symbols are triangles, ovals, shields, and rectangles (the "wide signs"). While Leroi-Gourhan admits that many of these sym-

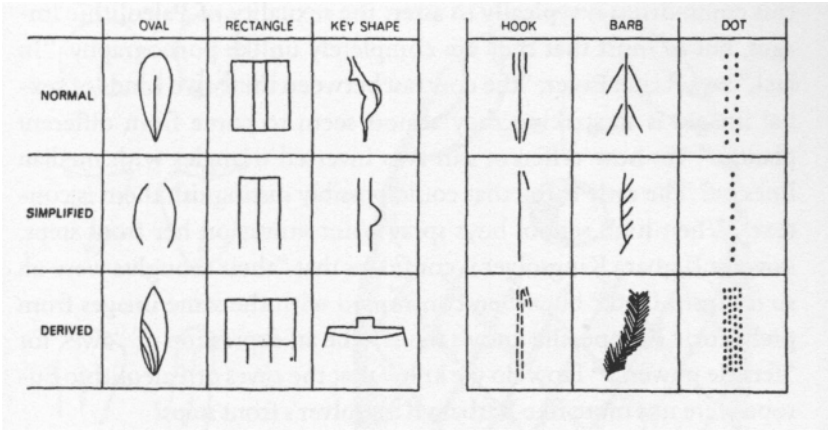


FIG. 7.2 "Wide" and "narrow" signs in Upper Paleolithic cave art, said by Leroi-Gourhan to "have evolved from earlier depictions of female and male figures or sexual organs."

boll are "extremely stylized," he nevertheless insists that most of the wide signs "are quite realistic depictions of the female sexual organ" (see Fig. 7.2). These wide signs turn up in some odd places—for example, in the wounds on animals and in the guts spilling from a disemboweled bison—but Leroi-Gourhan does not hesitate to identify them everywhere as vulvas."

Feminist matriarchalists have enthusiastically embraced the interpretive scheme that sees the walls of Paleolithic caves plastered with disembodied vulvas. For feminist matriarchalists, "the vulva is pre-eminently a symbol of birth, representing beginnings, fertility, the gateway to life itself," and its presence in cave art indicates that Paleolithic peoples valued birth, death, and rebirth." Yet as some observers note, there is an undoubted resemblance between the vulvas in Paleolithic cave art (that feminist matriarchalists celebrate as the sign of the goddess) and those that "would be right at home in any contemporary men's room." For feminist matriarchalist purposes, Paleolithic vulva images must not be pornographic, for then they are by definition objectifying and oppressive to women. But they must be sexual, for sex is good in matriarchalist terms: it is part of what worship of the goddess entails, part of what separates goddess religion from its wicked stepsons (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity). The solution to



this conundrum is typically to assert the sexuality of Paleolithic images, but to insist that they are completely unlike pornography. "In fact," says Riane Eisler, "the contrast between these two kinds of sexual images is so striking they almost seem to come from different planets." Yet how different can two inverted triangles with median lines be? The only thing that could possibly distinguish them is context. When high school boys spray paint vulvas on her front steps, novelist Barbara Kingsolver is confident that "their thoughts were oh so far from God," but when confronted with the same images from prehistoric Europe, she knows them to be an expression of "awe" for "female power."<sup>21</sup> How do we know that the caves of Paleolithic Europe were not more like Barbara Kingsolver's front steps?

Moreover, the distinct possibility remains that these "wide signs" of Paleolithic cave art were not meant to represent vulvas at all. The symbols purported to be vulvas are extremely variable (see Fig. 7.3)—Sarah Milledge Nelson says that many of them look more like molar teeth than anything else—and few are truly triangular, which is the shape that characterizes all the female genitalia found in context in Paleolithic art (that is, on full female figures).<sup>22</sup> However, feminist matriarchalists have something much better than engraved "vulvas" from the Paleolithic (and wavy lines from the Neolithic) upon which to stake their claim that femaleness was revered in prehistoric Europe and the Near East. For these peoples produced a huge number of anthropomorphic figurines, many of them clearly female.

#### DECODING ANTHROPOMORPHIC ART

Before becoming too enthusiastic about these anthropomorphic figurines, it is important to recognize that many of the figurines that feminist matriarchalists declare to be representations of the goddess are not obviously divine, female, or, in some instances, even human. For example, Marija Gimbutas titles a figure from StarCevo "an early loom-weight in the form of the Goddess" (see Fig. 7.4). This object has no arms, legs, or neck, and only dashes for eyes, a hole for a mouth, and a pinched nose: its face could belong to either gender or to a wide range of nonhuman animals. Similarly, Buffie Johnson discusses an "amulet of the buttocks silhouette" recovered from Paleolithic Germany (see Fig. 7.5). Though this 1 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inch sculpture has no head and no arms, Johnson asserts that wherever "an arc and a straight line"

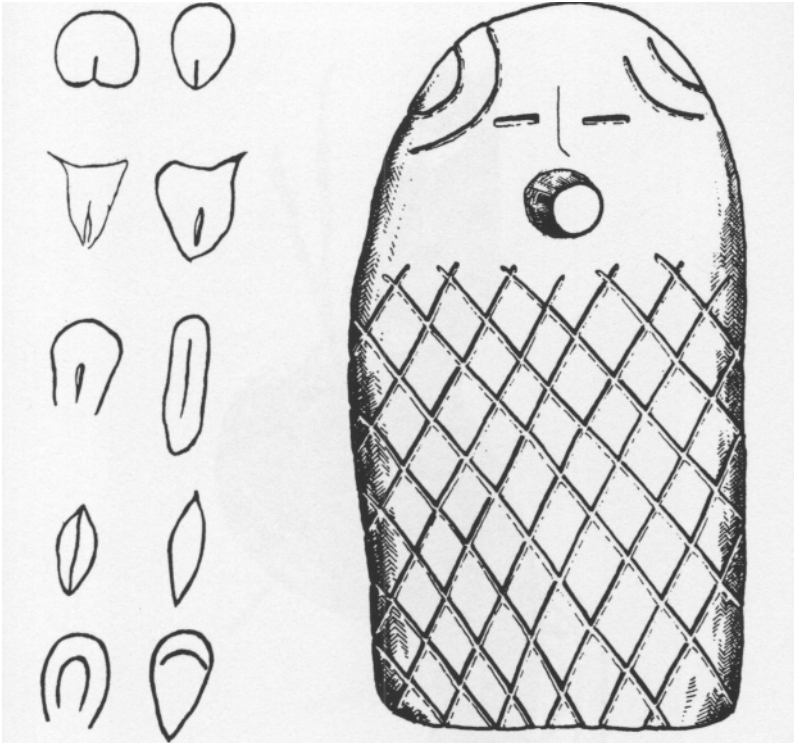


FIG. 7.3 (left) Incised and carved images from Upper Paleolithic cave art, said to be "vulvae."

FIG. 7.4 (right) Carved figure from Starčevo, Bulgaria, 5800–5600 BCE (height: 8.8 cm), identified by Marija Gimbutas as a "loom weight in the form of the Goddess."

combine to form a "P shape," one is viewing the "exaggerated egg-shaped buttocks" of the goddess." It is easy to see a human female in these objects if one is told that that is what is there. But if these figures were captioned differently, it would be as easy to see something else. A Paleolithic engraving which Johnson describes as "a female figure with Cosmic Egg in rump" does look like a highly schematized drawing of a seated person's profile with a circle in its middle, at least when you come across it in the pages of *Lady of the Beasts: Ancient*

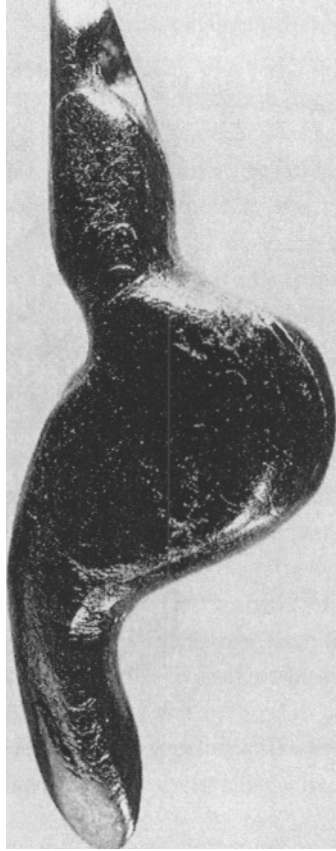


FIG. 7. 5 Figure carved in polished coal from Petersfels, Germany, c. 15,000 BCE, called a "buttocks silhouette."

*Images of the Great Goddess and her Sacred Animals.* But had I seen this same drawing in a book titled, say, *Paleolithic Landscapes*, captioned as "Vezere River showing central island and direction of current," then I would find this an equally plausible description of this engraving (see Fig. 7.6).

Even more questionable than the assignment of humanity to abstract line drawings or sculptures is the classification of virtually all anthropomorphic images as female. Feminist matriarchalists have



FIG. 7.6 Incised drawing from the Fontales cave in France, c. 10,000 BCE, described by Buffie Johnson as a "female figure with Cosmic Egg in rump."

been anticipated in this by archaeologists, who have also frequently been inclined to make female the default sex of ambiguous anthropomorphic images. There are comparatively few images in Paleolithic and Neolithic Europe that are definitely male (possessing a penis) and many that are definitely female (possessing either swollen breasts or a "clear female sexual triangle or vulva"). But what is generally not recognized in feminist matriarchalist studies of prehistoric art is that there is another class of images, varying in size depending on the era

or site in question, which have no clear sexual characteristics. If one were to assume that these were all intended to be male, this would generally yield a distribution by sex that is roughly fifty/fifty. These "sexless" images may have been intended to represent females, as feminist matriarchalists suggest, or men, or they may have been intentionally sexless, representing children, "or some generalized idea of the human being.

It is reasonable to attempt to discern stylistic conventions that indicate sex apart from obvious sexual characteristics, but it is a tricky undertaking. Such conventions may or may not exist, and where they do exist, they may be misread. In *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, Marija Gimbutas juxtaposes two figurines from the Neolithic site of Vin'6a in Yugoslavia. She describes both as images of the "Bird Goddess." The figurines are clearly of the same basic type, in spite of minor differences in shape and incised markings. One has small breasts, the other none at all (see Fig. 7.7). Gimbutas seems to regard the presence or absence of breasts as yet another stylistic difference in the two figures,<sup>24</sup> but the presence or absence of breasts may have been the defining feature of the sex of these figurines: the one with breasts being female, and the one without being male.

There are also prehistoric images that appear to purposefully combine male and female sexual characteristics, including Neolithic figurines said to have a "tall, phallic neck and head," which are described by feminist matriarchalists as "phallic goddesses." Feminist matriarchalists are quite careful to state that the presence of phallic features—or even, in some cases, a phallus itself—does not detract from the overwhelming femaleness of prehistoric anthropomorphic images. As Gimbutas explains, these images "do not represent a fusion of two sexes but rather an enhancement of the female with the mysterious life force inherent in the phallus."<sup>26</sup> Impressively then, even what one might think to be the most obvious signifier of maleness—the penis—is assimilated to femaleness in some feminist matriarchalists' interpretation of prehistoric anthropomorphic images.

The most dramatic example of this assimilation is the feminist matriarchalist reading of Paleolithic "batons." The most popular of these batons has an honored place in feminist matriarchalist iconography, turning up frequently in the first pages or slides devoted to Paleo-



FIG. 7.7 Terracotta figurines from Vine'a, Yugoslavia, c. 4800 BCE (height: 16 and 15 cm), named "Bird Goddesses" by Marija Gimbutas.

lithic images of the goddess. In spite of its striking resemblance to a phallus, feminist matriarchalists label the Dolni V'estonice baton an "abstract female with breasts," "shaft with breasts," or "ivory rod with breasts," and describe it as a "portable shrine," an image of "nurture reduced to its stylized essence" (see Fig. 7.8). But as archaeologist Timothy Taylor declares, "it seems disingenuous to avoid the most obvious and straightforward interpretation" that these are "phallic objects."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, some of them, at a length of six to eight inches, are hard to mistake for anything else (see Fig. 7.9).

Feminist matriarchalists also routinely take note of the existence of "breast pendants" or "breast beads" from Paleolithic Europe. Gimbutas describes these as an "abstract rendering of the female principle," composed solely of "two breasts at the base of a conical neck." This has long been the standard archaeological reading of these images, but archaeologist Alice Kehoe points out that the back of the pendant "exhibits a carefully carved projection through which is a

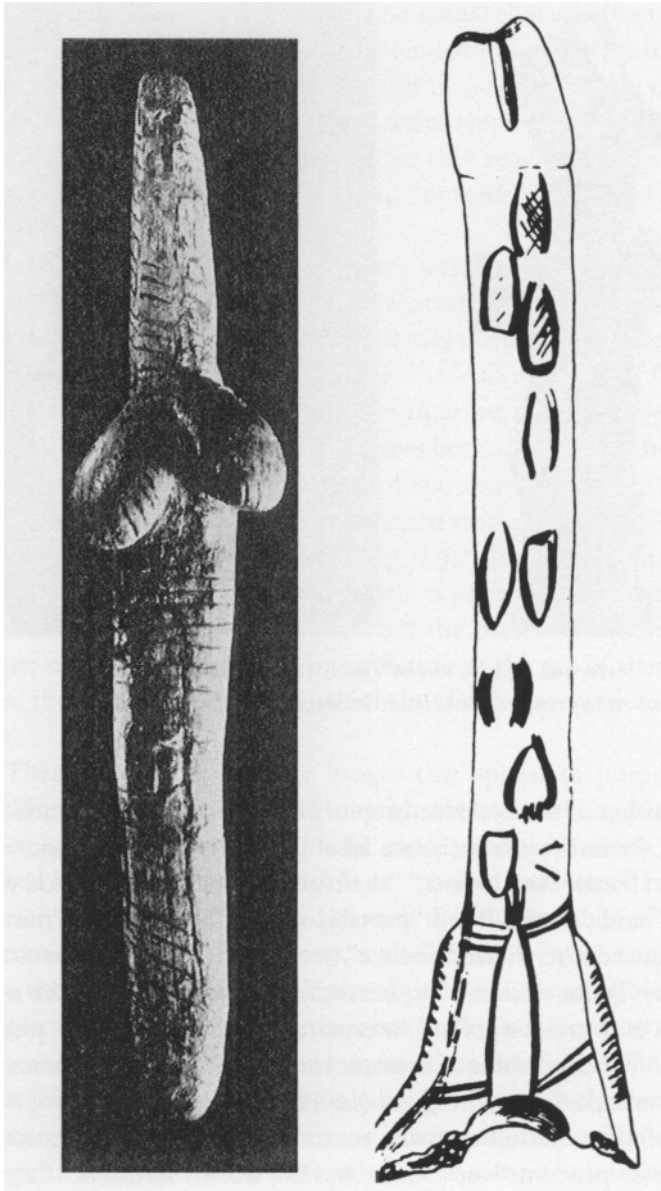


FIG. 7.8 Ivory carving, Dolni V'estonice, Czechoslovakia, c. 25,000 BCE, described as "abstract female with breasts."

