

The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas. Grand theories at the outskirts of modernity

Marija Gimbutas: Transnational Biography, Feminist Reception, and the Controversy of Goddess Archaeology

Rasa Navickaitė
(Routledge:
London, 2022)
244 pages

Although Marija Gimbutas is a well-known figure in her native Lithuania, throughout my education in Latvia and Estonia I had never heard about her, until recently when her name came up in a book in which I had no expectations of finding references to the Baltic states and our cultural context. The book *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow is a fascinating exercise that challenges everything we seem to know about social progress. It discusses new archaeological evidence and questions the existing narratives about prehistory. Within this ambitious critique focusing on meta-narratives of Western political and social modernity, Marija Gimbutas, a Lithuanian archaeologist, suddenly appeared as a significant heroine. Yet her presence in the book makes perfect sense, as Rasa Navickaitė's new biography of Gimbutas illustrates in a much-needed and excellent account of the Lithuanian archaeologist and scholar.

MARIJA GIMBUTAS established herself as a widely respected scholar, studying the origins of Indo-European people in Eastern and Central Europe. It was a largely neglected topic in the 1950s, when she moved to the US as a refugee after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Drawing on her research in this field, Gimbutas elaborated a general theory about the migration pattern of the proto-Indo-Europeans to the European mainland – the “Kurgan hypothesis”. As the biography rightly emphasizes, both large-scale excavations and grand theory building were usually the domain of male archaeologists, but Gimbutas carried out and established her name in both. Despite being an outsider due to both her gender and cultural background, Gimbutas made her way into the inner circle of the discipline. And yet – the grand theories she continued to formulate in her life's work became uncomfortable to mainstream archaeology, effectively resulting in Gimbutas marginalization and even expulsion from the academic canon. Gimbutas' most controversial thesis of Old Europe focused on the Neolithic period before Indo-Europeans and drew its source from a number of artifacts found in Gimbutas-led fieldwork in Southeastern Europe. Most notably, these were goddess figurines, but also pottery and other objects

with striking designs. Gimbutas described the civilization of Old Europe as women-centered, egalitarian and peaceful, based on the cyclicity of time and nature. She integrated the Kurgan hypothesis by arguing that the peaceful goddess culture of Old Europe was upended by patrilineal, warlike proto-Indo-European newcomers to Europe. If there was almost no evidence of arms and hierarchical social structures in the Old Europe, such was a plenty with the mass movement of Kurgans – people from the Pontic-Caspian steppes. For Gimbutas this was a clash of two completely different civilizations, of which the latter one became dominant throughout Western modernity. Gimbutas' ascribed connections between the artifacts was seen by her critics as an imposition of too much meaning on the discovered objects. Prehistory continues to be a difficult subject for interpretation since it is defined by the lack of any written sources. This lack is also what often leads to describe prehistory as a primitive stage of human development that has little to offer for today's political and social thought – a perception that Graeber and Wengrow challenge in their book. Marija Gimbutas would have agreed with them completely.

The book makes a compelling critical analysis of Gimbutas reception by mainstream and feminist academia without attempting to idealize Gimbutas' own limitations. Gimbutas certainly did not fall within the progressive strains of the scholarship at the time. She did not describe herself as a feminist, nor did she engage with critical perspectives on gender in academia. Yet Gimbutas was careful to look for a vocabulary that would not reproduce the binary of power in terms of hierarchy between sexes. She interpreted the focus on women as constituting a broader spiritual universalism, a fact that her critics took as an illustration of her bias, although such universalization from a male-centric perspective rarely received similar treatment. The prevailing interpretations of the ancient women figurines described their functions in terms of sexuality or maternalism. The women-centric cultures were generally viewed as a primitive stage on the way to the development brought by the Bronze age. For Gimbutas, these and other artifacts were indications of an altogether different cosmology that was female-centric and not to be assessed with the modern sensibilities of progress.

FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGISTS, as Navickaitė demonstrates, did not view Gimbutas work as a seminal dislocation of an androcentric paradigm. Instead, she was accused of proposing a sort of extreme matriarchy with an ideological bias that excluded a measured balance between sexes. In the emerging gender archaeology, Gimbutas' focus on women in prehistory was the “wrong kind” – too metaphysical in its approach and non-conforming to the paradigm of social constructivism. Here Navickaitė uncovers a striking paradox: the radical and constructivist approaches that critiqued Gimbutas for her essentialism, in turn, used essentialism to dismiss Gimbutas based on her personal circumstances. Critics such as Lynn Meskell went on to argue that Gimbutas'



Marija Gimbutas by Kerbstone 52, at the back of Newgrange, County Meath, Ireland, in September 1989.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Marija Gimbutienė commemorative plaque in Kaunas, Mickėvičius Street.



