

**Knocking Down Straw Dolls: A Critique of Cynthia Eller's
The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future
 By Max Dashu (2000)**

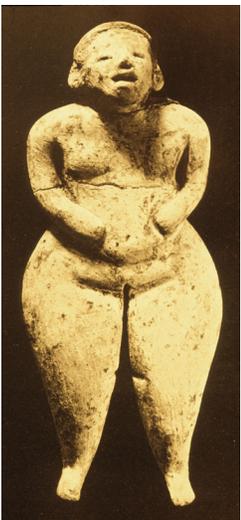
In the past thirty years an uproar has arisen over ideas that women once had power; that people traced their descent through the mother; or that ancient religions embraced goddess veneration. Academia rejected these interpretations of history in the 1960s, and their massive comeback as a result of the women's movement has caused an alarmed reaction. The straw doll of "matriarchy" is thrown up with an impossibly narrow definition, is then shot down on those grounds, and the matter is declared settled. Robert Schaeffer of www.patriarchy.com can then proclaim that "The feminist / New Age 'Idyllic Goddess' theory is not an intellectually respectable hypothesis."

All this polarization and oversimplification avoids the real issue, which is not female domination in a reverse of historical female oppression, but the existence of egalitarian human societies: cultures that did not enforce a patriarchal double standard around sexuality, property, public office and space; that did not make females legal minors under the control of fathers, brothers, and husbands, without protection from physical and sexual abuse by same. We know of many societies that did not confine, seclude, veil, or bind female bodies, nor amputate or deform parts of those bodies.

We know, as well, that there have been cultures that accorded women public leadership roles and a range of arts and professions, as well as freedom of movement, speech, and rights to make personal decisions. Many have embraced female personifications of the Divine, neither subordinating them to a masculine god, nor debarring masculine deities. Most importantly, there have been (and still are) societies based on matrilineage, matrilineal social organization and other cultural structures that place women at the social center.

Evidence for such societies exists, though there's no agreement on what to call them. For many people, "matriarchy" connotes a system of domination, the reverse and mirror-image of patriarchy. Identified with early anthropological theory and, during the 60s, with slams against African-American women, it had been overwhelmingly rejected by feminist researchers (but see below).¹ "Matrilineal" is inadequate, focusing on the single criterion of descent. "Matrifocal" is too ambiguous, since it could be argued (and has been) that many patriarchal societies retain a strong emphasis on the mother. A variety of names have been proposed for egalitarian matrilineages, including "matristic"² "gynarchic" societies³ or "woman-centered" societies, or "gylany."⁴ My preferred term is "matrix society," which implies a social network based on the life support system, or "mother-right culture." (More recently, the term "matriculture" has been proposed.)⁵

Old-school academics as well as post-structuralist upstarts like to scold refractory feminists about evidence and certainties. The pretense of disinterested objectivity reminds me of what Gandhi said when asked what he thought about Western Civilization: "I think it would be a very good idea." The notion that mainstream academia is somehow value-free, but that feminist perspective is necessarily ideological and agenda-driven, is still widely held. Covert agendas pass easily under the banner of objectivity.



El Salvador

The project of reevaluating history with a gender-sensitive eye is in its infancy, and necessarily allied to Indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives. An international feminist perspective views history as remedial—because sexism and racism have obscured, distorted and omitted what information is available to us—and provisional, because new information keeps pouring in. History has changed rapidly since the 1960s, in every field: Africana, Celtic studies, West Asian studies, American Indian scholarship. Thousands of new books come out every year that look deeper into women's status and stories in a huge range of societies and periods, at a level of detail not possible before. Fresh interpretations are being advanced from voices not heard before. It's way too soon for sweeping dismissals.

The deliberately provocative title of Cynthia Eller's book spells out her approach in a nutshell: it's not about history, but ideology. The ideas under fire are the insurgent feminist histories that reject the assumption of universal patriarchy throughout history. The author aims to critique

the views of what she calls “feminist matriarchalists,” but in the process commits the very offense of which she accuses them. History—detailed, in-depth analysis of historical evidence—takes a back seat to theory (in this case, of the post-structuralist gender studies variety) scattered with ethnographic remarks.

Eller’s standpoint differs from that of the most ardent opponents of mother-right history in being avowedly feminist. But this does not get in the way of a no-holds-barred polemic, beginning with the title itself. Eller styles the matrilineal histories as a “myth”—not a thesis or theory. She makes no distinction between scholarly studies in a wide range of fields and expressions of the burgeoning Goddess movement, including novels, guided tours, market-driven enterprises. All are conflated all into one monolithic “myth” devoid of any historical foundation.⁶

Though Eller acknowledges that most feminist thinkers in this area have rejected the word “matriarchy,”⁷ she has chosen this loaded, hot-button label as a descriptor. Throughout the book she refers to a diverse range of feminist researchers as “feminist matriarchalists,” tossing out broadbrush generalizations along the way: “Feminist matriarchalists’ interpretations of ancient myth are rather transparently driven by ideology.”⁸ (Since Eller’s label is polemical rather than descriptive, I will abbreviate it as “fm’s” in this review.) But her critical stance disappears when she cites anti-feminist ideologues, such as the author of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, reissued under the title *Why Men Rule*.

There are feminist scholars who have redefined the term “matriarchy.” Heide Göttner-Abendroth has confronted the frenzied reaction the term generates, exposing the sexist bias still engrained in academia and the media.⁹ Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday is quite conscious of “the disdain that the term matriarchy evokes in the minds of many anthropologists,” but notes that the Minangkabau people of Sumatra have adopted the Dutch term *matriarchaat* to describe their own matrilineal /local tradition.¹⁰ However, in her presentation at the conference “Female Mysteries of the Substratum,”¹¹ Sanday said that it is only Minangkabau men who use the word “matriarchaat.” The women say *adat ibu*, “Mother Law,” and men use this Indigenous expression as well. Both Sanday and Göttner-Abendroth reframe the etymology of “matriarchy”; instead of using the standard derivation of the Greek -*arche* stem from “rulership” (as in “hierarchy” or “monarchy”), they use an older form of *arche*, which means “beginning, origin, first principle.”¹² This redefinition reads as “mother-origination.”

The introduction to *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* acknowledges “substantial dissension” within the “matriarchal myth,”¹³ but the body of the book paints a different picture, relegating diverse opinions mainly to the footnotes. Eller goes for the easy targets and steps well around those that look like they will sit up and bite back. She relies heavily on poems and interviews, quoting from scholarly writers only in brief snippets. Marija Gimbutas is identified as a major influence, but not heard from directly on her historical thesis. Gerda Lerner is barely alluded to, which is strange given her prominence; evidently she would interfere with the desired impression of a wacko fringe. And where are Miriam Robbins Dexter, Mary Condren, Asphodel Long, Paula Gunn Allen, Patricia Monaghan, Pupul Jayakar, Aurora Levins-Morales, Joanna Hubbs, Ruby Rohrich, N.N. Bhattacharya, David Bakan, or the Africanists Sheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga?

The book’s tone is sardonic, often openly sarcastic: Heide Göttner-Abendroth’s book is called “a four-volume opus on matriarchal prehistory.” (The book is really about living Indigenous mother-right societies.) Eller treats the



Jomon culture, Japan

proliferation of products, publications, and classes as harmful, portraying them as a growing threat spreading into all areas. The youth are being corrupted, too, by teaching of a pernicious “myth” to innocent first graders, and even younger girls.¹⁴

Cynthia Eller has taken feminist spirituality as her anthropological subject. Her earlier book, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (1993), contains a chapter on the same material (“The Rise and Fall of Women’s Power”). In both books, Eller believes her informants define women “quite narrowly” as mothers, bodies, sex, and nature—embracing, she says, the preconceptions of the patriarchy they are trying to escape. Her critique of what she sees as “essentialism” is a major theme of *The Myth*. The author has no problem positing that all societies have been male-

dominated, but considers any and all proposals of sex-egalitarian matrilineages “essentialist.” This is the “invented past” of her title.

Eller recounts her first encounter with these ideas in an academic setting, when a male archaeologist suggested that Crete had been a matriarchal society. She reports an overwhelmingly negative response that seems to have impressed her deeply: “If a lot of mockery was all that prehistoric matriarchies could get me, who needed them?” Historical evidence is not a visible consideration here. Instead, Eller has chosen to join the camp of the mockers: “For those with ears to hear it, the noise the theory of matriarchal prehistory makes as we move into a new millennium is deafening.”¹⁵

The author does her best to portray this theory (and for her there is only one) as weird, unfounded, extremist, and its proponents as blithely unconcerned about historical veracity. She says that “fm’s” want the theory to be true so badly that they will believe it despite all the evidence. Eller is “appalled by the sheer credulousness they demonstrated toward their very dubious version of what happened in Western prehistory.” She implies that the evidence preponderates on the side of neolithic patriarchy, and even asserts that “the matriarchal myth fails completely on historical grounds.” but as she gets into the meat of her argument, it turns out to be inconclusive, unproven and (by her own admission) unprovable.¹⁶



El Kadada, Sudan, 4th millennium bce

Eller’s account of how the “matriarchal myth” originated follows the interpretation of non-feminists such as Ronald Hutton: feminists are copying ideas that originated with Johan Jakob Bachofen in 1861. The Swiss philologist proposed an era of “unregulated heterism” in which women were sexually degraded and defenseless, followed by an Amazonian revolt that inaugurated an era of mother-right. In this stage, women created marriage to tame the male. This supposedly still-animalistic and “backward” era was superseded by a “higher” stage of human development: patriarchy. But Peggy Reeves Sanday points out that Bachofen never used the word “matriarchy”; it was American translators who plugged in this term in the mid-20th century.¹⁷ Bachofen’s own favored word was Mother-Right, the very name of his book (*Das Mütterrecht*). He used a different term, “gynecocracy,” for “rule by women”.