FIG. 7.9 Paleolithic "baton," Bruniquel, France, c. 15,000 BCE.

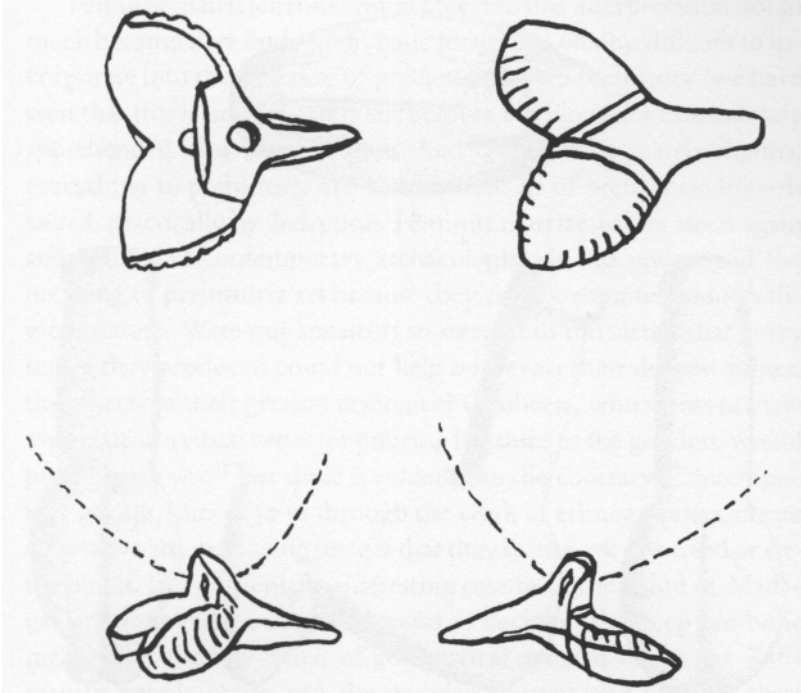


FIG. 7.10 Ivory pendant from Dolni Vstonice, Czechoslovakia, c. 25,000 BCE. Gimbutas and other feminist matriarchalists interpret this artifact as a woman's neck and breasts; viewed at the angle pictured here, it resembles a penis and testicles.

hole," which Kehoe suspects "was designed for a suspension string." When hung on a string the "breast pendant" seems instead "to be an erect human penis and testicles" (see Fig. 7. fo). Other objects are similarly ambiguous, their interpretation largely dependent on the angle from which they are viewed. For example, a "seated figure" from Late Neolithic Cyprus viewed from the back appears strikingly phallic. But the top view could be read as a vulva, and from the front or side, it resembles a seated figure with bent knees and tiny feet. Its sexual ambiguity could be an intentional statement of its artist, or, quite plausibly, it may be an artificial penis, equipped with a convenient handle (see Fig. 7.10.'8



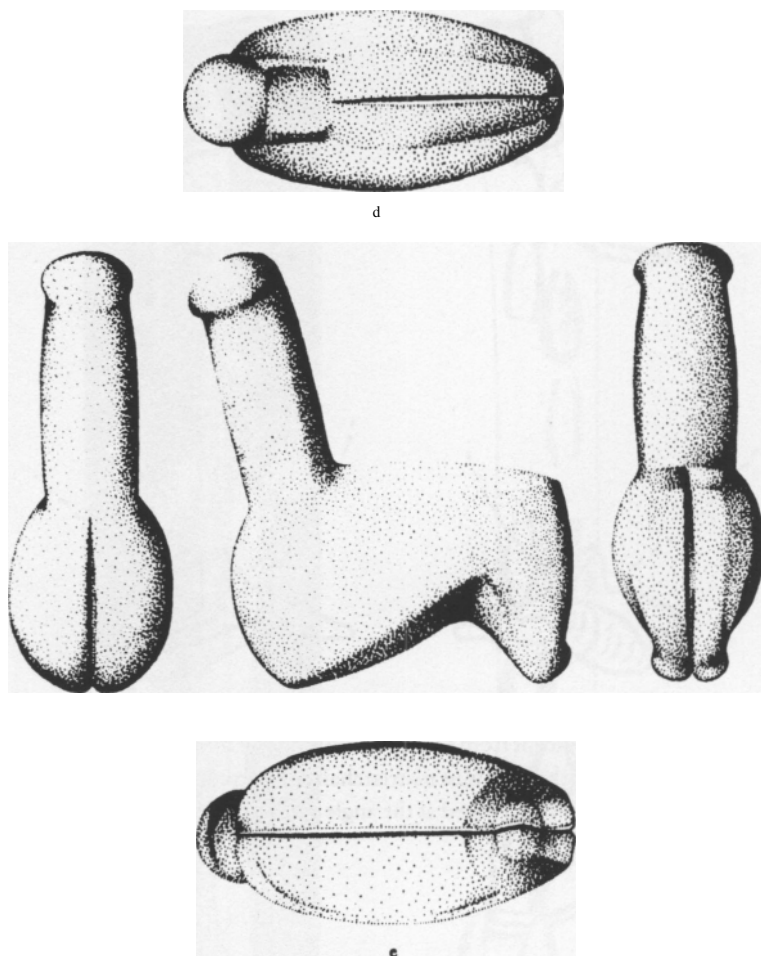


FIG. 7.11 Limestone figure from Sotira Arkolies, Cyprus, c. 2600 BCE, viewed from five different angles (height: 16 cm). View *a* and *b* (front and side views) resemble a seated figure; view *c* (rear view) appears phallic; views *d* and *e* (top and bottom views) resemble a vulva. Surface find.

Feminist matriarchalists would object to this interpretation not so much because they find a prehistoric image of a phallus difficult to incorporate into their picture of goddess-oriented prehistory (we have seen that this is not the case), but because a dildo is not immediately apprehended as a sacred object. And for feminist matriarchalists, everything in prehistoric art—and indeed all of prehistoric life—is sacred, practically by definition. Feminist matriarchalists assert again and again that contemporary archaeologists fail to understand the meaning of prehistoric art because they cannot comprehend its religious nature. Were our ancestors so steeped in the sacred that every image they produced could not help but reveal their deepest values, the objects of their greatest reverence? Gimbutas, who seems to view every cup as a ritual vessel for pouring libations to the goddess, would probably say yes.<sup>29</sup> But there is evidence to the contrary. Contemporary groups, known to us through the work of ethnographers, create decorative art, producing images that they insist have no sacred or ritual intent. In a particularly interesting case from the island of Madagascar, ethnographers tried for years to decipher the deep symbolic meaning of the low reliefs of geometrical patterns which the Zafimaniry people carve into the wooden shutters and posts of their homes. When asked, informants proved refractory, insisting that "they were pictures of nothing," that they were merely making "the wood beautiful."<sup>30</sup> It hardly seems warranted then to name all the prehistoric images we have retrieved as remnants of a vast, multi-layered religion of the goddess, or of a religion of any sort. Yet they are surely remnants of *something*, and particularly in the case of definite female images, it seems at least possible that they were intended to portray goddesses.

*Paleolithic Venus Figurines*

Intriguingly, the first representational art we have knowledge of consists of small statues of females. Those who first excavated these statues named them "Venuses" because they vaguely resembled the classical Venus di Milo with her missing arms. The Venuses have been found across a very wide geographical belt running from southern France to Siberia, but are concentrated in a few sites in France, the former Czechoslovakia, and the former Soviet Union. Many cannot be dated with any great precision, but increasingly scholars are coin-

ing to believe that the majority of the figurines were created within a few thousand years, possibly from 23,000 to 21,000 BCE.<sup>31</sup>

Though they are customarily classed together, the Venuses are not all alike. Some are clothed, others naked; they are carved in a variety of materials, including bone, stone, and mammoth ivory; and though generally small, they vary in size from 3.7 centimeters to as much as 40 centimeters. From the time they were first discovered, Paleolithic Venuses were classified as "fertility fetishes" or "goddess figurines." This basic interpretation of Paleolithic Venuses—that they are religious in character and concerned with fertility—has been remarkably persistent among archaeologists, though it has been losing ground over the past few decades as feminist archaeologists have critiqued it.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, feminist matriarchalists have taken up the fertility and mother goddess interpretations of Paleolithic Venuses (feminist matriarchalists resist the theory that the Venuses are fertility "fetishes," but still tend to interpret them as being fundamentally concerned with fertility). For example, descriptions of the Venus of Willendorf in feminist matriarchalist books and articles typically refer to her "great nourishing breasts" and "her sacred triangle" (see Fig. 7.12).<sup>33</sup>

The most conspicuous problem with regarding the Paleolithic Venuses as symbols of fertility is that they rarely show signs of pregnancy, childbirth, or lactation. If Paleolithic artists were interested in representing the fertility of women, there are obvious ways in which to do this—such as making female figures that are indisputably pregnant, giving birth, or holding an infant—yet these images have not been found in Paleolithic art. Some, both archaeologists and feminist matriarchalists, insist that the Venuses *are* pregnant, but many of them appear to be fat rather than pregnant, and others are quite thin.<sup>34</sup> Pregnant or not, the very size of some of the Paleolithic Venuses is read by feminist matriarchalists as an expression of fertility. For example, Gimbutas refers routinely to the goddess's "regenerative buttocks," as though buttocks were somehow actively involved in pregnancy and childbirth. Others let the connection to fertility drop and emphasize instead the apparent sacrality attaching to female fatness in Paleolithic times. As Starhawk remarks of the Venus of Lespugue, "whoever carved this figure evidently saw flesh as good, and the female form as worthy of veneration" (see Fig. 7.13).<sup>35</sup>

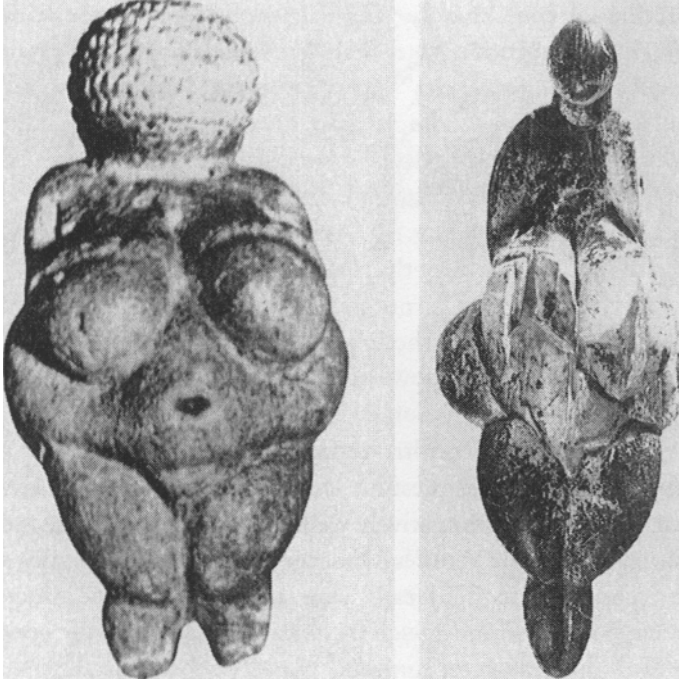


FIG. 7.12 Limestone figure, Willendorf, Germany, c. 30,000-25,000 BCE (height: 11 cm).

FIG. 7.13 Ivory figure, Lespugue, France, C. 23,000 BCE (height: 14.7 cm).

The fatness of the Paleolithic Venuses has been long commented upon. They are "monstrously exuberant and overabundant"; they are characterized by "pendulous breasts, broad hips, rotund buttocks and excessive corpulency." Prehistorians have sought to explain the fatness of these figurines in a variety of ways. Some speculate that it is a reflection of "the community's concern about hunger"; others say that the Venuses are merely straightforward depictions of the women of the time, who happened to be fat. Still others suggest that the Venus is a "Pleistocene pinup or centerfold girl." Some have rejected this notion on the grounds that the Venus of Willendorf could only be attractive "to perverse tastes," but others beg to differ. There is no ac-

counting for taste, they say, and Paleolithic men obviously liked fat women. Bjorn Kurten notes that "the female figures often appear in sexually inviting attitudes" and suggests that "there is a straight line from Ice Age art to Rodin, to Zorn's Dalecarlian women, and to the Playboy bunnies of later days." He illustrates his argument by comparing the female torsos of Paleolithic art to contemporary pornographic images (see Fig. 7.14). As with Paleolithic cave art, feminist matriarchalists flatly deny that Paleolithic Venuses are pornographic, primarily because they do not themselves experience this art that way. They deem it "truly pathetic when a woman cannot perceive the difference between the powerful Paleolithic figures and current pornographic portrayals of women as coy, vulnerable toys." "

Just what the Paleolithic Venuses signified to those who created them is an irresolvable question. But the idea that they had a religious or magical function is relatively well supported. One of the more notable features of the Venuses is that they tend to have carefully worked torsos compared to their heads, arms, and feet, which are either absent or modeled very simply. Such inattention to faces, usually considered the most individual, recognizable part of a person, seems to indicate that these figurines were intended to symbolize some more general fact of physical, social, or religious life. That so many of the figurines appear unfinished is another indication that they may have fulfilled some religious or magical function, with the act of producing the figurine perhaps being more important than the appearance of the end result.' It would seem that these female images were standing for something, just what we cannot tell. The Paleolithic Venuses, relatively few in number and tens of thousands of years old, provide us with few clues to their use or meaning. We have more to go on in the Neolithic era. Many of the archaeological sites are richer and more carefully excavated, and attention to figurine production in ethnographically documented cultures has also suggested some plausible interpretations of the Neolithic evidence.

