

Portia

[Click on the name of the moon above for astronomical information.]

Portia is a rich heiress in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. (Moon of Uranus.)

### The Return of the Goddess

by Geoffrey Ashe

[Excerpted from Dawn Behind the Dawn: A Search for the Earthly Paradise]

The central idea is that, although men have been the ruling sex for thousands of years, it has not always been so. A balanced society once existed. For a while the term matriarchy was popular, but it fell into disuse as suggesting a mere mirror image of present society, with women predominant instead of men.

When did it exist? In relevant scholarship the outstanding figure is Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist of the highest repute. Her main field of study is what she calls Old Europe, the central and eastern part of that continent, and especially the Balkans. As defined it extends a little way into Russia, but only a little, although Russia's archaeology has an important supplementary role. In Old Europe, agricultural societies flourished from about 6500 BCE onward, and according to Gimbutas they were peaceable, creative, and free from sexual chauvinism. Inheritance was traced through the mother. Old Europe's climactic achievement was Minoan Crete. Crete's beautiful art is said to reflect not only a society that was nonviolent but one in which women were respected, influential, and equal with men. And this was so, more or less, throughout Old Europe, before a slow process of change that began in roughly 4000 BCE and was completed in Crete and other islands by 1500 BCE. The outcome everywhere was a male-dominated society, tracing inheritance through the father, warlike, culturally inferior. This is labeled patriarchal or androcratic or androcentric. Much the same happened in other parts of the world, notably Anatolia (Asia Minor) and the rest of the Middle East. Humanity has never recovered.

All of this sounds like a partisan myth, yet it does not lack a degree of respectability. J.P. Mallory, Lecturer in Archaeology at the Queen's University, Belfast, while dissenting from the more interpretive part, has acknowledged that some of it is plausible. The Gimbutan view of Old Europe may look like a wild generalization from Crete, as the only exhibit we really know about. That, however, is not the case, largely because of a further factor -- the widespread evidence, or asserted evidence, for Old Europe's religion and a religious change. The matristic society worshiped the Goddess; its male deities were secondary. The patriarchal society that supplanted it worshiped gods, and eventually God, the almighty and exclusive Sky Father. Artifacts everywhere are said to reveal the same story. The upsetting of intersexual balance and the triumph of the male went with a transformation of ritual, theology, and myth, which likewise happened in other places.

One present consequence is the growth of what is sometimes called women's spirituality, involving an attempt to re-create the Goddess religion as a rival to the Christian and Jewish religions, which are condemned as products of the change and as oppressive of women. In part this is a development from a revival of witchcraft, or Wicca, professedly the Old Religion, which began in about the mid-twentieth century under the influence of the anthropologist Margaret Murray. The terrible witchhunts of the past have been annexed to

feminist history by being construed as Christian persecution of women, not only because of their sex but because witchcraft preserved a residual paganism with a female deity in it.

The Ancient Goddess, it is stressed, was not God with a mere difference of gender. God the universal sovereign, out there, apart from the world he made, is regarded as an invention of men and as having come on the scene later. The Goddess was and is the Great Mother. Earth rather than Sky, the life bestower, the creative energy, the giver of birth and rebirth, within nature. The question Does the Goddess exist? cannot be asked as it can of God, or argued about metaphysically, or answered yes or no. The Goddess is there in experience, and she transcends, and takes endless forms, as the goddess figures of myth and religion and as living women.

Her era of supremacy was the golden age so far as there ever was one. However simple or backward in modern terms, it had a basic rightness. When the matristic culture was overthrown, its patriarchal successors took over some of its achievements, but they debased and distorted them. The Goddess was not totally banished, except (officially at least) by the Israelites, but she was fragmented into a medley of goddesses and nymphs, made out to be daughters or wives or subordinate partners of ruling gods. Such is the picture we get in Greek mythology, because the original myths were rewritten, in the interests of Zeus and his Olympian gang. Zeus ends up with a wife and fifty-three mistresses. Similar rearrangements took place in the Middle East.

