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The Past as Myth. The Archaeological (After)life of the Goddess in Former Yugoslavia

Abstract: Marija Gimbutas's studies have profoundly influenced popular feminism, New Age religions, and Mother Goddess centred movements since the 1970's, but despite the authoress's status of a feminist icon, her influence on popular feminism remains largely unknown in archaeology and her works on Neolithic religion ignored. Modern archaeology, including gender archaeology, is now re-examining her researches and conclusions. The present paper studies how the theory of a Neolithic goddess was received at the time of its emergence and how the social structures of the past were (re)constructed in the archaeologies of former Yugoslavia.

Key words: archaeology, archaeological theory, anthropomorphic figurines, Neolithic, social structure, matriarchy

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Preteklost kot mit

Izveček: Dela Marije Gimbutas so imela od 70. let 20. stol. velik vpliv na popularni feminizem, na religioznost new age ter na gibanja, ki so osredinjena okoli teorije o Materi Boginji. Kljub temu da je avtorica postala ikona feminizma, ostaja v arheologiji njen vpliv na popularni feminizem neznan, njeno delo o neolitski religiji pa prezrto. Sodobna arheologija, vključno z arheologijo spolov, skuša prevetrili njene raziskave in ugotovitve. Predstavljena raziskava skuša odgovoriti na vprašanje, kako je bila teorija o obstoju neolitske boginje sprejeta ob času svojega nastanka in kako je bila (re)konstruirana pretekla družbena struktura v arheologijah nekdanje Jugoslavije.

Ključne besede: arheologija, arheološka teorija, antropomorfne figure, neolitik, družbena struktura, matriarhat

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INTRODUCTION

The following article will address some of the issues concerning the contemporary construction of the myth of a matriarchal past. By surveying the history of the myth in the 1970's and 1980's and the archaeological responses to this myth, we will try to present the situation in the West. Special emphasis, on the other hand, will be placed on the Yugoslav archaeologies of the time and on their interpretation of the social structures of Neolithic societies. Examining the rhetoric prevailing in the most prominent Yugoslav archaeological series, we will point at an emphasis which may hint at the complexity of this issue. Moreover, the contemporary life of the myth in archaeology will be briefly addressed with regard to gender archaeology, the New Age movement, and heritage industry.

THE RHETORIC OF THE FIGURINES

Anthropological debates about the existence of matriarchy originated in the late 19th century with the works of Johann Bachofen, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Frederich Engels. Further debates were launched by diffusionists in the 1950's and 1960's, while the 1980's witnessed a consensus among archaeologists that Neolithic cultures were matriarchal or matrifocal, peaceful, harmonic, and particularly appreciative of art; they were followed, however, by aggressive and destructive Indo-European patriarchal societies. Debates were inspired mainly by anthropomorphic figurines of Palaeolithic and Neolithic origins found in the Balkans and the Near East. The figurines have been subject to diverse forms of research and approached from a number of aspects with various methodologies. Lesure identifies four schools of figurine analysis: iconographic, functional, social analytical, and symbolic.² The present trend in figurine research is historiographic, examining the studies of figurines, the schools of interpretation, and the proposed interpretations. Interpreted as the Mother Goddess, the figurines are ascribed a variety of meanings and functions: the common references are to ritual, religion and spiritual life, while the functions proposed are mostly anecdotal, e.g. dolls, toys, magical items, afterlife accessories, sexual aids, fertility figurines, effigies, talismans, ritual figures, concubines, slaves, puberty models, training mechanisms, votive and healing objects, items used in initiation ceremonies, contracts, territory and identity markers.³

² Lesure, 2002.

³ Cf. Bailey, 2005, 12.