#### *Neolithic and Cross-Cultural Figurines*

As pottery technologies began to be developed during the Neolithic, figurines started to be made out of clay. These have survived in great numbers (though many are broken), especially from sites in the Near East and southeastern Europe. There is considerable stylistic variabil-

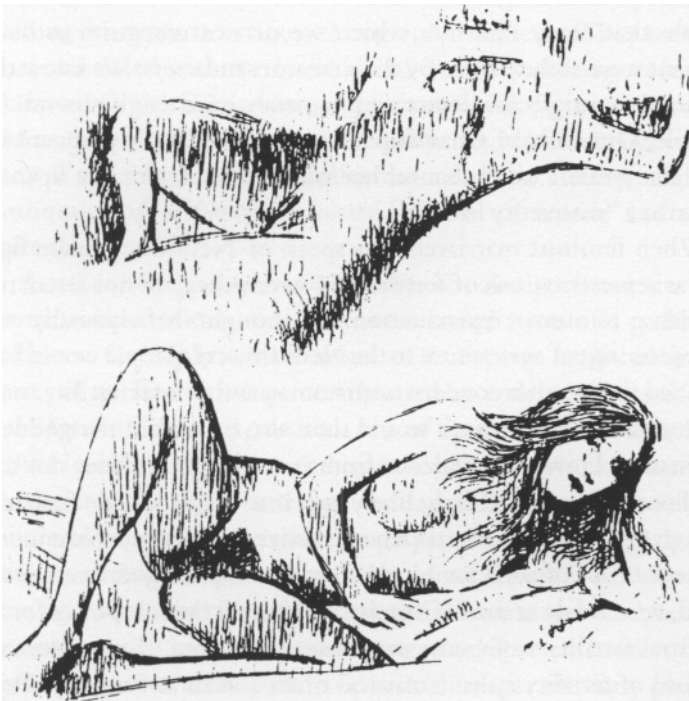
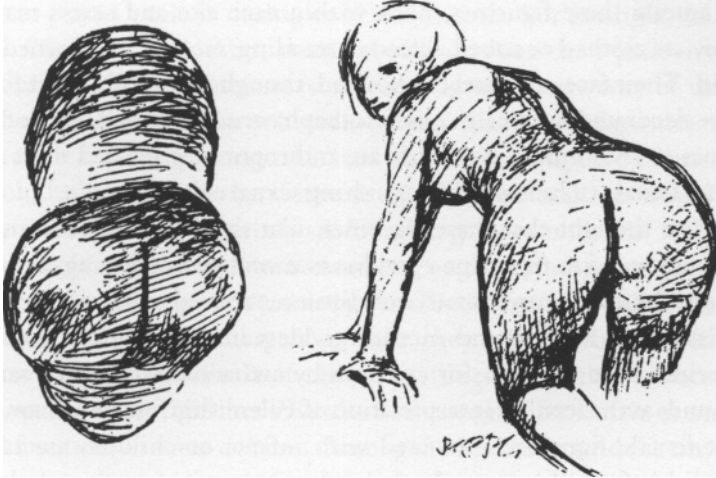


FIG. 7.14 Drawings by Hubert Pepper intended to illustrate a resemblance between Paleolithic figures (both in-the-round and in relief) and contemporary pornographic images of women.

ity among these figurines, both within each site and across many. They are clothed or naked, seated or standing, fat or thin, adorned or plain. Their faces are rarely elaborated, though it is possible that they were decorated with paint or seeds that have not survived. Some figurines are of animals, but more are anthropomorphic, and most are either female or lack any distinguishing sexual characteristics."

The thought that these figurines, like the Paleolithic Venuses, were intended to represent a goddess was well rooted among archaeologists before feminist matriarchalists ever arrived on the scene. But recently the fertility and mother goddess interpretations of these figurines have come in for criticism by archaeologists on the same grounds as the fertility interpretation of Paleolithic figurines, namely that female figurines associated with infants or children are rare. Neolithic figurines are rarely obviously pregnant either, though they, like the Paleolithic figurines, are sometimes quite fat.<sup>40</sup> Certainly it is possible that many figurines which we do not recognize as being pregnant were seen to be so by their creators and users. We know that artistic conventions for depicting pregnancy need not be literal. For example, Our Lady of Guadalupe is said by some to be pregnant because she wears a tassel around her waist that was, for the Spanish, known as a "maternity band." 41

When feminist matriarchalists speak of Neolithic female figurines as representations of fertility, however, they are not restricting themselves to human reproduction. It is thought that especially with the beginnings of agriculture in the Neolithic era, people would have extended their earlier concern with human and animal fertility to the fertility of the land, which would then also be within the goddess's provenance. However, evidence from historical times does not suggest that this is a particularly likely explanation for female figurines. Though agricultural societies have an active, understandable concern for the fertility of their land and sometimes invoke goddesses in this regard, we have no record of a group that assigns the sole power for agricultural fertility to females or goddesses. Indeed, the goddesses at the head of fertility cults in classical times—such as Ceres and Proserpina in Rome—were believed to bestow human rather than agricultural fertility.'

Ethnographic analogies suggest a number of possible alternative functions for Neolithic female figurines. Female figurines have at

times played a role in curing or healing rituals. For example, among the Chocó of Colombia, shamans will surround their patient with anthropomorphic figurines (sometimes as many as twenty of them) who represent the shaman's spirit-helpers. Since new figurines must be made for every curing ritual and old ones are disposed of unceremoniously, such a theory, if it were true for the Neolithic, would explain why so many figurines are found in garbage middens. It would also explain the continuum between rough, unfinished pieces and more polished ones, since, among the Chocó figurines will be made very quickly in an emergency, while they will be constructed far more carefully in the case of a lingering illness when time is not such an issue. Female figurines have also been assigned protective or magical functions in some cultures. Among the Seneca around the time of European contact, female figurines were buried with children, apparently to protect them in death. Female figurines have also performed teaching functions in various ethnographic contexts. They are sometimes associated with the initiation of boys, in addition to (or even exclusive of) girls. Elsewhere, anthropomorphic figurines have been used as dolls or children's toys. Actually, the Neolithic figurines fit many of the features seen in dolls cross-culturally: nudity, small size, sturdiness, and a disproportionate number of female and sexless figures.'

Another interpretation of Neolithic female figurines is the feminist matriarchalist one, that they were sacred icons of a goddess or goddesses. Certainly we are aware of numerous cross-cultural instances of goddess worship accompanied by widespread use of icons in the form of figurines, so this is one of the most likely explanations of the Neolithic figurine assemblages. Especially persuasive is the fact that goddess figurines—and larger-scale goddess images as well—exist in later cultures in the same geographic area. But there are some obstacles to this interpretation. To begin with, how would we know these figurines to be divine? Several critics have noted that there is an inconsistency in viewing female images as representations of goddesses while interpreting male or animal images similarly placed as being merely men or animals." The fundamental problem of interpreting images that have been lifted from their original contexts particularly affects attributions of divinity. For example, a sixteenth-century print by Hans Brosamer shows a nude woman with luxurious





FIG. 7.15 Hans Brosamer, *A Whore Venerated by a Fool*, c. 1530. Woodcut print.

hair and a possibly pregnant abdomen holding a lamp and a mirror while a man lies at her feet, gazing up at her with apparent awe (see Fig. 7.15). Those unaware of the image's context could well take it to be a representation of a beautiful, magisterial fertility goddess appearing to a man who responds in an attitude of thunderstruck adora-

tion. However, the work's title, *A Whore Venerated by a Fool*, tells us that it was intended to warn men against being taken in by women's sexuality.

We know also from historical examples that images of women, even ones that recur over and over again in an apparently symbolic mode, need not be images of goddesses. Disproportionate imaging of females is a widespread (though not universal) phenomenon, in our Western cultures as well as others, and we know that it can coexist with male dominance. We also know, significantly, that extensive female imagery can be found in cultures with male monotheistic religions. Furthermore, deities are not always represented; in fact they can be completely—or largely—invisible, as is the case with the putatively male god of the major Western religions.'

Indeed, the worship of relatively invisible male deities accompanied by more visible female deities is a pattern found frequently in ancient times. The iconography of Mycenaean Greek religion is "overwhelmingly feminine," but written tablets reveal that a host of additional deities—significantly, male deities—were also worshipped. Similarly, ancient Mesopotamian art is rife with depictions of Ishtar, who is comparatively rare in texts, while numerous male deities discussed in texts have no "visual counterparts."<sup>46</sup> Excavations from Iron Age Israel (in the eighth century BCE) have revealed a proliferation of female figurines of a specific type: they have a "pillar" base, breasts, and molded head, sometimes with arms and sometimes without. Scholars have termed these the *Dea Nutrix* or "nourishing deity," but we know that the religion of that place and era was adamantly monotheistic.' Feminist matriarchalists, presented with this evidence, would fit it into their theories by saying that the pillar figurines indicated the continued household practice of the ancient goddess religion in the face of an official takeover by the patriarchal Semites." But without the textual evidence confirming male monotheism, feminist matriarchalists would probably conclude the obvious: that these people worshipped a goddess, an immanent deity of birth and regeneration. Eighth-century BCE Israelites would fall as easily on the matriarchal side of the ledger as they now fall on the patriarchal side.

In sum, though we cannot know just what Neolithic figurines signified, it is plausible that they are the material remains of goddess

worship. The problem is that we don't know whether or not any such potential goddess worship was accompanied by worship of gods, or whether goddess worship, if it was practiced, worked to women's benefit. The female figurines dating to Neolithic times are in no position to enlighten us on these questions.

#### THE ART OF " MATRIARCHAL " CULTURES

Up until now, we have been looking at particular art forms across several millennia and many hundreds or thousands of miles, a practice I have criticized among feminist matriarchalists. So now let us examine the art of three specific cultures, ones heralded by feminist matriarchalists as matricentric, and see what their artistic production as a whole might say.

##### *Ca talheiyak*

The art of CatalhOynk has been an object of fascination from the time it was first excavated. James Mellaart, the site's first excavator in the 1960s, interpreted the art as evidence of goddess worship, and by 1980, feminist matriarchalists were concluding that the site provided "conclusive evidence for women's preeminence in the Middle Eastern Neolithic." In 1993, when excavations resumed under the direction of Ian Hodder, feminist matriarchalists mobilized to gain access to new archaeological data, and they are now a frequent presence at the site as they arrive on "goddess tours" and work to establish a "Goddess Guest House" in a nearby village.<sup>1</sup>

The art of CatalhOyak consists of plaster wall reliefs, wall paintings, and figurines either carved in stone or modeled from clay, radiocarbon dated to between 6500 and 5700 BCE. The walls at CatalhOynk were painted repeatedly, being covered with whitewash in between. Going up the ten to twelve levels of habitation at CatalhOyiik uncovered in the <sup>1</sup>Az "d of the mound excavated by Mellaart, one can see definite changes in the artwork. Plaster reliefs are present from the beginning, though at first they only include animal heads. They later come to incorporate anthropomorphic figures and "breasts" (conical plaster reliefs usually molded around the skulls of small animals), but by the last levels of habitation, these reliefs fell out of use entirely. Wall paintings include depictions of animals and people; some are hunting scenes. Though females are occasionally present, it is always males

who are actively involved in the hunt. One rather famous wall painting is of seven enormous vultures "making a feast of six small headless human beings," a scene which Mellaart relates to the burial practice of excarnation at çatalhoyuk.<sup>50</sup>

Figurines, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, have been found at every habitation level, though it is not always clear to which level they "belong." Being made of durable materials, they could have had a use life far exceeding the era in which they were first produced. These figurines range in size from five to thirty centimeters tall. About half are zoomorphic, and of the remainder some are anthropomorphic while others are hard to identify: some call them "humanoid," but others believe they are ducks or other animals. Definitely female figurines have been recovered from houses, grain bins, and, most commonly, rubbish heaps. Some of these figurines are very schematic, with "pointed legs, a stalk-like body, and a beaked head"; others are more naturalistically rendered. One particular figurine, "Goddess with Leopards," is a special favorite among feminist matriarchalists. She is said to sit on a throne flanked by two leopards, as "from between her legs, life emerges" (see Fig. 7.16). The figurine is slightly over four inches tall, and was recovered, headless, from a grain bin. Female figurines are typically found at later levels of habitation, and earlier styles of figurines, both animal and "humanoid," do not persist to the latest levels. If the female figurines are representations of the goddess, one must assume that the earlier inhabitants of Catalhoyuk either did not worship her, or did not make icons of her. This in itself casts some doubt on the matriarchalist interpretation of the art of Catalhoyuk, since this site was in theory goddess-worshipping from the beginning. Mellaart believed he found male figurines as well, though fewer in number. With admirable consistency, he described them as representations of "a male deity."<sup>51</sup> No mention of such a god is made by feminist matriarchalists.

The other major source of putatively female imagery is found in the plaster reliefs that decorate many of the rooms at çatalhoyuk. A familiar image is of a splayed figure with hands and feet pointing upward, sometimes with a slightly swollen belly that is emphasized by concentric rings drawn around the navel (see Fig. 7.17). Mellaart suggests that this figure is pregnant—though it is not decisively so—and that its position "is indicative of childbirth." While it is true that



FIG. 7.16 Seated female figure from CatalhOytik, Turkey, c. 5800 BCE, called "Goddess with Leopards" or "the Mother Goddess of CatalhOytik."

women give birth in a variety of positions, this one is particularly odd, since the woman would either be lying down spread-eagled or standing upright, balanced on her heels. Increasingly, archaeologists are interpreting these figures as being of indeterminate sex. Ian Hodder points out that many of the plaster relief figures have "short stumpy arms and legs" which make them "look more animal than human." Recent excavations at other Neolithic sites in Turkey have revealed similar splayed figures, but these have tails and serpentlike teeth, strengthening the case for interpreting these figures as something other than human females.'

Bucrania, or bulls' heads, are frequently found in the plaster reliefs at CatalhOytik, usually consisting of cattle horns incorporated into plaster heads (see Fig. 7.18). These have traditionally been regarded as

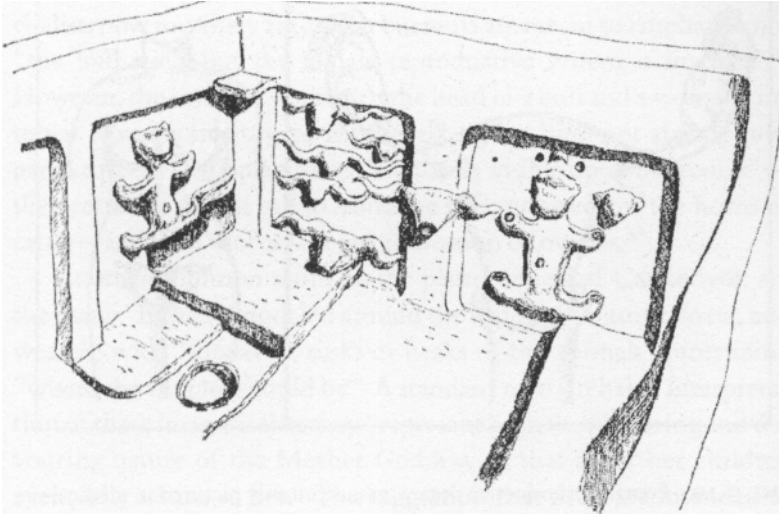


FIG. 7.17 Spread-eagled plaster reliefs, Catalhöyük, Turkey, c. 6200 BCE.

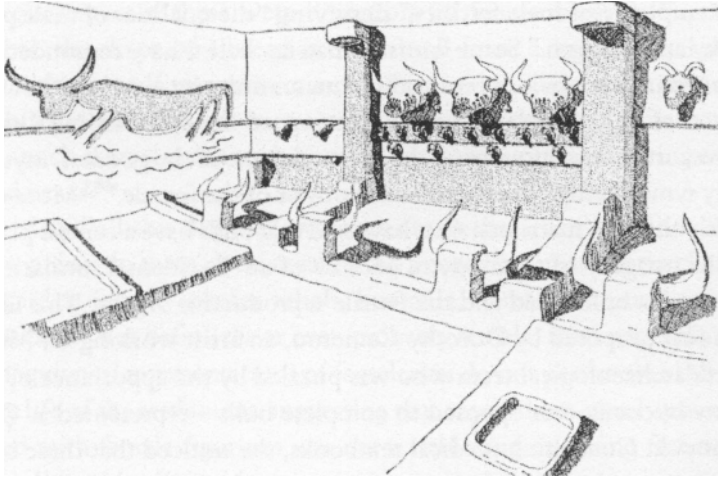


FIG. 7.18 Room with multiple bucrania and cattle horns, Catalhöyük, Turkey, c. 5800 BCE.

