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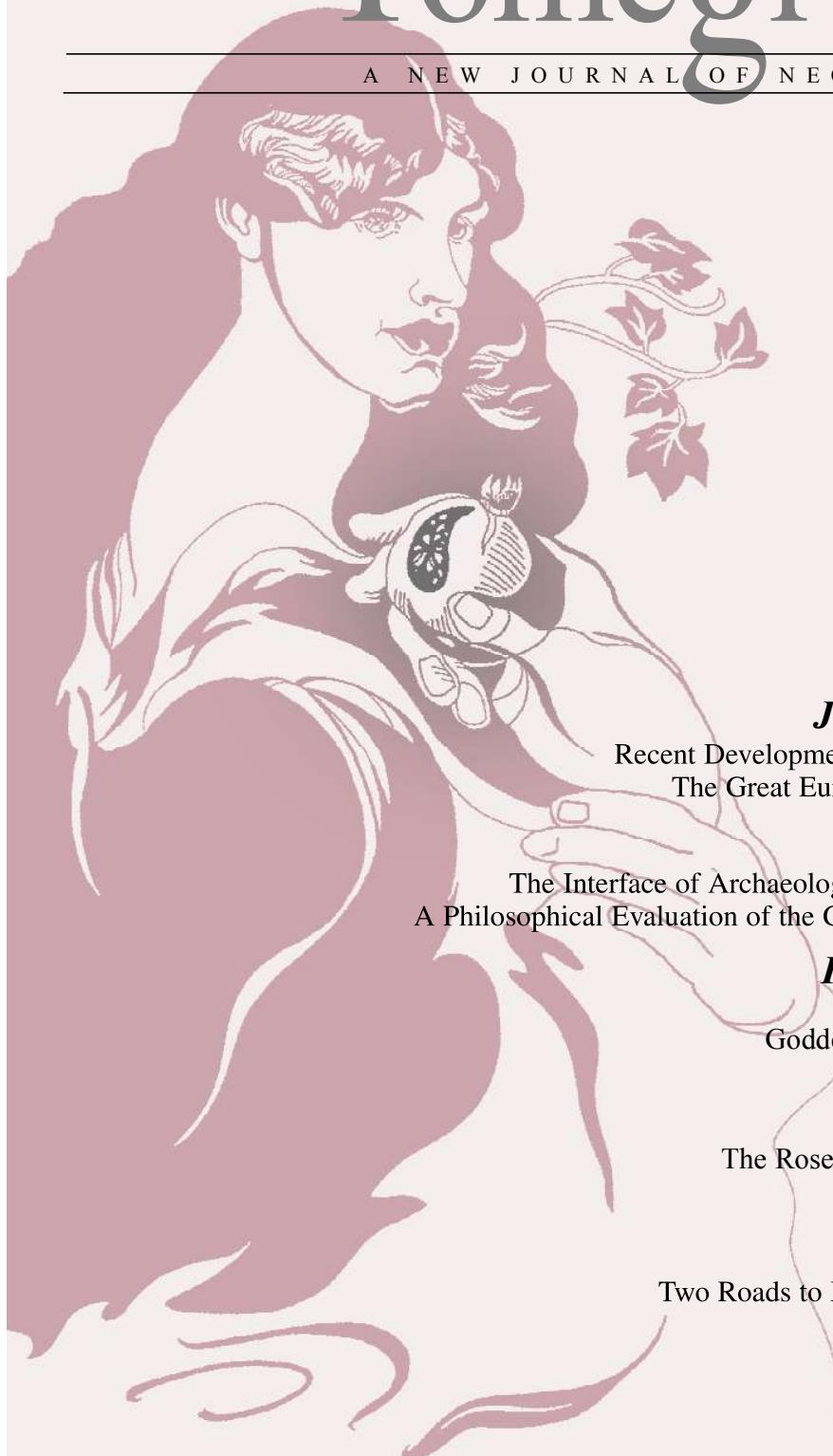
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The Pomegranate

A NEW JOURNAL OF NEOPAGAN THOUGHT



Jenny Gibbons

Recent Developments in the Study of
The Great European Witch Hunt

2

Mara Keller

The Interface of Archaeology and Mythology:
A Philosophical Evaluation of the Gimbutas Paradigm

17

Fritz Muntean

Asharah:
Goddess of the Israelites

36

Workings

The Rose Beyond the Grave
Evan John Jones

48

Book Reviews

Two Roads to Magical Herbalism
Chas S. Clifton

53



The Pomegranate

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The Pomegranate is the combined effort of a group of senior Pagans in the United States and Canada. Its purpose is to provide a scholarly venue for the forthright and critical examination of Neopagan beliefs and practices. We intend this Journal to be a forum for the exchange and discussion of the philosophy, ethics, and spiritual potential inherent within modern Paganism's many Paths. The consideration of new ideas, as well as the exploration of the roots of our current practices such as classical Paganism, western esoteric traditions and influences from other disciplines, will be included.

Notes from the Underground

*A*s many loyal readers of *The Pomegranate* already know, Diana Tracy, our co-editor and tireless subscriptions manager, was in a terrible traffic accident three weeks ago. The good news is that everyone involved did survive and all are well on the road to recovery. Diana, however, is laid up (at home, and in excellent hands) for the next month or so, and as a result, this issue has been printed in (and mailed from) Vancouver.

Several of our valued subscribers have recently written to inform us that their subscriptions have apparently fallen between the many cracks that seem to be forever opening up here in the notoriously unstable terrain of the Underworld. If this has happened to you — if there are any issues that you've already paid for but have yet to receive — do us the enormous favour of letting us know! You may email us at either <fmuntean@unixg.ubc.ca> or <antech@teleport.com> or drop us a note at the address on the inside front cover. If you have yet to resubscribe, please be so kind as to do so at once. For those of you who may have come in late and now wish to complete your set of back issues, all you really have to do is ask ...

As ever, we eager minions have done our very best to bring you the finest writing in the Neopagan community today. Our headline article (an original to *The Pomegranate*!) contains an update on the latest research being done (mostly in Europe) on the Great Witch Hunt of the 14-17th centuries, including the surprising discovery of the source from which the popular belief in a 'Nine Million Women' death toll may have evolved. Our second article is especially welcome — in response to the requests we *Pom* editors have been making to the Reclaiming Collective and the Belili Project, Professor Mara Keller of the California Institute of Integral Studies has graciously allowed us to reprint her recent article in praise of the 'archaeomythological' methodology of Marija Gimbutas, and in defense of her Neolithic Great Goddess paradigm. In a similar vein, our third feature article demonstrates the way in which conventional academic scholarship has succeeded in identifying and defining an individual Goddess — the Canaanite/Israelite Asherah — whose 'career' apparently spanned the Neolithic, Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

Our now-regular 'Workings' and 'Book Review' sections are also presented for your enjoyment. With any luck, our 'Reader's Forum' will soon reappear, hopefully in response to the provocative articles in this very issue!

Persephone's Hard-working Minions



Recent Developments in the Study of The Great European Witch Hunt

by Jenny Gibbons

Since the late 1970s, a quiet revolution has taken place in the study of historical witchcraft and the Great European Witch Hunt. While this revolution may not seem quite as dramatic as the development of radiocarbon dating, many theories which reigned supreme thirty years ago have vanished, swept away by a flood of new data. Unfortunately, little of the new information has found its way into popular history and literature. Many articles in Pagan magazines contain almost no accurate information about the "Burning Times," primarily because of a heavy reliance on out-dated research.

Beyond the National Enquirer. From the Great Hunt until very recently, historians have relied on witch hunters' propaganda: witch hunting manuals, sermons against witchcraft, and lurid pamphlets on the more sensational trials. Everyone knew that this evidence was seriously inadequate: imagine trying to study Satanism in America using only the *Moral Majority Newsletter* and the *National Enquirer*. The few trials cited were the larger, more infamous ones. And historians frequently used literary accounts of those cases, not the trials themselves. This is comparable to citing a television docu-drama ("Based on a true story!") instead of actual court proceedings.

Better evidence did exist, and beginning in the mid-1970s, historians stopped relying on witch-hunting propaganda and began to base their theories on thorough, systematic studies of all the witch trials in a particular area. Courts that tried witches kept records — trial verdicts, lists of confiscated goods, questions asked during interrogations, and the answers witches gave. This evidence was written by people who knew what actually happened. Witch hunters often based their books on rumor and hearsay; few had access to reliable information. Courts had less reason to lie since, for the most part, they were trying to keep track of what was going on: how many witches they killed, how much money they gained or lost, etc. Witch hunters wrote to convince people that witchcraft was a grievous threat to the world. The more witches there were, the bigger the "threat" was. So they often exaggerated the number of deaths and spread wild estimates about how many witches existed. Also, trial records addressed the full range of trials, not just the most lurid and sensational ones.

But trial data had one daunting draw-back: there was too much of it.

The Great "Burning Times" Quiz

1. Approximately _____ witches were killed in the Great European Witch Hunt.
(A) 50,000. (B) 100,000. (C) 1,000,000. (D) 9,000,000.
2. The number of witchcraft trials skyrocketed around _____.
(A) 500 CE, during the Christian conversion of Western Europe.
(B) 1300 CE, when the Inquisition developed the theory that witches were a Satanic cult.
(C) 1450 CE, when the printing press made witch hunting manuals readily available.
(D) 1550 CE, during the Reformation, amidst religious strife between Catholics & Protestants.
3. Overall _____ % of witches were women, though in some countries up to _____ % were men.
(A) Nearly 100%; 20%. (B) 80%; 50%. (C) 80%; 90%. (D) 60%; 70%.
4. Most witches were _____.
(A) Healers. (B) Pagans. (C) Women. (D) A and C.
5. Most witches were killed by _____.
(A) Non-religious courts. (B) Church courts. (C) The Inquisition. (D) Lynch mobs.
6. You had the best chance of surviving your trial if you were tried by a _____.
(A) Local government court staffed by your neighbors and members of your own community.
(B) National government court (one staffed by the King's men and professional jurists).
(C) Church court (one staffed by priests or Inquisitors).
(D) None of the above. All courts killed approximately the same percentage of those accused.
7. The first mass trial of witches occurred in _____ and killed approximately _____.
(A) Valais, Switzerland, in 1428; 100 people.
(B) Toulouse, France sometime between 1320 and 1350; several hundred witches, including 400 women in one day alone.
(C) Bamberg, Germany, in 1544; 2,000 people.
(D) Rome, Italy, in 1003; 100 people.
8. Wise-women and traditional healers were often accused of witchcraft by _____.
(A) Doctors. (B) Other wise-women and witches. (C) Their patients. (D) All of the above.
9. Generally speaking, witch hunting was most intense where:
(A) The Church was strong and the State weak. (B) The State was strong, the Church weak.
(C) Both Church and State were weak. (D) Both Church and State were strong.
10. The intensity of the trials varied:
(A) Very little. All countries throughout Europe killed large numbers of witches.
(B) By country. Different countries hunted witches at vastly different rates. But inside a particular country, the persecution was uniform.
(C) By country and by "centrality." The same as (B), however countries in central Europe tended to have worse persecution than remote countries like Ireland.
(D) By province or even by town. Witch hunting was intensely sporadic and shows few clear patterns.