The researcher most commonly associated with the so-called myth of matriarchy is Marija Gimbutas,⁴ although her research led her to distance herself from characterising Neolithic societies as matriarchal, which was the common practice in the second half of the 20th century. Between 1967 and 1980, she was in charge of five major excavations of Neolithic sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. The excavations of Greek sites, such as Sitagroi (with Colin Renfrew) or Achilleion, yielded hundreds of anthropomorphic figurines and cult vessels. In these she saw a reflection of “... *the small ragged remnants of a rich fabric constituting the mythical world of their time*”.⁵ During this period, when she was becoming acquainted with the prolific inventory of the sites she was excavating, her attention was diverted from the Kurgan Culture to Neolithic art, symbolism, and social structure. She undertook extensive research into anthropomorphic figurines, revealing “... *a cohesive and persistent ideological system*”. Gimbutas interprets the abundance of female representations as a reflection of sacredness. She uses terms such as *Goddess* or *Great Goddess*, referring to a creator of the world who is not limited to fertility and motherhood but is understood as the inseparable Source of everything that dies and is later reborn in the circle of life. The main theme of her research is, in her own words, the symbolism of goddesses, which “conceals” the secrets of birth, death, and renewal of life for people, for the world and the entire cosmos. Art, which she

⁴Marija Gimbutas, born in Lithuania in 1921, studied archaeology in Germany and Austria, received her PhD in Tübingen in 1946, and emigrated to the USA in 1949. As a research fellow and later lecturer on Eastern European archaeology at Harvard University, she devoted her life to the research of post-Palaeolithic Europe. The publication of her monograph *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe* in 1956 brought the prehistory of the territory reaching from the Baltic Sea to northern Caucasus closer to the English-speaking public, whose knowledge of the subject had been severely limited by the linguistic barrier. Later she published her researches in the monographies *The Balts* (1963), *Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* (1965), *The Slavs* (1971), and in many other texts. From 1963 to her retirement in 1989, she lectured at the University of California. Engagement in different research fields and periods strengthened her belief in the importance of interdisciplinary research, leading her to develop a discipline which combined elements from comparative linguistics, mythology, folklore, archaeology and history – the so-called “archaeomythology”. Her archaeomythological research into the art and symbolism of the Neolithic, which she renamed as the “Old World”, was presented in *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974) and in *The Language of the Goddess* (1989).

⁵Cf. Marler, 2001.

interprets as centred on the goddess, lacking all signs of soldiers or male domination, reflects a social order in which women played central roles as clan leaders and queens – princesses.⁶

*“The Goddess in all her manifestations was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoetic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on earth.”*⁷

Gimbutas’s later work was considered controversial among archaeologists but received much positive attention in the Goddess Movement in the USA, which resulted in the success and continuity of Mother Goddessism. Gimbutas, who never declared herself as a feminist,⁸ became a feminist icon, mainly outside the archaeological circles. While contemporary archaeology, including gender archaeology, nowadays distances itself from matriarchal interpretations of societies, contemporary New Age mythology has largely embraced such interpretations, especially of Neolithic societies.⁹ This exaggerated interest is colourfully illustrated by George P. Nicholas in connection with a video, *Goddess Remembered* (1989):

*“The preNeolithic goddess motif of the Old World not only has been revived but is enjoying sightings as widespread as those of Elvis Presley.”*¹⁰

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE PRENEOLITHIC GODDESS MOTIF

Gimbutas’s first book on religion, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*,¹¹ was written after twenty years of her academic career in archaeology. After the huge sales success of the book, which had an especially profound influence on popular feminism, the authoress devoted her attention to the issue of religion. Gimbutas’s work in the 1970’s and 80’s on Neolithic symbolic images of women coincided with the work of Mary Daly, Merlin Stone, Susan Griffin, Charlene Spretnak, Carolyn Merchant, Gerder Lerner, and many others who were connected with the so-called second wave of feminism, ecological movement, and

⁶ Gimbutas, 1989, xx.

⁷ Gimbutas, 1989, 321.

⁸ Cf. Sheaffer, 1999.

⁹ Meskell, 1995. Hutton, 1997, 97, 98.

¹⁰ Nicholas, 1994, 448.