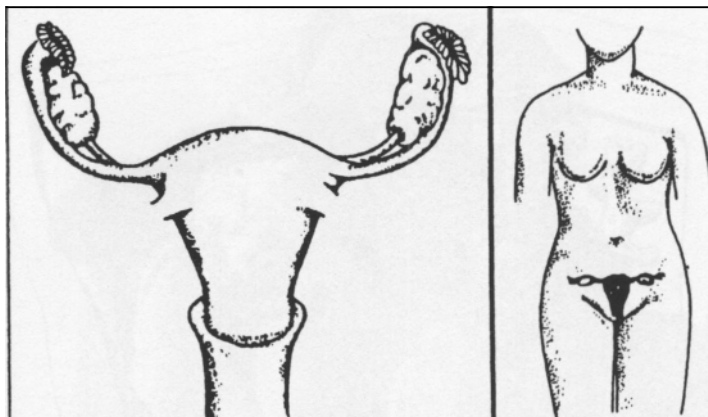


FIG. 7.19 Female reproductive organs, as customarily pictured in medical texts.

"an epiphany of male fertility," signifying "the qualities of male potency and strength." Some feminist matriarchalists have responded to this apparently obvious evocation of masculinity by viewing it as evidence of the complementary balancing of the sexes in Neolithic times, or by conceptualizing the bull as the son of the goddess, mystically symbolizing "the regenerative power of the female."<sup>53</sup> More recently though, matriarchalists have said that bulls have a central place in the imagery of CatalhOytik because of an "accidental similarity" between a bull's head and the female reproductive organs. This idea was first proposed by Dorothy Cameron, an artist working on Mel-laart's archaeological team who was puzzled by the appearance of so many bucrania—as opposed to complete bulls—represented at CatalhOyiik. Consulting medical textbooks, she noticed that these bucrania were shaped like a human uterus, with the horns positioned like fallopian tubes (see Fig. 7.19). The response of feminist matriarchalists to this insight has been enthusiastic. In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Marija Gimbutas describes the purported similarity of female internal reproductive organs and bucrania as "a plausible if esoteric explanation for the importance of this motif in the symbolism of Old Europe, Anatolia, and the Near East." But what on page 244 is simply an interesting theory becomes on page 246 a certain fact, as

Gimbutas writes, "Bull heads, that is, uteri. . ." Feminist matriarchalists now routinely argue that bucrania are meant to emphasize not "the bull itself but the female reproductive system it invokes." However, the similarity between the head of a bull and a woman's internal reproductive organs is not striking to those not already prepared to see it. Fallopian tubes "are barely visible upon dissection"—they certainly do not call to mind the size and sweep of the horns of cattle—and bulls' horns lack any indication of ovaries.'

Another common motif in the plaster reliefs of catalhoyuk are the many "breasts" modeled around the skulls of vultures, foxes, and weasels, with "the teeth, tusks or beaks of the animals" protruding "where the nipples should be." A standard matriarchalist interpretation of these images is that they "represent both the nurturing and devouring nature of the Mother Goddess, in that all of her children eventually return to her." The suggestion that these are intended to represent breasts seems far-fetched. These objects frequently appear alone or in rows; when they are paired, they are sometimes stacked one on top of the other in a column rather than side-by-side (as one might expect if these were depictions of female breasts). Furthermore, the shape of a breast is the natural form a small animal skull would take on if plaster were molded around it. This plaster encasing may have been simply a convenient way for the people of CatalhOyiik to attach animal skulls to their walls, or a means of emphasizing teeth and beaks.'

Amid all this disputed evidence about the art of CatalhOytik, a few points do seem clear: most of the images feminist matriarchalists regard as female (plaster reliefs, bucrania, "breasts" around animal skulls) are not definitely or even probably female; the images that *are* unequivocal representations of femaleness do not persist over the entire life of the settlement, suggesting that any goddess worship associated with female figurines was not a stable and enduring feature of CatalhOytik's religion; hunting continued to be an important activity, in symbol if not in practice, and was strongly linked to men; and death was a prominent theme. None fit the picture feminist matriarchalists paint for prehistory.

#### *Malta*

The "goddess" of Malta and the natural beauty of her Mediterranean environs feature prominently in current tellings of matriarchal myth.



Malta falls rather late in the chronology of matriarchal prehistory, flourishing between roughly 4000 and 2500 BCE. It is said by feminist matriarchalists to have survived in the face of patriarchal threats to its existence because of its enviable island locale. Early archaeological interpretations tended to assume that fourth and third millennium BCE Malta was goddess-worshipping, but interestingly, even early observers predisposed to the mother goddess theory didn't quite know what to make of Malta's enormous anthropomorphic statues (fifteen feet tall, unprecedented for that era).<sup>57</sup> The Maltese megalithic "goddesses" betray exceptionally little information about their sex. They could easily be female, or they could be male, like the icons of the Buddha to which Gertrude Rachel Levy likened them many years ago (see Fig. 7.20). They could even, as some have argued, be intended to represent eunuchs." There are some obviously female figurines from Malta, such as the so-called "Sleeping Goddess," but the ones of special interest to feminist matriarchalists are the megalithic figures upon whom the floor plans of the temples are supposedly based.

It has long been thought that these megalithic temples, described by one archaeologist as "a group of chambers centering about a central spine composed of courts and corridors") are a later derivative of the earlier Maltese tombs, which were cut out of rock in ovoid shapes during the fifth millennium BCE. Feminist matriarchalists claim that the floor plans of these temples replicate the body of the large stone statues. The multiple chambers are thought to form the goddess's head, arms, and legs (or, alternatively, her head, breasts, and hips), with entry through "the open legs of the Goddess." " This interpretation has become very popular among feminist matriarchalists. "Just as a Christian worshipper enters a cathedral which represents the living body of the crucified Christ," writes Cristina Biaggi, "to enter a Maltese temple is to enter the living body of the Great Goddess." <sup>60</sup> Or as Monica Sjöo puts it in poetic form:

. . . Through the vaginal gateways of the temples  
one enters into Her body to die and to be reborn.'

Certain of the Maltese temples, such as those at Ggantija, Gozo, or Mnajdra, have a floor plan that is a fair model of the human body as it is elsewhere portrayed in Maltese art and architecture (see Fig. 7.21). But other temples require a tremendous excess of interpretation to be regarded as anything remotely like a human body. The Ha-



FIG. 7.20 Headless standing statue carved in limestone, Malta, c. 3600-3000 BCE (height: 48.6 cm), termed "the Maltese Goddess" by Cristina Biaggi.

gar Qim temple, if it is the body of the goddess, has an extra appendage, with entrance through, perhaps, the goddess's foot (see Fig. 7.22); the Tarxien temple has one "goddess body" with entrance to what appears to be a four-tiered snowman from one of her arms (or breasts). Apart from the temples, Cristina Biaggi has described a rock formation common in this era in Malta—an inverted trapezoid, as tall as 1.5 meters—as a "pubic triangle,"<sup>62</sup> but the resemblance is invisible to anyone not looking for vulvas in virtually every geometric shape. In sum, the evidence for widespread goddess worship on Malta in the fourth and third millennia BCE is practically nonexistent.

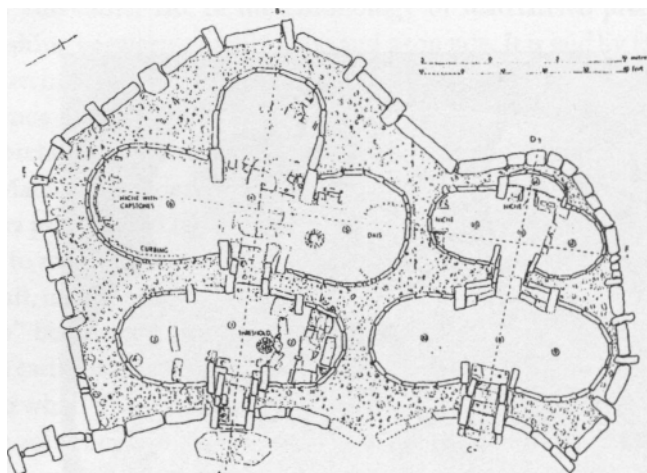


FIG. 7.21 Floor plan of temple at Ggantija, Malta, c. 3600-3000 BCE.

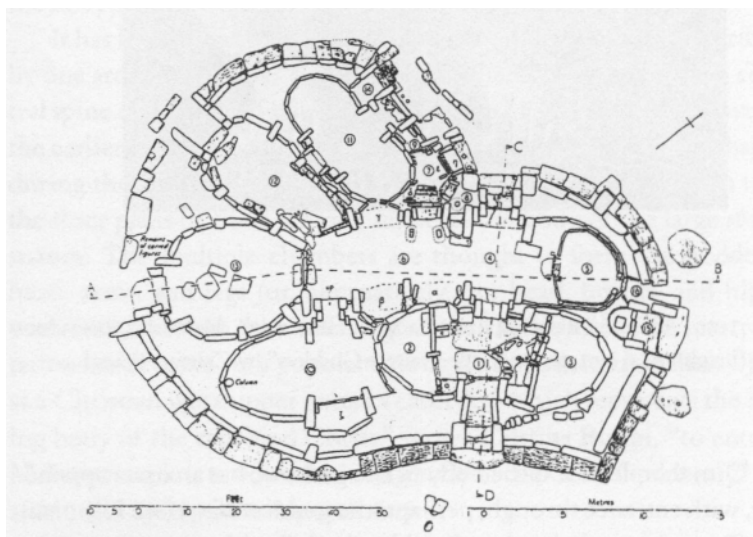


FIG. 7.22 Floor plan of temple at Hagar Qim, Malta, c. 4000-3500 BCE.

*Minoan Crete*

Minoan Crete has been an integral part of matriarchal myth for several generations now. Like Catalhuyuk, Minoan Crete was originally excavated by an archaeologist (Sir Arthur Evans) sympathetic to the idea of prehistoric goddess worship, and this has colored interpretation of its artwork ever since.

Prose has a tendency to wax and soar when the topic is Minoan Crete, a fact nearly as true of archaeologists' writing as it is of feminist matriarchalists'. There is something about the image of graceful palaces spilling across the rocky hills overlooking a sapphire sea, beautiful women in flounced skirts, and athletic young people leaping over bulls that brings out the poet in just about everyone. Minoan art is attractive to twentieth-century aesthetic sensibilities in a way that much earlier Neolithic and Paleolithic art simply is not. Even feminist matriarchalists frequently comment that they have had to learn to appreciate the beauty and power of earlier artifacts; not so with those of Minoan Crete. As Adele Getty writes, "The brightly coloured pottery and frescoes [of Minoan Crete] depict in free and elegant line both complex ceremonial practices and the beauties of Nature, expressing an inherent joy in the mystery of existence which surely reflects the harmonious relationship to life that the people experienced in their everyday activities." D. H. Trump, author of *The Prehistory of the Mediterranean*, attempts greater detachment, though he too is finally captivated: "True, we are seeing here only the wealthier and more powerful segment of society, to the exclusion of the humbler majority on whose labours this civilization depended, yet it is difficult to escape the impression of a happy people, their eyes open to nature, to foreign lands, to the good things of life, supported by a stable society and economy." "

Feminist matriarchalists sometimes say that the palaces of Minoan Crete, like the temples of Malta, replicate the body of the goddess on a grand scale. The palaces are "sited on a north-south axis facing a conical hill and beyond that a horned mountain containing a cave." According to Mimi Lobell, "the valley was her encircling arms; the conical hill, her breast or nurturing function; the horned mountain, her lap' or cleft vulva, the Earth's active power, and the cave sanctuary, her birth-giving womb." " The resemblance is something less than striking: breasts typically come in pairs and horned

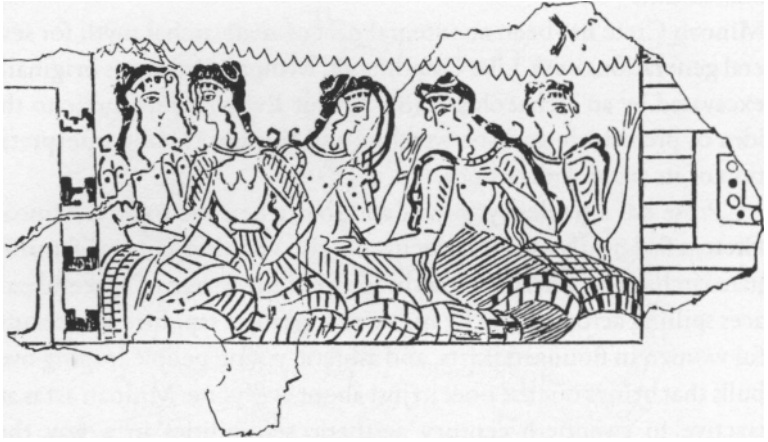


FIG. 7.23 The "grandstand" fresco from Knossos, Crete, c. 1600 BCE, showing a group of women in conversation.

mountains sound more phallic than vaginal, the caves notwithstanding.

The frescoes give us what appears to be our clearest picture of Minoan gender relations. We here have the advantage of seeing relatively naturalistic portrayals of groups of people, male and female, interacting in what appear to be the normal (if festive) situations of Minoan cultural life (see Fig. 7.23). A further advantage in interpreting this art is that there was a convention in Minoan art—though one occasionally broken—of painting women white and men red. This can be used to sort out gender in questionable cases, especially since women and men are otherwise depicted with a similar body type: waspishly thin waists combined with "exaggeratedly curved chests." The frescoes often portray women and men as "partners in relationship," say feminist matriarchalists, with women, like men, "strenuously engaged as boxers, bull-leapers, acrobats, charioteers, and hunters." From the testimony of these frescoes, women appear to have been active "in every sphere of Minoan society."

The evidence of the Minoan frescoes concerning the free interaction of the sexes is indeed impressive, though part of the reason for this is the background against which this art is typically viewed: namely, what we know to have been the relations between women



FIG. 7.24 "Master of Animals" sealstones from Minoan Crete, c. 1500 BCE.

and men in classical Greek times. Still, art is art, and life is life, and there may be no clear resemblance between the two. As classicist C. G. Thomas comments, "If the Procession Fresco were our only evidence for the position of Minoan women, we could give no answer. The subject is similar to that of the Parthenon frieze where Athenian maidens play a conspicuous role,<sup>66</sup> and fifth century Athens was definitely not a matriarchal society."

Scholars generally agree that many of the female images in Minoan sealstones and statuary represent goddesses, probably because they are reading back from classical times when this was a common meaning of female images. However, no female figurines have been recovered from "a definitely ritual context" or from graves; most have been found, as earlier, in garbage heaps. Females represented in sealstones, if goddesses, are notable mostly for their relationship to animals, with whom they are generally portrayed. Other "adorants," when present, are mostly women, leading classicist Nanno Marinatos to conclude that the Minoan goddess was "primarily the protectress of her own sex." Females do predominate in Minoan art. But there are considerably more males depicted in Minoan Crete than in Paleolithic and Neolithic European art more generally. Interestingly, these males appear in characteristically different roles than females. The most common male image is of a "god" whom classical archaeologists sometimes name "Master of Animals," for he "holds two wild animals in a position of submission or subjugation" (see Fig. 7.24). In



FIG. 7.25 Faience female figures from Knossos, Crete, c. 1600 BCE. The figure holding the snakes in front of her is 34 cm tall; the one holding the snakes in the air is 20 cm tall without her head. Neither was found intact, and both were reconstructed under the supervision of Sir Arthur Evans, the site's first excavator.

other pictures, males "hunt wild beasts" or engage in combat, unlike comparable females, who are typically shown "feeding or tending animals."