Answers:

1. (A) 50,000. 2. (D) 1550 CE. 3. (C) 80%; 90%. 4. (C) Women. 5. (A) Non-religious courts.
6. (C) Church or Inquisitorial court. 7. (A) Valais, Switzerland, in 1428; over 100 people were killed.
8. (D) All of the above. 9. (C) Both Church and State were weak. 10. (D) Varied by province & even by town.

Scoring:

By picking answers at random, you should get an average of 2-3 questions right. 4-6 shows you're reasonably up to date on the subject, and 7-10 is great. If you're not happy with your score, there are some books which will help bring you up to speed. The best is Brian Levack's *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, an excellent survey of our new information on Witchcraft. Robin Briggs' *Witches and Neighbors* is also good, though more localized. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen put together a fine collection of essays called *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*. It's the best source of information on trials in outlying areas, like Iceland, Finland, Portugal, etc.



Witch trials were scattered amongst literally millions of other trials from this period. For most historians, it was too much work to wade through this mass of data. The one exception was C. L'Estrange Ewen. In 1929 he published the first systematic study of a country's trial records: *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*. Focused on England, his work offered vivid evidence of how much data literature missed. In Essex County, for instance, Ewen found thirty times as many trials as any previous researcher. Scholars were basing their theories on only 3% of the available evidence. And that 3% was vastly different from the other 97%.

In the 1970's other researchers followed in Ewen's footsteps, so in the last twenty-five years, the quantity and quality of available evidence has dramatically improved. Now we can look at all the trials from an area and see what the "normal" trial was really like. Court documents frequently contain detailed information on the gender, social status, and occupation of the accused. Today, for the first time, we have a good idea of the dimensions of the Great Hunt: where the trials occurred, who was tried in them, who did the killing, and how many people lost their lives.

400 In One Day: An Influential Forgery. Another, smaller breakthrough also profoundly altered our view of the early history of the Great Hunt. In 1972, two scholars independently discovered that a famous series of medieval witch trials never occurred. The forgery was Etienne Leon de Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition en France*, written in 1829. Lamothe-Langon described enormous witch trials which supposedly took place in southern France in the early 14th century. Run by the Inquisition of Toulouse and Carcassonne, these trials killed hundreds upon hundreds of people. The most famous was an outbreak where 400 women died in one day. No other French historian had noticed these trials.

In the early 20th century, the prominent historian Jacob Hansen included large sections of Lamothe-Langon's work in his compendium on medieval witchcraft. Later historians cited Hansen's cites, apparently without closely examining Lamothe-Langon's credentials. Non-academic writers cited the writers who cited Hansen, and thus Lamothe-Langon's dramatic French trials became a standard part of the popular view of the Great Hunt. However, as more research was done, Lamothe-Langon's trials began to look odd to historians. No sources mentioned them, and they were completely different from all other 14th century trials. There were no other mass trials of this nature until 1428, no panics like this until the 16th century. Furthermore, the demonology in the trials was quite elaborate, with sabbats and pacts and enormous black masses. It was far more complex than the demonology of the

While nobody cites Lamothe-Langon directly anymore, his fictions show up everywhere, including in both Z Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* and Raven Grimassi's *The Wiccan Mysteries*.

Malleus Maleficarum (1486). Why would the Inquisition think up this elaborate demonology, and then apparently forget it for two hundred years?

Questions like these led Norman Cohn (*Europe's Inner Demons* and "Three Forgeries: Myths and Hoaxes of European Demonology II" in *Encounter* 44 (1975)) and Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) to investigate Lamothe-Langon's background. What they found was reasonably conclusive evidence that the great trials of the *Histoire* had never occurred. First, Lamothe-Langon was a hack writer and known forger, not a historian. Early in his career he specialized in historical fiction, but he soon turned to more profitable horror novels, like *The Head of Death*, *The Monastery of the Black Friars*, and *The Vampire* (or, *The Virgin of Hungary*). Then, in 1829, he published the *Histoire*, supposedly a work of non-fiction. After its success Lamothe-Langon went on to write a series of "autobiographies" of various French notables, such as Cardinal Richeleau, Louis XVIII, and the Contesse du Barry.

Second, none of Lamothe-Langon's sources could be found, and there was strong reason to suspect they never existed. Lamothe-Langon claimed he was using unpublished Inquisitorial records given to him by Bishop Hyacinthe Sermet: but Cohn found a letter from Sermet stating that there were no unpublished records. Lamothe-Langon was not posted in Toulouse long enough to do any serious research in its archives, and he had no training in paleography, the skill needed to translate the script and copious abbreviations used in medieval documents.

Third, under close examination a number of flaws appeared in his stories. He cited records written by seneschal Pierre de Voisins in 1275, but Voisins ceased being seneschal in 1254 and died not long after. The Inquisitor who ran many of these trials was Pierre Guidonis (nephew of Bernard Gui from *The Name of the Rose*). But Guidonis wasn't an Inquisitor at the time when the trials were held. Cohn and Kieckhefer published their findings in 1972. Since then academics have avoided this forged material. Unfortunately by this point, Lamothe-Langon's lurid trials had entered into the mythology of Witchcraft. While nobody cites Lamothe-Langon directly anymore, his fictions show up



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Today, we know that there is absolutely no evidence to support this theory.

everywhere, including in both Z Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* and Raven Grimassi's *The Wiccan Mysteries*.

There is no simple way to weed out all of Lamothe-Langon's disinformation, but a few guidelines will help: a) Use scholarly texts written after 1975. b) Beware of any trial set in Toulouse or Carcasonne. While these cities did have real cases, only the forged ones get cited regularly. c) Ignore any trial involving Anne-Marie de Georzel or Catherine Delort; these are forgeries. d) Ignore any trial that killed "400 women in one day;" this never happened. e) Avoid Jules Michelet's *Satanism and Witchcraft*. Although he wrote a poetic and dramatic book, Michelet never found much historical evidence to support his theory that witchcraft was an anti-Catholic protest religion. What little bit there was came from the Lamothe-Langon forgeries. So when they were debunked, the last props for his book collapsed. f) See the appendix of Richard Kieckhefer's *European Witch Trials*, which contains a list of all known trials that occurred between 1300 and 1500.

The New Topography of Witch Hunting. The pattern revealed by trial records bears little resemblance to the picture literature painted. Every aspect of the Great Hunt, from chronology to death toll, has changed. And if your knowledge of the "Burning Times" is based on popular or Pagan literature, nearly everything you know may be wrong. (To test yourself, try taking "The Great Burning Times Quiz" in the sidebar.)

a) Chronology. Popular history places the witchcraft persecutions in the Middle Ages (5-14th centuries). 19th century historians considered the Great Hunt an outburst of superstitious hysteria, fostered and spread by the Catholic Church. "Naturally," therefore, the persecution would be worst when the Church's power was the greatest: in the Middle Ages, before the Reformation split "the" Church into warring Catholic and Protestant sects. Certainly there were trials in the early modern period (15-18th centuries), but they must have

been a pale shadow of the horrors that came before. Modern research has conclusively debunked this theory. Although many stereotypes about witches pre-date Christianity, the most lethal outbreaks of the Great Hunt actually occurred during the "Age of Reason." Lamothe-Langon's forged trials were one of the last stumbling blocks that kept the theory of medieval witch hunting alive, and once these trials are removed, the development of witchcraft stereotypes becomes much clearer.

All pre-modern European societies believed in magick. As far as we can tell, all passed laws prohibiting magickal crimes. Pagan Roman law and the earliest Germanic and Celtic law codes all contain edicts that punish people who cast baneful spells. This is only common sense: a society that believes in the power of magick will punish people who abuse that power. Furthermore, many of the stereotypes about witches have been with us from pre-Christian times. From the Mediterranean to Ireland, witches were said to fly about at night, drinking blood, killing babies, and devouring human corpses. We know this because many early Christian missionaries encouraged newly converted kingdoms to pass laws protecting men and women from charges of witchcraft — charges, they said, that were impossible and un-Christian. For example, the 5th century Synod of St. Patrick ruled that "A Christian who believes that there is a vampire in the world, that is to say, a witch, is to be anathematized; whoever lays that reputation upon a living being shall not be received into the Church until he revokes with his own voice the crime that he has committed." A capitulary from Saxony (775-790 CE) blamed these stereotypes on pagan belief systems: "If anyone, deceived by the Devil, believes after the manner of the Pagans that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and if on this account he burns [the alleged witch] ... he shall be punished by capital sentence." In the Middle Ages, the laws on magick remained virtually unchanged. Harmful magick was punished, and the lethal trials we know of tended to occur when a noble felt that he or she had been bewitched. The Church also forbade magick but assigned relatively mild penalties to convicted witches. For instance, the Confessional of Egbert (England, 950-1000 CE) said that "If a woman works witchcraft and enchantment and [uses] magical philters, she shall fast [on bread and water] for twelve months. ... If she kills anyone by her philters, she shall fast for seven years."

Traditional attitudes towards witchcraft began to change in the 14th century, at the very end of the Middle Ages. As Carlo Ginzburg noted (*Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*), early 14th century central Europe was seized by a series of rumor-panics. Some malign conspiracy (Jews and lepers, Moslems, or Jews and witches) was attempting to destroy the Christian kingdoms through magick and poison. After the terrible devastation caused by



the Black Death (1347-1349) these rumors increased in intensity and focused primarily on witches and “plague-spreaders.” Witchcraft cases increased slowly but steadily in the 14-15th centuries; the first mass trials appeared in the 15th century. At the beginning of the 16th century, as the first shock-waves from the Reformation hit, the number of witch trials actually dropped. Then, around 1550, the persecution skyrocketed. What we think of as “the Burning Times”—the crazes, panics, and mass hysteria—largely occurred in one century, from 1550-1650. In the 17th century, the Great Hunt passed nearly as suddenly as it had arisen. Trials dropped sharply after 1650 and disappeared completely by the end of the 18th century.

b) Geography. Before Lamothe-Langon’s forgeries were discovered, the earliest outbreaks appeared to occur in southern France, in an area once the home of the Cathar heresy. This led some historians to suggest a link between Catharism and witchcraft, that witches were the remnants of an old dualist faith. After you delete the forged trials, the center of the early cases shifts to northern Italy and what later became Switzerland, away from Cathar lands. When all trials are plotted on a map, other surprising patterns emerge. First, the trials were intensely sporadic. The rate of witch hunting varied dramatically throughout Europe, ranging from a high of 26,000 deaths in Germany to a low of 4 in Ireland. Robin Briggs’ *Witches and Neighbors* can give you a good feel for how erratic the trials were. It contains three maps showing the distribution of trials throughout Europe, throughout Germany, and throughout the French province of Lorraine, which Briggs studied in depth. They reveal that some of the most enormous persecutions (like the panics of Wurzburg, Germany) occurred next to areas that had virtually no trials whatsoever.