Nevertheless, because Bachofen and other elite white male theorists of the 19th century saw patriarchy as an evolutionary advance, Eller contends there is “nothing inherently feminist” in the “matriarchal” thesis (by whatever name). Worse, since it was proposed by “the enemies of feminism,”¹⁹ she believes that it is against women’s interests to pursue this theory. But the fact that history was firmly in white men’s hands in Bachofen’s time does not somehow obligate women today to follow their interpretations. In any case, it’s hard to see how the idea of mother-right advanced the patriarchal agenda in a world where male domination was already a given. In fact, the initial reception of *Das Mutterrecht* was hostile. After several decades, the book became influential, but its pull was indirect (it did not appear in English until 1967) and diffuse (the idea of mother-right itself eclipsed the particulars of Bachofen’s analysis).

Sexist preconceptions aside, the Swiss scholar seems to have been trying to account for information that did not fit the picture of universal male domination. It was not Bachofen’s heroic view of patriarchy that attracted several generations of women researchers, but his anomalous suggestion of prehistoric female power. By pulling together little-discussed information to make this case, he stimulated discussion of the question of female status from a new angle.

It is worth looking at the history of this idea more closely. Earlier writers had already begun to address the issue of female power as they encountered Indigenous societies in colonial contexts. Their accounts present a tangle of European projections based on everything from Greek Amazon traditions to Christian colonizers’ claims that Indigenous peoples worshipped devils. They also record their culture shock at encountering senior priestesses (as in the Philippines and Siberia) and female chieftains (as in Virginia and Delaware).

In 1724 the French missionary Lafitau expressed astonishment at the power of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) matrons: “Nothing, however, is more real than this superiority of the women... All real authority is vested in them.”²⁰ Lewis Morgan spent four decades studying the Iroquois and spinning his own theories about matriarchy, published in 1877 as *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization*. The



Caroline Parker, Seneca, of the Six Iroquoian Nations, 1850

unconscious but patent racism of these categorizations stained the new “science” of anthropology, as also history and all other academic disciplines.

Morgan’s work in turn had a tremendous impact on Engels, who put forth its outlines in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and on Marx, who had begun writing along similar lines before his death. Eller’s brief summary indicates that Freud and many other thinkers of the late 19th century were influenced by these theories of matriarchy, barbarism and civilization, and that feminists—notably Matilda Joslyn Gage and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—also began to draw on them for their own sociopolitical analysis.

With Gage, however, we come back full circle to the Iroquois—but not as anthropological informants, grist for an elite white theoretical mill. For Gage they acted as teachers who inspired a different vision of human relations than the patriarchal European model, and as elders who honored her with the rank of matron of the Wolf clan in the Mohawk nation. Sally Roesch Wagner has fleshed out the direct impact of Iroquois culture on Gage, Stanton, and other founders of the US women’s movement. Her research shows that these early feminists had frequent contact with the Haudenosaunee and were deeply impressed by the contrast in women’s status in the two cultures.

While US women were legal non-persons lacking rights to vote, hold property or child custody, and even rights over their own persons, Haudenosaunee women spoke in council, participated in decision-making, selected the men who would be chiefs, and had the authority to “knock the horns off” a chief who failed the people. The chiefs themselves upheld the traditional respect for women, staunchly defending it to white men over the centuries. It was not a coincidence that the first women’s rights conference took place at Seneca Falls. Even the “Bloomer” dress reform movement started here, with “an uncanny resemblance to the loose-fitting tunic and leggings” of Iroquois women.²¹

Barbara Mann’s phenomenal *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas*²² is the must-read exposition of Six Nations history. The Seneca historian synthesizes the (orally-transmitted) Keepings of her people with key written sources, with great insight, wit, and a trenchant critique of “Euro-forming the data.” And Paula Gunn Allen laid out indigenous antecedents for the European-American women’s movement in her influential essay, “Who is Your Mother: The Red Roots of White Feminism.” She points to “the informal but deeply effective Indianization of Europeans” that seeped in from many directions, including the second- and third-hand accounts of Morgan, Marx and Engels. These influences went unrecognized, since Indians were “officially and informally ignored as intellectual movers and shapers in the United States, Britain and Europe.”²³

Seemingly unaware of these studies of American Indian influence on European-American feminists, anthropologists and leftists, Eller portrays the matrix theories as indebted only to male chauvinists. She moves on to a discussion of anthropologists’ repudiation of “matriarchy” after 1900. Her explanation is that evolutionary theory came into disrepute and armchair anthropology gave way to fieldwork. Still, the eminent classicists Jane Harrison and George Thomson, as well as the anthropologist Robert Briffault, continued to mine the cultural record for evidence of early female power.

Scholars who did not adhere to the new doctrine of timeless patriarchy were subjected to “the jeers of most of their colleagues,” as Eller admits.²⁴ It is strange that she so quickly passes over this subject of ridicule in academia, which has persisted to the present day. In college during the late ‘60s, I experienced it full force before I even had a position on “matriarchy.” It was made quite clear that certain questions were not to be raised. The negation was so pervasive as to be doctrinal, a trigger for shouting-down rather than reasonable discussion. Breaches have appeared in the wall since then, but the threatened behavior persists. Many of its targets are non-academics, but the most visible challenge emerged from within the ivory tower, in the person of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas.

THE FUROR OVER GIMBUTAS

So polarized has this debate become that, as Wendy Griffin has observed of Marija Gimbutas, “Her theories tend to be judged as either absolutely true or absolutely false...”²⁵ It is impossible to mention the work of Gimbutas in academia without being caught up in a heated dispute. A positive mention is immediately assumed to indicate total agreement with every interpretation she ever wrote, and to warrant heated attack. In this charged atmosphere, the content of her work invariably gets lost, and the documentation she provided is never evaluated. Those who dismiss her work as being about “matriarchy” and a “mother goddess” (terms she explicitly rejected) consistently misrepresent her far more complex views.²⁶

By any account, Marija Gimbutas had a distinguished career as a 20th-century archaeologist and a primary founder of modern Indo-European studies. She excavated sites of the Vinca, Starcevo, Karanovo and Sesklo cultures. Her ability to read sixteen European languages enabled her to study virtually all the archaeological literature on both sides of the Cold War split, a crucial skill since most key publications in her study area were written in eastern European languages. It was Gimbutas who laid pivotal groundwork for integrating archaeological data with linguistic studies of Indo-European origins. Her model for Indo-European origins is still the leading theory in the field. Its basic outlines are upheld—minus the focus on women’s status and goddess interpretations—by her former student J.P. Mallory, now one of the top authorities in Indo-European Studies.

Eller acknowledges the “tremendous linguistic expertise” Gimbutas possessed, and her “encyclopedic knowledge of Central and Eastern European archaeological sites that permitted her to speculate effectively on ‘big picture’ questions.” However, Eller completely sidesteps the Lithuanian scholar’s heavily footnoted analysis of why she thinks the kurgan-builders were invaders, and why patriarchal. She declines to compare Gimbutas’ work to theories of the archaeological establishment, claiming that it would be “ultimately unfair to all parties involved. There is no archaeological consensus...”²⁸—and furthermore, everyone has an agenda, even the traditionalist men. (No kidding, but what happened to the thorough debunking promised in the introduction?) What truly is unfair is to condemn a scholar’s work without bothering to analyze her text. Eller never describes Gimbutas’ theory in its own right or quotes from her historical analysis. Instead she assails it through a pastiche of descriptions by her detractors and supporters. Then she declares that the argument that Indo-European speakers spread from the steppes through military conquest “is completely speculative.”²⁹



Cucuteni,
Romania

At this point Eller resorts to outright misrepresentation. She writes, “As J.P. Mallory summarizes, ‘almost all of the arguments for invasion and cultural transformations are far better explained without reference to Kurgan expansions.’”^{29a} Reading this came as a shock, because my understanding of Mallory’s position was quite different. I had to look it up; sure enough, he says the opposite: “One might at first imagine that the economy of argument involved with the Kurgan solution should oblige us to accept it outright. But critics do exist and their objections can be summarized quite simply”—and here follows the phrase Eller so misleadingly cites.³⁰