¹¹ Gimbutas, 1974.

earth-based re-emergence of spirituality. Convincing authors that the prehistoric culture of the Goddess had indeed existed, her work greatly contributed to the popular belief in the quondam existence of a peaceful golden age of female power. Feminist researches provided the basis for claims about woman's leading role as a creator of culture and for rejecting the rooted convictions about the universality of male dominance in religion and society.¹²

The archaeological circles criticised Gimbutas's work mainly because of her methodology, emphasising her old-fashioned frame of binary oppositions in particular. Disputable is, in Ruth Tringham's view, especially her use of categories of assigned gender roles, which are the same for the whole period and all Neolithic societies. The notions of cultural stages and of brutal attackers are characterised by Tringham as naive.¹³

While criticised for its old-fashioned methodology, Gimbutas's work was definitely not old-fashioned in the political sense. From the beginning of the 20th century onward, the "prehistoric Goddess" was usually associated with backward literature and with a rhetoric hostile to modernity; in Ronald Hutton's view, Marija Gimbutas retained a similar rhetoric, gradually adding and developing a radical feminist tone.¹⁴ Hutton believes that she carefully transformed the image of the goddess so as to suit the requirements of the developing feminist opinion. The goddess became dissociated from motherhood, fertility and sexuality, and far more emphasised in her role of a mighty creatrix, presiding over all life and death. Gimbutas radicalised her thesis of the destruction of matriarchal cultures, portraying the entire ensuing period up to the present as a dark patriarchal age. While Neolithic and Aeneolithic cultures were, in her opinion, flawless, the subsequent periods had no redeeming qualities at all.¹⁵ If her first book on Neolithic religion merely sketched the structure of the society as generally peaceful, matrilinear, matrifocal and egalitarian,¹⁶ the last source available, an audio tape from 1992, attempted to dissociate matriarchy from social structure: supposedly there would have been no husbands, men did perform important roles in construction, craft and trade, women would have enjoyed freedom, sexual and social, and their

¹² Marler, 2003.

¹³ Cf. Brown, 1993.

¹⁴ Hutton, 1997, 97.

¹⁵ Hutton, 1997, 98. Gimbutas, 1989, 316-321.

¹⁶ Gimbutas, 1974.

lives would have been inseparably intertwined with a rich religious system which enabled their importance.¹⁷ Characteristic of Gimbutas's late work is that she ceased to publish scientific works, targeting her extremely popular books at a broader readership, gave interviews for feminist magazines, and ignored the critiques of archaeologists, which were relatively unknown to the feminist public.¹⁸

Gimbutas's work influenced many authoresses of popular books informed by history, feminism, and the New Age movement. An extremely popular book¹⁹ by Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade. Our History, Our Future*,²⁰ translated into 19 languages, summarised Gimbutas's conclusions and brought them even closer to the public.²¹ The history of matriarchy and patriarchy was presented through a chronological survey from the Palaeolithic to capitalism. Both are characterised by a model of dominance and a model of partnership. The former, where, according to Gimbutas, "the lethal power of the blade" is worshipped, is distinctive of matriarchy and/or patriarchy; the societies assigned by Eisler to this category include Hitler's Germany, Khomeini's Iran, Samurai Japan, and the Aztecs. The partnership model, on the other hand, is characterised by linkage; such societies, according to Gimbutas, worship the "life-generating and nurturing powers of the universe". The societies grouped in this category by Eisler include BaMbuti, !Kung, and contemporary Swedes. According to Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory, cultural evolutions moved from the partnership model through chaos and an almost complete interruption of culture to the dominance model; since the Renaissance, however, humanity has supposedly been returning to the partnership model.²²

¹⁷ Cf. Meskell, 1995, 78.

¹⁸ Hutton, 1997, 98.

¹⁹ "The most important book since Darwin's *Origin of Species*." This citation by anthropologist Ashley Montagu was published on the cover of the 1988 paperback edition of Eisler's book.

²⁰ Eisler, 1987.

²¹ Eisler summarises Gimbutas's *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* and further develops the authoress's theories; on the introductory pages, she also thanks Gimbutas for reading the first version of her book. It seems that the influence went both ways: Gimbutas, in her turn, includes in her *Language of the Goddess* (1989, xx) Eisler's label of the social structure in Old Europe, Anatolia and Minoan Greece as "gylany", a social structure characterised by gender equality.