One result was a change in attitudes toward death. In the time of the Great Mother, death led to rebirth and was not feared. The horror of mortality came into the world with the male takeover because the male is not the life giver. Although there was still an afterlife, it was, for all but a few favorites of the gods, a dreary near-nullity in a realm of shades.

Goddess logic would suggest that the Stone Age Altaic tribes lived in a state of primitive wisdom and intersexual balance under the Great Lady's aegis. It would not be seriously disputed that life was hard, sometimes violent, and, on average, short. But it had an imponderable spiritual rightness.

Pursuing the prehistory, we might infer that Altaic influence drifted across the Soviet Union and into Europe, becoming part of the substratum. With the growth of farming economies from the seventh millennium BCE and social, technological, and artistic progress, the Goddess culture blossomed and culminated in Crete. Its religion gloriously outgrew the Siberian heritage, but that heritage had prepared and played a formative part.

In the Paleolithic Altai country, or anywhere near it, we cannot hope for inscriptions or kindred items. These people were hunters and gatherers, using stone implements, dressing in skins and furs, living in caves or the crudest shelters. They had art of a simple kind, but no metals and not even a beginning of literacy. Nothing follows, of course, about mental inferiority. Genius and creative talents can take forms that leave no tangible traces. Even in classical Greece, as Mortimer Wheeler once remarked, an archaeologist may find the tub in which the philosopher Diogenes lived while completely missing Diogenes. The European cave paintings at Altamira and Lascaux are later, and megalithic monuments like Carnac and Avebury are later again, yet those gifted artists and builders were still as backward in some respects as Paleolithic Siberians.

At Mal'ta, the cult center where some of the oldest and best [goddess] figurines were found, there is evidence from other objects that the place's importance might have continued. But among the earliest of all, retrieved from a cave burial, is an oblong panel of

mammoth ivory dated about 24,000 BCE. On one side of it, three snakes establish its place in the Goddess network. On the other side is a design composed of lines of dots. They curve around to form seven spirals, six little ones framing a seventh that is much larger. In the large spiral the line goes around seven times, circling inward to a hole in the center. This is the first instance anywhere in the world of something destined to emerge far and wide as very strong magic indeed -- the peculiar mystique of the number seven.

Since the spiral on the Mal'ta panel is a simple one, its role as prototype is very much a conjecture and may seem farfetched. But archaeology does not in fact offer a prototype anywhere else, and an argument in favor arises from the developed spiral's most surprising appearance -- among the Hopi of Arizona, who call it the Mother Earth symbol. In their eyes it represents a road of life that, if followed, leads to rebirth through the eternal Mother. The rebirth is a reenactment in the individual of a myth of history, the Emergence. Three human races were destroyed before this one, but in each case a remnant lived underground and emerged to repopulate the world. Other native American myths tell related tales, to the effect that the survivors reached the surface by a tunnel following the same course and that the double spiral depicts the umbilical cord and fetal membranes of the Earth Mother when she gave birth to her children.

We are told that the Goddess-worshiping gylanic order was tragically replaced by male-ruled, god-oriented societies, ancestral to the present world. Some anthropologists, who more or less accept the gylanic age, see its eclipse as due to technological progress, giving men wider scope and advantages. Not so Marija Gimbutas and her followers. The end came through active destruction -- gradual, piecemeal, but deadly. The story has villains. They are the Indo-Europeans.

Who were the Indo-Europeans? Why, when, and how are they supposed to have extinguished the golden age?

They were a mysterious people whose language is thought to have been ancestral to many others and whose descendants are thought to have spread these derived languages over a huge area, its extent shown by the fact that the Gaelic of Ireland and the Hindi of India both belong to the Indo-European family.

Well over a century ago philologists realized that many languages have overlaps and parallels implying a common origin. This is easy to see in such cases as Italian and Spanish, both of which are derived from Latin. But the argument can be pressed much further. Besides Latin and the Latin-derived group, the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic languages and Greek are all classed as Indo-European. English counts as Germanic, although its main Anglo-Saxon element has been augmented by many words from other sources. The reason for the Indo is that the same logic brings in Sanskrit and its Indian descendants. It also brings in Persian and several dead languages, such as Hittite. This linguistic family is distinct from the Semitic family, of which Hebrew is a well-known member, and from the languages of Africa and the Orient.