Second, the trials were concentrated in central Europe, in Germany, Switzerland, and eastern France. The further you got away from that area, the fewer the persecution generally became. Third, the height of the persecution occurred during the Reformation, when the formerly unified Christian Church splintered into Catholic and Protestant sects. In countries like Italy and Spain, where the Catholic Church and its Inquisition reigned virtually unquestioned, witch hunting was uncommon. The worst panics took place in areas like Switzerland and Germany, where rival Christians sects fought to impose their religious views on each other.

Fourth, panics clustered around borders. France’s major crazes occurred on its Spanish and eastern fronts. Italy’s worst persecution was in the northern regions. Spain’s one craze centered on the Basque lands straddling the French/Spanish border. Fifth, although it has become commonplace to think of the outbreaks of witch hunting as malevolent pogroms imposed by evil elites, in reality the worst horrors occurred where central authority had broken down.

When the trials peaked in the 16th and 17th century, the Inquisition was only operating in two countries: Spain and Italy, and both had extremely low death tolls.

Both Germany and Switzerland were patchwork quilts, loose confederacies stitched together from dozens of independent political units. England, which had a strong government, had little witch hunting. The country’s one and only craze took place during the English Civil War, when the government’s power collapsed. A strong, unified national church (as in Spain and Italy) also tended to keep deaths to a minimum. Strong governments didn’t always slow witch hunting, as King James of Scotland proved, but the worst panics definitely hit where both Church and State were weak.

c) Christianity’s Role in the Persecution. For years, the responsibility for the Great Hunt has been dumped on the Catholic Church’s door-step. 19th century historians ascribed the persecution to religious hysteria, and when Margaret Murray proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect, popular writers trumpeted that the Great Hunt was not a mere panic, but rather a deliberate attempt to exterminate Christianity’s rival religion. Today we know that there is absolutely no evidence to support this theory. When the Church was at the height of its power (11-14th centuries) very few witches died. Persecutions did not reach epidemic levels until after the Reformation, when the Catholic Church had lost its position as Europe’s indisputable moral authority. In fact, most of the killing was done by secular courts. Church courts tried many witches but they usually imposed non-lethal penalties. A witch might be excommunicated, given penance, or imprisoned, but she was rarely killed. The Inquisition almost invariably pardoned any witch who confessed and repented.

Consider the case in York, England, as described by Keith Thomas (*Religion and the Decline of Magic*). At the height of the Great Hunt (1567-1640) one half of all witchcraft cases brought before church courts were dismissed for lack of evidence. No torture was used, and the accused could clear himself by providing four to eight “compurgators,” people who were willing to swear that he was not a witch. Only 21% of the cases ended with convictions, and the Church did not impose any kind of corporal or capital punishment. The vast majority of witches who died were condemned by secular courts. Ironically, the worst courts were local courts. Some authors, like Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*), blame the death toll on the decline of the “community-based” medieval court, and the rise of the centralized “national” court. Nothing could be further from the truth. “Community-based” courts were

Folk healers ... routinely blamed diseases on witchcraft and offered counter-spells to cure their patients. Many were even willing to divine the name of the cursing witch, for a fee.

often virtual slaughterhouses, killing 90% of all accused witches. National courts condemned only about 30% of the accused. Why were the execution rates so vastly different? The differences between local and national courts are relatively easy to understand. Witchcraft cases were usually surrounded by general fear and public protests. "Community-based" courts drew their officials from the group of people affected by this panic. National courts had more distance from the hysteria. Moreover, national courts tended to have professional, trained staff who were less likely to discard important legal safeguards in their haste to see "justice" done.

d) The Inquisition. But what of the Inquisition? For many, the "Inquisition" and the "Burning Times" are virtually synonymous. The myth of the witch-hunting Inquisition was built on several assumptions and mistakes, all of which have been overturned in the last twenty-five years. First, the myth was the logical extension of 19th century history, which blamed the persecutions on the Catholic Church. If the Church attacked witches, surely the Inquisition would be the hammer it wielded.

Second, a common translation error muddied the waters. Many records simply said that a witch was tried "by inquisition." Some writers assumed that this meant "the" Inquisition. And in some cases it did. But an "inquisition" was also the name of a type of trial used by almost all courts in Europe at the time. Later, when historians examined the records in greater detail, they found that the majority did not involve the Inquisition, merely *an* inquisition. Today most historians are careful about this, but older and more popular texts (such as Rossell Hope Robbins' *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*) still have the Inquisition killing witches in times and places where it did not even exist.

Third, the only witch-hunting manual most people have seen was written Inquisitor. In the 1970's, when feminist and Neopagan authors turned their attention to the witch trials, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) was the only manual readily available in translation. Authors naively assumed that the book painted an accurate picture of how the Inquisition tried witches. Heinrich Kramer, the text's demented author, was held up as a typical Inquisitor. His rather stunning sexual preoccupations were presented as the Church's "official" position on witchcraft. Actually the Inquisition immediately rejected the legal procedures Kramer recommended and censured the Inquisitor

himself just a few years after the *Malleus* was published. It was secular courts, not Inquisitorial ones, that resorted to this work.

As more research was done and historians became more sensitive to the "an inquisition/the Inquisition" error, the Inquisitorial witch-hunter began to look like a rare bird. Lamothe-Langon's trials were the last great piece of "evidence," and when they fell, scholars re-examined the Inquisition's role in the Witch Hunts. What they found was quite startling. In 1258 Pope Alexander IV explicitly refused to allow the Inquisition from investigating charges of witchcraft: "The Inquisitors, deputed to investigate heresy, must not intrude into investigations of divination or sorcery without knowledge of manifest heresy involved." The gloss on this passage explained what "manifest heresy" meant: "praying at the altars of idols, to offer sacrifices, to consult demons, to elicit responses from them ... or if [the witches] associate themselves publicly with heretics." In other words, in the 13th century the Church did not consider witches to be heretics or members of a rival religion.

It was not until 1326, almost 100 years later, that the Church reversed its position and allowed the Inquisition to investigate witchcraft. But the only significant contribution that was made was in the development of "demonology," the theory of the diabolic origin of witchcraft. As John Tedeschi demonstrates in his essay "Inquisitorial Law and the Witch" (in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen's *Early Modern European Witchcraft*) the Inquisition still played a very small role in the persecution. From 1326-1500, few deaths occurred. Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) found 702 definite executions in all of Europe from 1300-1500; of these, only 137 came from Inquisitorial or church courts. By the time that trials were common (early 16th century) the Inquisition focused on the proto-Protestants. When the trials peaked in the 16th and 17th century, the Inquisition was only operating in two countries: Spain and Italy, and both had extremely low death tolls.

In fact, in Spain the Inquisition worked diligently to keep witch trials to a minimum. Around 1609, a French witch-craze triggered a panic in the Basque regions of Spain. Gustav Henningsen (*The Witches' Advocate*) documented the Inquisition's work in brilliant detail. Although several Inquisitors believed the charges, one skeptic convinced La Suprema (the ruling body of the Spanish Inquisition) that this was groundless hysteria. La Suprema responded by issuing an "Edict of Silence" forbidding all discussion of witchcraft. For, as the skeptical Inquisitor noted, "There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked and written about."

The Edict worked, quickly dissipating the panic and accusations. And until the end of the Great Hunt, the Spanish Inquisition insisted that it alone had the right to condemn witches — which it refused to do. Another craze broke out



in Vizcaya, in 1616. When the Inquisition re-issued the Edict of Silence, the secular authorities went over its head and petitioned the king for the right to try witches themselves. The king granted the request, and 289 people were quickly sentenced. Fortunately the Inquisition managed to re-assert its monopoly on trials and dismissed all the charges. The “witches” of Cataluna were not so lucky. Secular authorities managed to execute 300 people before the Inquisition could stop the trials.

e) **The Witches.** Court records showed that there was no such thing as an “average” witch. There was no characteristic that the majority of witches shared, in all times and places. Not gender. Not wealth. Not religion. Nothing. The only thing that united them was the fact that they were accused of witchcraft. The diversity of witches is one of the strongest arguments against the theory that the Great Hunt was a deliberate pogrom aimed at a specific group of people. If that was true, then most witches would have something in common.

We can isolate certain factors that increased a person’s odds of being accused. Most witches were women. Many were poor or elderly; many seem to be unmarried. Most were alienated from their neighbors, or seen as “different” and disliked. But there is no evidence that one group was targeted. Traditional magick users might have a slightly higher chance of being accused of witchcraft, but the vast majority of known “white” witches were never charged. Before trial evidence was available there were two major theories on who the witches were. Margaret Murray (*The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*) proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect that worshiped the Horned God. Murray’s research was exceptionally poor, and occasionally skated into out-right textual manipulation. She restricted her studies to our worst evidence: witch hunting propaganda and trials that involved copious amounts of torture. She then assumed that such evidence was basically accurate, and that the Devil was “really” a Pagan god. None of these assumptions have held up under scrutiny.

In 1973, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English suggested that most witches were midwives and female healers. Their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* convinced many feminists and Pagans that the Great Hunt was a pogrom aimed at traditional women healers. The Church and State sought to break the power of these women by accusing them of witchcraft, driving a wedge of fear between the wise-woman and her clients. The evidence for this theory was — and is — completely anecdotal. Authors cited a number of cases involving healers, then simply assumed that this was what the “average” trial was like. However, a mere decade after *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* was published, we knew that this was not true. Healers made up a small percentage of the

To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been discovered in all of Europe and America combined.

accused, usually between 2% and 20%, depending on the country. There was never a time or a place where the majority of accused witches were healers. In 1990, D. Harley’s article, “Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch” (in *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990): 1-26.) demonstrated that being a licensed midwife actually decreased a woman’s chances of being charged.

And there was worse to come. Feminist and Pagan writers presented the healer-witch as the innocent, enlightened victim of the evil male witch hunters. Trials showed that as often as not, the so-called “white” witch was an avid supporter of the “Burning Times.” Diane Purkiss (*The Witch in History*) pointed out that “midwives were more likely to be found helping witch-hunters” than as victims of their inquiries. How did witches become witch-hunters? By blaming illnesses on their rivals. Feminist authors lambasted male doctors who blamed unexplained illnesses on witches. Trial records suggest that this did happen, though not terribly often. If you look at doctors’ case books you find that in most cases doctors found natural causes when people thought they were bewitched. When they did diagnose witchcraft, doctors almost never blamed a particular healer or witch. They were trying to explain their failure, not to destroy some individual. Folk healers, on the other hand, routinely blamed diseases on witchcraft and offered counter-spells to cure their patients. Many were even willing to divine the name of the cursing witch, for a fee.

f) **Gender Issues.** One basic fact about the Great Witch Hunt stands out clearly: most of the people accused were women. Even during the Hunt itself, commentators noticed this. Some speculated that there were 10,000 female witches for every male witch, and a host of misogynist explanations were trotted out to account for this fact. Later, the predominance of women led some feminists to theorize that “witch” and “woman” were virtually synonymous, that the persecution was caused by Europe’s misogyny. Overall, approximately 75-80% of the accused were women. However, this percentage varied dramatically. In several of the Scandinavian countries, equal numbers of men and women were accused. In Iceland over 90% of the accused were men. But Central Europe killed the most witches, and it killed many more women than men — this is why the overall percentages are so badly skewed.

