Thinking about Goddesses: A Review of Three Recent Books

BY CAROL P. CHRIST, CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF INTEGRAL STUDIES, SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA & DIRECTOR ARIADNE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF MYTH AND RITUAL, MOLIVOS, LESBOS, GREECE

Julia M. Asher-Greve and Joan Goodnick Westenholz. *Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships, and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources*. Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press Fribourg Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Gottingen, 2013, 460 +xii. 73 pages of illustrations. £106.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber. *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013, 429 + xiii. Illustrated. \$35.

Heide Goettner-Abendroth. Translated by Karen Smith. *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012, 2013, 535 + xxxviii. \$49.95.

Together, these books raise important methodological issues concerning the study of Goddess traditions. They were written in the context of new feminist questions and on-going controversies about the roles of women and Goddesses in prehistory, ancient history, and contemporary societies. These questions were raised with new fervor in the 1970s by feminists who had been taught that the male God of Biblical traditions was the only God. Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father* (1973) crystalized the feminist critique of Biblical religions when she stated that when God is male, the male is God. The re-discovery of the existence of widespread Goddess worship was exciting. Feminists wanted to know if female images of divinity correlated with female power. Merlin Stone provided an answer to this question when she argued in *When God Was a Woman* (1976) that women had greater rights in earlier cultures in the Near East that worshipped the Goddess and that these rights were gradually diminished as societies became increasingly patriarchal.

This feminist ferment was disconcerting to scholars trained in the study of ancient texts and archeology. Though earlier scholars, including professor of

Roman law J. J. Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht (Mother Right)* (1861) and Jungian Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother* (1955), had discussed 'matriarchal' Goddess worship, most of them agreed that matriarchy represented a lower stage of culture that needed to be superseded by patriarchy. Feminists asked the unasked question: what if patriarchy is not a higher stage of culture? Scholars interested in upholding the status quo could dismiss early feminist work on Goddesses. Merlin Stone's book, for example, was critiqued for being based on secondary sources and not containing footnotes. (I believe her conclusions are largely correct, nonetheless.)

The situation was not so simple when it came to Marija Gimbutas and her 1981 book, *The Language of the Goddess*. Gimbutas was a widely recognized scholar of Indo-European languages and cultures with numerous published books and articles; she had directed several archaeological excavations; and she was professor of archaeology at a prestigious university. Gimbutas proposed that Europe was defined by the conflict of two cultures: one Indo-European and the other pre-Indo-European. She named the earlier culture 'Old Europe,' dating it circa 6500-3500 BCE, and defining it as: peaceful, settled, agricultural, highly artistic, egalitarian, matrifocal, probably matrilineal and matrilocal, worshipping the Goddess as the power of birth, death, and regeneration in all life. She described the Indo-European culture (defined by the Indo-European language group) as: warlike, nomadic, horse-riding, patriarchal and patrilineal, not highly artistic, and worshipping the sun and shining bronze weapons.

Gimbutas did not toe the line: she did not call the patriarchal Indo-European culture superior, and the clear implication of her work is that it was inferior to the culture it overthrew. To take Gimbutas' theories seriously would require a revolution in thinking and a revision of the canon of great works. Does the epic of war known as *The Iliad* represent 'the highest values of human culture'? Was classical Athens which tolerated slavery and excluded women from positions of power 'the foundation of democracy'? Are Plato (who urged philosophers to 'rise above the body') and Aristotle (who considered females to be 'misbegotten males') 'the models for all rational thinking'? Given that Gimbutas challenged the widely-held assumption that classical Greece is the foundation of rationality and culture, it is perhaps to be expected that her carefully developed theories would be dismissed as 'romantic fantasies' of a 'golden age' based in 'emotional longings' with no basis in fact.¹

In truth, emotional feelings are easily evoked on the other side of the debate. Recently I met with two male scholars to discuss the hypothesis that Minoan Crete (c. 3000-1450 BCE) might not have been ruled by kings. Beginning from our common assumption that the Goddess was the main deity in ancient Crete and that there was no evidence for war, I suggested that patriarchy and warfare arise together: the earliest kings are warrior kings.² Thus, I continued, if Minoan Crete did not have war, it probably did not have kings. My colleagues had never heard this theory. One of them immediately interjected: 'You shouldn't blame men for warfare and all the evil associated with it. After all, there were women guards at the death camps in Nazi Germany.' Surprised that the conversation

¹ See for example, Lynn M. Meskell, 'Goddesses, Gimbutas, and "New Age" Archaeology', *Antiquity* 69 (1995), 74-86.