Mallory spends pages laying out the evidence for a Pontic-Caspian steppe origin for the Indo-Europeans: “the present formulation of this theory owes much to the publications of Marija Gimbutas who has argued for over 25 years that the Proto-Indo-European homeland should be identified with her Kurgan tradition.” Mallory explains that the region she proposes (southern Ukraine/Russia) “evidences all the attributes of a putative Indo-European society reconstructed from linguistic evidence.... a warlike pastoral society, highly mobile...” which expanded into Europe.³¹ In support of the invasion theory, he notes evidence of sharp changes in Balkan mortuary practice:

there appear alien burials morphologically identical to those on the steppe. These are generally confined to males and are accompanied by weapons—arrows, spears and knives... The rite of suttee, the sacrificial execution of a woman on the death of her husband, is indicated in some burials suggesting the patriarchal character of the warrior pastoralists who superimposed themselves on the local agricultural populations.³²

Other changes occur: population displacement (in every direction but east), abandonment of Old European tell sites, dissolution of the tradition of fine painted ceramics, and “infusion of a new physical type into the Danube region

which can easily be traced back to the steppe region.” Mallory calls this “something of a Balkan ‘dark age,’” and further writes of “unequivocal evidence” for steppe intrusions into the Balkans in the mid-3rd millennium BCE.³³ All this is straight out of Gimbutas. Mallory does not follow his teacher in every detail (for example, he disagrees with her analysis of the northern Globular Amphora cultures), but he draws heavily on her synthesis of archaeological and linguistic studies. Her influence is also strong among eastern European scholars. The prominent Russian archaeologist Nikolai Merpert wrote in 1997 that “generally, new archaeological data continues to confirm the conception of Marija Gimbutas concerning the Indo-Europeanization of southeastern Europe.”³⁴

But Cynthia Eller is dismissive: “Neither is there any positive evidence that the Kurgans from the Russian steppes were an exceptionally brutal, supremely patriarchal people.”³⁵ She does not mention the women executed for burial with the dominant males around whom these early kurgan graves are centered, nor the absence of kurgan burials of women in their own right. At this point, I started to question if Eller had actually read Gimbutas’ documentation of the kurgan “suttee”-burials. *Civilization of the Goddess* details their appearance in the Sredny Stog and Yamnaya steppe cultures, and their westward spread with the kurgan graves.

Eller concludes that Gimbutas’ thesis is a “house of cards,” insisting that we cannot say that Indo-European conquest brought about a more patriarchal social order in the Balkans.³⁶ Her omission of the burials with executed women is striking in light of a suggestion she makes elsewhere in the book. While claiming that there is no real evidence for “matriarchy,” Eller proposes an example of the evidence that would really prove female “dominance”: a rich woman buried with murdered men!³⁷ By her own criterion, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that the kurgan-builders belonged to a male-dominated society—even if she refuses to discuss that evidence. (It is buried in a short footnote.) Crucially, Eller’s projection of a patriarchy-in-reverse shows that she has failed to grasp the most basic points made by the feminist historians she is attacking.

It’s understandable that many feminists have seized on Marija Gimbutas as an academically viable feminist prehistorian. Many do not have access to the higher echelons of academia, and even less to a historically male-dominated field like archaeology. What made Gimbutas stand out among her contemporaries was her bold attention to issues of women’s status. For anyone who has waded through archaeological monographs that bury this kind of information, her writing contrasts sharply to the traditional silence about women’s social position, and the assumption that they were subordinate to men in all times and places.

The accusation is often repeated that Gimbutas made interpretations without supporting evidence—unlike other archaeologists. This is just not credible. Interpretation goes on all the time, and it is charged with political ramifications. Brian Hayden, one of Gimbutas’ most vociferous critics, has gone out on a long theoretical limb with his claim that Old Europe was dominated by Big Men.³⁸ But even in the complete absence of evidence, interpretations of “princely” or “priestly” complexes are never as controversial as calling female figurines “goddesses.”



Megalithic woman, northern France, 3rd millennium

For example, Jean-Pierre Mohen’s attempts to contort west European megalithic societies to his preconceptions would be funny if they were not so depressingly typical of stuff I’ve read for years: “The standardized design of neolithic houses indicate a largely egalitarian society: but could this not have included a dominant family, even if it lacked some or all the material signs of power?” Mohen also assumes, without offering any evidence, that the megaliths were the seat of power of a chief endowed with divine authority.³⁹

For all the glaring flaws in his Indo-European origin hypothesis (and it has attracted much criticism from linguists and archaeologists) Colin Renfrew never encountered the contemptuous response that Gimbutas received. (In his version, it is the Indo-Europeans who bring agriculture to Europe from Anatolia and are responsible for the civilization of neolithic Old Europe.) Women scholars who challenge doctrines of gender hierarchy can expect a much harsher reception. Lawrence Osborne attacked Gimbutas for making the original kurgan culture (circa 4400-3500 BCE) out as “patriarchal villains.” After all, were women warriors not excavated in late kurgan burials (circa 600-200

BCE)? Osborne simply ignores the 3000-year time gap and probable ethnic discontinuity between the two societies, calling them “the same culture.”⁴⁰

Naomi Goldenberg vividly illustrates what Gimbutas was up against in her description of a 1972 symposium she attended in Italy. She was deeply impressed by Gimbutas’ learned, precise presentation, but found that male colleagues not only did not share her enthusiasm but did not take her work seriously, laughing behind her back. By contrast, a Swedish archaeologist who had dismissed Gimbutas out of hand (while commenting to Goldenberg that “She used to be quite a sexpot”) was applauded for “one of the more absurd papers of the conference,” based on his speculation that Norse priests had stood on two dents in a rock.⁴¹

Eller dismisses charges that Gimbutas was put down for concluding that neolithic Europe was matricentric and goddess worshipping.⁴² Well—yes—she was seen as passé, condescended to, and ignored rather than debated. But then, asks Eller, why did earlier archaeologists who proposed prehistoric goddess veneration, and even powerful priestesses, retain a high standing in their field? That is a puzzling question: Who does she mean, what did they have to say, and why are they missing from her historiography of the subject?



Mohenjo-Daro, Pakistan,
ca 2500 bce

Eller appears to be referring to O.G.S. Crawford, Gordon Childe, and Jacquetta Hawkes. The first two held back from interpreting symbolism in megalithic European sites for several decades, while the anthropological reaction against “matriarchy” was still fresh. By 1938 Hawkes was chafing under her seniors’ admonitions to withhold her ideas about a widespread megalithic goddess: “caution has been enjoined and it must be observed.”⁴³ Hawkes broke her silence in 1945 with a book describing the megalith builders as worshippers of the Great Goddess, a religion she envisioned as spreading to western Europe from the Balkans and Canaan via the Mediterranean. By the 1950s, Crawford, Childe, and Glyn Daniel also advanced theories of a neolithic goddess religion across Europe and west Asia.

Ideas about an era of goddess veneration became widespread in the early 1960s, when James Mellaart excavated Çatal Höyük. Although Eller is reticent about it, it seems clear that another wave of “matriarchal” theory swept through in the mid-20th century, this time in the field of archaeology. It appears to have been fueled by the realization, as a result of many 20th century digs, that neolithic iconography was predominantly female. *The Myth* only acknowledges this second wave once, obliquely, by including a 1963 quote from Jacquetta Hawkes: “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.”⁴⁴

But by the late 60s, a reaction had set in against interpreting female images as goddesses (or as having any sacral power, for example as ancestor figures). The “New Archaeology” turned away from cultural analysis to an emphasis on scientific process and technology. The trend was simply to ignore the female figurines, although they were often classified in passing as “fertility idols,” “dancing girls,” “pretty ladies,” and “concubines.” Most were squirreled away in obscure journals as tiny, poorly reproduced black-and-white shots, while warriors got full-page color treatment in *The Dawn of Man*-type coffee table books. There was more than a reluctance to call them goddesses; details were typically omitted about the sites where they were discovered, and in what contexts, even about dates. Most readers did not notice this blank amidst the extensive analysis of weapons and tools: how is it possible to evaluate information that’s withheld? Such structural omissions are by no means a thing of the past. Amnon Ben Tor’s survey of Israeli archaeology is a paradigmatic example of this studied inattention.⁴⁵

Other than Gimbutas, Eller claims, no other archaeologists support the “matriarchal myth.” This is easily disproven by naming a few: Gro Mandt of the University of Bergen; Jiao Tianlong and Du Jinpeng of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Kristina Berggren of the Swedish Institute of Classical Studies in Rome; and Jeanine Davis-Kimball of the University of California at Berkeley, who excavated the famous “Amazon” burials of the Sauromatians at Pokrovka. The range of opinions is not as monolithic as *The Myth* portrays. Davis-Kimball, for example, has said, “I think Gimbutas may have been wrong about the mother goddess per se. But she may have been right about an underlying, unbroken tradition of female cultic power and wisdom, which has been suppressed since

the Middle Ages and especially since the Industrial Revolution.”⁴⁶

Eller writes that most feminist archaeologists and anthropologists are critical of the popular trend toward interpreting the wealth of ancient female images as goddesses. Unfortunately, we do not hear from them directly (except for the work of Tringham and Conkey, on whom she relies heavily.)⁴⁷ There’s no question that the dominant paradigm in archaeology is hostile to interpreting the ubiquitous female figurines as having sacred significance, whether that be as goddesses or maternal ancestors, and to any matrilineal interpretations of prehistory. Or perhaps it may be more accurate to say that it is American and English archaeologists who reject these interpretations, since much more sympathetic views are found among archaeologists of other nationalities (for example Shashi Asthana 1985, Pierre Cauvin 2000, and Danny Youkana 1997).