Proponents of the misogyny theory generally ignore these variations. Many simply do not discuss male victims. One of the most egregious examples comes from Anne Llewellyn Barstow’s *Witchcraze*. Barstow says that Iceland



Sociologists draw chilling parallels between the Great Hunt and recent panics over Satanic cults, evidence which hints that we're still not out of the shadow of the Burning Times.

did not have a "real" witch hunt. In fact, Iceland killed more witches than Ireland, Russia, and Portugal combined. Barstow claims that all these countries had "real" hunts, and offers no explanation of what made Iceland's deaths "unreal." The only thing I can see is that almost all Icelandic witches were men, and Barstow's theory cannot handle that.

Given the sexism of the times, it's not difficult to find shockingly misogynist witch trials. But misogyny does not explain the trial patterns we see. The beginning and end of the persecution do not correlate to any notable shifts in women's rights. Trials clustered around borders — are borders more misogynist than interior regions? Ireland killed four witches, Scotland a couple thousand — are the Scots that much more sexist? Barstow admits that Russia was every bit as misogynist as Germany, yet it killed only ten witches. Her theory can't explain why, and so she simply insists that there were probably lots of other Russian witches killed and they were probably mostly women. We've just lost all the evidence that would support her theory.

From Nine Million to Forty Thousand. The most dramatic changes in our vision of the Great Hunt centered on the death toll. Back before trial surveys were available, estimates of the death toll were little more than pure speculation. The only thing our literary evidence told us was that a lot of witches died. Witch hunting propaganda talked about thousands and thousands of executions. Literature focused on crazes, the largest and most sensational trials around. But we had no idea how accurate the literary evidence was, or how common trials actually were. So early death toll estimates, which ranged from several hundred thousand up to a high of nine million, were simply people trying to guess how much "a lot" of witches was. Today, the process is completely different. Historians begin by counting all the executions/trials listed in an area's court records. Next they estimate how much evidence has been lost: for what years and in which courts are we missing data. Finally they survey the literary evidence, to see if any large witch trials occurred during the gaps in the evidence. There's still guess-work involved in today's estimates and many areas have not yet been systematically studied. But we now have a solid data-base to build our estimates from, and our figures are getting more specific as further areas are studied. When the first trial record studies were completed, it was

obvious that early estimates were fantastically high. Trial evidence showed that witch crazes were not everyday occurrences, as literature suggested. In fact most countries only had one or two in all of the Great Hunt.

To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been discovered in all of Europe and America combined. (If you would like a table of the recorded and estimated death tolls throughout Europe, and a full list of the sources for these figures, send me a note at jennyg@compuserve.com.) Even though many records are missing, it is now clear that death tolls higher than 100,000 are not believable. Three scholars have attempted to calculate the total death toll for the Great Hunt using the new evidence. Brian Levack (*The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*) surveyed regional studies and found that there were approximately 110,000 witch trials. Levack focused on recorded trials, not executions, because in many cases we have evidence that a trial occurred but no indication of its outcome. On average, 48% of trials ended in an execution, therefore he estimated that 60,000 witches died. This is slightly higher than 48% to reflect the fact that Germany, the center of the persecution, killed more than 48% of its witches.

Ronald Hutton (*The Pagan Religions of the British Isles* and "Counting the Witch Hunt," an unpublished essay) used a different methodology. First he surveyed the regional studies and counted up the number of estimated deaths they contained. When he ran into an uncounted area, he looked for a counted area which matched it as closely as possible, in terms of population, culture, and the intensity of witch hunting mentioned in literary evidence. He then assumed that the uncounted area would kill roughly as many witches as the counted area. Using this technique, he estimated that 40,000 witches died in the Great Hunt.

Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*) estimated that 100,000 witches died, but her reasoning was flawed. Barstow began with Levack's 60,000 deaths. Then she increased it to 100,000 for two reasons: 1) To compensate for lost records; and 2) Because new trials are still being found. This may sound reasonable, but it's not. The 110,000 estimated witch trials that Levack based his calculations on already contained a large allowance for lost records. Barstow was apparently unaware of this, and added more deaths for no good reason. Her point about new trials is true, but irrelevant. Yes, more deaths are being discovered each year. But the more we find, the lower the death toll goes. This makes sense once you understand how historians make their estimates. "New" trials aren't trials we never dreamed existed. They appear when we count areas and courts that haven't been counted before. Historians have always known that our data was imperfect, and they always included estimates for lost trials. So when you find "new" executions, you can't simply add them to the



total death toll; you also have to subtract the old estimate they're replacing. And since old estimates were generally far too high, newly "found" trials usually end up lowering the death toll.

Why It Matters. These changes make it critically important to use up-to-date research in the investigation of historical witchcraft. We have perhaps 20 times as much information as we had two decades ago. Witchcraft studies has also become an inter-disciplinary field. Once the domain of historians alone, it now attracts anthropologists and sociologists who offer radically new interpretations of the Great Hunt. Anthropologists point out the ubiquity of witchcraft beliefs, demonstrating that the Great Hunt was not an exclusively European phenomenon. Sociologists draw chilling parallels between the Great Hunt and recent panics over Satanic cults, evidence which hints that we're still not out of the shadow of the Burning Times.

We Neopagans now face a crisis. As new data appeared, historians altered their theories to account for it. We have not. Therefore an enormous gap has opened between the academic and the "average" Pagan view of witchcraft. We continue to use out-dated and poor writers, like Margaret Murray, Montague Summers, Gerald Gardner, and Jules Michelet. We avoid the somewhat dull academic texts that present solid research, preferring sensational writers who play to our emotions. For example, I have never seen a copy of Brian Levack's *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* in a Pagan bookstore. Yet half the stores I visit carry Anne Llewellyn Barstow's *Witchcraze*, a deeply flawed book which has been ignored or reviled by most scholarly historians.

We owe it to ourselves to study the Great Hunt more honestly, in more detail, and using the best data available. Dualistic fairy tales of noble witches and evil witch hunters have great emotional appeal, but they blind us to what happened, and what could happen again today. Few Pagans commented on the haunting similarities between the Great Hunt and America's panic over Satanic cults. Scholars noticed it; we didn't. We say "Never again the Burning!" But if we don't know what happened the first time, how are we ever going to prevent it from happening again?

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The Interface of Archaeology and Mythology: A Philosophical Evaluation of the Gimbutas Paradigm

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In her corpus of twenty books and over 300 articles, Marija Gimbutas makes a comprehensive study of empirical archaeological data that serves as the basis for her challenging new theory of the cultural roots of Western civilization. To substantiate her thesis that Old Europe was relatively peaceful, egalitarian and primarily Goddess-worshipping, Gimbutas cites (1) the frequent placement of villages on open plains without fortifications; the absence of caches of weapons; no artistic images of weapons, warfare or warrior deities; and no evidence of violent destruction of villages (until the Kurgan invasions). (2) comparable burials for women and men in terms of wealth and social status. (3) a much higher proportion of stylized female figures in ritual or sanctuary contexts (interpreted as goddesses) in comparison to images of stylized male figures in similar contexts (interpreted as gods) in the "approximately 30,000 miniature sculptures in clay, marble, bone, copper and gold from some 3000 sites from southeastern Europe alone" (Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 1986: 146). Her discussion of the evidence gives rise to a new understanding of the (pre)history of Europe and to a new theory of cultural transformation (Riena Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, 1987). In this essay I argue that Gimbutas' thesis is worthy of consideration for three reasons. First, a careful reading of her work and of the dynamic controversy surrounding it supports the view that Gimbutas' theory is to date the most scientifically plausible account of the available information regarding Neolithic Europe (c 6500-3500 BCE in Southeast Europe) and the transition to the Indo-European Bronze Age (c 3500 BCE). Second, Gimbutas' methodology of archaeomythology is germinal for the important interfacing of science and religion, for bridging the still antagonistic ideologies of matter and spirit. Third, the implications of Gimbutas' theory of European origins converge with various other tributaries of post-modern reconstructive thought to provide an important stimulus for the contemporary transformation of culture towards a survivable, sustainable future.



I. Gimbutas' Theory of European Origins. The view taught as canonical in universities of Europe and the United States has insisted that civilized history begins at Sumer in Mesopotamia about 3500 BCE with the onset of the Bronze Age and the rise of empire-building, standing armies, class stratification, monumental architecture and writing in service to the ruling class (see Samuel Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer*, 1981). The enslavement of defeated enemies by warrior-priest-kings and their armies, to form a slave-based economy, is generally treated by Western scholars with disinterest. The historical subjugation of women and the establishment of male dominance are usually not mentioned, the assumption being, perhaps, that male dominance has always existed (see Lerner 1986: 4, 7-8).

Gimbutas fundamentally challenges this established view in her companion works *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). Her theory of the cultural origins of Europe can be described in three stages:

1. Neolithic Europe was a pre-Indo-European civilization that was socially egalitarian, communal, peaceful, highly artistic and primarily Goddess-worshipping. It flourished in Southeast Europe for at least 3000 years, from 6500 to 3500 BCE, and 2000 years longer in Crete and the Aegean islands, until c 1450 BCE.
2. This civilization was overrun and dominated by patriarchal, horse-riding, Indo-European-speaking, Sky-God-worshipping invaders from the Russian steppes in three successive waves: I. c 4400-4300 BCE, II. c 3500 BCE, and III. c 3000 BCE.
3. The subsequent cultures of Europe are the result of a hybridization of the Old European and Indo-European cultures.

I recommend that this dramatically different way of understanding European origins be called the "Gimbutas paradigm."

Some of the major points of controversy around Gimbutas' theory are whether or not Old Europe should be called a civilization, whether or not it should be seen as a sexually and economically egalitarian (or "gynanic") society, whether or not it should be considered a peaceful culture, and whether or not it should be interpreted as a "Goddess civilization." Once these major points of controversy are resolved, we will be able to assess Gimbutas' overarching conclusion that Neolithic Europe underwent a cultural transition "From matrilineal to patrilineal order, from a learned theocracy to a militant patriarchy, from a sexually balanced society to a male dominated hierarchy, and from a chthonic goddess religion to the Indo-European sky-oriented pantheon of gods" (Gimbutas 1991: 401).

II Gimbutas' Methodology: Archaeomythology. During the early 1970s,

... those archaeologists (and others) who hold the epistemological assumption that only empirical knowledge is reliable knowledge cannot logically believe it possible to have any probable knowledge of the mind-states or spiritual experiences of ancient peoples ...