What captures feminist matriarchalists' imagination more than all else, however, is elegantly-crafted figurines of the Minoan "snake goddess": a bare-breasted woman holding snakes in each of her hands (see Fig. 7.25). Feminist matriarchalists have devoted extensive attention to interpreting this figurine (which is unmatched in number of

modern reproductions by any save the Venus of Willendorf), as can be seen in this passage from Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's *The Myth of the Goddess*:

The open bodice with the bared breasts is eloquent of the gift of nurture, while the caduceus-like image of intertwined snakes on the belly suggests that the goddess whose womb gives forth and takes back life is experienced as a unity. . . . The trance-like, almost mask-like expression . . . composes a meditation upon this theme of regeneration. . . . The net pattern on her skirt, which gathers significance from its Palaeolithic and Neolithic ancestry, suggests she is the weaver of the web of life, which is perpetually woven from her womb. Her skirt has seven layers, the number of the days of the moon's four quarters, which divide into two the waxing and waning halves of the cycle. . . . Although seven was also the number of the visible "planets," this is probably a lunar notation of series and measure, so that sitting in the lap of the goddess, as the overlapping panel of her gown invites, would be to experience time supported by eternity, and eternity clothed in time. For the goddess, by virtue of holding the two snakes, is herself beyond their opposition; or rather, she is the one who contains the two poles of dualism and so prevents them falling apart into the kind of opposition that our modern consciousness assumes as inevitable."

Whatever their meaning, it is clear that the "snake goddesses" have been given a symbolic role out of proportion to their very modest number. Though this has been described as "a deity very popular in Minoan times," there are actually only two such figurines from the entire palace period in Crete, both uncovered from the same pit in the palace at Knossos. As Nanno Marinatos writes, one may as well "speak of a Lily, Goat, Lion, or Griffin Goddess."

The art of Minoan Crete is certainly beautiful, but the divinity of the figures pictured is uncertain, and again we must ask what effect any Minoan goddess worship might have had on human women. The evidence of sealstones indicates that hunting and combat were thought of as male activities, which is not suggestive of a peaceful cultural ethos. And though the frescoes show an unprecedented intermingling of the sexes and significant freedoms for women, they are no more than what we are accustomed to in our own culture, one which, according to feminist matriarchalists, is patriarchal.

It is unfortunate that prehistoric art cannot tell us more about how



women were regarded in prehistoric societies, or how they lived their lives, but the evidence of prehistoric art is simply inconclusive. It tells us that women existed, and that people in prehistoric societies chose to represent them, usually in stylized or abstract forms. It tells us that then, as now, women seemed to be depicted more often than men. But beyond that, we are given precious little information about the status of either divine or human women in prehistory; it shows us nothing that would contradict the alternative hypothesis that male dominance flourished throughout the prehistoric times from which these works survive.

## Was There a Patriarchal Revolution?

If the vision of a prehistoric matriarchal utopia cannot stand against cultural anthropological and archaeological evidence, the possibility remains that there was nevertheless a decisive change in social organization around 3000 BCE (at least in southeastern Europe and the Near East) that propelled human civilization in a more patriarchal, hierarchical, and warlike direction.

Previous chapters have cast doubt on explanations for the rise of patriarchy that attribute it to internal developments within matriarchal cultures. The connection between sexual intercourse and conception was probably well known long before 3000 BCE; it seems doubtful that male "womb envy," insofar as it exists, would take a sudden and nefarious turn five thousand years before our time; intensive agriculture has been found historically and ethnographically to correlate with class-stratified societies and male dominance, but horticultural and foraging societies tend to be male-dominated as well; and animal husbandry, far from being a patriarchal invention, was already being practiced in CatalhOyi.i.k and Old Europe, cultures which feminist matriarchalists claim were goddess-worshipping and matricentric. We are left then with the leading external explanation for patriarchal revolution: that armed invaders imposed their male-dominant, male-god-worshipping cultures on formerly peaceful goddess-worshippers. Since Semitic invasions are mentioned by feminist matriarchalists but rarely discussed at any length, we will confine our attention here to their favored invaders: the horse-riding, nomadic Kurgans.

In reconstructing the era in which the Kurgans supposedly de-

scended on the goddess-worshipping lands to the south, we have access to resources not available in earlier eras: the evidence of comparative linguistics, which, together with archaeological evidence, can help trace probable prehistoric population movements; genetic studies on contemporary populations which may also document migrations; and written texts that may provide clues to past events that were still living in human memory when they were recorded. Together these sources speak to the question of whether or not there was a patriarchal revolution in southeastern Europe and the Near East on the very eve of the historical era.

### PREHISTORIC MIGRATIONS

There is much disagreement among prehistorians as to whether or not the invasions—or, more neutrally, migrations—described by feminist matriarchalists occurred during the late Neolithic in the areas under question. For most of the twentieth century, archaeologists have tended to assume that changes in the material record were due to shifts in population. So, for example, when a certain type of pottery known as a "bell beaker" turned up in, say, Holland, the assumption was that the "bell beaker people" had immigrated to Holland from wherever they had been before. This assumption is now out of favor. Archaeologists are currently much more prone to envision stable, sedentary Neolithic populations that adopted the pottery styles of their neighbors without ever relocating themselves from one spot to another.'

This accounts, in part, for the chilly reception of Marija Gimbutas's work among other archaeologists. From the 1970s on, she continued to postulate large-scale migrations at a time when archaeological fashion had turned in the opposite direction. But on the face of it, it seems as dubious to suggest that prehistoric populations virtually never moved as it is to say that they were constantly picking up their bell beakers and traveling hundreds and thousands of miles with no apparent provocation. Certainly taking the long view of human history, back to the beginnings of the hominid line and forward to our own times, migration has been the rule rather than the exception. There are groups who sit on the same plot of land, cultivating or hunting within an established range for many generations. But there are also groups who are highly mobile. And even in sedentary groups,

there may be a number of mobile individuals trading, exploring, colonizing, or immigrating.' Large-scale prehistoric migrations, such as those that feminist matriarchalists propose for the Kurgans, cannot be ruled out in advance.

*The Evidence from Linguistics*

The spread of Indo-European languages throughout Europe, the Near East, and southern Asia is a key piece of evidence for feminist matriarchalists. The reach of the patriarchal revolution can be charted very simply, they suggest, by noting when and where Indo-European languages appear.

Today Indo-European languages blanket Europe and much of southwest Asia, and owing to colonial expansion, the Americas and Africa as well. In the eighteenth century, when European linguists began to trace connections between these languages, there were dozens of Indo-European languages and very little record of any non-Indo-European languages having been spoken in Europe. Indo-European languages were first written down in the nineteenth century BCE; by this time, there were already several such languages.' However, the usual postulate for linguists—and for feminist matriarchalists too—is that at some time earlier than this, prehistorically, there was a group of people who spoke a language which, for convenience, is called "proto-Indo-European." It is further assumed that this group must have lived somewhere in Europe or Asia in such a position that their language could have, by whatever means, proliferated outwards to fill the territory that the languages derived from it eventually came to inhabit.

By searching through the most widely separated Indo-European languages for vocabulary they share in common, linguists believe that they can reconstruct a small portion of the proto-Indo-European language. This bank of words, the protolexicon, is an extremely important tool in efforts to locate when and where proto-Indo-European may have been spoken, and what sort of economy and society its speakers might have had. For example, the English word *birch* is found in a similar form in German, Lithuanian, Old Slavonic, and Sanskrit, which is taken as an indication that *\*bhergh*—a parent word for birch, reconstructed and assigned to the proto-Indo-European lexicon—grew in the landscape where the proto-Indo-Europeans lived.'

It has been a longstanding tradition among linguists to think of the proto-Indo-Europeans as nomadic herders, since there is a fairly rich vocabulary in the protolexicon for the herding and breeding of domesticated animals (including dogs, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, and especially cows), while there is a comparatively sparse vocabulary for agriculture (although it is definitely present in words like "wheat" and "barley"). It is certainly possible that the proto-Indo-Europeans had a thriving farming economy, but that for whatever reason it was words related to herding that successfully propagated themselves down the many lineages of Indo-European languages. (Perhaps the people who adopted Indo-European languages used their native words for farming, but Indo-European ones for herding.) This caveat notwithstanding, it is clear that the proto-Indo-Europeans practiced animal husbandry and that they were familiar with horses, both important factors in the matriarchalist thesis. The case for the proto-Indo-Europeans having been nomads, as feminist matriarchalists suggest, is not as strong: they apparently built their houses of wood, which is not easily transportable, and they did in fact have terms for a more intensive and sedentary form of agriculture, namely plowing.'

There is not much argument among linguists regarding the basic social system of the proto-Indo-Europeans: it was patriarchal. It has been more or less established that kinship was reckoned patrilineally, that a woman went to live with her husband or his family upon marriage, and that the term "husband" had roots meaning "master" or "lord of the house." There are also indications that it was a class-based society, since the basic tripartite scheme of the top levels of the caste system in India—priests, warriors, and herders-cultivators—is seen in other ancient societies in which Indo-European languages were spoken.' Most linguists believe proto-Indo-Europeans owned slaves and practiced warfare, though terms for slavery are unknown and terms for weapons are extremely limited. There are terms for "sword" and "bow and arrow," but they are not widely attested, being found in only two Indo-European languages each. Little is known about proto-Indo-European religion. There is a generic term for "god," but only one name for a specific god survives in known Indo-European languages: the Greek Zeus or Latin Jupiter, whose name is related to the word "day." Feminist matriarchalists have suggested that the god of the proto-Indo-Europeans was a sky or sun god,

and indeed there are intriguing phrases that surface in several Indo-European languages: "the wheel of the sun" and the expression, in reference to the sun, "he who spies upon gods and men." 8

Just where the proto-Indo-Europeans called home—the *Urheimat*, or homeland—has probably been the subject of the most intense debate among Indo-European linguists. Many candidates have been proposed, based either on the reconstructed protollexicon, on archaeological and historical evidence for migrations, or both. Today the contenders have been more or less narrowed down to two: Anatolia (present-day Turkey) and the Russian-Ukrainian steppes.<sup>1</sup> The case for an Anatolian homeland is relatively weak. Anatolia is nowhere near the first known geographical center of Indo-European linguistic dominance; Indo-European languages are not the only or even the most common languages of the region. Nor do these languages seem to resemble their Semitic neighbors, as one might expect if they had been in close contact with one another for several millennia.<sup>1</sup>

The argument in favor of the Russian-Ukrainian hypothesis is, in contrast, quite good. Geographically speaking, the steppes provide "a corridor for constant movement and migration." Central Europe is accessible via the Danube; northern Europe can be reached by heading north of the Carpathian mountains, through Poland; the Near East and western Asia lie directly below the steppes. Certainly in later eras (later than those Gimbutas posits for the patriarchal invasions) there is excellent evidence that the steppes were home to nomadic, horse-riding pastoralists: the Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Huns, Magyars, Bulgars, and Mongols, among others. And though words from the protollexicon can be used to argue for an enormous variety of potential homelands for proto-Indo-European, terms for trees and animals do seem to suit the flora and fauna of the steppes.<sup>1</sup>

A best guess for when Indo-European languages began to disperse can also be derived from the protollexicon. Since there are terms for things like "milk" and "wool" in the protollexicon, associated with what is known as the "secondary products revolution" (when domesticated animals began to be used not only for meat, but also for transportation, clothing, dairy products, and the like), we can be fairly certain that the languages did not disperse before 4000 BCE. There is also a term for "copper" in the protollexicon, but none for metals which

came into use later, and this too points to a dispersal beginning in the fourth or fifth millennium BCE.<sup>12</sup> Putting these together, most linguists provisionally date the dispersal of the proto-Indo-Europeans to 4500 to 2500 BCE, a time span that matches feminist matriarchalists' claims perfectly—which should not be surprising when one remembers that this time frame was adopted directly from Indo-European linguists, especially Gimbutas.

What information from the Indo-European protollexicon cannot tell us is if the people who spoke proto-Indo-European moved to a new area, or if the people previously living in that area merely adopted their neighbors' language (to facilitate trade, for example). It cannot tell us if the transmission of the language was friendly or hostile, or how much of proto-Indo-European was grafted onto preexisting languages. It cannot tell us with certainty which words were shared because they existed in the parent language, and which were invented much later and then traded between neighboring languages (as words like "television" and "telephone" are shared between many otherwise unrelated languages today). Linguists examine the spread and differentiation of *languages*, not of cultures or peoples. Any connections to be drawn between the two must be done carefully—usually with the help of other sorts of evidence, primarily archaeological.'

*The Evidence from Archaeology*

Prehistoric pastoralists of the Russian-Ukrainian steppes are known to us—though not terribly well—through archaeological excavations. The Sredny Stog culture, dated to 4500-3500 BCE, is located near the Dnieper River in southern Ukraine, and its material remains indicate that the people of this culture were cattle herders who also farmed, hunted, and fished. Excavations have unearthed "cheek-pieces," which may indicate that they rode horses. Following the Sredny Stog culture, and apparently growing out of it, is the Yamnaya or "Pit Grave" culture that Gimbutas has named "Kurgan." Covering a much broader swath than the Sredny Stog culture (from the headwaters of the Danube across to the Volga River and beyond) and dated from 3600 to 2200 BCE, the basic signature of the Yamnaya culture is, predictably, its style of burial: the body was placed in a deep pit, lying on its back with the knees drawn up. A mound was placed over the top

of the grave after it was filled in. Sometimes wagon wheels marked the corners of these pit graves. Feminist matriarchalists regard these burials as novel in two ways: first, they were not communal, but individual, which they take to suggest a possible weakening of community ties, and second, some of the graves contain greater wealth than was typical of the burial practices of earlier societies."

Similar burials—graves for a single individual, covered by a mound—emerged around 3000 BCE across northern and western Europe, along with a distinctive style of pottery called "Corded Ware." This "culture complex" has often been thought to have been related to the Yamnaya culture of the steppes. If the Yamnaya people spoke an Indo-European language, as many suggest, then the Corded Ware people may have as well, forming another center from which Indo-European languages could then have spread (see Fig. 8.1). What is thought to have facilitated these migrations is the mobility made possible by the domestication of the horse (for riding) and the introduction of wheeled vehicles. Both innovations appear to have taken place on the Russian steppes, with domestication of the horse occurring in the fifth millennium, and the invention of wheeled vehicles in the fourth millennium.'

To reiterate though, the spread of archaeological artifacts, such as pottery types, or even of new technologies and practices such as wheeled transportation or the domestication of the horse, does not necessarily reflect the spread of either people or languages. There is no shortage of examples of military and linguistic dominance coinciding (as in the European conquest of the Americas), and it is difficult to throw off the image of warlike, horse-riding invaders imposing political rule and linguistic change upon subject peoples. But there is also no shortage of examples of the peaceful transfer of languages, or of military conquests that bring about no linguistic changes.' And the existing evidence for the Indo-European case can be explained in other ways.