DECONSTRUCTING “MATRIARCHAL MYTH”

The outlines of the book’s critique will be familiar to any well-read person. Feminists have invented a “golden age,” a utopian narrative fantasizing a time when women were free. Eller calls it “a universalizing story: once things were good, everywhere; now they are bad”—an account based on dualistic thinking and “a reductive notion” of who women and men are.⁴⁸ Wait, which is the reductive idea: that women have always been subordinate, and men dominant; or that other models have existed in human society, and that even patriarchal societies show a significant range in the degree of male domination? The simplistic charge of fantasizing a “golden age” avoids having to look at evidence for a more complex picture.

Feminist historians are not the only targets of this characterization; it has also been leveled at *indigenista* accounts of European conquest and slavery, for looking back to a culture of reverence for Nature, in which the sacred permeates daily life. Eller makes this connection, comparing “fm’s” to people of color who embrace a positive vision of their “race.”⁴⁹ (Actually, the primary significance of “Blackness,” “Raza,” and “Indigeneity” is cultural and political rather than biological.) She finds these identifications “discomfiting” because race has been a tool used against people of color. The oversimplification does not serve her analysis well. Reasonable people will acknowledge that there is much more to the Afrocentric protest against erasure and distortion of African history than theories about “sun people” and “ice people.” The arguments are more usually based on culture and history, addressing the ideological underpinnings of racism.

The Myth seems to admonish that the issue of identity under oppression should not be engaged directly; to speak of groups with common history comes too close to essentialism. On those terms, it’s hard to see how to stop the dominant groups’ ideology from continuing to define reality. As Chris Brickell comments, “the term ‘essentialism’ has become something of an epithet,” and even a term of abuse.⁵⁰ Most often it is leveled at feminists, whose analysis of historical / situational patterns and behavioral conditioning is equated with biological determinism, no matter how often and explicitly we reject it.



Jamacoaque culture,
Ecuador, ca 600 CE

To hear Eller tell it, matriarchal historians have fixed on a theory that women’s original power was based on male ignorance of conception, and its overthrow followed men’s discovery that they had a part in generation. This claim has been made, but it’s very much a minority viewpoint. The rest overwhelmingly reject the assumption that archaic peoples were ignorant of the basics of reproduction. The sparse citations that Eller supplies do not come close to proving her contention that this explanation for patriarchal revolution “reigns supreme” over all others.⁵¹ (A rich irony here is that Bronislaw Malinowski, whose functionalist interpretation of patriarchal takeover myths Eller espouses, himself interpreted the cultural unimportance of paternity among Trobriand Islanders as ignorance of how children were conceived.)⁵²

Eller believes that “virtually all feminist reconstructions of matriarchal society” focus on childbirth. She finds it significant that many childless women celebrate birth or, failing that, menstruation, as a central mystery of matrix cultures.⁵³ However, the feminist resacralization of the body was driven by more than a reaction to current politics. The rediscovery of ancient art and surviving traditions celebrating women’s embodied power played a crucial part. For Eller, this approach is a centerpiece of “essentialism.”⁵⁴ Apparently there is to be no

reclaiming of female experiences which have been so deeply marked by patriarchal definition and control. Eller concedes that it's reasonable to rehabilitate degraded categories which have been defined as feminine, but objects to continuing to define them as female. In the brave new world of post-modernist deconstruction, heaps of cultural baggage calling the female "bad" and "inferior" can be disposed of at will. But the positive images associated with "woman" must also be stripped away, in hopes that doing this will somehow make oppressive realities disappear. (It's hard to imagine the world's women going along with this prescription.) Women looking for positive female images in history are just deluding themselves: "inventing" a past.



Samarra, Iraq

Eller throws out charges of "biological determinism," then backs away, qualifies them, and reasserts them again as fact. At one point she says "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." But on the next page, she asserts that even though feminist theory is reacting against the idea of biological causes for patriarchy, "yet its basic approach is to accept these biologically determined sex differences" in the guise of "timeless" femininity. Some pages down the line, she tries to square the circle: "Despite their claims of biological determinism and robust sex difference, feminist matriarchalists recognize the cultural determinants of gender."⁵⁵

No perspective on historical patterns enters into this muddled and distorted picture. The majority of matrix theorists say that patriarchy emerged out of historical processes, not biological necessity. Turning this problem around the other way, is declaring patriarchy a historical universal itself not a kind of biological determinism? To insist, amidst all the luxuriant variation in human culture, that egalitarian societies never emerged, seems to be equivalent to positing male domination as an inherent trait.

AMONG THE ANTHROS

Although the book is titled *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, its true subject is anthropological theory. Having rebuked matristic historians for using ethnographic data to buttress their case, Eller proceeds to do just that. She writes that "it makes good sense" for anthropologists to use ethnography to speculate about prehistory. For her the salient point is that "Ethnographic analogies to contemporary groups with lifeways similar to those of prehistoric times ... show little sex egalitarianism and no matriarchy." A further disproof is "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."⁵⁶

Eller's covert assumption appears to be that modern foragers or horticulturalists can be taken as representative of some primeval order. This kind of theoretical leap has been rejected by American Indian critics, among others, as giving off more than a whiff of the racist evolutionary ideas that modern anthropologists find so embarrassing. Because the foraging peoples' technology / economy has not changed dramatically does not mean that their social organization remained static over the millennia. They live within history, like the rest of humanity.

Given the paucity of material evidence, how would we know if these peoples' social structure had changed? The primary source would be their own oral histories. But these have been available mainly through anthropological mediators, due to the way information is organized in "Western" institutions. They are presented as ethnography, not as history. There has been a strong tendency to analyze the oral histories as mechanisms of societal function, rather than on their own terms. In recent decades, this type of analysis has come under heavy fire in anthropology itself.

But it is this functionalist approach that Eller takes as she turns to the widespread legends that female power was overthrown by men who took over the primary rituals, lodges, and sacred objects. Such traditions have been recorded among Australian and Melanesian peoples, the Dogon and Mende in west Africa and the Kikuyu in the east, peoples of the northern Amazon and Tierra del Fuego, among many others. (The literature on legends of masculine overthrow of female power is vast, but examples include Deborah Gewertz, 1988, which gives many examples from Melanesia; Griault, 1974, for the Dogon; Yolanda and Robert Murphy, 1974, for Brazil; and Berndt and Berndt, 1952, for Australia.) Eller upholds Malinowski's functionalist thesis of "charter myths," which interprets these legends as a

means of maintaining male dominance and defining morality.⁵⁷

But that would be no less true if these traditions do contain a memory of actual shifts in social organization. In fact, they would be more necessary. If male dominance is universal and existed from the beginning, what need is there to justify it in “charter myths” and the rituals that enact it? Eller’s suggestion that they relieve social tensions falls flat. If anything, they emphasize them. Reenactment of the takeover story involves an element of enforcement, shown by her example of men disguised as demons terrorizing nonconformist women by tearing through their property and even beating or stabbing them. Eller thinks these myths function to reconcile women to their status through a fantasy of former power, but the threat of violence and the display of male authority seem much more convincing reasons.⁵⁸

Eller fails to consider a possible relationship between these legends of male seizure of ritual power and the widespread ceremonies in which men imitate birth and menstruation, or wear fake breasts and other female regalia. She also disregards historical patterns of men taking over spheres originally presided over by priestesses. Some will argue that references to Apollo’s priests taking control of the female oracles in Greece and Anatolia are more mythical than historical. Yet the written record does reflect an escalating encroachment of male priests on female turf even in later periods. For example, a Greek inscription of the 4th century BCE shows the high priestess of Eleusis fighting in court to stop the male priest from usurping her traditional privileges.⁵⁹ We can also roughly track the elimination of priestesses from public authority in Mesopotamia, China, and Europe.

Nor are such accounts limited to ritual offices. Columbia River legends of Tsagaglalal speak of a time when female chieftainship ended. The Aztecs told of a challenge thrown out to the male chiefs by the female warrior Quilaztli.⁶⁰ Historical documentation proves that such female leaders existed in many American Indian societies.⁶¹ In Angola, the BaChokwe say that the female ruler Ruwej was overthrown by her brothers. (Another version says that Ruwej married a BaLuba chief who took over her political functions and imposed patrilineal descent.) To preserve their matrilineal ways, BaChokwe oral history says that they split off from the BaLunda and migrated south to Angola. Among the BaLunda themselves, the name Ruwej remained as one of the titles of female officers in court councils. The names of other court offices—Mwad Mwish, “First Female Pillar,” and Mwad Chilab, “First Courageous Woman”—indicate that they originally belonged to women.⁶² The Aztec high office of Cihuacoatl (“Serpent Woman”), occupied by men at the time of the Spanish conquest, carries similar implications.