Gimbutas invented the methodology she called *archaeomythology* in order to comprehend the civilization of Old Europe where, as best she could tell, the material and spiritual aspects of culture had not been sundered, but were still whole (Gimbutas 1974). Although "previous books on Neolithic Europe have focused on habitat, tool kits, pottery trade, and environmental problems, treating religion as 'irrelevant,'" Gimbutas insisted that archaeologists "cannot remain scientific materialists forever ... A combination of fields — archaeology, mythology, linguistics, and historical data — provides the possibility for apprehending both the material and spiritual realities of prehistoric cultures ... [which are] intertwined ... reflections of each other" (Gimbutas 1991).

The Greek archaeologist Nanno Marinatos, in her outstanding book on ancient Crete, *Minoan Religion* (1993), also addresses the issue of narrowness in empiricist archaeological research. Like Gimbutas, she argues for a more well-rounded approach that includes a consideration of religion. "Religion is elusive, it is claimed, in comparison to economy and subsistence ... [but] no ancient culture can be understood without its religion. If we reduce the study of culture to pottery classification and data quantification (with some spice from the socioeconomic sphere), the scope of the humanist may be lost to that of the pseudo-scientist" (Marinatos 1993: 10).

Gimbutas' interpretation of the symbol system of Old Europe constructed a bridge between archaeology and mythology. This was the result of a lifetime of work, primarily in archaeology. Gimbutas pursued her internationally acclaimed studies of the Indo-European Bronze Age from the 1940s into the 1970s, publishing extensively, before turning to studies of Neolithic Europe. She directed five major excavations in Southeast Europe, and pursued her study of Neolithic artifacts in museums throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Meanwhile, she continued her exhaustive reading of scholarly reports (in their original languages) on both Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, combining her background in linguistics with a working fluency



Kurgan burrow-graves appear for the first time, containing privileged male burials that not only have weapons and an extraordinary amount of wealth goods ... but also sacrificed animals such as horses and oxen, and sacrificed women, children and others, probably slaves.

in twenty European languages. Finally, she applied her studies of mythology, history of religion and folklore (which began in her homeland of Lithuania), searching for "internal coherence: in the old European symbols and their associative contexts." She brought her prodigious knowledge plus her life experience to the construction of a comprehensive view of Old European culture that, to her surprise, contrasted sharply with that of the later Indo-European cultures of which she was a world class expert (see Joan Marler "The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas" in *The Legacy of the Goddess: The Work of Marija Gimbutas*, 1996).

Partly because of Gimbutas' ground-breaking work, the field of archaeology is beginning to address the matter of gender, and the role of ideology — not only in ancient cultures, but also in contemporary archaeologists' culturally constructed and biased frameworks of interpretation. Archaeologists influenced by the feminist epistemological critique of modern science are beginning to replace narrow empiricism with an engendered, anthropological archaeology that has "empirical depth" and is also able to deal with the interpretive, symbolic and even mythic dimensions of culture (Margaret Conkey, "Does It Make a Difference? Feminist Thinking and Archaeologies of Gender," Chamcool Archaeological Association, University of Calgary, 1990). At the same time, scholars in the fields of mythology, theology, history of religions, and religious studies are developing a more relational and intersubjective understanding of reality, as well as adopting a more multi-disciplinary approach. These epistemological expansions enable us to see more clearly the value of Gimbutas' archaeomythological approach, which includes her love for and empathic understanding of her subject matter, along with her rigorous scientific investigations and application of extensive mythological, religious, folkloric and linguistic knowledge.

III. Evaluating the Gimbutas' Paradigm Amid Controversy. Gimbutas' thesis has not been widely accepted by the archaeological establishments in

the United States and Europe (Philip Davis, "The Goddess and the Academy," *Academic Questions* 6 (1993): 49-66; Brian Fagan, "A Sexist View of Prehistory," *Archaeology* 45 (1992): 49-66; Mary Lefkowitz, "The New Cults of the Goddess," *American Scholar* 62 (1992): 29; "The Twilight of the Goddess: Feminism, Spiritualism, and a New Craze," *The New Republic* 207 (1993); Lynn Meskell, "Goddesses, Gimbutas and 'New Age' Archaeology," *Antiquities* 69 (1995): 74). I want to address this controversy philosophically in order to engage in dialogue with those who are resistant to, or who actively oppose, Gimbutas' findings, by referring to the epistemological theory advanced in Plato's *Republic* called "The Divided Line," and its corresponding metaphysical or mythological theory as related in "The Myth of the Cave." These passages from Plato's writing grapple with the complex, interconnected epistemologies of both science and mythology, and thus serve as a useful beginning point for our evaluation of Gimbutas' work.

Plato depicts his teacher Socrates explaining that truth-seeking occurs on four levels, with a different method of awareness or recognition appropriate to each. The first two levels deal with the visible world and conventional morality. The first level of awareness, *eikasia*, is that of *imagining what is reflected to us*, taking sense perceptions or moral projections at face value, at first blush. It is the level of unfounded opinion, of imagined perception of objects and values. At this stage of seeking to know, one operates largely on conjecture, and one has the tendency to take as real, as genuine and true, the shadows or somewhat murky reflections of objects not clearly seen. This is like believing in the shadows cast on a cave wall by firelight (to use Socrates' metaphor), or like believing that what one sees on television, or hears as gossip, is the same as reality. Now, we may want to believe that what we see on television is accurate, or that what we hear from friends as gossip or hearsay is the whole truth, but what we are receiving may be at best only fragments of truth, or partial truths, and at worst distortions or negations of truth by the false use, false conceptualization, or false depiction of events. How can we tell false opinion from correct opinion, for example, in the televised retelling of daily news events, or, for that matter, in the differing scholarly accounts of past events?

The second level of conscious awareness Socrates calls belief, *pistis*. This level deals with the *direct sensory perception* of the objects and relationships of the visible world, "the living creatures about us and all the works of nature or of human hands" (*The Republic of Plato*, Oxford UP, 1965: 224). At this level, Socrates teaches, one can hold correct opinions about directly observed empirical and moral facts, about first-person, embodied experience. For example, one can have a commonsense opinion



about whether the weather is rainy or sunny, warm or cold; or about the general preferability of health to disease, pleasure to pain, kindness to cruelty. To develop clearer beliefs about Old Europe, it would be helpful, for example, if we, like Gimbutas, had firsthand experience of the sites of Old Europe and their thousands of artifacts. While we might begin our search for the truth of a matter through dimly perceived or partial truths, there is a point, especially when one comes upon confused sensations or contradictory notions, at which one feels moved to search further for a more complete and better-integrated picture. Socrates asserts that beyond these first two levels of impressionistic awareness and sense-based beliefs, there is a higher realm of intellectual knowing. It is also divided into two levels.

The third level is that of *thinking within a theory*, using a system of ideas that accepts first principles from which can be deduced reliable conclusions, as in mathematics, science or moral theory. Socrates calls this the level of ordinary knowing by discursive reasoning, *dianoia*. This third level of theoretical understanding does not dismiss the second level of direct sensory perception, but works with it, drawing the sense-based opinions which have been found to be persistent or reliable under scrutiny into a larger interconnected context or matrix, a larger framework or picture which can augment and further clarify the meaning of the facts, so they make more sense, have more meaning. For example, the disparate reports from different archaeological digs can be fitted together to provide a more compelling explanation of how the peoples of a particular region and era lived. A theory is like a vessel or a model that holds together and interrelates various facts into a coherent and comprehensive whole that satisfactorily explains the many parts and their interrelationships. A theory (for example, of cultural origins) is a dynamic intellectual synthesis that would be consistent with the empirical facts, inclusive of all relevant factors, highly plausible, and elegant, and should have predictive or heuristic value for making new discoveries and expanding knowledge into new fields and domains. In addition, a theory must meet the criteria pertinent to a particular field of study. Modern empiricist scientists operate on the second and third levels of inquiry, using sensory observations, measurements, empirical experiments and theoretical frameworks to assess material facts (artifacts), verify material causal relations and develop reliable explanations. Archaeologists use the methods of site survey, excavation and data analysis. Historians of religion, mythology and folklore also operate on these two levels of inquiry, using several methods of fact-finding as well as theological frameworks for interconnecting the facets of meaning into a larger, explanatory whole. Gimbutas used a fact-based, combinatory process, and the intersection of the scientific theoretical

If we want to understand a civilization where spirituality may have been an integral part of peoples' everyday life, which way of looking would be more successful: one that studies only the material artifacts, or one that studies the material artifacts plus the cultural symbolism of the people as expressed in their art, architecture and burials?

framework of archaeology (including the latest laboratory dating methods using radiocarbon 14 and dendrochronology) and the theological frameworks of diverse mythologies, religions and folkloric systems.

But for Socrates, there is a fourth level of intelligibility that is more deserving of the name of knowledge. This is the level of *noesis*, attained by the use of *dialectical reasoning*. Socratic dialectic is a form of critical thinking and truth-seeking by which persons, in dialogue, pursue an ever more truthful understanding of a controversial matter. Each speaker expresses her or his personally held point of view. Where their views differ, the speakers engage in philosophical argumentation in hopes of mutually attaining closer and closer approximations of the truth. Socrates believed it was more important to reach toward truth than to hold on to a personal need to feel right. At this fourth, more advanced level of knowing, persons involved in knowledge-seeking need to be able to realize that competing theories, and especially the first premises they are holding onto as first truths, will have to be reconsidered as primary *assumptions* upon which the rest of each theory, continentally, depends. How then to evaluate which first premises or primary assumptions are more truthful, more reliable? At the point, Socrates becomes somewhat vague, and refers to the power of the dialectic to turn first premises into "hypotheses, in the literal sense, things 'laid down' like a flight of steps up which dialectical reasoning may mount all the way to something that is not hypothetical, the first principle of all; and having grasped this, may turn back and, holding on to the consequences which depend upon it, descend at last to a conclusion ..." (Plato 1965: 226). In this way, Socrates proposes, one arrives at knowledge in the fullest possible sense: *noesis*.

According to this epistemology or theory of knowledge, to attain



... cognitive archaeology ... is beginning to explore the archaeological record for material indicators of ancient mental processes ... To the extent that cognitive archaeology is unwilling to grapple with the possible and probable reality of an immanent and transcendent goddess mythology and its implications for gendered social relations in Neolithic Old Europe, it still appears to carry a cultural bias that hinders its study of the "ancient mind" of Old Europeans.

clear, reliable, noetic knowledge one needs to reach toward the direct apprehension or intuition of "the first principle of all." Some scholars refer to this act of intelligence as "rational intuition," others as "mystical intuition" (Thandeka, *The Embodied Self: Friedrich Schleiermacher's Solution to Kant's Problem of the Empirical Self*, 1995). For Socrates and Plato (although not for most of us today), these two seem to have meant the same thing. That is, for ancient Greeks from Pythagoras to Socrates to Aristotle, intuition was seen as both rational and mystical. Reality itself, conceived of as *logos*, was understood as being both rational and mystical, and thus essentially accessible to the dialectically reasoning-intuiting mind. Since the classical Greek era, reason has become largely separated from intuition, and it is difficult for many of us today to imagine how the two could be related, let alone how they might be interrelated. And yet this is where I believe a new epistemology of physics and metaphysics is leading us today (a point to which I return in the fourth section).