Marija Gimbutienė on a 2021 stamp of Lithuania.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

idealized life of the Old Europe destroyed by a Kurgan invasion was motivated by her experience of “two foreign occupations by ‘barbaric invaders’” of which the ones from the East stayed. As the book argues, Gimbutas’ work was used to create a “paradigmatic case of biased science”, and it was pursued with a special rigor in the most progressive strains of the discipline. Navickaitė explains this as a move from gender archaeology to establish its scientific credibility in mainstream archaeology. Thus, to avoid reproducing the dominant androcentrism of the discipline, the feminist discourse instead invalidated Gimbutas on the basis of her personal experiences, cultural background, age and even medical history.

IN NAVICKAITĖ’S assessment, Gimbutas’ main contribution was a type of “pre-her-story”, constituting an important step in the change of perspective on gender in archaeology, which was not, however, understood and appreciated by her peers. While it certainly appears to be the case, I think there is more to be said about assessing Gimbutas’ complex legacy. Specifically, this concerns the positionality of Eastern Europeans once it is placed

closer to the discourses of the Western “core”. As the biography demonstrates, the cultural identity of Gimbutas, once acknowledged, was seen to interfere with her capabilities as a scholar of more general, “objective” knowledge. Furthermore, even if she was celebrated, the embeddedness of her work in the Baltic culture was Orientalized, as in the case with the goddess spirituality movement in the US, or Westernized, as in the case of post-socialist identity building in Lithuania. All these cases uncovered the liminal positionality of Eastern Europe from the point of view of either the “core” or “periphery”.

Gimbutas’ historical and cultural background was important for both her critics and supporters. It was significant for Gimbutas herself, as in her latter books, she focused on myths and folklore as resources for interpreting archaeological evidence. Gimbutas defined

Continued.

The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas

this approach as archaeomythology and expanded on the ideas about the centrality of pre-Christian, marginalized European cultures for understanding prehistoric, pre-Indo-European civilization. If there remained traces of Old Europe, they were in the folklore of those European people who were the last to be touched by Christianity, such as those adhering to the Baltic, but also the Basque, Celtic and Germanic paganisms. This sourcing of interpretation in folklore moved Gimbutas even further away from the mainstream discipline. The autobiography seems to view Gimbutas “mythological turn” critically, especially the ways it connected with her New Age supporters. Gimbutas found her supporters and community in the feminist spirituality movement of the 1980s onwards, which was based in the US and flourished in the New Age milieu. In Navickaitė’s reading, for the women’s spirituality movement, the goddess spiritual world, elaborated by Gimbutas, provided a pre-modern European heritage that was free from associations with whiteness, modernization and domination. The contemporary Eastern European context was presented as an almost unmediated link to the world Gimbutas envisioned. It was valuable as much as it still could be perceived as untouched and removed from Western modernity, reproducing an Orientalizing gaze on Eastern Europe that was absent in Gimbutas’ own work.

Gimbutas reading of prehistory could certainly be criticized as making overly general assumptions, yet what distinguished Gimbutas, was her wish to seek genuinely new perspectives of what she saw and move beyond the premises of modern history writing. Gimbutas was insufficiently self-critical, imagining the possibility of a detached, “modest” perspective that was free from any cultural and ideological influences. However, her work was also continually reduced to the cultural bias of her audience. This included Gimbutas’ reception in Lithuania in the early 1990s, an aspect that appears but is not explicitly addressed in the discussion about the period in the biography.

GIMBUTAS CRITICAL perception of the Western modernity, which she associated with both capitalism and communism, significantly manifested in her views on the future of post-socialist Lithuania. In contrast to most public figures in the transition era, Gimbutas viewed the Christian heritage of Lithuania as a result of internal European colonization. She was critical of Westernization as a desired endpoint for the post-socialist transition and urged Lithuanians to take pride in their ancient spiritual origins, preserved by folklore in the female deities like Laima, Ragana and others. At the same time, Gimbutas’ view of paganism was not embedded in a typical ethnonationalist perspective. Nationalism was a product of modernity, whereas Gimbutas was looking for alternatives to the teleological view of the progress over the last few hundred years. As the biography demonstrates, the Lithuanian feminist movement of the 1990s took Gimbutas arguments to construct an identity that was both pro-Western and nationalist. Such positionality was clearly paradoxical from

Gimbutas’s point of view; however, Navickaitė’s book pays less attention to this discrepancy. The book implicitly shows that the fact that Gimbutas had recognition and prominence abroad meant a lot for Lithuanians, while her actual arguments appeared to fade in comparison. Gimbutas’ ideas contradicted the mainstream transition narratives of the Baltic states, illustrating how such contradicting narratives were essentially erased from the hegemonic “end of history” discourse in the post-socialist context.