The Myth insists that all known human societies have valued men over women, and points to anthropological studies which say that matrilineages are just as male-dominated as patrilineal societies. (Some are male-dominated, though not to the same degree, but it’s the others we are concerned with here.) Sherry Ortner is cited for her claim that lower female status is “one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.” If so, Ortner’s highly theoretical paper does not demonstrate it; she assumes it as a given, offering only two shallow paragraphs on the Chinese and the Crow (Absaroke) as examples.⁶³ She has since changed her position on that.⁶⁴

Anthropologist Barbara Joans has observed that the subject of “matriarchy” was long considered “a closed chapter” in her field, until feminists like Sally Slocum (author of “Woman the Gatherer”) opened it up. Joans thinks it likely that “some matriarchal systems” have existed. She points to the few known examples of polyandrous societies: “Had not several of them survived into the 20th century we would probably be arguing the improbability of their existence.” It would have been declared a myth “because it contradicts so much current anthropological data.” (And ideology.)⁶⁵

Eller has a basis for saying that matrilineage alone does not guarantee an absence of patriarchal customs. The problem with her analysis is that it’s based on an either-or proposition, with no perspective on historical shifts to patrilineage and patriarchal law. For example, Elamite inscriptions show matrilineal descent was once observed in western Iran, as it also was in ancient Korea, or according to Greek writers, in parts of western Asia Minor. These matrilineages have all been supplanted by patrilineal systems, in a common, recurring pattern. The oldest recorded epic of West Africa, Duga, proclaims: “Descendance from the woman, descendance from the woman has ended...” But there seem



Ancestral Mother roof-crest, BaPende, Congo

to be few examples of patrilineal systems shifting to matrilineal reckoning; the traffic is in the other direction. In the early '60s, Kathleen Gough documented signs of shifts away from matrilineal descent reckoning under heavy colonial pressure.⁶⁶ Today indigenous matrilineages face even more intense pressures as they battle for survival on all fronts.

What is completely missing from Eller's book is any discussion of matrilineal/local societies with high female status, such as the Khasi (NE India), Haudenosaunee (New York/Ontario), Mosuo (SW China), Tuareg (Sahara), Keres (New Mexico), Minangkabau (Sumatra), Amahuaca (E Peru), Seri (NW Mexico), Vanatinai (Pacifica). Nor are bilateral societies with significant female spheres of power discussed. Also missing is any historical perspective—whether written, oral or archaeological—on female spheres of power in the Two Thirds World. *The Myth* considers Indigenous women only through the lens of Western ethnography—and misses much of what even that has to tell us.



Mosuo matrilines are headed by female elders. Yunnan, SW China

WHERE'S THE HISTORY?

Although evidence from prehistoric times is “comparatively sparse,” we are told that “matriarchal myth fails completely on historical grounds.”⁶⁷ But this book does not provide them, offering little history and much theory. Citing the early deaths of women at Çatal Höyük (average age in the 20s) and high infant mortality, Eller concludes the situation was unlikely to cause reverence for miraculous pregnancy and birth as “the gifts of a munificent goddess.”⁶⁸ (On that analogy, world suffering precludes beneficent deities in *any* religion.) It would be just as easy to conclude that the danger of childbearing intensified the impulse to appeal to its goddess for protection, and might even have given it the charge of a shamanistic passage.

Eller rejects the idea that women's burial under the central platforms carries any implications of high status. After all, the men might still have owned the platforms and “buried their wives and children under them” out of affection—or to underscore their ownership of them as property!⁶⁹ The unlikeliness of these interpretations is pointed up by the fact that the men are buried on the peripheries. If they had been found buried in the shrine centers, archaeologists would have held that up as a predictable confirmation of their importance and authority.

The statement that “most remains are not detectably gendered”⁷⁰ may or may not be true. The problem is that until recently archaeologists paid scant attention to evidence about gender. They made assumptions about the kind of grave goods that should go with males or females, sexing burials by grave goods rather than by skeleton analysis. Often, even usually, they failed to record relevant data. (I'm reminded of how medical researchers—in another male-dominated field—took men as the norm and extrapolated about women's health from that, drawing invalid conclusions from their assumption.) Eller concedes that archaeologists “typically rely on ethnographic analogies”⁷¹ to interpret human remains. The question is: which cultures are to be used for comparison?

The book's skeptical stance fades as Eller turns to the “third gender” option now in fashion. Not only is the evidence for female power problematic, but “we cannot assume that a female skeleton is a woman.” She may have been biologically male but socially female, or vice versa. But if it is difficult to prove female authority from prehistoric remains, it is an even more daunting task to prove “that gender was a pronounced category in prehistory and that it was characterized by ‘variability, permeability, changeability, and ambiguity.’”⁷² Maybe so, but here the stern demand for evidence is suddenly missing in action.

Eller writes that theories for the cause of patriarchy “tend to find fault with men,” who are described as awful and wicked. But then she says that “narrators of the myth are generally reluctant to blame men...”⁷³ So which is it? Eller alludes briefly to theories that the advent of plow agriculture or animal husbandry had something to do with the development of male domination, and that is a valid observation. But her discussion of the rise of patriarchy centers on theories of sudden patriarchal invasions. Of course, patriarchy by conquest is only one model. Others have described a gradual change in which male dominance builds up within a society over time, but Eller has little to say about these. The case Gerda Lerner made in *The Creation of Patriarchy* is barely mentioned. Nothing in *The Myth* hints at the extensive discussion of historical indicators of this shift in the last thirty years.

Eller's summary of the kurgan invasions narrative is miles removed from Gimbutas' detailed analysis. She asks where the invaders came from and, sarcastically: "How did they carry out their nefarious mission?"⁷⁴ Stooping to conspiracy theory, she proposes that questions of historical evidence aside, "fm's" picked the Ukrainian steppe because it's large, within striking distance of Europe and "the Near East," and with a poorly documented prehistory. Best of all is its sparse modern population "since no one wants to come from the place where patriarchy began..."⁷⁵ Whew. (In the footnotes, we learn that Cold War demonization of the Russkies was also at work.) The documentation Gimbutas assembled is nowhere in sight. Neither is the fact that she did not set out to found a feminist school (indeed, she initially did not even see herself as a feminist) but came to her conclusions based on her work in eastern European archaeology — including the neolithic Tripilyle culture of Ukraine.

Eller is critical of the assertion that early neolithic sites were peaceful, but her discussion of weapons and fortifications is extremely thin. She cites the presence of maces, but without comparative data, or names of sites other than Catal Huyuk. Her discussion of the Aegean is particularly disappointing. We're offered one scholar's speculation that Crete may have been "warlike," but his evidence has disappeared— since all the alleged battles took place at sea!⁷⁶ Surprisingly, Eller claims that "fm's" minimize the intensely patriarchal character of ancient Greece. However, her own account blurs the distinctions between Cretan, Mycenaean, Homeric and classical Greek societies.⁷⁷

There is, however, plenty of room for Eller's criticism of a chronic overemphasis on Europe and West Asia.⁷⁸ She is unjustified however in implying that this is true of all "fm's," or that the problem is unique to feminists—who have also

challenged it. The fixation on the so-called "West" comes from the dominant Euro/American culture which continually broadcasts its own myths in education, the arts and all media. Intellectual culture is awash in this bias: the books published and the influential review magazines, the over-representation of European subjects in the canon, and prestigious web sites which equate "antiquity" or "the ancient world" with the Mediterranean and southwest Asia.



Marajó, Brazil

There is no question that the nature of available sources, especially those that openly address women's status, has shaped the content of much feminist analysis. Some have readily accepted these structural blinders, and ended up reproducing the stereotypical spotlight on the Mediterranean. Eisler acknowledges the problem of limited focus in *The Chalice and the Blade*, but does not go beyond recommending that further study is needed in other world regions.

(However, she did inspire Chinese scholars to take her up on it.) In turn, Eisler's book became a primary source for many women who had no other historical background. They elevated her examples of Çatal Höyük, Malta and Crete as the primary models of prehistoric female power. Thus it's common to hear women extrapolating from European and west Asian chronology to make declarations about "when patriarchy started." But there is no one chronology, as some of us have been saying for decades, and a wide variation in degrees of patriarchy. Sumatra and Niger and Ontario and Venezuela have their own constellations of social custom and historical change.

A similar pattern has occurred in response to the work of Marija Gimbutas, creating the impression that once again, it's all about Europe. But to stop there is to give a very incomplete picture of the range of feminist research going on. There is an explosion of investigation into these questions globally. My own work in the Suppressed Histories Archives has involved 35 years of research [as of 2000] on women in the archaeology, history and oral traditions of Africa, the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the islands. There are many others, more than those named earlier in this article.