²² Eisler, 1987.

With Gimbutas's quotation, Eisler introduces the claim that the Neolithic social structure was neither matriarchy nor patriarchy but a society with no subordination, merely partnership:

*"... the world of myth was not polarized into female and male as it was among the Indo-Europeans and many other nomadic and pastoral peoples of the steppes. Both principles were manifest side by side. The male divinity in the shape of a young man or a male animal appears to affirm and strengthen the forces of the creative and active female. Neither is subordinate to the other: by complementing one another, their power is doubled."*²³

Eisler criticises the "if-it-isn't-patriarchy-it-has-to-be-matriarchy" logic which was, in her opinion, used by James Mellaart in describing a Turkish site, the Neolithic tell settlement of Çatalhöyük (Fig. 1). But despite her talk of a partnership model, she perceives the female role of priestesses and clan leaders as the leading role in the society. Although her rhetoric echoes the writings of two established prehistorian archaeologists of the time, her conclusions are methodologically poorly grounded, as is best illustrated by the following example:

*"For here both men and women were the children of the Goddess, as they were the children of the women who headed the families and clans. And while this certainly gave women a great deal of power, analogizing from our present day mother/child relationship, it seems to have been a power that was more equated with responsibility and love than with oppression, privilege and fear."*²⁴

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE GODDESS MOVEMENT AND GIMBUTAS'S WORK

For academic and popular feminists, Gimbutas's interpretation of prehistoric figurines is of basic importance for the theories of the Goddess, while the negative archaeological response to her work is mainly unknown in these circles. On the other hand, archaeologists are usually not aware of the positive influence of Gimbutas's theories in other fields, e.g. in classical studies.²⁵ As pointed out by Shelby Brown, it is ironic that the public recognises the work of Marija Gimbutas as the biggest contribution of archaeology to feminism, while this contribution

²³ Cf. Eisler, 1987, 27.

²⁴ Eisler, 1987, 28.

²⁵ Brown, 1993, 239.

is neither acknowledged nor known in archaeology itself.²⁶ The founding work of gender archaeology,²⁷ *Engendering Archaeology*, refers to theories connected with the goddess as to something external.²⁸ The main archaeological criticisms are directed against the use of inappropriate methodology, dating, testing, and typological and statistical analysis, calling into question also the authoress's qualification for artistic interpretation and her overbold interpretations. Due to these research weaknesses, her results have not been taken seriously. Professional disagreement with Gimbutas's thesis of a gynocentric past has been most commonly expressed by archaeologists through silence and ignorance.

Despite the ignorance of Gimbutas's work, evident also in a survey of Yugoslav archaeological publications, to which we will return later, critiques became more common with the assertion of gender archaeology. According to Lynn Meskell, these gynocentric stories sooner reflect the contemporary comprehension of and attitude to the past and are more informative about modern ideologies than about the original use of the figurines; solidarity amongst women should not be a reason for accepting disputable conclusions or for silence.²⁹

"The Mother Goddess metanarrative presents a possible challenge to feminist archaeologies in that solidarity can often prevent us from contesting theories presented by women which seem to espouse prof/female notions even if the evidence would suggest otherwise. Loyalty to a misrepresented picture of the past and our human her-

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ A certain influence of the women's movement on western archaeology can be traced sporadically since the 1970's (cf. Sørensen, 2000, 17, 20-24), but a stronger interest in the reinterpretation and "engendering" of the past arose in the 1980's under the influence of the social sciences. Even before Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector's frequently cited article, *Archaeology and the study of gender* (1984), which firmly established gender as an important concept in archaeology, British, Danish and Norwegian archaeologists had been calling attention to the same problems as early as the 1970's (cf. Dommasnes, 1992; cf. Sørensen, 2000, 17, 20-24). Early critiques were directed against the neglect of gender roles in the interpretations of past societies as offered in museum exhibitions, in general interest publications, and in archaeological texts. Gradually, gender archaeology developed entire sets of themes and approaches to researching gender. According to Roberta Gilchrist, the themes and positions which helped to form gender archaeology were political feminism, gender theory, and historical revisionism (Gilchrist, 2000).