As I see it, those archaeologists (and others) who hold the epistemological assumption that only empirical knowledge is reliable knowledge cannot logically believe it possible to have any probable knowledge of the mind-states or spiritual experiences of ancient peoples — be they pre-literate or literate. Strict empiricists may disparage as purely speculative or imaginary any efforts to consider and understand religious beliefs, or any beliefs. They have reached the limits allowed them by their own theory of empirical science. But when they justify their positivist views

by invoking the empiricist scientific methodology and its encompassing theory of science, and proceed to reason discursively from only those premises to their conclusions, then their work is constrained by a worldview of theory that accepts without question its own first premises about what is valuable and reliable in the work of seeking knowledge. They are in the epistemologically awkward, self-contradictory position of believing in a theory of empiricism that itself cannot be proven empirically. This is not to say that empirical science is without value; it has great value. But its own method is too limited to explain its own value.

The Euro-American discipline of empiricist archaeology challenges Gimbutas' new discipline of archaeomythology. Are these simply different fields of study with different theoretical frameworks on interpretation and different methodologies? Shall we resolve the controversy by proposing that those who wish to deal only with matters of empirical (arti)facts should confine themselves to that sphere and engage only in the precise cataloguing of material data (a very valuable task in itself)? Do empirical archaeologists wish to shun all non-material inferences whatsoever and remain strictly silent in relation to the interpretation of cultural meaning from artifacts? If not, if empirical archaeologists to any degree pursue this same goal of the interpretation of cultural meaning, as inferred from the material artifacts, then our two theories and methodologies are to some extent in competition as to which can construct the better interpretation of culture. Then we can ask the question, which is better suited to the task?

Let us compare methodologies by first focusing on the more empirically testable findings of the Gimbutas paradigm. Gimbutas documents a profusion of evidence (mentioned at the beginning of this essay) for her characterization of Old Europe as a peaceful, egalitarian, Goddess civilization. Perhaps most telling for her theory is the contrast between the burial customs of the Old Europeans and the invading Kurgans. In the graves of Old Europe, women, men and children were typically buried with comparable respect, with objects of their crafts, jewelry, tools, trade goods or ritual items. With the incursions of horse-riding nomads from the Russian steppes, the Kurgan burrow-graves appear for the first time, containing privileged male burials that not only have weapons and an extraordinary amount of wealth goods (especially gold), but also sacrificed animals such as horses and oxen, and sacrificed women, children and others, probably slaves (Gimbutas 1991: 331-341, 352, 357-401). An interpretation of these data countervailing the one presented by Gimbutas argues that such cultural shifts are the result not of invasion by outsiders but of a gradual change that emerges from dynamics within the societies in question (Colin Renfrew,



Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins, 1987; Margaret Ehrenberg, *Women in Prehistory*, 1989: 99–107). This view may, to some extent, contribute to a more complete understanding of the cultural shift that took place in the later centers of Old Europe, as it was in transition from a matristic communal society toward a patriarchal class society. However, Gimbutas' discovery of a pattern of Kurgan invasions from the Russian steppes into Eastern Europe has recently been corroborated by the work of the Stanford University geneticist Cavalli-Sforzo ("Demic Expansions and Human Evolution," *Science* 259 (1993) no. 29), who has found genetic evidence for a population expansion into Eastern Europe stemming from an area "that almost perfectly matches Gimbutas' projection for the center of Kurgan culture." Additional scientific corroboration for Gimbutas' theory of the domination of a pre-existing matristic Old Europe by an androcratic Indo-European warrior culture is provided by the work of the geographer Robert DeMeo. Using a vast database and computer-generated models, DeMeo has coordinated climactic changes and human migration patters around the globe since the Paleolithic. His evidence indicates that climatic changes caused drought and desertification in what he calls "Saharasia," resulting in mass human migrations out of the Middle East as well as from the Kurgan homeland in Eurasia, around 4000 BCE, by what he called "patristic" culture (see Eisler 1995: 92–96).

The burden of proof has now shifted. Those who do not accept Gimbutas' theory of pre-Indo-European Old Europe and its overthrow by invading, horse-riding Kurgan nomads need to present persuasive material evidence of indigenous warfare, sexual and economic inequality and the dominance of male rulers and male power icons (male deities) as typical of Neolithic European (pre)history. Without a preponderance of evidence to the contrary, we are justified in acknowledging that Gimbutas has proposed the most plausible and probable interpretation of the presently available material data for these aspects of Neolithic Europe. What about the less empirical, more symbolic aspects of Neolithic European culture? How does one construct a highly probable interpretation of symbolic meaning from material objects images and signs? If we want to understand a civilization where spirituality may have been an integral part of peoples' everyday life, which way of looking would be more successful: one that studies only the material artifacts, or one that studies the material artifacts plus the cultural symbolism of the people as expressed in their art, architecture and burials? If we want to understand the social relations of women and men, would we be more successful if we use a methodology that implicitly assumes male dominance, or one that poses gender as a question, discussing the reflections of gender in

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the art, architecture and burials? If we want to understand the relations of clans to their neighbors, whether they were largely peaceful or belligerent, would we use a methodology that fails to consider the absence of weapons, fortifications and images of warfare, weapons and warrior deities, or one that seriously considers the significance of this notable absence? If for all these cases we answer that the second methodology would have a greater chance of success in leading to a more complete and coherent knowledge regarding our subject of inquiry, then wouldn't we be agreeing that the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach of Gimbutas is preferable? Wouldn't we be led to adopt archaeomythology as the larger field of inquiry, within which empirical archaeology would serve a valuable and indispensable subsidiary role, alongside the disciplines of linguistics and cultural anthropology and the histories of mythology, religion and folklore?

While Gimbutas amasses material evidence for her conclusions, she also uses intuition to discover within the widespread cultures of Old Europe repeating patterns that lead to her interpretations of the symbolic meanings for Old European inscriptions and artworks. How reliable are her claims that peoples primarily worshiped goddesses, as well as gods, during the Neolithic period throughout all of Europe? Did Old Europeans use, as she argues, a sacred script? Should the various societies of Neolithic Europe be grouped together as a single civilization? Were these peoples invaded and subordinated by warriors from the Pontic steppe region who primarily worshiped Sky-Gods? Were the warrior clans socially hierarchical, led by economically and spiritually privileged male chieftains, with women as subordinate to men? In European civilization since the Bronze Age a hybridization of the two cultures, the inheritor of two oppositional symbolic systems expressing countervailing values, ideals, spiritualities? Here we enter a level of interpretation that begins with, but inevitably moves beyond, simple material facts and causal material relations.

It is difficult to imagine more profound implications than those that flow from the Gimbutas paradigm: the re-integration of science and spirituality, the primacy of cooperation over competition as the basis of cultural development, re-conceiving loving relationships among the sexes, and the rebirthing of human community, embedded within an awareness of cosmic unity.

Fortunately, during the 1990s, more archaeologists, including Colin Renfrew and his colleagues, have begun to address the challenges presented by Gimbutas' archaeomythology (as well as by post-structuralist, post-processualist and Marxist archaeology) to the overly empiricist approach of the "New Archaeology" of the 1960s and 1970s. This new approach, called "cognitive archaeology" or "cognitive-processualist archaeology," is beginning to explore the archaeological record for material indicators of ancient mental processes — such as counting and measurement, planning, social relations, art-making, the evolution of symbolic script and religious practices, including ritualized burial practices and the focusing of attention toward superhuman powers of divinities (Renfrew and Bahn, *Archaeology, Theories, Methods and Practices*, 1966; Renfrew and Zobrow, *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, 1994). Similar to the practice of Gimbutas, they propose a methodology of drawing inferences from the scientifically analyzed database of the culture to possible and probable interpretations of the artifacts. The primary goal, according to Renfrew and Bahn, is to develop frameworks and explanations for understanding "the symbolic side of human society." Because symbols are assumed above all else to distinguish humans from other animals, it is intended that symbols "will play a central role" in the inferential work of cognitive archaeology (Renfrew and Bahn 1996: 473). While cognitive archaeology reaffirms the importance of scientifically derived "empirical depth," it yet lacks what could be called "mythological depth." At last some of these scholars are beginning to corroborate Gimbutas' general findings and theoretical framework, although they tend to underplay the importance of the elements of goddess-worship, the egalitarian social relations and the general peacefulness of the

people. For example, they have not yet explored in depth the basic questions of the differences between mythological frameworks that are centered on female iconography and those centered on male iconography, or on the significance of mythological systems that hold a belief in the immanence *and* transcendence of divine powers; nor have they sufficiently explored the possibility that the life of a culture may be altogether spiritual and symbolic and not separated into sacred and secular compartments (see Renfrew and Bahn 1996: 388; Renfrew and Zobrow 1994: 47-48).

Some scholars unfairly seek to dismiss Gimbutas' work as unscientific speculation or merely idiosyncratic interpretation. However, Gimbutas' archaeomythology scientifically analyzes the material database for Old Europe and draws possible and probable inferences from these analyses, mediated by the application of her knowledge of mythology, folklore, history of religion, and linguistics, to reconstruct the symbolic, religious ideology of Old Europe. To the extent that cognitive archaeology is unwilling to grapple with the possible and probable reality of an immanent and transcendent goddess mythology and its implications for gendered social relations in Neolithic Old Europe, it still appears to carry a cultural bias that hinders its study of the "ancient mind" of Old Europeans.

Gimbutas remains unsurpassed as a scholar in the combination of both empirical and mythological breadth and depth of knowledge as the framework of inference and interpretation for Old European civilization and its takeover by Indo-European culture. No one before Gimbutas had made a careful catalogue of signs and symbols of Neolithic Europe and subjected them to exhaustive comparative analysis. When she did so, she began to see repeated correlations of signs and images and contexts (called "continuities of cult" or "redundancies" by other archaeologists) from which she inferred persistent attributes of the female images. She determined that many of these female icons represented goddesses because of their use in ritual context, the consistency of their symbolic designs, the shamanic combination of the human female with animal powers (as in the images of the Bird Goddess and Snake Goddess) and the widespread utilization of similar symbolism across wide expanses of geography and chronology. Moreover, Gimbutas could find "no images ... of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record" (Gimbutas 1991: x). Surprisingly, male icons made up no more than 3-5% of the archaeological record (Gimbutas 1990). The multitude of correlated signs and images finally led Gimbutas to reconstruct an internally coherent mythological symbol system for Old Europe centered on a Great Goddess of Birth and Nurturance, Death and Regeneration. This system contrasted sharply with the well-known warrior Sky-God mythological framework



inferred from the archaeological remains of later Bronze Age Indo-European cultures. Contrasts include different correlations for the color black, the color white, the serpent, the bull and the bucranium, the sun and the horse (Gimbutas 1991: 400).