Amidst all the talk of bad scholarship, I was surprised to see no examples of my pet peeve: writers who make uninformed speculations about the derivation and relationships of ancient names. I've seen some pretty strange linguistic comparisons over the years, especially in some of the older feminist books: attributing "Abraham" and "Brahma" to a common origin, for example, or saying that "Kali" and "Cailleach" are the same name, or even that "Cailleach" derives from "Kali."⁷⁹ (Cailleach comes from the same root as the Latin *pallium*: a word meaning "covering, mantle." Kali is from an Indic root meaning "black." Irish and Indic are distantly related, but the two names have different meanings and etymologies—even though both refer to unfettered goddesses of the people.)

Some writers have been careless or indifferent to historical and linguistic evidence, which adds fuel to accusations that all feminist history is spurious. However, those inaccuracies should not be used to automatically discredit all

feminist researchers of these issues. The fact that such smears are so easily believed is just as problematic. All scholarship should be taken on its own merits, without ideological bans on feminist investigations.

ARGUING ABOUT THE GODDESS

Eller claims that “feminist matriarchalists almost always posit a form of goddess monotheism for prehistory...”⁸⁰ She does not seem to have a clue to how controversial this idea has been in Goddess circles. Already in the ‘70s, pagan feminists objected to anything that smacked of a monotheist Big Daddy in the Sky. More recently, Asphodel Long wrote, “for Goddess people generally the term ‘the Goddess’ describes all aspects of female divinity, goddesses singular and plural: academic determination to impose a monotheism on us is misplaced and counterproductive.” Daniel Cohen remarks that archaeologists “perceive ‘the goddess’ and ‘goddesses’ as being opposing notions,” but he points out that pagans use them interchangeably, “with the same person referring to ‘the goddess’ in one sentence and ‘goddesses’ in the next.”⁸¹

Eller uses the problematic claim of goddess monotheism to sidestep the prehistoric preponderance of female iconography. She acknowledges “a huge number of anthropomorphic figurines, many of them clearly female.”⁸² But it is not “many,” it is “most.” These overwhelmingly female statuettes are found on a global scale, from Ecuador and Colombia to Ohio and Utah and Alaska, from Chad and Egypt to Kazakhstan and the Punjab and Japan. Their femaleness has not been controversial (at least until recently) even if historians have usually ignored them.

However, Eller contends that only 50% of the ancient Balkan figurines that Gimbutas studied are indisputably female. If all the rest are assumed to be male, she says, then the gender breakdown would be 50-50. An illustration shows one of these “sexless” images: a statuette from Vinca in the stance of the obviously female figurines: hands on belly, feet together. Its rounded hips are wider than the shoulders, the body violin-shaped, but Eller thinks it may be male since it is breastless.⁸³ Her interpretation is hardly compelling, but even if we were to concede that such images were male, how many male-dominated societies do we know of that make nude figures of masculine gods, lords, warriors, or fathers—sans penis?



Mal'ta, Siberia

Conversely, Eller believes the female images are the neolithic equivalent of porn: after all, “how do we know” they are not? To make her case, she uses drawings by Hubert Pepper comparing paleolithic art and modern pornography. He pictures an archaic sculpture from the rear, with its buttocks turned up, in order to compare it with a doggy-style photo. A butt is a butt, but the figurine is not on its hands and knees, nor does the reclining female relief in the second example resemble the splayed modern photo. None of the ancient figures display the simpering coyness of Playboy pinups. Anyway, people do not bury their dead with porn. Female nakedness does not equate to pornography, and the old sexist assumption that a vulva signifies a sex object while a phallus indicates power should be tossed out.

Eller proffers other possible interpretations of the figurines: they may have been used in curative rites and then disposed of, since some were found in garbage middens. (Possibly: but did men not get sick also, or do the figurines then represent healing goddesses or ancestral mothers?) The sacral context of many finds hardly comes into consideration, although Eller concedes that the figurines had “protective or magical functions in some cultures.” She runs through other theories that they were dolls, toys, or were used to teach boys.⁸⁴ (Why not girls?) None of this explains how they ended up in so many burials, or why they were buried under thresholds, or in temples from Malta to Niuheliang to the North and South American mounds.

We learn that feminist researchers are prone to see vulvas everywhere (though a male archaeologist also comes under fire for interpreting signs in cave art as vulvas). The symbols in Figure 7.3 “said to be vulvae” seem to fit the bill quite well, and so do those on the phallic baton in Figure 7.9. The author expects “fm’s” to object to interpreting a multi-valent Cypriot seated-woman/phallus/vulva sculpture as a dildo.⁸⁵ Yet for decades now, feminists have speculated that phallic-headed female figurines were ritually used to stretch hymens open in womanhood initiations.

Eller thinks that most of the images regarded as female, including the famous plaster reliefs at Catal Huyuk, “are not



Hagar Qim, Malta

definitely or even probably female.” Her short discussion of Malta states that evidence for widespread goddess worship “is practically nonexistent.”⁸⁶ Why? Because certain archaeologists have declared the larger statues to be of uncertain sex, or even “eunuchs.” (One man has likened them to Sumo wrestlers.) Common sense should apply here: the sculptures have huge hips, round feminine arms, and tiny hands. There is no penis. The breasts are small, but similar proportions are found, with the same ridge of belly fat, on manifestly female figurines from Sardinia and, from an earlier period, at Sesklo in north Greece and at Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria.⁸⁷ A smaller Maltese sculpture from



Sesklo, Greece

Gozo shows a pair of seated women, identical in shape, holding children in their laps. No masculine statues with these voluptuous

proportions have been found anywhere. Nor is there any evidence for eunuchs before the bronze age.

Eller also discounts the idea that the Maltese temples are shaped in the form of a goddess. She admits that their outlines resemble the amply proportioned sculptures.⁸⁸ But she notes two exceptions at Hagar Qim and Tarxien that depart from the shape of the earlier temples at Ggantija, Mnajdra and Gozo, with extra chambers added on. However, both date from the later phase of temple-building. Tarxien also has earlier temples of the classic fat-woman shape.

Although I usually disagreed with Eller on issues of interpretation, some of her points are well taken. For example, she criticizes a woman who called some four-fold cross-like symbols “moon signs.” I couldn’t see any basis for the claim myself. The same symbols have elsewhere been interpreted as “sun signs”; who’s to say? I think Eller is right that the paleolithic “Venuses” are not pregnant, but that’s hardly startling: everyone I know thinks they are simply fat. I don’t find Gimbutas’ interpretation of the “egg-shaped buttocks” convincing (but not ridiculous either). What strikes me most about these clay sculptures is their resemblance to Nile Valley contemporaries, as well as Saharan and South African rock art.

Eller observes that the Greeks did not regard their various goddesses as “aspects of a unitary goddess.”⁸⁹ That’s true for classical Greece, but a case can be made for a syncretic Mediterranean goddess in late antiquity. An aretalogy of Isis identifies her with Artemis and various west Asian goddesses such as Astarte (Palestine) and Nanaia (Iraq).⁹⁰ The famous invocation by Apuleius is one of several Roman-era litanies treating major national goddesses as manifestations of one Great Goddess: “My name, my divinity, is adored throughout all the world, in different ways, in variable customs and in many names, for the Phrygians call me the Mother of the Gods; the Athenians, Minerva; the Cypriots, Venus; the Candians, Diana...” and so on at length, culminating with the Egyptian veneration of Isis.⁹¹ The overlap in these litanies is matched by the iconographic exchange of symbols and attributes of Isis, Fortuna, Terra Mater, Tyche, and various Celtic and west Asian deities across the Roman empire, and further afield into Iran and Afghanistan.



Isis, Alexandria

Another example of a “unified” goddess is found in the Shakta (Goddess-oriented) stream of Hindu religion. Devī (Goddess) is worshipped under a myriad of names and forms. Many Indian scholars think her origins are very ancient.⁹² Numerous litanies of the Thousand Names of Devī are still being chanted today, the most famous being the *Srī Lalitambikā Sahasranama*. They approach all the classic Indian goddesses as aspects of Devī. One of her names is Ekākīnī, “[She Who Is] the One, the Only.” Litanies of the ancient Kemetic goddess Neit include the same title. Neit is also called Mother of the Gods, a concept found in a great many other cultures, including the Phrygian, Ugaritic, Aztec, and Calinya Caribs. While not “monotheistic” or exclusive of male gods, these traditions clearly do envision a Great Goddess.

Naturally, Eller counters the assertion that goddess veneration proves high female status by bringing up goddesses who are violent or support patriarchal custom.⁹³ They exist, and her example of Anat wading in the blood of battle is to the point (although I’m curious what she’d say about Anat bearding her father El, king of the gods, and coercing him to do her will). Eller’s observation that “Goddess worship has been reported for societies rife with misogyny” is also true. She points to low female status in Hindu, Buddhist and Catholic societies (not officially goddesses in the

latter case). Clearly, goddess worship alone can not be used as a measure of women's social power. But is it meaningless as an indicator? All Eller's examples come from post-imperial societies, which combined many strands of Indigenous traditions with the religion of ruling elites and their priesthoods. The ancient goddesses persisted in the ancient empires like Babylon and Rome, and much ink has been spilled about the pronounced gap in values between folk religion and state theology.