² See my 'A New Definition of Patriarchy: Control of Female Sexuality, Private Property, and War', *Feminist Theology* 24/3 (2016), 214-225.

so quickly turned to the Holocaust, I responded that I did not blame men, but rather a social structure known as patriarchy for the evil of Nazi Germany, adding that women have always participated in patriarchy. Our discussion continued on an emotional level, as the two men debated the point I had already conceded: that men are not intrinsically evil—and never returned to the question of kings in Crete. I share this story because it illustrates the highly charged atmosphere in which the three books under consideration here were written.

Julia M. Asher-Greve and Joan Goodnick Westenholz's *Goddesses in Context* is in many ways a circumspect book, written within the disciplinary boundaries of Near Eastern Studies, and ruling out the question of the origins of Goddess worship. For the most part a catalogue of Goddesses and their functions, it covers a time frame of three millennia, from roughly 3300 BCE almost to the beginning of the common era. As such, it will be an indispensable reference for anyone who wishes to think about Mesopotamian Goddesses. The illustrations are a treasure trove. Like many other disciplines, Near Eastern Studies has been dominated by the written word. Esteemed scholar of the ancient Near East Samuel Noah Kramer said that 'history begins at Sumer' in his foundational book, *History Begins at Sumer* (1956), because he believed writing was invented there. Art, if it is discussed at all by Near Eastern specialists, has been used to illustrate or explain texts, according to Asher-Greve and Goodnick Westenholz (p. 8). They consider this methodology to be flawed, arguing that 'combined analysis of textual sources, visual images and other material . . . produces a more differentiated picture about goddesses than focusing on either images or texts alone' (p. 9). This is an important methodological innovation that, like Margaret Miles' work on visual images in the Christian tradition in *Image as Insight* (1985), begins to shift the focus of a field away from the written word, which usually reflects the viewpoints of literate male elites. Asher-Greve and Goodnick Westenholz note that many of the seals depicting the goddess³ as a central figure were owned by women (p. 293). Such images may be more likely to reflect women's views of the goddesses than texts.

Asher-Greve and Goodnick Westenholz are concerned to dispel the notion that goddesses are primarily mothers or that they embody stereotypically feminine characteristics and attributes. They note that Near Eastern goddesses are rarely depicted pregnant, giving birth, or nursing. (Gimbutas [1981] made a similar observation regarding the Goddess of Old Europe.) Goddesses were associated with a variety of activities, many of which were also attributed to gods—activities ranging from healing and purification, to sexuality and birth, to agriculture, to writing and mathematics (p. 288). The 'primary and essential functions' of the goddess included 'cosmic creatrix' and 'royal legitimation' (p. 288). In addition, goddesses frequently functioned as 'mediators,' receiving prayers and petitions to be passed on to other divinities. The authors suggest that goddesses may have been more concerned with daily life than gods (p. 289). They consider 'the changing status of the goddesses' (p. 294), but attribute it to factors other than changes in the status of women. The authors agree that the theories of matriarchal prehistory are myths or fiction (p. 23). I find the last two conclusions unwarranted, especially in light of the new research on matriarchies to be discussed below.

³ When summarizing their work, I use lower case for goddess and goddesses as the authors do.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber, author of the ground-breaking book *Women's Work* (1994) on women and weaving, traces the motif of *The Dancing Goddesses* throughout European history—from contemporary folklore back to the beginning of agriculture, and earlier. Wayland Barber brings her extensive knowledge of folklore, folk imagery, classics, and archaeology to bear on the question of the origins and meaning of the images of the Dancing Goddesses. She begins with images she calls 'willies' (though they have other names), female creatures said to reside in rivers and streams and to emerge in spring to fertilize the fields. Wayland Barber notes that in traditional cultures young girls frequently gather to dance out-of-doors in the spring. She hypothesizes that girls who can give birth but have not done so were thought to spread their fertility on the ground as they danced. The willies are ghosts of girls who die before giving birth—maintaining their fertile potency after death. Wayland Barber finds the Dancing Goddesses motif to be widespread in European folk stories and in folk art. She traces it back through the Middle Ages, to Roman and Greek times, to the Bronze Age, and then to the Neolithic.

Wayland Barber suggests that in Neolithic cultures without kings or other forms of hierarchical social organization, dance was a way of shaping and creating community. Though she acknowledges that dance must have originated earlier, she argues that agriculture (the defining invention of the Neolithic Age) required greater degrees of co-operation than hunting and gathering did. European and Near Eastern folk dances are rule-driven: they bring people together and reinforce the need to co-operate. A folk dancer herself, Wayland Barber understands that dance, especially circle dance, connects people to their bodies and the bodies of others, forming ties that continue after the dance ends. The final piece of the puzzle for Wayland Barber is the relation of small female figurines to seeds and seed offerings. If we imagine these figures dancing, she suggests, have we not found the origins of the Dancing Goddess?