Gimbutas' study of the "language of the goddess," as she called it, has been criticized but not seriously critiqued by other archaeologists. That is, no one to date has attempted to re-examine all the same artifacts, their contexts, dates and inscriptions, to see if there are repeated patterns of association that substantiate, or unfound, Gimbutas' theory. However, an important step in this direction has been taken by the linguist Harald Haarmann in his exacting analysis in *Early Civilization and Literacy in Europe* (1996). His work confirms that Old Europeans did use a script, most frequently in religious contexts, and that it was nearly identical to the Linear A script of early Bronze Age, pre-Mycenaean Crete! Perhaps Gimbutas' work will provide the key to unlock the full decipherment of Old European and Cretan Linear A writing. When these scripts are finally translated, scholars will have to acknowledge Old Europe and pre-Mycenaean Crete, with their Goddess civilizations, as belonging to "history" (which in scholarly definition, begins with written records) and "civilization." If the empirical aspects of Gimbutas' theory of early European origins are corroborated by empirical science; if her multi- and interdisciplinary methodology is more comprehensive in scope and more appropriate to a culture that was both material and symbolic in expression; and if her symbolic inferences and interpretations are increasingly corroborated by scholars in the fields of archaeology, linguistics, genetics, geography, mythology, history of religion and folklore; then why is there so much resistance to Gimbutas' methodology, findings and resultant theory of European origins? To answer this question, we must address another set of questions, not only about methodology, but about cultural substance and ideology (ideas used for value-based social construction).

IV. Contemporary Cultural Transformation. In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Gimbutas addresses the contemporary relevance of her work: "This material, when acknowledged, may affect our vision of the past as well as our sense of potential for the present and future. *We must refocus our collective memory.* The necessity for this has never been greater as we discover that the path of 'progress' is extinguishing the very conditions for life on earth." (Gimbutas 1991: vii, emphasis added). Why are some people resistant to entertaining this possibility, to considering seriously the Gimbutas paradigm? Why might some reject this re-telling of the cultural origins of Europeans?

I see the new physics of today as closer to the body and mind physics-metaphysics of the ancient Greeks, and probably also of the Old Europeans, than has generally been recognized.

Socrates believed in the capacity of the human mind to be illumined: to apprehend the underlying oneness, beauty and goodness of life itself. In addition to the "Divided Line" and the "Myth of the Cave," we also have Socrates' teaching called the "Ladder of Love," in Plato's "Symposium." After one has ascended the "Divided Line" or the "Ladder of Love," then from the vantage point of illumination — as if one had looked directly into the radiant sun (to use another of Plato's metaphors), or had received a beatific vision of the heart of reality by turning one's eyes "toward the open sea of beauty" ("Symposium," in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, Bollingen Series 71, 1961: 562) — a person becomes capable first of discerning which of the first premises of differing theories are preferable, then of choosing between competing theories, and from there of drawing implications and finally conclusions about matters of fact and of morality in the visible world.

Now, persons who do not believe that an illuminating experience of the essential nature of reality is possible cannot utilize the Socratic methodology of truth-seeking. A person simply cannot use a methodology into which she or he will not put any interest, even tentative trust or effort. And yet, this is problematic for truth-seeking. For, as quantum physics has demonstrated in the sub-visible realm, and psychology has also demonstrated in the invisible realm of the mind; what we see and come to know is interdependent with where and how we choose to look. What if life itself, as embedded in the universe, is rationally approachable yet beyond complete human comprehension, hence also mysterious and thus susceptible to mythological and cosmological explanations?

Socrates and Plato used both logic and analogy, scientific as well as mythological reasoning, to persuade their interlocutors of the insights or wisdom they desired to impart. They used both masculine and feminine metaphors to midwife experiences of spiritual insight or vision. While some of the metaphors may seem more masculine to some (a linear, hierarchical, disembodying ascent up a ladder, using reason, to see the sun, the *logos*), I can also imagine a contrasting process in what seem to be more feminine metaphorical terms (a spiraling descent into the void that issues into

It may be that the resistance to her discoveries stems more from the investment individuals have in the paradigm of civilization that is constructed in accord with the prevailing gender, race and class hierarchies of domination and submission.

embodies love spreading through concentric, nesting circles); both of these may lead to the same place of noetic beholding. Perhaps Socrates, an initiate of the Mysteries of the Goddess at Eleusis, used both these kinds of methods, and a more masculine emphasis was eventually given by an older Plato and subsequent Platonists to the linear metaphors without their feminine complements. In any case, I recommend their combination as a more complete, multifaceted and holistic epistemology.

To further compare our two competing theories of European cultural origins, let us review their first-premise beliefs as if they are working assumptions used for the (re)construction of particular social systems. If, after assembling the relevant material facts and studying the competing theoretical explanations, we could engage not simply in discourse but in dialectical dialogue about European cultural origins; if we could finally allow this dialogue to lead us toward an intuition or vision of the first principle or source of all life, of reality in its fullness; if we could open ourselves to this as though beholding the brilliant, life- and death-giving sun spiraling through the spacious void of the universe; and then, having opened to this radiance and this generous blackness, if we would ask which set of working assumptions leads to greater understanding of human culture, its past, present and future possibilities — what might we believe? One first-premise belief is the prevailing view that the cultural origins of Europe began in the Bronze Age, with its empire-building, standing armies, class stratification, slave-based economies, monumental architecture, writing used in service to the ruling class, male dominance, and male-dominant religions. Would this assumption not bolster the belief that since its inception, the foundations of civilization have included class domination by warrior clans and the rule of the stronger over the weaker, wealth acquisition primarily through force and warfare, men's domination of women and human domination over (the rest of) nature? Would believing in what can be termed the "androcratic warrior theory of the origins of western civilization" further lead to contingent beliefs

that the fruits and pleasures of human creativity are destined repeatedly to be produced and destroyed by forces of personal greed and collective warfare; suffering is the primary fate of the majority of humanity; women should be submissive and accept a servile status in relation to men, who are superior aggressors; the main hope for alleviating the suffering of the many is either a world-renouncing, ascetic, abstract spirituality or other addictions; and the dominant economic and political world powers will probably continue unchecked from their course of the "ecocide" and "omnicide" of the life-systems through a dual attack by the non-sustainable consumption of the environment and military warfare?

On the other hand, might embracing the theory of the origins of European culture as reconstructed by Gimbutas lead to the sharing of a collective memory of an ancestral culture that was gynanic (neither patriarchal nor matriarchal); egalitarian (not exploitative); communal (not egoistic); relatively peaceful (not warring); spiritual in the sense of an embodied, immanent *and* transcendent spirituality (not of disembodied transcendence); goddess-centered and god-revering (not exclusively God-centered); artistically and linguistically advanced, with a sacred script (neither primitive nor illiterate); and nature-embedded (not alienated from nature and the cosmos)? The implications of accepting Gimbutas' radically different view of the origins of Western civilization would be far-reaching, not only for peoples within Western civilization, also but for non-Western peoples, with whom Westerners might begin to feel a greater sense of kinship.

It is difficult to imagine more profound implications than those that flow from the Gimbutas paradigm: the re-integration of science and spirituality, the primacy of cooperation over competition as the basis of cultural development, re-conceiving loving relationships among the sexes, and the rebirthing of human community, embedded within an awareness of cosmic unity. If one were given a choice between the one theory or the other; and if one were able to use empirical data and also artistic sensibility, ethical values and spiritual wisdom; and finally, if one were able to attain a vision that sees clearly into the radiant, vibratory nature of reality — which would be the more truthful, reliable, morally valuable and wise theory to choose?

As I understand it, a *noetic act of intelligence* is a rational intuition of the growthful, adaptive, creative dynamics of life as it actualized the innate potential and interrelational opportunities of sentient beings seeking the experiences of safety, satisfaction and fulfillment. It is a rational intuition that is sometimes imbued with feelings of wonder, awe, reverence, joy and gratitude and, at other times, with feelings of fear, pain, hatred, guilt or other suffering. I see the new physics of today as closer to the body and mind

physics-metaphysics of the ancient Greeks, and probably also of the Old Europeans, than has generally been recognized. Similarly, I think Gimbutas' methodology of archaeomythology comes closer to the noetic insight Socrates recommended than either empirical science or religious studies as separated disciplines, because of its recombination of body and nature with mind and spirit. Here I use the word *spirit* to mean that which animates, like breath, fire, water and earth, like the creative forces of the universe.

As the works of Thomas Kuhn and others working on the sociology of knowledge have informed us, a radical change in scientific paradigms (or philosophical worldviews) is not easily accomplished, even when there is considerable evidence and incentive to do so. While I believe human beings are inherently truth-seeking creatures, we are also survival- and comfort-seeking creatures, and creatures of vested interests. It is very difficult for a person to give up a worldview or theory that has provided a sense of survival, stability and/or privilege. Moreover, even if someone wants to shift perspective from a habitual way of thinking, recent brain research informs us that the brain itself is "wired" into clusters of information, around nodes or central organizing points and matrices, that give each person a "mindset," that is to say, a mind that is set into a structure of neurological networks and fields that becomes more and more firmly established, providing a person with his or her sense of identity. To change our paradigms or worldviews, we need to transform the brain circuitry itself! To change to a new theory of life, or theory of civilization, a person would need to allow him- or herself to experience the discomfort that would come from the deconstruction of a firmly constructed mindset and, thus, the dissolution of identity, with a subsequent sense of loss, disorientation and chaos. Yet these would be the preconditions and prelude to a new frame of mind, a new identity and a new way of viewing the world (Joseph Pearce, *Evolution's End: Claiming the Potential of Our Intelligence*, 1992).

To become capable of accepting Gimbutas' theory of the cultural origins of early Europe, an individual would need to question the inevitability of warfare, economic hierarchies of dominance and subordination and the exclusively male-centered concept of divinity. It is accurate to say that in the West, these are long-cherished and entrenched beliefs that have been upheld as pillars of Western civilization. Thus, when the work of Gimbutas is met with skepticism and rejection, it may not be because her methodology is unorthodox or her conclusions unfounded. It may be that the resistance to her discoveries stems more from the investment individuals have in the paradigm of civilization that is constructed in accord with the prevailing gender, race and class hierarchies of domination and submission. Fortunately, scientists,

humanists, historians of religion and historians of culture are now engaged in revisioning the course of Western civilization and reconstructing the sciences, humanities and religions into a "new paradigm" that is more inclusive, more reliable and more integrated as a hologram of reality. Gimbutas' work plays in concert with this larger endeavor to create a "paradigm shift" that interrelates more of the post-modern expansion of human knowledge. Her theory is compatible with the embodied cultural and spiritual understanding being newly proposed by cultural theorists and theologians, as well as with the "New Science" being developed by physicists, biologists, mathematicians, systems theorists and others coming to terms with the mysterious interface of mind and matter, body and spirit, reason and intuition. The New Science is in the process of exchanging the "dispassionate" pursuit of "objectivity" and "absolute certainty" for an epistemology that is "anticipatory," "interdependent," "inter-subjective" and "probabilistic." It explores the noetic insights of the interdependence and underlying oneness of all life, the primacy of cooperation over competition for biological evolution, the aliveness of the whole Earth as GAIA and the integral relationships of humans to the larger cosmic whole.