Western feminist analysis turned to goddesses partly because they are so strongly anathematized in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures. In the Christian world, their erasure was linked to suppression of priestesses, both pagan and Christian (the female prophets of the Montanists, for example). In Judaic scripture, their worship was condemned as "whoring after false gods," with a recurring metaphor of Zion as an adulterous wife punished by a wrathful god-husband. (See for example chapters 16 and 20-23 of Ezekiel, and the entire Book of Hosea.) Islam's triumph resulted in outlawing of the old Arabian deities, among whom a trilogy of goddesses was prominent: "instead of him, they worship only females."⁹⁴ The idea that patriarchal religion is pervaded by sexual politics is inescapable.

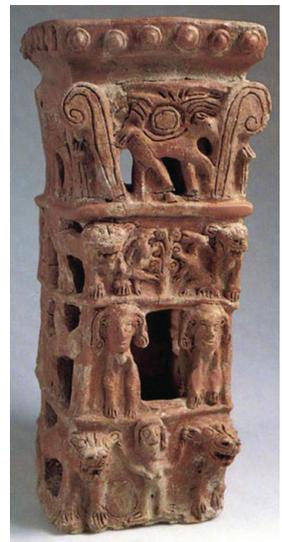
An extremely strong case for religious pluralism in ancient Judah and Israel has been built in the past thirty years. In *The Hebrew Goddess*, Raphael Patai marshalled much evidence from the Bible itself to show that ancient Jews worshipped the goddess Asherah, and that her image stood in the Temple itself for two-thirds of its existence. Archaeologists have turned up female figurines in great numbers, but Eller scoffs at discussions of Hebrew goddess figurines, because "we know that the religion of that place and era was adamantly monotheistic."⁹⁵ This assumption is seriously outdated. (Unsurprisingly, the sole footnoted source for it is Tikvah Frymer-Kensky,⁹⁶ who has been fighting a rearguard action against the idea that Asherah was a goddess.) The weight of scholarly opinion has shifted as more information emerged—not least the Asherah inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, and quite a bit of archaeology such as the altar-stand of Ta'anach—indicating greater religious diversity than conventional Biblical scholarship was prepared to concede until quite recently.⁹⁷

Eller is correct that some feminists (most notoriously Elizabeth Gould Davis) advanced a thesis that the Hebrews were patriarchal invaders and destroyers of goddess religion. Many expressions of this theory unconsciously incorporated anti-Semitic tropes of the old Christian blood libel, replacing the old charge of "Christ-killers" with some version of "Jews destroyed the Goddess." But these ideas have been roundly attacked and not the all-pervading theme the book implies. (The only reference to feminist opposition to them, all too brief, is buried in the footnotes.)⁹⁸ Jewish women such as Phyllis Chesler, Naomi Goldenberg, and Starhawk are left out of the picture, though Eller elsewhere describes them as supporters of the the "myth." Starhawk (Miriam Simos) has pushed back against accusations by Judith Antonelli and others that the Goddess movement was inherently anti-Semitic.

The story is complicated, because feminists did not make up the Hebrew invasion narrative, or the accounts of prophets smashing idols. Like many others, they took the Biblical accounts at face value as history, looking at the Book of Joshua's description of a conquest with genocidal destructions of Canaanite towns and later accounts of kings ordering the smashing of religious sanctuaries and images. (See Deut. 2:34; 20:16-17; Num. 31:15-18, and much of Chronicles and Kings.) In recent decades, archaeology has contradicted the Bible, showing Hebrews gradually assimilating to their Canaanite relatives. Some excavators have even stated that it's difficult to tell the two cultures apart. It is also clear that the Hebrew states were never a great regional power.⁹⁹

POMO PRESCRIPTIONS

Eller sees "fm's" as reinforcing patriarchal gendering by insisting on the classic feminine traits. On the other hand, she doesn't seem to entertain any possibility of redefining "female" in a positive, flexible and diverse way. For her it represents—can only represent—a negative, constrictive category imposed by a patriarchal system. In support of this, she uses a great quote from the 19th-century British feminist Millicent Fawcett: "We talk about 'women' and 'women's suffrage,' we do not talk about Woman with a capital W. That we leave to our enemies."¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, many estimable feminist activists such as Matilda Joslyn Gage used this syntax to articulate very radical ideas.



Altar stand, Ta'anach, ca. 900 bce

It seems tautological to say that “both the category of feminism and its context are to a large degree determined by prior discrimination against the very people who are forced to occupy that category.”¹⁰¹ Why else would a women’s rights movement come into existence at all? Eller’s formulation seems to deny any voice, creative shaping or subversion of ordained identity to the women themselves. Her solution to the problem is simple: vacate the category of women, as meaningless, illusory, and confining.

In post-structuralist mode, Eller proclaims that it is pointless to look for commonalities, since there are none: “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.”¹⁰² (Are all identities as meaningless as this? Do we really have to talk about “all women” as opposed to patterns affecting vast numbers of women? And do words really trump socio-political realities?) Eller skims over the theory of gender performativity without addressing — except for a mention of pink and blue blankets—the heavy social / cultural / economic enforcement that underlies these “performances,” or the retaliation and repression dealt out for disapproved and nonconforming behaviors.¹⁰³ As Stevie Jackson has pointed out, “Regarding meaning as entirely fluid can mean denying even the starkest of material realities.”¹⁰⁴

And, because it recognizes no group interests, a post-structuralist worldview also entails abandoning solidarity and collective action. The program seems to be: Make gender disappear, as in no previous human society. But what about the structural realities of patriarchy—physical and sexual abuse, low female status combined with heavy caregiver responsibilities, economic insecurity, legal inconsequence, and women’s reactions to violent and degrading treatment: can all that be made to vanish by declaring gender irrelevant? Quoting Vicki Noble’s remark that “We have to create the feminine,” Eller asks, “Why can’t we just ignore it and see if it goes away?”¹⁰⁵ (She must not have been to a toy store lately.) The naiveté of this strangely passive approach is staggering.

Eller proposes the Sisyphean project of overcoming a pan-historic male domination of women through... moral choice. She doesn’t address the problem of whether the will to achieve this exists on a society-wide basis, amidst the anti-feminist backlash against women’s recent gains. But even if this goal is unreachable, we can still try really hard, hoping for a better future in spite of a bleak past. And “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.”¹⁰⁶

Hmmm. What conditions might these be? This is the first mention of male dominance having to be created, it having existed since the dawn of time and all. Now Eller points to Richard Leakey’s argument that the hunting and gathering division of labor is the culprit in women’s oppression. She hopes that “the farther we grow from those roots, the less we need to be affected by social roles that made sense only in the past.” This assumes that they ever made sense—that they were not based on sheer coercion of women, children, and non-dominant males, a maladaptive historical shift.¹⁰⁷

But if patriarchy originated in foraging societies, why do so many of them—the Agta, Mbuti, Semang—display relatively egalitarian social relations? And why is it that the most patriarchal systems are found in the highly organized feudal, imperial and capitalist societies? Many anthropologists have proposed the reverse of Leakey’s thesis: that gender parity in foraging societies gave way to patriarchy within the settled agrarian societies. None of this has been settled.



Agta huntress, Philippines

There’s another problem. Eller puts this era of leaving behind foraging lifeways (at least for “the West”) at some 10,000 years ago. It seems that this would be more than long enough to outgrow any functionality of old hunter-gatherer roles (were we prepared to concede it) which would then just “go away.” She tries to explain away the problem: “social systems can continue to thrive long after the conditions that formed them have become irrelevant.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed. This is what any number

of feminist thinkers have been saying about the persistence of goddess veneration in patriarchal societies, but Eller doesn’t apply the principle in that case.

Although Eller posits male domination throughout history, she hedges toward the end of her book with the question

“Why is it that *where gender hierarchy has developed*, women have always been the dominated gender?” (emphasis added)¹⁰⁹ So, is male domination universal or not? *The Myth* gives the impression that patriarchal social systems serve no interests, entail no power or benefits: “Male dominance may be perpetuated through inertia and have no better reason to exist than tradition.”¹¹⁰ Structural violence, enforcement and exploitation are not in the picture.

At the end of the book, Eller offers an unconvincing sop to the objects of her inquiry: “The care and imagination feminist matriarchalists have devoted to these ‘origins’ questions is in itself an impressive achievement.” There is cold comfort in this, as she immediately reverts to accusing “fm’s” of “sloppy or wishful thinking.” She must continue to protest against “the myth” even after it is “stripped of its pretensions to historical truth.”¹¹² Not only does Cynthia Eller consider the entire spectrum of matrix theories escapist and nostalgic for patriarchal archetypes, she thinks they are dangerous and ultimately serve the enemies of feminism.