The most common criticism of the theory of horse-riding nomadic invaders from the steppes is that articulated by archaeologist Colin Renfrew, who asks, "Why on earth should hordes of mounted warriors have moved west at the end of the Neolithic, subjugating the inhabitants of Europe and imposing proto-Indo-European language on them? What enormous upsurge of population on the steppes



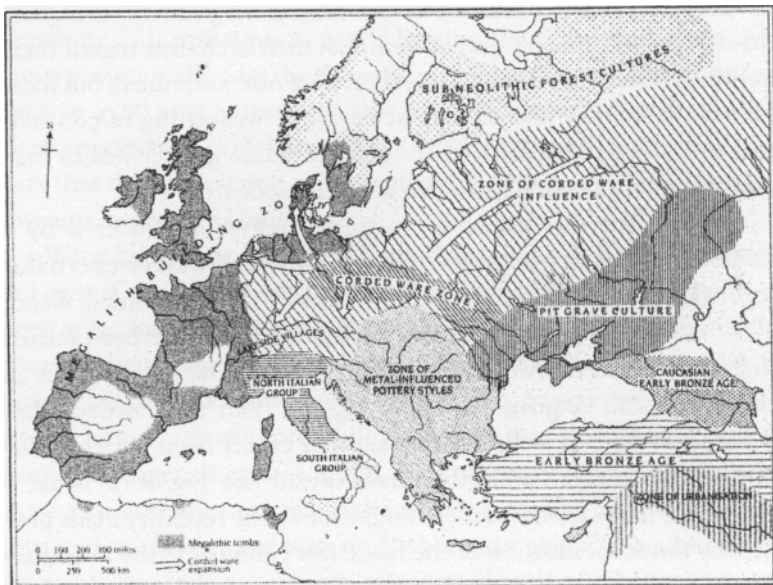


FIG. 8.1 Map of late Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and early Bronze Age Europe, 3500-2500 BCE, as derived from archaeological findings. The Pit Grave culture is that which Gimbutas calls Kurgan and which feminist matriarchalists claim is the source of Indo-European language, horse-riding, war, male-dominated religion, and patriarchy. Some archaeologists have suggested that the Corded Ware culture is related to the Pit Grave culture and that Indo-European languages were spoken in both.

could have been responsible?" When people migrate, Renfrew implies, it is because conditions where they are have become unsatisfactory: either the environment has changed or the population has expanded beyond what the environment can comfortably carry. There is no archaeological evidence of either of these events occurring on the Russian steppes in the fifth and fourth millennia scE." We are left, then, with the general sentiment behind matriarchal myth: that the peoples of the steppes—the proto-Indo-Europeans, the Kurgans—were cruel and greedy, and, presented with an opportunity to rape and pillage, they took it, although they already had everything they needed at home.

To my cynical mind, this is not an outrageous hypothesis, but it doesn't sit well with many archaeologists.' And indeed there are other potential explanations for the social disintegration that is apparent in the archaeological record around the time of the purported patriarchal revolution, at least in southeastern Europe. The best evidence for incursions from the steppes comes "long after the stable villages of the Copper Age had disappeared" because of deforestation and environmental degradation. As J. P. Mallory summarizes, "almost all of the arguments for invasion and cultural transformations are far better explained without reference to Kurgan expansions."

### *The Evidence from Genetics*

Scientists' increasing ability to detect relationships between peoples based on genetic material found in their blood and bones is providing another means for reconstructing prehistoric migrations in Europe and western Asia. To date, genetic research has been conducted on living Europeans—not their ancestors. And the way genetic material is distributed in Europe today is the result of so many overlapping population movements that it is by no means trivial to separate and identify them.' Nevertheless, genetic studies have yielded some interesting data that informs speculation about prehistoric migrations.

Pioneering work in this area was first carried out by Italian geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and his collaborators in the 1970s. Sampling blood from modern European populations and tracking key genetic differences across these populations (beginning, most simply, with blood type), Cavalli-Sforza was able to detect statistically significant differences that could be mapped directly onto the European landscape. He sorted these differences into "principal components." That which accounted for the largest portion of the total genetic information (27 percent)—the first principal component—was centered in the Near East and gradually thinned out in radiating arcs as it pushed across the European continent. Cavalli-Sforza and others have interpreted this first principal component—the oldest—to be consistent with a gradual movement of farming populations from Anatolia throughout Europe. But Cavalli-Sforza uncovered other principal components in the genetic material of modern Europeans, ones that mapped quite differently. The second principal component, accounting for 18 percent of the genetic similarity, indicated a movement of

population from northern Europe southwards, and was theorized to be "due to a genetic adaptation to the climate difference between north and south Europe" or to the southward movement of speakers of Uralic languages. The third principal component (accounting for 12 percent of the genetic similarity), uncovered something far more exciting to feminist matriarchalists: a trend centered in Poland, the Ukraine, and southern Russia, extending out into Europe proper. The fit between this third principal component and Gimbutas's theory did not go unnoticed even by Cavalli-Sforza, who wrote as early as 1984 that one possible explanation of this genetic phenomenon "would be the expansion of Indo-European speaking people whose homeland has been placed in the region to the north of the Black Sea on the basis of linguistic considerations."

Feminist matriarchalists have welcomed this as proof that Gimbutas was correct in postulating a series of invasions from the Russian steppes,' but this is not exactly how Cavalli-Sforza and certain anthropologists view the matter. Cavalli-Sforza has noted that the center of the third principal component of his gene mapping project does not have "precise contours," and that the genetic effect it represents could be due to much later invasions, even as recent as the end of the Roman Empire. Others have suggested that the third principal component dates to significantly earlier times (around 7000 BCE), before any purported patriarchal revolution, with the expansion of a Mesolithic hunting and gathering population. Furthermore, tests how well Cavalli-Sforza's third principal component conforms to Gimbutas's archaeologically derived maps are "currently still at the borderline of statistical significance."<sup>23</sup> It simply cannot be said, on the basis of the available data, that genetic evidence proves that there were Indo-European invasions in the fifth and fourth millennia BCE, or indeed migrations of any sort from the Russian steppe to southeast Europe and the Near East at this time. In short, the case for the spread of Indo-European speakers from the Russian steppes is merely suggestive, and the argument that this spread occurred via military conquest is completely speculative—though not entirely implausible.

#### READING BACK FROM THE LITERATE PAST

Another avenue back into the era of putative patriarchal revolution is written texts. Since feminist matriarchalists believe that the patriar-

chal revolution coincided with the development of written language, or else lived within the memory (or oral history) of the earliest writers, they believe that that conflagration is recorded in very early histories and myths.

The earliest texts of the West, when they trouble themselves to speak about women, seem to indicate that male dominance, in one form or another, was already the norm. Cuneiform texts from ancient Sumer (beginning around 2500 BCE) record widespread goddess worship, with female religious functionaries being more common than male ones. Women of the upper classes were able to own slaves and other property, to transact business, and to retain control over their dowries (though inheritance went first to sons, if there were any). Royal women in particular had considerable power, founding dynasties, managing large temple estates, and even ruling city-states. But farther down in the class structure, legal texts show that women could be sold by their husbands, put to death for adultery, divorced if barren, or drowned for refusing to bear children. Since most girls were wed by age eleven or twelve, marriage was the state in which they lived most of their lives. Women's children were regarded as the property of their fathers, who were permitted by law to decide whether they should be exposed, married, or sold as slaves. The lot of female slaves was of course worse: in addition to being "subject to the master's sexual whims," female slaves received about half as much food as their male counterparts, and many died at a young age owing to the harsh conditions under which they labored.'

Minoan Crete also had a written script—Linear A, an apparently non-Greek language developed around the eighteenth century BCE. Some scholars have found what they believe to be the names of individual deities in Linear A texts, though their gender is not clear. But since Minoan texts remain undeciphered, written records in the Mediterranean cannot be used to determine the status of women in ancient times until the emergence of Linear B (a syllabic script, representing an early Greek language, with a visual appearance similar to Linear A) on both Crete and the Greek mainland in roughly the fourteenth century BCE. Deciphered Linear B documents indicate that there was a king (male) in Mycenaean Greece and that there were numerous female workers who had possibly been taken captive in raids and were either slaves or servants in the palaces. Male workers also ap-

pear in Linear B texts, rearing sheep and managing groups of female laborers whose tasks were more menial than those of men (apart from weaving, which was a skilled occupation restricted to women). Linear B tablets also record offerings made to goddesses and gods, with women most often serving female deities, and men male ones.' Thus Linear B texts, like cuneiform ones, suggest that women had roles as religious functionaries, but also portray a society stratified by class in which women—at least those of the lower classes—had fewer advantages and harder lives than the men of their own class.

A picture of early Greek life begins to emerge in the works of Homer, which, though they date to the eighth or ninth century BCE, offer accounts of earlier events and are believed to be the codification of a preexisting oral tradition. The window which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* open on the position of women in Bronze Age Greece must be regarded with some suspicion, given the intervening time and the poet's agenda (which was not the dispassionate recording of historical fact). Homer's central female characters are aristocratic women, some of whom evidence considerable power within their families. The only other women he mentions are slaves. Homer's aristocratic female characters are free to walk the streets (accompanied by an escort) and can sit in the public rooms of their homes with male guests, unlike women in later Greek societies. But a Homeric woman's principal tasks were, as classicist Eva Cantarella details them, to be beautiful, to take care of domestic tasks, and to "above all be obedient." Female slaves had fewer freedoms and possessions, and like aristocratic wives, were required to be sexually faithful to their master alone.'

Later Greek literature paints a picture that is not at all favorable to women. Aristotle, writing in the fourth century BCE, put it unequivocally: "The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled." Greek poetry, drama, and myth are full of the "problem" of women. The eighth-century BCE poet Hesiod describes woman as a drone who "sits within the house and reaps the fruits of others' toil to fill her belly," saying that even a "good wife" will bring misfortune upon a man. Indeed, the myth of Pandora suggests that women were regarded as a breed apart, not truly human. Pandora, the first woman, is created as a punishment to men. And though Greek literature recognizes it as an (unfortunate) fact that women are involved in reproducing all human beings, Pandora is named only as the origin of "the race of women."

The misogyny evident in Greek literature permeated Greek society. Women in classical Athens were under the guardianship of one male or another for their entire lives. Married free-born women were confined to their houses—actually to one portion of the house designated for women, the *gynaecaeum*. Fathers had the right to expose their newborn children, and more girls than boys were left to die in this manner. Heterosexual sex was understood as "an unequal transaction by which woman steals man's substance," and so men were better advised to have sexual relations with one another. As Eva Keuls sums up classical Athens: "In the case of a society dominated by men who sequester their wives and daughters, denigrate the female role in reproduction, erect monuments to male genitalia, have sex with the sons of their peers, sponsor public whorehouses, create a mythology of rape, and engage in rampant saber-rattling, it is not inappropriate to refer to a reign of the phallus." 28

Nothing in this picture is particularly congenial to the matriarchal thesis, unless one interprets the zeal with which women were oppressed in antiquity to the newness of the practice. Many feminist matriarchalists draw exactly this conclusion, and they believe it to be documented—albeit in carefully encoded ways—in one type of ancient text, namely myth.

#### *Finding Matriarchy in Ancient Myth*

Gender was fascinating to the ancient cultures of the West, as it is to us, and their myths are full of references to conflicts between the sexes at both the individual and communal levels, among humans and also, strikingly, among the gods and goddesses. A subset of these myths is particularly fascinating to feminist matriarchalists: first, those that involve the triumph of gods over goddesses; second, those that tell a story of women's former dominance and its overthrow; and third, those that describe a past golden age. The first two types are taken to be documentation of a patriarchal revolution, while the third is seen as a memory of matriarchal times.

One of the most dramatic ways gods triumph over goddesses in ancient myths, according to feminist matriarchalists, is by murdering them. The narrative that is most often cited in this regard is the Babylonian myth of Tiamat and Marduk, in which Marduk conquers the chaotic forces of nature by subduing the primeval mother goddess Tiamat. Tiamat fights Marduk with serpents, dragons, water snakes, and

other ferocious animals, but Marduk eventually dismembers her, then uses the pieces of her sundered body to create the earth and the sky. Feminist matriarchalists argue that all serpents and dragons are symbols of prehistoric goddess religion, and that therefore myths of serpent murder (like Marduk's of Tiamat and her reptilian creatures), found from India to Israel to Ireland, are records of patriarchal revolution."

The new gods sometimes achieve the same ends without actually killing the old goddesses, feminist matriarchalists say. For example, the rape of Persephone by Hades and the consequent rupture of her heretofore exclusive relationship with her mother Demeter is thought to be another allegory of patriarchal revolution. So too is the myth of Athena's birth. Feminist matriarchalists say that when Zeus swallowed Athena's mother Metis and produced Athena from his head, he in effect "swallowed the ancient matrilineal line and gave birth to Athena . . . the first daughter of the patriarchy."

One of the most fully elaborated myths involving a transition from the power of the goddess to the power of the gods is found in Hesiod's *Theogony*. As a compilation of preexisting Greek myths about the gods and goddesses, the *Theogony*, dating to roughly 700 BCE, sought to put these disparate myths in a logical order. The resulting narrative progresses from the physical—embodied in Gaia and her parthenogenetic children, Sky, Mountains, and Sea—to the anthropocentric: Zeus and the rest of the Olympian pantheon. This is also, says translator and editor Norman O. Brown, an evolution "from the primacy of the female to the primacy of the male."

Two other ancient Greek narratives are repeatedly cited by feminist matriarchalists as evidence of the patriarchal revolution, and both tell a more transparent story of women's loss of power, on the secular rather than the divine level. The first is the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus; the second is the myth of the naming of Athens (taken from Varro and appearing in Augustine's *City of God*). Aeschylus's tragedy was based on a legend told by Homer in the *Odyssey* (and later retold in different versions by the Greek poets Stesichorus and Pindar). The basic plot of the *Oresteia* revolves around a series of murders within the "house" or family of the king of Mycenae, Agamemnon. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to the gods to calm the winds so that his ships may safely sail off to war; Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother, kills

Agamemnon upon his return in revenge for his having killed their daughter; and finally Orestes, their son, avenges Agamemnon's death by killing his mother, Clytemnestra. This is quite enough action for even the trilogy of plays that form the *Oresteia*, and this seems to be where the earliest versions of the legend end. But in Aeschylus's version, the drama is just beginning: Orestes finds himself pursued by his mother's avenging furies (*erinyes*) who wish to punish him for his act of matricide. His case comes before a tribunal in Athens, over which Athena presides. Orestes's defense is offered by Apollo, who claims: "The mother is not the true parent of the child / Which is called hers. She is a nurse who tends the growth / Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male." To underscore his argument, Apollo points to Athena: "Present, as proof, the daughter of Olympian Zeus: / One never nursed in the dark cradle of the womb." The tribunal—composed of Athenian citizens—votes on whether to convict or acquit Orestes in the murder of his mother, and the vote is tied. Athena breaks the tie by voting to acquit, stating, "No mother gave me birth. Therefore the father's claim / And male supremacy in all things . . . wins my whole heart's loyalty." Although no earlier matriarchal period is explicitly invoked in the *Oresteia*, there is a clear shift from female power (under which matricide is the most heinous crime) to male power (legitimately housed in the father, the only true parent).'