The question about these various dimensions determining Gimbutas’s legacy is not simple. Navickaitė’s book makes a compelling case against Gimbutas’ unjust position in the “intellectual backwater”, showing that most of Gimbutas’ criticism has been based on a crude simplification of her works and personal background. In its concluding part, Navickaitė’s biography calls for a re-evaluation of Gimbutas’ work as a valid resource for the continuing re-thinking of womanhood across ages. The biography has been written with a focus on gender studies debates, which were the most controversial aspects of the Old Europe thesis. The focus on Gimbutas contribution to gender studies is important, but it remains rather unclear on how it could relate to the contemporary themes of the field. Gimbutas might not be restricted to intellectual but historical backwater instead.

As the biography discusses the controversies of Gimbutas research, it pays less attention to the work of Gimbutas that earned her a reputation in the first place. Gimbutas focused on the early Bronze Age in Eastern Europe, a subject that, due to the language barrier in the West, was virtually unexplored at the time. Through her regional focus, she proposed a hypothesis that described the origins of Proto-Indo-European language. The Kurgan hypothesis was more recently confirmed by DNA data and has been at the centre of the debate about the Proto-Indo-European language, such as in David Anthony’s renowned *The horse, the wheel and language* (2007). Yet, Gimbutas name in academic and popular context is tied to the controversies and the accusations of pseudo-science. However, Gimbutas identity as a scholar did not appear to change much over time – she was looking for connections and meanings where others saw isolated objects. Such approach

could lead to wrong explanations, but it could also propose truly novel ideas, which could be explored further by other researchers and new data analysis.

AS GRAEBER and Wengrow write, certain myth-making is inevitable when making grand historical arguments, but it is only allowed for some – and it certainly was not allowed for Gimbutas, whose reward “was not a literary prize, or even a place among the revered ancestors of archaeology; it was near-universal posthumous vilification, or, even worse, becoming an object of dismissive contempt.” The myth-making in question does not entail simple fantasy; it concerns a certain gap between facts and our interpretations about them, which cannot ever really be closed. Most often these interpretations reflect historical hegemonic conjectures, of which also Gimbutas was not immune – but nor were her critics as much as they assumed the position of “objective science”. Rasa Navickaitė does an excellent job tracing these conjectures in academia and beyond, with their consequences for Gimbutas perception, making it a very important contribution to the debate about her legacy. Hopefully, it will significantly add to its re-evaluation over time and deepen her position in Eastern European intellectual history. Gimbutas is both a cautionary tale about the limits of one’s positionality and, at the same time, an inspiration precisely because of it. ❌

Lelde Luika

Postdoctoral Research Fellow
at CBEEES, Södertörn University.



Women from the Riekkala village near the town of Sortavala washing their laundry in Lake Ladoga in the early 1930s.

PHOTO: PEKKA KYTTINEN, FINNISH HERITAGE AGENCY, HELSINKI, FINLAND. CC BY 4.0.

Lake Ladoga. A transnational history

Lake Ladoga: The Coastal History of the Greatest Lake in Europe

Maria Lähteenmäki and Isaac Land, eds.
(Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2023).
Studia Fennica Historica vol. 27,
233 pages.

Histories of great bodies of water – maritime histories, histories of river basins – have been the object of scholars’ interest for quite some time, while similar approaches to lakes have been less common. Not to look too far, the Baltic Sea has had its share of histories throughout the 20th century, written with various agendas in mind, depending on the changing times and the changing geopolitical contexts.¹ Maria Lähteenmäki, one of the editors of the book under review, calls the Baltic Sea “Ladoga’s ‘big sister’” in the first chapter (p. 12), thus connecting the two on the level of scholarship, as well as on the level of the environment and lived experience, into one system – the lake becoming, in a way, the sea’s extension to the east. Lake Ladoga, Lähteenmäki seems to be saying, deserves as much attention as the big sister.

The volume under review aims to do just that, to present a transnational history of the lake, and more precisely its coasts. The editors and authors emphasize the concept of “new coastal history” introduced in 2007 by Isaac Land (the other of the volume’s editors),² as one of the guiding concepts behind the book: