

Maternal Cosmotheism of “Old Europe”

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. As noted in the last lecture introducing the Neolithic Revolution, humanity shifted the locus of the sacred in the Neolithic from wild prey to fertility. Neolithic religion will also divinize many features of their surrounding environment, as well as local species that symbolically evoke herders and farmers’ relationship to and attunement with fertility. Such religion has traditionally been referred to as “polytheism” but more recently it has been argued that it is better framed as an immanent *cosmotheism*, where the divine is found in the lived world around them in contrast to the transcendent *monotheism* of later axial religion in which salvation *from* this world is sought in a transcendent spiritual reality beyond it and beyond this life, created and governed by a God worshipped as “wholly other.”
2. If what one holds sacred is what is most important, that upon which one is utterly dependent for a meaningful existence, it only makes sense that the locus of the sacred would shift from (1) prey for hunters, and bounty for gatherers to the (2) fertility of livestock and the soil for herders and farmers. So too it only makes sense that sacred time would be marked no longer by the (3) annual migration patterns of prey but by (4) the annual cycle of the seasons. Communal public rituals would likewise evolve from shamanic spirit possession to symbolic re-enactment of that cycle of the seasons, aligning it with cycles of fertility and of life for plants, animals and humans.
3. As we also saw in the previous video, living a sedentary domestic lifestyle, humans supplemented (1) public communal rituals, with domestic (2) family rituals within the home, around the hearth, to commemorate both those who have died in the family within living memory, the “living dead” as well as the ancestral long dead.
4. With writing yet to be invented, evidence for Neolithic cosmotheism comes from material archeological artifacts, especially clay figurines and artwork on sacred vessels. Many historians of religion supplement this archeological evidence through the historical retrieval of Neolithic vestiges within the religious myth and symbolism of scribal Bronze age religious literature. For as we shall argue when we turn to the study of scribal culture, literacy begins as merely a transcription of oral speech. Scribal myth and symbolism thus record oral traditions with roots reaching down into Neolithic religion. However, as

might be expected, such speculative reconstructions of Neolithic myth and symbolism are fraught with controversy.

5. To begin with there is a fundamental controversy over whether to even attempt such speculative reconstructions at all. (1) Many archeologists, for example, argue that reconstructions of Neolithic culture should be (2) restricted to social and economic life, considered to be less “speculative” than religious interpretations of the same evidence. However all agree that in oral culture generally there is no qualitative distinction between the sacred and profane. Rather all behavior is on a continuum of more or less. Even the most profane is still understood in relationship to the sacred. After all the very term “profane” literally means “before the temple.” What does not exist in the Neolithic is the “secular.” (3) Thus all ordinary life is to be understood as more or less religious, just as all religious life is “this-worldly,” personifying and deifying elements of the physical, natural and social world they inhabit. What is needed for the study of Neolithic religion then, is expertise in multiple academic disciplines: not only material field archeology but also (4) the anthropology of religion. These two in turn needs to be (5) informed by the study of ancient texts that may retain traces of Neolithic religious beliefs and practices as well as (6) inter-religious dialogue with contemporary religiosity still evolving from the Neolithic, such as traditional African religions, as we saw in the last lecture. Only through such interdisciplinary study can we hope to even partially understand the “lived religion” of our own Neolithic ancestors.
6. In the rest of this lecture I will be relying mainly on the work of one such archeologist and historian of religion, Marija Gimbutas. She devoted her life work to the Neolithic culture of the Aegean and the Balkans, where Neolithic farmers and herders first settled in their diffusion from Southern and Central Anatolia beginning around 7,000 BCE. She named this culture “Old Europe,” in that it was prior to the Aryan migrations from the Pontic steppes north of the Black Sea beginning around 3,000 BCE from which virtually all living Europeans descend. We will explore this second Aryan migration in the next video lecture
7. Gimbutas’ work is controversial. She freely uses her background in religious myth and symbolism to interpret the artifacts her archeological finds have unearthed. In her work, she argues for “an agrarian, largely peaceful and egalitarian maternal religion centered on

fertility and personified in “the Great Goddess.” She argued that this “matri-centric” religion and culture was later forcibly overthrown by the warrior-centered patriarchal religion of Aryan horsemen and herders. And she means “horse~~men~~” for DNA evidence has since confirmed that up to 80% of the Aryan migrants were male, whether herders or warriors, and mostly both, who would settle and marry local Old European females. This Aryan migration coincides with a dramatic depopulation of the eastern and central European lands they first entered. Is this evidence for Gimbutas’ argument for a violent invasion or is it evidence of the first plagues emptying “old Europe” opening it up for a more peaceful Aryan migration.