The myth of the naming of Athens is perhaps the clearest statement in classical Greek literature of a transition from female to male power. According to this myth, an olive tree and a spring appeared in the area that was to become Athens, and the residents asked Apollo what these marvels meant. Apollo replied that the olive tree came from Athena and the spring from Poseidon, and that the residents of the city could choose to name their city after one or the other of these gods. The citizens—both male and female—placed their votes. All the men voted for Poseidon, while all the women voted for Athena; because the women were in a majority of one, the decision was in favor of Athena. This so outraged Poseidon that he caused a great flood to occur. He demanded that the Athenians be punished for choosing Athena over him, and his punishment was this: that women should no longer be able to vote; that women's children should no longer be named after them, but after their fathers; and that women should not be called Athenians. Here indeed is a patriarchal revolution, as matri-



liny and women's suffrage are overthrown in favor of a society in which women have no political status or power.'

Myths and legends of Amazons are also sometimes read by feminist matriarchalists as accounts of patriarchal revolution. Amazons are documented very early in Greek literature (in Homer's epics), and they later become a staple of classical Greek discourse. The Greeks describe the Amazons as valiant warriors, but in legend and pictorial representations they always lose to men; either they are defeated directly in battle or they revert to domesticated femininity—roles of wife and mother—upon falling in love with their Greek enemies.' In feminist matriarchalist interpretations, Amazon legends record the efforts of armed defenders of matriarchy. The only reason Amazons are portrayed as losers or reluctant warriors is because the Greeks wrote these stories from their own misogynistic, post-patriarchal-revolution point of view.

If Amazons are held by feminist matriarchalists to represent the dying days of matriarchal civilization, its zenith is thought to be portrayed in ancient accounts of the golden age. The adjective "golden" was first applied to the past by Hesiod, who wrote of a golden race of men' who "lived like gods, carefree in their hearts, shielded from pain and misery." Hesiod inspired later poets and philosophers, who by the first century CE were habitually referring to a "golden age," a time when life was easy and good." Interpreting golden age myths quite literally, feminist matriarchalists find in them "folk memories of a more peaceful partnership-oriented epoch."

#### *Myth as History*

Throughout feminist matriarchalist interpretations of myth lies the assumption that ancient myths are encoded versions of classical and preclassical history. This idea has been around for quite some time, and has led to some important archaeological discoveries. For example, Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy was guided by Homer's texts, which had previously been believed to be fictional. Feminist matriarchalists continue this tradition of regarding myth as "a vast mirror that faithfully reflects the reality of the past." "

But discovering a prehistoric patriarchal revolution through ancient myth is no simple matter. Feminist matriarchalists are tripped up first by the fact that the myths they say reflect a patriarchal revolution

are not very close to the event in question. Classicist H. J. Rose suggests a date for the myth of the naming of Athens of no earlier than the fourth century BCE. The *Oresteia* is an older story, dating at least to Homer's time, but many of the more damning details in Aeschylus's version—Athena's speech defending male supremacy, the tied vote, Apollo serving as defense attorney for Orestes—are most likely original to Aeschylus, writing in the mid-fifth century BCE. In the Homeric version of the Orestes legend, in contrast, Clytemnestra gets what she deserves, and Orestes need suffer no guilt over his matricide, a theme that seems to reflect an entrenched patriarchy rather than a new one.' It is the *later* myth rather than the earlier one that reads like a record of patriarchal revolution.

Beyond these sorts of specifics, if a patriarchal revolution occurred in 3000 BCE, the memory of it would have to have been preserved for more than two thousand years to be written into Greek myth. This would be like us having accurate accounts of events in classical Greece passed down through oral tradition alone—an unlikely scenario. Gimbutas's editor, Joan Marler, claims that "mythology and folklore are conservative and slow to change," implying that any history contained within myths could be carried along intact for many generations. But myths may not be as old or static as we typically take them to be. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade gives a striking example of how quickly history can become myth, and in the process become sufficiently corrupted that it bears little relation to historical events. Folklorist Constantin Brailoiu discovered a ballad in a small Romanian village relating the story of a young man who, about to be married, was bewitched by a mountain fairy who threw him off a cliff out of jealousy. His body was brought back to the village, where his fiancée "poured out a funeral lament, full of mythological allusions." Brailoiu's informants told him that it was a "very old story," an event that happened "long ago." However, Brailoiu eventually discovered that the events in question had occurred less than forty years earlier, and that the fiancée who was said to have composed the funeral lament was still alive. Upon speaking with her, Brailoiu learned that the young man had slipped and fallen from a cliff and been brought back to the village alive, where he eventually died, and that he was mourned in the customary way, with no unusual lament.'

This is an interesting case, since clearly there is an historical event embodied in the myth, a story of untimely (if ordinary) death lying underneath the story of the jealous mountain fairy. But without access to living informants or texts, it is not a trivial matter to decide which parts of the story represent history, and which are mythic themes and fabrications.

Feminist matriarchalists do not suggest that history happened exactly as myth says it did. None claim that a great male hero named Marduk actually dismembered the goddess Tiamat, or that prehistoric Athenians voted for Athena as their patron goddess, thus so engaging Poseidon that women were cursed from that point forward. In feminist matriarchalist interpretation, Tiamat and Marduk are metaphors for the shift from female power to male power; the vote of the Athenian assembly is a compact mythic telling of an event that took place over the course of hundreds or even thousands of years.

There is an enormous project of sorting and judging going on here. Plausible connections between myth and reality must be drawn; more fanciful elements (for example, Athena being born from the head of Zeus) must be dispensed with or read as metaphors; certain elements or certain myths must be credited with greater importance than others; and so on." This can be a very messy business, characterized by legions of unspoken assumptions.

Feminist matriarchalists often give as their justification for parsing Greek myth as they do the fact that they are stripping away "patriarchal accretions." " These elements can be recognized because they do not conform to the pattern that feminist matriarchalists expect to find in ancient myth (however covered over by the purposeful political machinations of later redactors). This is a very convenient method of interpreting ancient myth: once the assumption is in place that prehistoric societies were matriarchal and goddess-worshipping, myth yields up that conclusion quite naturally. Critics who point to aspects of a myth that do not support that conclusion can be dismissed by the claim that those aspects are patriarchal accretions, and not the "original myth." If anything, troublesome aspects of a myth—for example, that it was a goddess, Athena, who championed patriarchy—lend even more credence to the matriarchal thesis, since they illustrate that a conspiracy took place within the text of the myth itself to eradicate even the memory of ancient matriarchies.

Feminist matriarchalists encourage one another to adopt this methodology of taking their conclusions as their premises. For example, Hallie Austen Iglehart encourages her readers to "fill in the gaps" left by patriarchal researchers with your own knowledge, common sense, and intuition. . . . Soon you will begin to see matrifocal influence in art and civilizations that you had not noticed before." " What feminist matriarchalists do *not* do is to encourage one another to seek out evidence that might disprove their thesis. If the evidence contradicts the theory, it is the evidence that is wrong.

*Myth as Charter*

Granted that feminist matriarchalists are making some unwarranted leaps in interpreting myth as history, this still does not rule out the basic premise that myth could in fact be encoding a history of patriarchal revolution. Certainly some of the Greek myths to which feminist matriarchalists appeal offer a clear account of the imposition of male dominance on formerly free (or freer) women. And classical Greece is not the only place such myths are found. These myths of former female dominance are found around the globe. They are full of local details, but they contain some interesting similarities. The most common pattern is that certain powerful and/or magical ceremonial objects (hats, flutes, trumpets, masks) were originally owned or created by women, and possessing them gave women greater social power. Eventually, men confiscated these objects and withheld them from women and, as a result, women's social status is lower to this day."

A good example of such a myth comes from the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego. The Selk'nam were a hunting and fishing people, mostly undisturbed by outsiders until white colonization of their land began in 1880. According to Selk'nam myth, women originally "ruled over men without mercy" The men did all the hunting, but also all the child-tending and domestic work, while the women met in private in the Hain, a large hut where they lived apart from the men, to deliberate on and resolve important social matters. Despite the men being physically larger and armed with hunting weapons, the women kept them subjugated by impersonating demons and spirits. In these disguises they visited the village during ceremonies, frightening and punishing men who threatened to get out of line. The

women periodically ordered the men to deliver meat to them to satiate the demons' voracious appetites. The men did as they were told, and the women feasted on the meat and laughed "with malice at the men's incredible naivete and stupidity."<sup>46</sup>

Things continued in this manner until one day Sun, a male culture hero, spied on two young women as they practiced the parts they would play in the ceremony. When Sun reported the women's secret back to the men, they responded by immediately attacking and killing the women. (Men who could not bear to kill their own daughters or wives asked other men to kill them for them.) Only the youngest girls and infants were spared. In order to prevent these girls from growing up to revive the rule of women, the men hatched a plan: they would live in the Hain apart from the women, and they would periodically impersonate demons and spirits to scare the women into submission—not a very original plan, to be sure, but a time-tested one.<sup>47</sup>

Feminist matriarchalists hold that these myths of former female dominance, like all "legends that won't die," contain a "race-memory."<sup>48</sup> They would not be so widespread, they argue, if there weren't some historical basis for them. The primary competing explanation for these cross-cultural myths of women's former dominance is that they are a "social charter" for male dominance.

The idea of myth as "charter" was first proposed by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s. Interested in the functions of myth, Malinowski claimed that for any group myth could be understood as a collection of narratives that dictate belief, define ritual, and act "as the chart of their social order and the pattern of their moral behaviour." Malinowski suggested that myth tends to promote the status quo, since its function "is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events." Such mythic charters are said to operate especially in areas of sociological strain, such as significant differences in status or power. Gender disparities certainly fit in this category, and indeed Malinowski drew special attention to them: "Nothing is more familiar to the native than the different occupations of the male and female sex," Malinowski wrote. "There is nothing to be *explained* about it. But though familiar, such differences are at times irksome, unpleasant, or at least limiting, and there is the

need to justify them, to vouch for their antiquity and reality, in short to buttress their validity." "

This theory seems ready-made to account for cross-cultural myths of women's former dominance. The aim of the myth is to justify the present state of affairs: in this case, male dominance. If women had power before—especially if they misused it, as they frequently did—then it is only fair that men should have it now, these myths seem to say. The myth-as-charter view suggests that myths of women's former dominance merely "mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and . . . win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, thereby obviating the need for the direct coercive use of force and transforming simple power into 'legitimate' authority." In short, "ideology masquerades as aetiology."

That these myths of women's former dominance are working to justify male dominance is often quite plain in the contexts in which they are deployed. When the Selk'nam congregate for the Hain festival which celebrates the male takeover, women are terrorized by men dressed as deities and demons. As anthropologist Anne McKaye Chapman reports, "women whose behaviour has not conformed to the model of subservient wife" are singled out by these demons: their huts are shaken, their hearths stirred up, their belongings dragged out of their huts or thrown at them; they may even be beaten and stabbed with a stick. And in at least some of the groups that hold a myth of women's former dominance, the men self-consciously use the myth to retain their power. For example, male informants from a tribe in Papua New Guinea have told anthropologists that without their myth and the sacred flutes associated with it, the women "would laugh at us and we men would lose all authority over them, they would no longer cook for us nor rear our pigs." Marie Reay, speaking of a group that credits women with inventing marriage during a time of female dominance, notes that the men "admit freely that they wish women to think that marriage was the women's own idea so that they may become reconciled to an institution in which all the advantage lies with the men." 51

Classicists who have concerned themselves with ancient Greek myths of women's former dominance tend to interpret them in this same way, as justifications for male dominance which are "didactic rather than historical." Even in antiquity, there was some dispute

about whether Amazons were fictional or historical.' Today most scholars are agreed that Amazons existed strictly in myth, and that legends about them served as morality tales teaching that women's rule is dangerous and unnatural. Amazon societies are constructed as a reversal of Greek practices, an "antitype to the patriarchal social order that the Greeks identified with civilization." They display what the world would be like in the absence of patriarchal gender norms, and it is a frightening place.

It is not just the Amazons to whom the ancient Greeks attributed an unnatural level of power for women. The Egyptians, the Lycians, the Lemnians, and others are all credited with this "barbaric" arrangement. Indeed, the ancient Greeks show a preoccupation with the rule of women not unlike that found in tribal New Guinea or South America. A myth such as that of the naming of Athens clearly "justifies the lowly estate of women in society" and pins it squarely on women, who voted the wrong way and thus earned their lot in society.<sup>54</sup>

In general, feminist matriarchalists have no trouble believing that myths of women's former dominance, whether from ancient Greece or contemporary New Guinea, are used to keep women down. To this extent, they are in agreement with their critics. The key difference is that feminist matriarchalists believe that the myth is not only a charter, but also a history, a belief their critics do not share. "We don't fear something that doesn't exist, something that never happened, something that never could happen,"<sup>55</sup> reasons Phyllis Chesler. But we fear all sorts of things that don't exist (monsters, dragons, and the like) or that haven't happened (extraterrestrial invasions, all-out nuclear war). Some of our fears are reasonable, others are not, but the relevant factor in whether or not we find things frightening is not their prior, documented existence. It seems perfectly plausible that men could find the rule of women frightening even if women have never ruled; perhaps *especially* because women have never ruled and how they would behave is therefore unknown. Men have ample reason to fear that the desire for revenge would run high if the tables were ever turned and women took power. Myths of women's former dominance—which have in fact been invented exclusively by men, as far as we can tell—could well exist only to quell men's anxieties about their social position.'

Feminist matriarchalist interpretations of ancient myth are rather transparently driven by ideology. Mythical evidence can by its nature be given various incommensurable interpretations. In this case, it provides no real support for the proposed prehistoric patriarchal revolution, though it does offer a fertile field for imagination. In contrast, linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence offer some support for the theory of Indo-European invasions from the steppes in the fifth and fourth millennia BCE. It is not implausible that the people and concepts that spread out from the Russian steppes into neighboring lands were patriarchal, patrilineal, and warlike. But as previous chapters have shown, it is likewise not implausible that the peoples who came in contact with them were already as patriarchal, patrilineal, and warlike as their enemies. Neither is there any positive evidence that the Kurgans from the Russian steppes were an exceptionally brutal, supremely patriarchal people. Their stock of weaponry, as it has been uncovered archaeologically, does not dwarf that of Neolithic peoples to the south, nor do Kurgan skeletons give unusual evidence of violence toward women. Therefore an Indo-European military conquest—if one occurred, which is by no means certain—cannot be assumed to count as the birth of patriarchy.



## On the Usefulness of Origin Myths

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is an impressive—and to some, a beautiful and enticing—house of cards. The cards of which it is built are not totally flimsy. Some are plausible interpretations of historical and artifactual data. But others are patently absurd. They are either bad interpretations of the available data, or assertions based on no data at all. Taken together, the entire structure is unstable, and if there were not things stronger than archaeological or historical evidence holding it up—things like passionate hope and religious faith—it would be in imminent danger of collapse.