²⁸ Cf. Brown, 1993, 254, 255.

²⁹ Meskell, 1995, 84.



FIG. 1: A VIEW FROM THE TELL SETTLEMENT OF ÇATALHÖYÜK IN ANATOLIA, TURKEY, IN OCTOBER 1998. ON THE LEFT IS THE EXCAVATION TENT AND RESERVOIR.³¹

*itage by dismissing or misconstruing the archaeological record cannot be supported under the guise of any political standpoint.*³⁰

Since the archaeological discipline has always maintained a considerably conservative attitude to Gimbutas's viewpoints, her analysis of Neolithic art has not received serious critical attention until recently. Heritage industry, however, has been more open to the popular New Age cult of the Goddess. Due to Riane Eisler's and Marija Gimbutas's writings, the Anatolian tell site of Çatalhöyük (Fig. 1) has become a place of pilgrimage for many followers of the modern Goddess religion. The cooperation is a result of the post-processual archaeology orientation which acknowledges the equal coexistence of alternative, often differing or even contradictory interpretations of the past, e.g. aboriginal, archaeological, and/or religious. In keeping with this kind of orientation, the exchange of ideas between archaeologist Ian Hodder and Anita Louise, a member of the "Goddess community", has been published on the excavation's web site.³²

³⁰ Meskell, 1995, 84.

³¹ Photo: Merc.

³² Hodder, Louise, 1998.

THE ARCHAEOLOGIES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF NEOLITHIC SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

After World War II, the archaeology in Yugoslavia was not uniform, for the budding independent discipline was influenced by sundry schools of archaeology and thought, each with its own theoretical and practical background. While Slovene archaeology accepted the German model, the Merhart School with its “kulturhistorisches” approach,³³ Serbian archaeology, on the other hand, was also influenced by “Childe’s archaeology”.³⁴

Post-war Yugoslav archaeologies shared in the contemporary consensus of the other countries that Neolithic societies were matriarchal. Yet the prominent former Yugoslav archaeological series on prehistory in five volumes, *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja*,³⁵ especially the third volume, reveals certain contradictory notes which suggest the authors’ lack of agreement on the meaning of the term “matriarchy”.

The project of publishing *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja* was the work of leading prehistorian archaeologists from 36 museums, faculties and other institutions from all Yugoslav republics at the end of the 1970’s and in the 1980’s.³⁶ The series was coached in scientific jargon and targeted at archaeologists; the bibliography cited at the end of every volume was a representative overview of relevant literature. An agreement about the joint preparation of *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja* was made in Slavonski Brod on 19th May 1972, accompanied by the assignment of the editorial board and the editors of particular volumes, as well as by the setting of guidelines for all articles.³⁷ The guidelines for presenting the social structure of societies were the following:

“... (f) every volume should also contain a conclusion with a short survey of the genesis of the cultural groups, possess stylistic virtues, and include relative and

³³ Gabrovec, 1984. Novaković, 2002.

³⁴ Babić, 2002.

³⁵ Benac, 1979-1987.

³⁶ Benac, 1979a, 11.

³⁷ Every member of the editorial board was also the editor of one volume: Đuro Basler for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, Milutin Garašanin for the Neolithic, Nikola Tasić for the Aeneolithic, Ksenija Vinski-Gasparini for the Bronze Age, and Stane Gabrovec for the Iron Age (Benac, 1979a, 10, 11).

absolute chronologies, the basic elements of spiritual life, and ‘ethnic’ problems; in addition, the conclusion should contain a historical interpretation of the social groups, tied to the contemporary world view and to the development of social groups in the prehistoric periods;

(g) the analysis of particular cultural groups should – in addition to providing information about the location and chronology of each group – cover all elements of material and spiritual culture (the type of settlement and buildings, movable inventory, burial ritual, art, economic aspects, spiritual life and social structure, genesis etc.); ...”³⁸

Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja served not only as the complete register for the prehistory of the former Yugoslav area, but also as a bibliographical reference for scholars, since its sections on bibliography cited all important works by Yugoslav and other scholars dealing with the region of former Yugoslavia. Because of its synthetic nature, the series lent itself to a bibliometrical analysis, according to which most of the authors cited in the series were Yugoslav,³⁹ while only 9% of cited bibliography in the second, Neolithic, volume was written by women.⁴⁰ On the basis of his analysis, Bakaršić concludes that the bibliography of the series reflects the development of the discipline.⁴¹

Since Gimbutas was personally acquainted with Yugoslav archaeologists and, indeed, engaged on several excavations in the region, with the influence of her ideas being – in my opinion – evident in some of the articles, it is not surprising that her works should have been included in the bibliography of the second (Neolithic) and third (Aeneolithic) volumes of *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja*. While these two volumes, both published in 1979, do not cite her most influential book, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974), they do list some of her other,

³⁸ In Serbo-Croatian: “...f) svaki tom treba da ima i jedan zaključni tekst sa osvrtom na genezu kulturnih grupa, stilske odlike, relativnu i apsolutnu hronologiju, osnovne elemente duhovnog života i ‘etničke’ probleme; u isto vrijeme, u zaključak ulazi i istorijska interpretacija društvenih zajednica, vezana za savremeni pogled na svijet i na razvoj društvenih zajednica u praiistorijskim periodima; g) u obradi pojedinih kulturnih grupa treba – uz podatke o području i hronologiji grupe – obuhvatiti i sve elemente materijalne i duhovne kulture (tip naselja i naseobinskih objekata, pokretni inventar, pogrebni ritual, umjetnost, ekonomske aspekte, duhovni život i društvenu strukturu, genezu i sl.); ... (Benac, 1979a, 11).”

³⁹ Bakaršić, 1990, 30, 31.

⁴⁰ Merc, 2005, 28.

⁴¹ Bakaršić, 1990, 30.

more scholar-oriented publications, such as the preliminary report *Achhilleion. A Neolithic Mound in Thessaly* (1974), *Neolithic Macedonia I* (1976), etc.

In *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja*, the term “matriarchy” is a label used to describe the social structure of various Neolithic societies (of Körös, Kakanj, Butmir, Impresso, Danilo, the Central Balkan zone).⁴² The characterisation of societies or social structures as matriarchal is based on a thesis generally accepted at the time (in the case of Impresso),⁴³ and usually supported with interpretations of anthropomorphic sculpture (in the case of Kakanj, Butmir, Körös, and the Central Balkan zone);⁴⁴ in the case of Danilo, it is also linked to anthropological analogies,⁴⁵ and, in the case of Körös, to the type of buildings as well.⁴⁶

While the matriarchy of Neolithic societies is usually referred to as a matter of common knowledge, there are a couple of examples where gender roles are mentioned explicitly. Emphasis is placed on the important role of woman in matriarchy as a bearer of social and economic relations (Impresso),⁴⁷ and the common depictions of women are explained as a proof of their decisive role in the gens.⁴⁸ In other cases, however, their role, which should itself be stressed by a term connected with matriarchy, is disregarded or even portrayed as the opposite of what is usually understood by this word. A double dug-out hut at Nebo, for example, is interpreted as resulting from a need to consort with the male members of the gens in order to reach mutual understanding, or as a “men’s house” where unmarried men lived for certain periods of their lives.⁴⁹ Alongside the claims that the existence of female figurines points to the role of women in Neolithic society,⁵⁰ this duality in attributing importance to both men and women – indeed, in claiming that it was men rather than women who decided

⁴² Brukner, 1979, 224. Benac, 1979b, 405, 443, 448. Batović, 1979, 515, 562. Garašanin, 1979, 195.

⁴³ Batović, 1979, 515.