All Indo-European languages seem to have been derived, through a long process of separation and evolution, from a Proto-Indo-European original. This parent tongue may have been a single language or a cluster of closely related dialects. Proto-Indo-European is completely undocumented. There are no inscriptions, no texts, no secondhand reports. However, a little of its vocabulary can be inferred from words that are shared, with only limited divergence, by all its derivatives -- such words as those for mother or father.

The speakers of this original tongue, the Proto-Indo-Europeans, presumably had a homeland in one geographic region. Some of their descendants spread over Europe, carrying dialects that evolved and grew, till they resulted in Greek, Latin, and the rest. Others spread over parts of Asia, with a branch reaching Iran and creating Old Persian, and a branch reaching India and creating Sanskrit. The latter are known as Indo-Aryans. The term Aryan is of Indian origin. It used to be applied more widely, even to Indo-Europeans in general, but racist exploitation brought it into discredit, and it is confined now to the Indo-Europeans who reached India, plus one other grouping to the west of them that was closely akin.

Many attempts have been made to locate the homeland. Marija Gimbutas equates the first Indo-Europeans with Neolithic dwellers on the steppes of Russia, who disposed of their more important dead in chambered mounds known as kurgans, so that burials of this type can be used to plot their movements. Kurgan society began to take shape in the Volga basin as far back as the seventh millennium BCE. The Kurgan people were pastoral, practicing small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry. After a while, they domesticated the horse and had wheeled vehicles. They were patriarchal, male-dominated, with a male pantheon, and they were combative and fond of weapons, making these from copper and bronze as metallurgy developed.

Gimbutas has Kurgan people expanding into Old Europe in several waves over a long period, from about 4300 BCE to about 2800 BCE. Old Europe's matristic society was pre-Indo-European and had been in possession for a long time, worshiping the Goddess in various forms and living peaceably by farming. The change for the worse was due to Kurgan mobs entering as conquerors, imposing not only Indo-European speech but the ascendancy of male warriors and a male religion. The process was not complete everywhere till centuries after the last actual invasion, but there was no reversing it.

Study of Indo-European cultures could turn up evidence, even supportive of the Gimbutan prehistory, that has been obscured by their dismissal as merely barbaric. Whoever they were, Indo-Europeans were scattered across the steppes very early, not only in Russia but far into Asia. On Gimbutas's own showing they occupied what was, or had been, Goddess territory. Cults and mythology from the hypothetical seedbed could have lingered on; there could have been a fertilization of Indo-European groups from Siberian cultures in which they did linger on. There may be traces of such an influence in Indo-European societies farther afield, carried there with the great dispersal. It is not a question of finding them throughout the Indo-European complex, borne along everywhere with the linguistic baggage, but simply of finding them somewhere in it. If apparent traces exist -- and if they can be detected farther afield, among peoples with whom Indo-Europeans came into contact -- then it may be proper to draw inferences about the seedbed area. Researches not hitherto brought to bear may turn out to offer a key, or several keys.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Fanciful or not, I think the inquiry does go somewhere. When the data are assembled we may glimpse a common origin for things widely separated; a beginning behind recognized beginnings; a dawn behind the dawn and an Eden, if you will, behind Eden.

#### Further Resources

#### World of the Goddess

## Video

When God Was a Woman  
by Merlin Stone

Brave Dames and Wimpets  
by Susan Isaacs

The Creation of Patriarchy  
by Gerda Lerner

Mismeasure of Woman  
by Carol Tavris

The Chalice and the Blade  
by Riane Tennenhaus Eisler

For Her Own Good  
by Barbara Ehrenreich

The Language of the Goddess  
by Marija Gimbutas, Joseph Campbell

Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe  
by Marija Gimbutas

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