8. Part of the reason for the controversy surrounding Gimbutas’ reconstruction of a maternal-oriented religiosity in Old Europe was how it was taken up with enthusiasm, and with Gimbutas’ encouragement, by second-wave feminists. To the horror of archeologists who aspire to put their field on a scientific footing, feminists in the 80’s and 90’s used Gimbutas work to criticize “patriarchy” as a whole as the product of a violent invasion and overthrow of an original matriarchal egalitarian and peaceful culture centered around the “Great Goddess.” However the entanglement of Gimbutas’ reconstruction in contemporary gender politics does not mean it is wrong. After all, opposing, purely secular reconstructions of early Neolithic artifacts are equally “unscientific” speculations that also go “beyond the evidence.”
9. As we already saw in paleolithic religious art, caves and underground caverns will remain sacred in the Neolithic. But Gimbutas argues that their religious symbolism changes. While still illumined by flickering torchlight, rock paintings of prey give way to oracles beside subterranean springs, sometimes warm with high mineral content, giving off trance inducing odors such as at Delphi. She argues that rather than sites of initiation for the hunt, these caverns evoke the maternal womb. (1) Similarly, in the Neolithic southwest of the United States, there are pictographs of a man exiting the top of an underground maze from which he has been born. Labyrinth images, from Crete to Britain also date back to Neolithic.
10. In these caverns, female oracles and seers join male shamen. The practice of incubation, sleeping overnight in a temple with resultant dreams divined the next morning by a medium may also extend back to Neolithic times. Here is a religious ritual which is

personal and intimate, seeker and seer together exploring a spirit world later to be understood as one's "inner depths."

11. Goddess figures also undergo a dramatic change, from the corpulent woman of Çatal Höyük to (1) highly stylized, minimalist carvings, evocative less of childbirth than the divinization of an ideal fertility. Fertile young maidens and pregnant mothers are also supplemented by (2) stern matriarchs. They short protuberances for arms, small bumps for breasts, elongated pillar-like necks and bird beaks for noses.
12. The iconic pose of a seated mother with a child on her lap also dates back to this era. But here too, as remains true even in (1) many medieval Madonna and child statues, mom's eyes are not cast down lovingly at her child but staring straight ahead intimidating the viewer. These goddess figurines may still allure and comfort but they also evoke awe and judgment. They personify what Rudolf Otto identifies as the dual aspect of the numinous or holy: a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.
13. Gimbutas argues that there are three iconic great goddess personae: the young virgin of germinating new life in the spring, the bridal lover of summer fertility, and the imperious matriarch of fall aging and winter death who enforces social mores by holding her children to account. Her personae are symbolized by the phases of the moon, whose Goddess she is. The waxing moon signifies growth culminating in the full moon of maturity. The waning moon signifies aging culminating in the darkness of death...to be followed by the rebirth of the new moon.
14. Gimbutas also finds an array of water symbols associated with the goddess, evoking our watery origins—wavy lines, zigzags and whirls, stylized streams, nets, and labyrinths.
15. She identifies chevrons as vulva imagery, while lakes and springs, ground wells and rainfall also fall under the purview of the "Great Goddess."
16. Animal figurines and imagery are also feminine: snakes and frogs, with their moist and slimey skin; bears known for their fierce protection of their young; owls whose upright perch and wide eyed stare are reminiscent of the goddess figurines discussed earlier, their nighttime hoots and screeches evoking both fear and awe, and finally deer and elk not as prey but as symbols of fertility. Their regenerating antlers every spring evoke renewed life. Some of the symbolism survives into the Bronze Age as for example in the Greek goat god, Pan, the horned god of spring.

17. The Gorgon or Medusa's head evoke both fear and awe. She has large round eyes, with a lolling tongue exposed teeth or fangs, her hair, a nest of snakes. At the very sight of her male warriors turn to stone.
18. Gimbutas also argued that as in African Neolithic religion, masks were used in Neolithic ritual to bring the gods down to earth. Donning the mask, one became possessed by the god. Such masking carried over into classical times when Greek actors would wear masks in the tragedies and comedies performed as part of annual religious festivals.
19. Nature's fertility, as it unfolds over the cycle of the seasons, was ritually re-enacted in the mother-daughter pairing of Demeter and Persephone. In the Greek myth the young virgin Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, the God of the Underworld and made his Queen. Demeter, the mother goddess of grain and fertility wanders the earth searching for her lost daughter, neglecting her maternal nurturance of the natural world. Nature withers and begins to die as the goddess descends into the underworld to rescue her daughter. Her success heralds the return of Spring. Persephone, returning above ground, becomes a mother in her own right, adopting her mother Demeter's role, as the cycle repeats with her daughter, a new Persephone. The myth was ritually enacted every spring across the Greek world, but especially north of Athens at Eleusis. We shall return to this ritual when exploring the literate religion where the focus of the "Eleusian mysteries" shifts from the annual cycle of nature to the rejuvenation and immortality of the individual.
20. Now was the Neolithic centrality of the feminine mirrored in the social order? Was the Neolithic matriarchal? Gimbutas herself argues that village life remained largely egalitarian, but she did imagine a governing council of elder matriarchs rather than patriarchs and her later second wave feminist disciples advocated a fully matriarchal culture. In its favor, male herding and farming likely lacked the heroism and so status of the hunt. Hunting sharpens intelligence, while long days working the fields could dull the mind with its back breaking labor, and tending the herds could already be done by kids. But we do not find evidence of status inequality whether by household or by gender. The Neolithic remained largely egalitarian... and peaceful, incentivizing cooperation over competition.
21. Let me close this video lecture with Gimbutas' reconstruction of the Neolithic myth of creation. Reality begins as a cosmic egg. Its shell breaks in two to form the sky above and

the earth below. The yoke symbolizes the fertile earth, the fetus, of course, cosmic life. Finally, the clear albumen surrounding the yoke is the ocean circling the earth, also figured as the uroboros, a circling snake eating its own tail. As with other Neolithic symbolism, all evokes fertility of flora, fauna and humans, ever abundant and annually renewed.

22. As I mentioned at the outset, these original neolithic farmers of Old Europe would decline and be replaced in the third millennia by a new wave of migrants from the Pontic steppes just north of the Black Sea. These migrants were horse and cattle herders more than wheat and barley farmers. They would bring with them new disruptive technologies, especially the wheel and the smelting of bronze. In the next lecture we shall explore how these inventions catalyzed yet another revolution in our species' way of being in the world and with it the turn to a new sacred, from the fertility of nature to the sacred order of society and the political power necessary to create, enforce and extend it among a dramatically larger population of cooperators, and increasingly competitors, in the first urban cities, kingdoms and, ultimately, empires.
23. Traditionally, this second wave of migration into Europe has been referred to as the "Aryan invasion." However it is now thought that the first epidemics sweeping through Old Europe at around the same time may have emptied the landscape even prior to the arrival of the Aryans. (1) For one of the entanglements of domestication is precisely vulnerability to bacteria and viruses crossing over the species barrier from the livestock with whom Neolithic villagers lived. In fact there is evidence of the Black Plague bacillus among human remains from this period. During later outbreaks of the plague in the sixth and again in the fourteenth centuries, the mortality rate is estimated to have reached as high as 60%. The sixth century outbreak, the "Justinian Plague" coincided with the decline of the Eastern Roman and Persian empires and the rise of disease-free Arabic Islam; the fourteenth century outbreak, the "Black Death" coincides with the demise of feudalism and the reforestation of Europe. An outbreak of the plague in the Neolithic among a population with little history of disease, could well have been similarly demonic, wreaking apocalyptic devastation. The many villages burned to the ground and abandoned during this period may have been the work not of ruthless Aryan conquerors

but of local villagers themselves fleeing death from disease by scattering and burning their ancestral homes behind them in a desperate effort to combat the virus.

24. In the next video lecture we shall track a similar story of the rise and fall of the most sophisticated Neolithic culture to emerge, on the other side of the Middle East, in the Harrapan culture of the Indus Valley. As we discovered traces of Old Europe in classical mythology, so too we shall find traces of Harrapan religion in classical Hinduism. The sudden collapse of Harrapan culture had also been blamed traditionally on Aryan invaders, but here too, disease, together with climate change, are now considered more likely culprits.