⁴⁴ Benac, 1979b, 443, 448. Brukner, 1979, 224. Garašanin, 1979, 195.

⁴⁵ By attributing meaning to the use of white or red colour (Batović, 1979, 557).

⁴⁶ The discovery of smaller houses (6 × 5 m, 3 × 5 m, 4 × 4 m) in the settlements is seen as a proof of matriarchal-monogamic division into smaller families (Brukner, 1979, 224).

⁴⁷ Batović, 1979, 515.

⁴⁸ Brukner, 1979, 224.

⁴⁹ The Serbo-Croatian term *pripadnici* – male members – might also denote the plural (Benac, 1979b, 446).

⁵⁰ Benac, 1979b, 448.

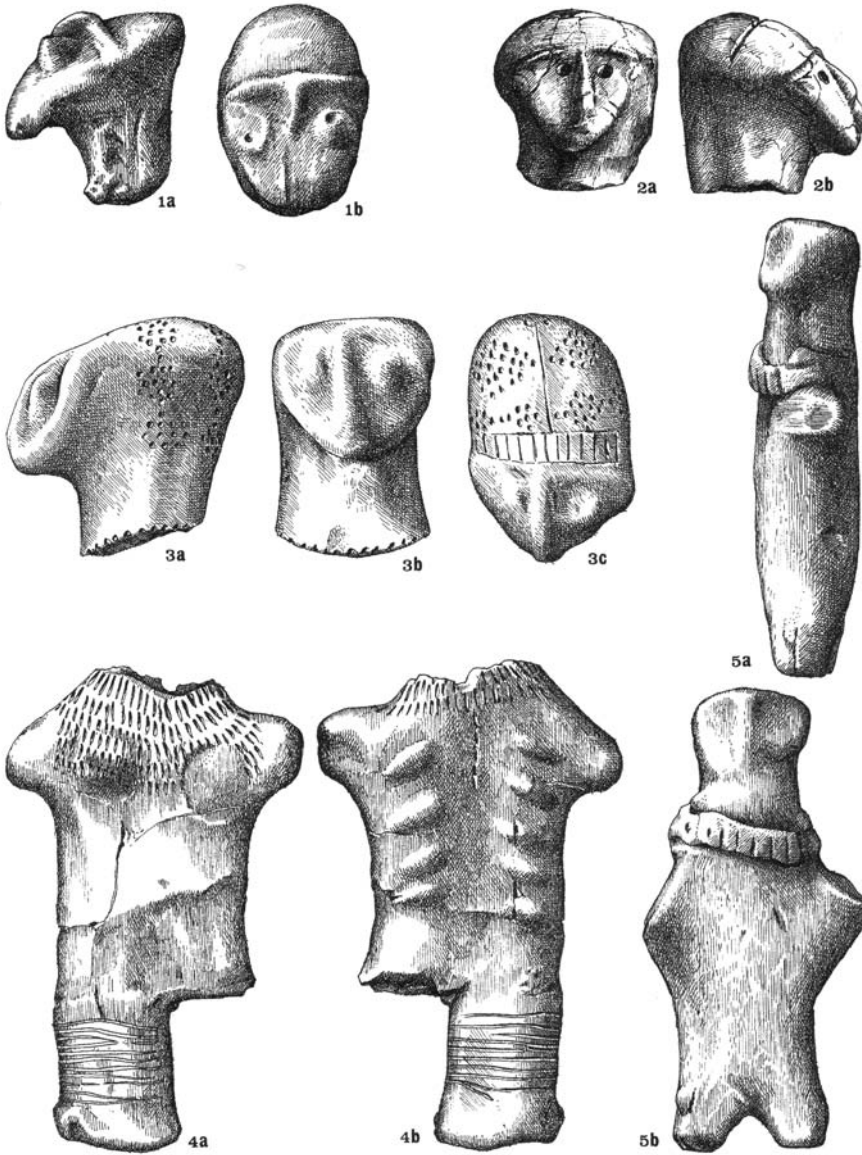


FIG. 2: BUTMIR CULTURE, ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES FROM THE SITES OF BUTMIR (1, 2, 4, 5) AND NEBO (3).⁵¹

⁵¹After Benac, ed., 1979, T. LXVII.

on important community matters – is particularly interesting when we consider that the subject under discussion is the so-called “matriarchal” society.