The only problem is, those enemies just love her book. On the internet it is gleefully hailed by outright and covert anti-feminists alike. Lawrence Osborne trumpets on salon.com: “False Goddess: Despite what believers in prehistoric matriarchy proclaim, women never ruled the Earth.”¹¹³ Osborne gloats that Cynthia Eller is “unraveling the pretensions of matriarchalists” and “middlebrow feminists.” According to him, they are “sentimental, gawky,” and “woozy, sexist romantics,” whose “twaddle” is probably a “pathological reaction” to corporatist society. (In Osborne’s blinkered worldview, women’s oppression could not be considered a valid cause of anything.) The more cautious types on scholarly listservs won’t be caught using his extreme language, but some are still holding up this book as the definitive refutation of pesky “feminist ideologues” and goddess “fantasies.”



Machi (shaman) of the Mapuche, Chile

So *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* fails Eller’s own “enemies” test. But we don’t have to choose between the two extremes of pan-historic masculine domination or a utopian negation of violence and oppression. The differences between the Hopi and the Nazis do count. There’s a vast expanse of variation in human culture, with much more to be learned about the history of women’s power, oppression and resistance. However, theory needs to take a back seat to assembling a broader range of knowledge, one that accounts for female clan heads in Yunnan, women shamans in Chile and South Africa and Korea, Alaskan huntresses, Bulgarian midwives, and priestesses in Togo and Okinawa.

Richer and more nuanced scholarship is on the way. Some of the most exciting contributions, histories never published before, are coming from Indigenous perspectives and from the global South. The real task of synthesizing and analyzing information about women from archaeology, oral history, linguistics, and written records is just beginning.

This article was originally published by the Suppressed Histories Archives, www.suppressedhistories.net/eller.html and later appeared in Feminist Theology 13.2, Sheffield UK: Sage Publications, 2005, pp 185-216. I’ve made slight revisions in this 2016 version, but have not attempted to expand it, except by adding illustrations. More images of the female figurines can be found at www.suppressedhistories.net/femaleicons.html.

About the author:

Max Dashú founded the Suppressed Histories Archives (1970) and presents visual talks on global women’s history. Her research is done from an international and interdisciplinary perspective, foregrounding women and Indigenous peoples passed over in “classic” history. She has built an archive of over 15,000 slides and some 20,000 digital images, and 130 presentations (see www.suppressedhistories.net). Over the past 47 years, Dashu has presented hundreds of slide talks at universities, community centers, bookstores, schools, museums, galleries, prisons, and conferences, including Northwestern, Stanford, UC-Berkeley, and Princeton University. She has published two videos, *Women’s Power in Global Perspective* (2008) and *Woman Shaman: the Ancients* (2013) as well as a book, *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion* (2016).

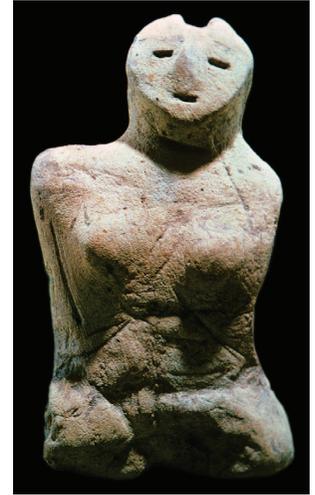
Notes:

1. Many feminist scholars, including this writer and Marija Gimbutas, found the term's connotations of a mirror-image of patriarchy obstructed the ability to communicate the fact that we are talking about an entirely different paradigm. Gerda Lerner repudiated it even though her work shows the development of patriarchy as a historical process.
2. Gimbutas, 1991
3. Gunn Allen, 1986
4. Eisler, 1987
5. From "Matrilineal Kinship to Matriculture: Establishing a Canadian Agenda," University of Ottawa, April 25-28, 2017 <https://arts.uottawa.ca/canada/en/news/matrilineal-kinship-matriculture-establishing-canadian-agenda>
6. Eller, 11, 81
7. Eller, 12. This is less the case now than at the writing of this review 16 years ago, mainly due to the redefinition of matriarchy by Sanday and Göttner-Abendroth. Many Indigenous women and men have embraced the term.
8. Eller, 12
9. See Göttner-Abendroth, 2012
10. See Sanday, 2002
11. Rila, Bulgaria, June 2004
Godwin, Joscelyn, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981
12. Sanday, 2002: 237; Göttner-Abendroth, keynote presentation at World Congress on Matriarchy, Luxembourg, Sept 5-7, 2003. See Göttner-Abendroth (2012) for a full discussion of her definition.
13. Eller, 3-4
14. Eller, 28
15. Eller, 3-4
16. Eller, 6, 81, 13-14
17. Sanday, 2002
18. Eller, 8
19. Eller, 8
20. *Jesuit Relations*, I, 66-67, in Judith Brown, 1975, 238
21. See Roesch Wagner's *Sisters In Spirit: Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Influence on Early American Feminists*, 2001
22. New York: Peter Lang, 2000
23. Gunn Allen, 1986, 211, 220
24. Eller, 32
25. Griffin, 2000
26. See Joan Marler's defense (1999) of Gimbutas' contributions and historical narrative. Also Charlene Spretnak, 2011
27. Eller, 38
28. Eller, 95
29. Eller, 166
- 29a. Eller, 165
30. Mallory, 185
31. Mallory, 182-183
32. Mallory, 184
33. Mallory, 239, 251
34. in Marler 1997: 76
35. Eller, 179
36. Eller, 79
37. Eller, 115
38. Hayden, Brian, 1986
39. Mohen, 1990
40. Osborne, 1997
41. in Marler, 1997: 43
42. Eller, 90
43. Hutton 1996: 94
44. History of Mankind, quoted in Eller, 34
45. Ben Tor, 1992
46. Osborne, 1997
47. See their article "Rethinking Figurines: A Critical View," in *Archaeology of Gimbutas, the 'Goddess' and Popular Culture*, 1999
48. Eller, 56
49. Eller, 76
50. Brickell, 1998
51. Eller, 45-46
52. See his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1950) pp 52-55, 71-2
53. Eller, 43
54. Eller, 64-74
55. Eller, 63, 72-4
56. Eller, 95, 180, 102
57. Eller, 176
58. Eller, 175-177
59. Zaidman, 1992, 372
60. See Nuttal, 1901
61. Gunn Allen, passim
62. Crine-Mavar, 1974
63. Ortner, 1974, 67-87
64. Sanday, personal communication, Sept. 2003
65. Joans, ca. 1978
66. Gough, 1962
67. Eller, 81
68. Eller, 99
69. Eller, 100
70. Eller, 87
71. Eller, 88
72. Eller, 89-90
73. Eller, 48
74. Eller, 49
75. Eller, 49
76. Eller, 114
77. Eller, 167-169
78. Eller, 40
79. These are a couple of many incorrect etymologies

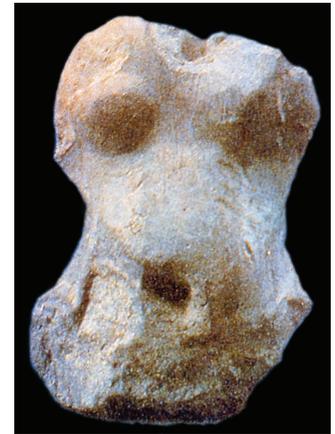
found in Barbara Walker's *A Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, 1983

80. Eller, 103
81. Long and Cohen, 1998
82. Eller, 124
83. Eller, 125-129
84. Eller, 139
85. Eller, 125, 130, 133
86. Eller, 149
87. See Gimbutas, 1991 and Youkana, 1997, for pictures
88. Eller, 149
89. Eller, 103
90. Godwin, 120-121
91. The Golden Ass, book XI
92. N. N. Bhattacharya, Pupul Jayakar, Adit Mookerjee, Shanti Lal Nagar, Devdutt Pattanaikm, to name a few.
93. Eller, 104
94. Quran, IV, 117. Some translations render the last word as "idols," apparently a highly gendered word in Arabic. Along the same lines, Sura LIII, 27: "Most surely they who do not believe in the hereafter name the angels with female names."
95. Eller, 141
96. See *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 1992
97. In the works of Ruth Hestrin, Asphodel Long, Joanna Stuckey, Tilde Binger, William Dever, Z'ev Herzog, Israel Finkelstein, Mark Smith, and Jenny Kien, among many others.
98. See Eller, 50, 201
99. Finkelstein and Silverman, 2001
100. Eller, 80
101. Eller, 76
102. Eller, 42
103. Eller, 79, 74
104. Jackson 1992: 92
105. Eller, 73-74
106. Eller, 186-187
107. Eller, 186
108. Eller, 186
109. Eller, 182
110. Eller, 187
111. Eller, 182-183
112. Eller, 183
113. Osborne, 2000

Poverty Point,
Louisiana



Walrus ivory,
Greenland



Hongshan culture,
northeast China



Paracas culture,
southern Peru

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