We cannot know nearly as much as we would like to about prehistory. Interpretation of "gendered" data especially is so overburdened by observers' wishes and assumptions that it is very difficult to bracket off present concerns and discover past reality. But what we do know (or can judge to be probable) about gender in prehistory is not particularly encouraging regarding the status of women. Ethnographic analogies to contemporary groups with lifeways similar to those of prehistoric times (hunting and gathering or horticulture, practiced in small groups) show little sex egalitarianism and no matriarchy. Indeed, these societies always discriminate in some way between women and men, usually to women's detriment. Women may have powerful roles, but their power does not undermine or seriously challenge an overall system of male dominance in either these groups or ours, and there is no reason to believe that it would have in prehistoric societies either. If there are in fact societies where women's position is high and secure, these exceptions cannot lead us to believe that it was

*this* pattern (rather than the more prevalent pattern of discrimination against women) which held in prehistory.

There is also nothing in the archaeological record that is at odds with an image of prehistoric life as nasty, brutish, short, and male-dominated. This does not mean that it *was* this way, but only that it could have been, as easily as—more easily than, actually—it could have been blissful, peaceful, long, and matriarchal. Female and male grave goods of equivalent wealth do not prove that men were not dominant, nor does the absence of weapons of war among the material remains we have uncovered mean that there was no warfare. But beyond this simple absence of proof positive, we have some disconfirming evidence: suggestions that prehistoric peoples did not live in peace, and that the division of labor between women and men resembled that found in later societies, which have consistently given disproportionate value to the labors of men.

There is no question that some prehistoric groups in Europe and the Near East made vast numbers of artistic representations of women, and the suggestion that many (if not all) of these images were meant to represent goddesses is plausible. The major monotheistic religions of the world notwithstanding, most peoples worship goddesses. It would be distinctly odd if it were the case that prehistoric cultures were uniformly non-theistic, or worshipped only male deities. But it would also be odd if prehistoric goddess worship was exclusive. Judging from ethnographic data, gods were probably worshipped too, whether or not they were represented in anthropomorphic form. And whatever religions prehistoric peoples practiced, we can be fairly sure that goddess worship did not automatically yield cultures of peace and plenty led by the goddess's priestesses. This pattern has been found nowhere.

Prehistoric human societies may have been different from all those that came after them, but any such assertion runs into three perhaps insurmountable obstacles: first, there is no evidence that they were; second, there is no reason to expect that they would be (at least not when we are talking about the past thirty to forty thousand years of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as feminist matriarchalists typically are); and third, if they were utterly different, and universally so, we need a compelling explanation of why things changed so drastically. Femi-

nist matriarchalists' make their strongest case for patriarchal revolution in southeast Europe and the Near East, where it is at best one possible explanation among others. Elsewhere in the world, patriarchal revolution is an even less likely scenario. Feminist matriarchalists' arguments explaining how, why, or even when patriarchy became a worldwide phenomenon simply do not square with the available evidence.

In spite of all these difficulties, the house of cards that is feminist matriarchal myth continues to stand. Certainly I do not anticipate that the puff of wind I offer in this book will blow it down. The image of prehistoric social life as matricentric and goddess-worshipping is far too valuable to those who treasure it to be sacrificed out of a concern for historical veracity. Feminist matriarchal myth provides answers to questions that are troubling to anyone hoping to secure freedom, safety, and equality for women, questions like, "Why is it that where gender hierarchy has developed, women have always been the dominated gender?" or "How did men succeed in enforcing the subordination of women?" Questions that seek to uncover the historical (or prehistorical) roots of male dominance, particularly institutionalized male dominance, have long held a special fascination for feminist writers, who have asked again and again, "Were things always as they are today?" and "When did 'it' start?" The care and imagination feminist matriarchalists have devoted to these "origins" questions is in itself an impressive achievement.

Perhaps the solution then is to embrace the myth of matriarchal prehistory as myth. If feminist matriarchalists abandon their ambitions to historical veracity, then accusations of sloppy or wishful thinking will not tarnish their myth (or the feminist movement more generally), and perhaps it could perform the functions for which it was intended. In other words, while there *is* a problem with the historical inaccuracy of matriarchal myth, there does not *have* to be one. For in theory, little can be said against the propriety of imagining a time—prehistoric, if necessary—when women were treated well rather than badly, with respect rather than condescension or outright hatred. Envisioning a feminist future is arguably a necessary task. And insofar as envisioning a feminist past helps accomplish this—as it clearly does for many people—it would seem to have obvious merit. In the face of this, quibbling over archaeological evidence seems, as

Theodore Roszak has put it, "a minor pedantic objection . . . [which] once it has been spoken as a sort of cautionary footnote . . . has nothing more to offer." 2

Nevertheless, though it might seem that only the hardest of anti-feminist hearts could resist the appeal of matriarchal myth once it is stripped of its pretensions to historical truth, there are many feminists, myself included, who must continue to protest against it. The very attempt to ask and answer origins questions about sexism—which is both matriarchal myth's motivation and method—is fraught with danger. To begin with, origin stories tend to reduce historically specific facts and values to timeless archetypes (this is particularly the case with "femininity," as we have seen). Therefore the solutions proposed by origins thinking are not tailored to specific cultural environments, but rather to a totalizing image of "patriarchy." Also, origins thinking is often characterized by nostalgia for a lost past, a feeling that "things ain't so good as they used to be." If this nostalgia enables those who experience it to imagine a different future and take steps to secure it, then it is functional. But nostalgia is rarely this functional; or rather, its function is usually escapist.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, origins thinking usually rests on a rather curious (though also quite common) notion of "the natural." According to this view, there is a way of living and thinking that is in harmony with our "natural" proclivities, and there was a time when we effortlessly lived like this. This way of being is precultural, instinctual. Life since then, by contrast, is false, constructed. To know who we really are, to decide what we must do to foster our happiness and that of the rest of the ecosystem, we need to be in dialogue with who we were: which is at the same time who we are truly supposed to be. It is this kind of thinking that imagines that by observing how foraging peoples live, we will know how we ourselves should live. If they breastfeed their children for four years, then so should we; if they eat a diet high in protein and fiber, then so should we; if they honor motherhood and worship an earth goddess, we can do no less if we want to be true to our "nature." But it should be obvious that when we reach foraging cultures, we have not reached "nature": we have merely uncovered other cultures, ones which mediate as thoroughly between themselves and any imagined human "nature" as ours does (though in quite different ways). As discussed earlier, it is simply not possible to find

human nature "uncontaminated" by culture, no matter how far back one looks in human evolution.

This vision of the "natural" is produced in part by a common misunderstanding of the principles of Darwinian evolution. "Survival of the fittest" has trickled down into popular thinking as the conviction that if no one gets in the way of natural selection, evolutionary processes will produce the very best organisms and societies. That is, "nature" is thought not merely to *select*, but also to *optimize*. Thinking like Dr. Pangloss, it is now natural selection (rather than god or fate) that makes everything for the best, in this, the best of all possible worlds. Feminist matriarchalists surely do not see this drive toward goodness operating in the cultural sphere (where things like the patriarchal revolution happen), but they do tend to see "nature" as a force that operates to our eternal benefit, and this conspires to make them reach into the past—where nature supposedly dominates culture—to find a template for living. But natural selection does not choose what is best, it merely finds something that works, and continues to do it. So long as one generation is surviving and producing the next, natural selection will not keep endeavoring to find a better way. Biological evolution is full of accidents, some of which get turned to interesting good fortune and others to disaster.'

Apart from the search for our true nature, feminist matriarchalists justify their commitment to origin stories by claiming that since "our analysis of causes affects strategies for change," we cannot usefully proceed without knowing where sexism came from. This makes a lot of intuitive sense, especially for those of us who were told in every history class we ever took that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. There is only one wrench in the works: if sexism had an origin—that is, if it were not always present from the beginning of hominid evolution—then we know that it came into being during prehistory. And when it comes to detecting ideological developments in prehistory, we *can't* learn the relevant history: it is "in principle unobtainable."

More importantly, to say that learning the origins of sexism will inform our political strategies reverses the order in which these steps actually take place: it is our present political interests that determine the origin stories we offer for sexism, not vice versa. The story feminist matriarchalists tell us, the one that says what's wrong with us and

how we should proceed, is not history capable of teaching us how to avoid past mistakes. It is a myth. Feminist matriarchalists, like other myth-makers, begin with a vision of the world as they would like it to be, project it into the past, and then find a way (narratively speaking) to make present conditions emerge from ideal ones. Given the paucity of information with which anyone seeking the prehistoric origins of sexism is working, the only thing feminist matriarchalists can count on is the reappearance of the assumptions with which they began.

If we are not going to discover history at the end of the day, but simply create myth, then the *only* grounds upon which feminist origins thinking can be justified is that it serves feminist political purposes. I have already dwelled at length on the problems inherent in pinning sexism on universalizing notions of the differences between women and men. Insofar as strong theories of sex difference are an unavoidable component of matriarchal myth, we should be suspicious about the myth's feminist utility from the start. But it is problematic on another level too. As archaeologist Sarah Taylor remarks, "I for one do not find it very comforting to think that once, in a very distant and 'primitive' society, women held power, especially if we have been moving away from that condition ever since."

Many do find this comforting. Matriarchal myth addresses one of the feminist movement's most difficult questions: How can women attain real power when it seems we have never had it before? How can we hope that sex egalitarianism is possible, that male dominance can be ended, when it has been a mark of who we are as a species from time immemorial? Feminist matriarchal myth answers that question in what I think has to be admitted is an emotionally compelling, inspiring way. But it raises new questions, equally difficult to answer: Why did matriarchy collapse—and not just in one place or time, but everywhere, all around the world? And how can we hope to get it back, under conditions so radically different from those which supposedly fostered it in the first place? If male dominance followed naturally on the discovery of biological paternity, is the only way to reclaim matriarchy to ensure that no one knows who the fathers of individual children are? Though this could be easily achieved through artificial insemination or promiscuous sex, no one who puts the patriarchal revolution down to the discovery of paternity seriously advocates this as a desirable public policy.' Others have pinned

male dominance to the development of agriculture, but we cannot return the world to a sustainable foraging technology without euthanizing 99 percent of the world's population.

None of these questions are easy to answer. I once asked a class of students which problem they would rather live with, all claims to historical truth aside: that of explaining women's (pre)historical loss of power in such a way that it does not rule out women's power in the future, or that of explaining how male dominance—universal up until now—can be ended at some point in the future. Roughly half chose the first, the other half the second. As one woman who chose the first option remarked, "I need to have an Eden, a belief that things once were right."

I am a partisan of the second option, and I would like to make a case for asking and answering it. The most alluring feature of matriarchal myth is the precedent it offers. But a precedent is not, as some feminist matriarchalists claim, required. Its absence need not "doom women from the start, from the point of origin." Indeed, there is a respected tradition among liberal social reformers to call for redressing the wrongs of the ages, without any concomitant attempt—or any felt necessity—to say that things were ever different. As Kate Millett observes, John Stuart Mill "saw no further back in time than a universal rule of force and took the subjection of women to be an eternal feature of human life," but he firmly believed that " 'progress' and moral suasion" could alter this reality, just as they had made inroads against tyranny and slavery.'

Whether patriarchy is our only history, or merely one history, we are not in either case bound "to clone the past." We can comfort ourselves with the thought that many of the conditions we suspect have worked to create male dominance are no longer with us, or need no longer produce the same response as they did in the past. If in fact it is a hunting and gathering division of labor that gives rise to male dominance, as anthropologist Richard Leakey argues, then presumably the farther we grow from those roots, the less we need to be affected by social roles that made sense only in the past. That we have not already shed the legacy of male dominance some ten thousand years after the West left foraging technologies behind does not mean that we cannot: social systems can continue to thrive long after the conditions that formed them have become irrelevant. Male dominance may be per-

petuated through inertia and have no better reason to exist than tradition. The fact that "anatomy<sub>10</sub> *once was* destiny," then, does not mean that it need be so any longer.

If modern technologies give us one kind of freedom to innovate, the very fact of cross-cultural diversity gives us another. Sex roles and gender expectations are extremely diverse from one culture to another, to the point of being almost completely arbitrary. Motherhood, a cross-cultural universal, is acted out in a huge variety of ways and given a wide range of meanings. Heterosexual sex, present in all cultures for reproduction, is sometimes the norm, the only approved sexual activity, and at other times accepted only as a grudging necessity. Gender, another cross-cultural universal, varies from being tremendously significant to comparatively minor. There is, as anthropologist Christine Ward Gailey says, "no global content to gender roles." "

One could choose to interpret this as evidence that male dominance has many cunning tools in its toolbox, but one could as easily read the sheer amount of ethnographic variety in matters of gender and sex as proof that we have a lot more latitude in setting up gender relations than any amount of sorrowful recounting of the sins of Western patriarchy would lead us to believe. As anthropologist Martin King Whyte concludes from his cross-cultural study of the status of women, "our analysis suggests that there is no *inevitable* obstacle to change in the role of women; no *inherent* or *biological* barrier that must prevent women from attaining equality in any area of social life [my emphasis]."<sub>12</sub>

If there are no inherent barriers to women's equality, then the future of women does not rest on biological destiny or historical precedent, but rather on moral choice. What we must be and what we have been will of course have an effect on our gender relations, but ultimately these cannot and should not dictate what we *want* to be. If we are certain that we want to get rid of sexism, we do not need a mythical time of women's past greatness to get on with the effort toward ending it.

But suppose for a moment that there *are* inherent barriers to women's equality; that male dominance is so hard-wired into our genes that we can never completely overcome it. How does this change the picture? Less than one might think. We have ample reason



to believe that human beings will always do bad things: they will lie, they will steal, they will injure one another. Some cultural contexts encourage this, others discourage it; cruelty and crime are rampant in some places and relatively rare in others. But at base, these seem to be cross-cultural universals. So what do we do in the face of these facts of human nature? Do we wake up in the morning and say, "there is no escaping it, people do bad things . . . I may as well go out today and rob a bank"? This is neither the motivation for the crime, nor is it an excuse. Similarly, even if we conclude that male dominance is universal and inevitable, this is not a charter for writing the oppression of women into law, or pardoning men who hurt women on the basis that they were only responding to their genetic inclinations. The fact that a goal—in this case, eradicating sexism—is in principle unreachable does not mean it is not worth pursuing with every ounce of moral fiber we can muster. In short, if our moral resolve is in place, there is nothing in the "facts" of biology or history that need detain us any longer.

Accounts of history and origins have a place. Ignorance of the history of a particular injustice may trip us up in our efforts to rectify it. For example, it is helpful to know that Africans were kidnapped and brought to America as slaves when we seek to address racism in America. But this history is not nearly as important as the clear conviction that racism is bad and must end. It is white Americans' ambivalence about the worthiness of this goal and the amount of energy that they feel should be devoted to it that is more likely to limit progress.

The same is true of sexism. Feminist matriarchal myth does not actually recount the history of sexism, as it purports to do. It may provide us with a vision of what it considers to be socially desirable and the hope that it can be attained. But we do not need matriarchal myth to tell us that sexism is bad or that change is possible. With the help of all feminists, matriarchalist and otherwise, we need to decide what we want and set about getting it. Next to this, the "knowledge" that we once had it will pale into insignificance.