In contrast to Gimbutas’s term “religion”, which was also the main topic of her analysis, the series uses the term “Neolithic spiritual life”. The rare references to “spiritual life” in Volume 3 usually occur in connection with anthropomorphic figurines. In the case of Obre 1, a site excavated by Alojz Benac and Marija Gimbutas, there are references to a cult of the sun, a sacrificial cult, and a cult of the dead, while Kakanj is associated with a cult of the sun which is characterized as a women’s cult, and Butmir with a cult of red paint and of the axe respectively.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Comparing different examples of describing social structures, we are led to conclude that the *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja* normally uses the term “matriarchy” as a matter of common knowledge, only occasionally linking it up to anthropological analogies. Throughout the series, the frequently used concept of matriarchy lacks a more detailed explanation and is understood differently by different authors. It is therefore even more consequential that Alojz Benac, Milutin Garašanin and Dragoslav Srejšević conclude the volume and their observations on Neolithic social structure by leaving open the issue of whether and to what extent there obtained matriarchal relations, which was at the time the common explanation of the Butmir “female figurines” (Fig. 2), while they do point out that anthropomorphic (female) sculptures must be a reflection of the women’s role and status in society.⁵³

Although the theory of matriarchy is nowadays abandoned as a way of describing Neolithic societies, the myth of the Goddess remains very much alive. To a certain extent, it is still present also in Slovenia. Comparing the characterisation of prehistoric societies and gender in the above-mentioned series with that in *Zakladi tisočletij*,⁵⁴ a complete monographic survey of Slovene archaeology, we note that the latter abandons the rhetoric from the time of *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja* in its discussion of the Neolithic, a little known period represented with few sites, yet – more importantly – fails to replace it with any

⁵² Benac, 1979b, 384, 385, 403 - 405, 445.

⁵³ Benac, Garašanin, Srejšević, 1979, 664, 665.

⁵⁴ Aubelj, 1999.

other characterisation of the social structure. Since there is nothing to fill the void in interpretation, matriarchal Neolithic lives on in public memory.

Nowadays, the myth is widespread mainly as a residue of the characterisation of Neolithic societies which is still used in popular press, as well as in museum exhibitions and, most vividly of all, in the New Age movement and in art. The permanent exhibition in the Regional Museum of Murska Sobota describes the Neolithic period as follows: “*At that time, the earth as a phenomenon of life acquired the image of a woman, who, as a Magna Mater, represents for life in general what woman means for the life of an individual.*”⁵⁵ In this quote from an exhibition panel, we can perhaps recognise the interpretations influenced by the works of Marija Gimbutas, an impression which is further reinforced by the many drawings of figurines and descriptions of the ornaments’ meaning.

We may therefore conclude that the myth of matriarchy has profoundly influenced not only popular western religions, but also certain interpretations in Slovene museology. A survey of the rhetoric employed in *Praistorija jugoslaven-skih zemalja* has revealed that Gimbutas’s interpretations were as little known in former Yugoslavia as in the West. Yet despite the prevailing ignorance, and nowadays even the loud criticisms in the scholarly circles, the myth of a matriarchal past lives on in the popular perception.

Such construction of the past is still publicised in heritage industry, partly due to public demand and partly to the absence of alternative interpretations. This is especially problematic in countries where archaeology still consists mainly of chronological and typological analysis, while in-depth social analysis is significantly lacking. For the purpose of telling the story behind an exhibition, the current lack of gender and social archaeology is certainly not very helpful.

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⁵⁵ In Slovene: “V tem času je zemlja kot fenomen življenja dobila podobo ženske, ki kot Magna mater v splošnem življenju predstavlja to, kar ženska pomeni v življenju posameznika.” The analysis of the exhibition was carried out in the spring of 2003.

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