The Dancing Goddesses clearly owes a debt to Gimbutas' combination of archaeology and folklore in the method she named archaeo-mythology as well as to her theories about the Goddess of Old Europe. Strikingly, Gimbutas is not mentioned in the text, though several of her books are cited in the bibliography. Wayland Barber focuses her discussion on the level of mythology and folklore, not directly addressing issues of women's social power and agency. Thus she does not consider the theory that as the likely inventors of agriculture (as well as weaving and pottery), women would have had considerable agency and power in Neolithic cultures.⁴ Yet, if women invented agriculture, then is it not likely that women held social power in Neolithic societies? And that women were the cultural agents who encoded the mysteries of planting, nurturing, and harvesting in myths and rituals that have come down to us as the Dancing Goddesses?

Matriarchal Societies is a revision and translation of three books originally published by Heide Goettner-Abendroth in German in 1988, 1991, and 2000. The revised version incorporates indigenous research presented at the two conferences Goettner-Abendroth organized on Matriarchal Studies, collected in

⁴ This theory is discussed by Autumn Stanley in *Mothers and Daughters of Invention* (Rutgers University Press, 1993). Also see Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1994).

the book she edited, *Societies of Peace* (2009). Trained in modern philosophy, Goettner-Abendroth turned to the study of matriarchy after she recognized that the western philosophical tradition is based in male domination. She redefines 'matriarchy' to mean a society with mothers at the center, rejecting the common assumption that matriarchy refers to female domination. In contrast to patriarchies, matriarchal societies are egalitarian, reflecting the mother's desire for all of her children to flourish. In the Introduction Goettner-Abendroth offers a structural definition of matriarchy (based on the research she discusses) as involving: (1) economic mutuality based on the circulation of gifts; (2) social equality based on nonhierarchical matrilineal kinship; (3) political equality based on structures of consensus; (4) spiritual equality rooted in the view that the world has come forth from the Divine Mother or Divine Feminine (p. xxv). In the first chapter Goettner-Abendroth provides a brilliant critical overview of earlier matriarchal theories, which, she argues, founder on a lack of clarity about the structural basis of matriarchal societies.

From there Goettner-Abendroth launches into discussions of currently existing indigenous matriarchal societies in East Asia, Indonesia, Oceania, the Americas, India, and Africa, in seventeen chapters, each devoted to a specific culture. Most of these societies practice simple agriculture, often called horticulture, controlled by the women. Some of them express all of the elements of matriarchy, while others retain elements of matriarchy mixed with patriarchy.⁵ Goettner-Abendroth began to study living matriarchal societies after concluding that speculations about egalitarian matriarchies in the past could not be proved. Her work helps us to understand how societies that are egalitarian, matrifocal, matrilineal, and often matrilineal actually function. The evidence she provides about living matriarchies should make it more difficult to dismiss theories about egalitarian matrifocal societies in the past as nothing more than myth and fiction.

Marija Gimbutas' theories about the civilization of the Goddess in Old Europe challenged the unnamed assumption of the patriarchal scholarship: the idea that the patriarchy and war are inevitable. Thus it is not surprising that her work is more often dismissed than built upon by other scholars of the ancient world. Heide Goettner-Abendroth said that leaving the academy gave her 'the chance to be as free as possible from the internalized patriarchal ideology that [the universities] indoctrinate their students and everyone else with' (p. xviii). Scholars were once students, and it is hard to unlearn what we have been taught. But, I would argue, that is exactly what we must do if we are to gain a fuller understanding of how the symbols of Goddesses developed and flourished and then were transformed. I look forward to the day when the discussion of egalitarian matrifocal or matriarchal societies will evoke neither hostility nor fear. I look forward to the day when scholars will be able to look with new eyes at the

⁵ I am not in a position to evaluate all of the evidence Goettner-Abendroth provides. I am, however, critical of one of her interpretations. Following poet and mythographer Robert Graves (*The White Goddess*, 1948), she argues that matriarchal cultures often practice sacrifice of the king. She explains that if a sacrificial victim goes willingly to his fate, such a practice is perfectly acceptable. But this explanation can also be used to justify widows jumping on the funeral pyre in Indian suttee. Moreover, in truly egalitarian societies, there would be no kings.

roles and power of women in early agricultural societies. I look forward to the day when scholars can discuss the possibility that Goddesses were worshipped in egalitarian societies in which women were honored as mothers and as the inventors of agriculture, weaving, and pottery. I look forward to the day when theories about female power at the foundation of culture and cultures will not be censored or self-censored.

Carol P. Christ is a feminist philosopher, theologian, and historian of religion who holds a Ph.D. from Yale. She is the author of *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997), *She Who Changes* (2003), and most recently, *Goddess and God in the World* with Judith Plaskow (2016), and *A Serpentine Path* (2016). She leads the Goddess Pilgrimage to Crete, www.goddessariadne.org.