As a feminist, philosopher and peace activist, I choose to imagine a global civilization that has matured beyond chronic warfare and competition as primary cultural values, by replacing these with cooperation, pleasure and compassion. I see a civilization that has moved beyond the splits of science and religion, nature and culture, immanent and transcendent religions, becoming a world community that has learned to cherish and care for the living mantle of the Earth Mother and Her offspring, sprung from the regenerative powers of both Earth and Sky. I see a world where women and men live in creative harmony, in a dance of polarity, partnership and diversity, a world that has applied creative human intelligence to the tasks of ending poverty, hunger and social injustice, and has thus created the foundations of enduring peace. All this, in significant ways, is not unlike the memorable lifeways our Old European ancestors once were able to create and enjoy.

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ASHERAH: Goddess of the Israelites

by Fritz Muntean
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In 1975-76, at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in northern Sinai, an archaeological team from Tel Aviv University uncovered the remains of what is believed to be an early Iron Age religious centre. Inscriptions found on jars at this site contain blessing formulae which include the astounding phrase "Yahweh and his Asherah." A few years earlier, an inscription was found in a burial cave at another site, Khirbet el-Qom, near Hebron, which may also refer to "Yahweh's Asherah" (Judith Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription"; "Some Drawings and Inscriptions of Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 57, 180). These findings present us with material that dates from around the beginning of the eighth century BCE, well into the monarchical period and after the establishment of the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem, but from sites which were far from the centers of orthodoxy and the watchful eyes of the Jerusalem establishment (William Dever, "Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 31). In light of these discoveries, the Israeli historian Amihai Mazar suggests that it might be possible to assume that the two pillars and two altars found in a small temple in the fortress of Arad might reflect a similar theology, the larger standing stone symbolizing "the God of Israel and the smaller one his consort, Asherah" (Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 1990: 496-97). When examined along with the frequent references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, these discoveries may throw new light on an hitherto unsuspected aspect of Israelite theology.

Is it possible that the God of Israel, in the popular religion of tribal and monarchical times, had a consort? The Israelite religion unequivocally represents itself as a strict monotheism that began with Yahweh's original revelation to Abraham, although many scholars date the origin of Hebrew monotheism a few centuries later, during the days of the great prophets (Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 1967: 20). In defense of this austere monotheism, the Hebrew Bible contains considerable counsel against the veneration of Canaanite deities; particularly Asherah, whose worship by the Israelites is condemned on forty different occasions. In spite of this, Asherah is often associated (Deut 16:21; Ezek 8:5) with the altar of Yahweh, and a long series of reformations was apparently required to remove her cultic paraphernalia from the Jerusalem Temple (1Kgs 15:13; 2Kgs 18:4; 21:7; 23:4, 6, 7).

In this article we will first identify the goddess Asherah, examining the references to her in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Classical material. We will define her place in the Canaanite pantheon, and attempt to separate her identity from those of other related goddesses. Turning then to the Hebrew Bible, we will chronicle the progress of Asherah among the Children of Israel, comparing prophetic condemnations with archaeological findings. In the light of all this material, we will then return to a closer examination of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom material. Finally, we will attempt to understand the reasons behind both the hostility displayed by the Hebrew Prophets toward the cult of Asherah, and the apparently persistent popularity of her worship among the Israelites.

Asherah first appears in Akkadian cuneiform texts of the second millennium (c 1830-1431) as a goddess named Ashratum, the consort of the chief god Amurra. She bears the titles "bride of the king of heaven" and "mistress of sexual vigor and rejoicing." Another 15th century text in Akkadian cuneiform from Taanach, near Megiddo in northern Palestine, contains a tantalizing reference to a "wizard of Asherah," which calls to mind the prophets of Asherah mentioned in 1Kgs 18:19 in the time of King Ahab (John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 386). Twelve hundred years later, during the Hellenistic period, Asherah is mentioned in the Phoenician History by Philo of Byblos, and she also appears in Lucian's *The Syrian Goddess* as a syncretistic deity named Atargatis who encompasses Astarte, Anath and Asherah (Walter Maier, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, 1986: 68).

By far the largest body of orderly and consistent references we have to Asherah and the other deities of Northwest Semitic religion, which include the Phoenician as well as the Canaanite, are the Ugaritic manuscripts of the mid-second millennium. Ugarit was a thriving Mediterranean port and cosmopolitan trading centre until its destruction in the early 12th century BCE, and it was there that the world's oldest alphabet, a cuneiform alphabetic script, was invented, apparently for the specific purpose of setting ancient religious narratives in writing (Alan Cooper, "Canaanite Religion: An Overview," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987: 35-36). In Ugaritic mythology, the two preeminent male deities are the remote and transcendent El and his immanent and active son (sometimes nephew), the storm-god Baal. Asherah is the wife of El, and Baal's consort is the goddess Anath.

Anath, who is the daughter of Asherah and El, is by far the most active goddess in the Ugaritic pantheon. Like the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar, her attributes incorporate many opposites: she is the goddess of love and of war, she is virginal and yet wanton, amorous and yet given to uncontrollable outbursts of rage and appalling acts of cruelty. Anath manifests what are often

cited as the four basic traits of Near Eastern goddesses: chastity and promiscuity, motherliness and bloodthirstiness (Patai 1967: 187). No ancient Near Eastern goddess was more savage and more easily provoked to violence than she. These attributes of Anath, as well as her lineage, will play a part in our subsequent arguments.

Asherah, in the Ugaritic texts, is referred to as '*atrt*', which is assumed to be pronounced Athirat. She bears other titles as well: she is called '*ilt*', pronounced Elat, which literally means "goddess"; and she is referred to as *qnyt 'ilm*,

*... Maacah [was deposed] from her exalted position of queen-mother because, according to 1Kgs 15:13, she had "made an obscenity for Asherah." In the Vulgate Latin translation, "obscenity" reads *sacris Priapi*, and as such it was understood ... to be a phallic device — apparently one of no small stature, since it had to be hewn down and taken to the Kidron River to be burned.*

"Progenitress (or Mother) of the gods" (Day 1986: 387). She was associated with the sea from a very early time and, at her shrines in the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, Athirat is called *rbt 'atrt ym*, "Lady Athirat of the sea," and one of her servants is *Qodesh-wa-Amrur*, "the Fisherman of Lady Asherah of the sea" (Maier 1986: 195). Asherah sometimes bears the epithet "*Qudsu*," which means "holy" or "sanctuary." This is also the name of a nude female figure wearing a Hathor headdress which is found on Egyptian scarabs of the Second Intermediate Period (Day, "Canaanite Religion," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1990: 831). The figure is often winged, and frequently holds lotus blossoms or a branch in her hands. However, full frontal nudes — especially those of divinities — were almost completely unknown in Egypt, but plaques and figurines of this type have been found in Syria and Palestine from throughout the second millennium (Day 1986: 389). The prayers inscribed on these stelai show that Qudsu was considered to be primarily a goddess of fertility, eroticism and sexual vigor. In a broader and more secondary sense, she was also seen as a welfare- and life-giving goddess, and according to one of the prayers, as a goddess of the dead (Maier 1986: 86).

Already the discerning eye may have noticed some important differences between the Ugaritic Athirat/Elat and the Palestinian Asherah/Qudsu. In 14th

century Canaanite mythology, Athirat is essentially a mother goddess and her daughter Anath is the deity of erotic fertility. Furthermore, in a number of the references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, she is associated with Baal. By this line of reasoning, the biblical Asherah might better be equated with the lusty Anath rather than with the nurturing Athirat. On the other hand, Dever points out that at Ugarit, in addition to the epithet "Elat" that she bears as the consort of El, Athirat is also called "Baalat," and in the Taanach tablets Asherah, not Anath, appears with Baal (Dever 1984: 29). Day states that Athirat is definitely identified in the Ugaritic texts with Qudsu, "a fertility goddess of marked erotic character," and he further directs our attention to a Hittite myth from the second millennium which shows us that Asertu (Athirat), the consort of Elkunirsa (El), was already attempting to seduce the storm god Baal — the allusions to Asherah alongside Baal in the Hebrew Bible "may imply that she eventually got her man!" (Day 1986: 399).

Further confusion may result from the fact that many of the references to Asherah and Baal in the Hebrew Bible are in the plural, the implication being that they may have been generic terms for a multitude of local pagan deities. However, these passages are clearly polemical in nature, and we should certainly wonder if the Canaanites would themselves have described their deities in the same way. Even writers as early as Philo of Alexandria have noted that, because of its polemic character, biblical witness to Canaanite religion must be considered unreliable. Philo recognized that Canaan was the biblical symbol of 'vice,' which the Israelites were naturally bidden to despise. However parochial the biblical writers may have been, it is clear from their accounts of pagan cult among the Israelites that the nature of those practices, as well as the names of the deities worshiped, were many and varied. One theory holds that the "Baals" and the "Asherim" of the Bible refer to the cultic paraphernalia of the local "high places," or sanctuaries, where the worship of Asherah, combined with that of a Baalized Yahweh, was practiced (see Exod 34:13) from the days of tribal Israel (Day 1990: 835). The evidence for the persistence of such cultic activities is contained in the frequent calls by the Hebrew Prophets for their abrogation.

It is clear from these biblical references that the worship of Asherah had penetrated Jerusalem itself at least by the time of Solomon's son Rehoboam. His wife Maacah, the daughter of Absalom (2Chr 11:20-21), was the mother of Abijah, Rehoboam's heir. Maacah apparently used her influence as queen-mother to introduce Asherah, who was already worshiped in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon, into the Temple itself (Patai 1967: 45). Abijah was succeeded by Asa, who after reining for fifteen years, came under the influence of a prophet named Azariah the son of Oded, at which time (the late 890s) Asa carried out the first religious reform in the history of Jerusalem. Not only did he remove the sacred

male prostitutes and all the idols, altars and images from the Temple, but he deposed Maacah herself from her exalted position of queen-mother because, according to 1Kgs 15:13, she had “made an obscenity for Asherah.” In the Vulgate Latin translation, “obscenity” reads *sacris Priapi*, and as such it was understood, at least by St Jerome, the Vulgate’s translator, to be a phallic device — apparently one of no small stature, since it had to be hewn down and taken to the Kidron River to be burned. The task of removing the Asherim first from Jerusalem and the Temple, and then from all of Judea, was continued into the middle of the ninth century by Asa’s son Jehoshafat. However, since nowhere in the biblical sources do we read of the setting up of these Asherim, this may lead us to the conclusion that this popular form of Asherah worship was a heritage from the pre-monarchic period. Upon the death of Jehoshafat, Asherism was reestablished in Judah (2Chr 21:6). A new reform movement began in 715 under King Hezekiah and the Prophet Isaiah, but Hezekiah’s heir Manasseh allowed the re-establishment of altars for Baal and Asherah, and he is recorded (2Kgs 21:3-7) as having set a carved image of Asherah in the Temple. Manasseh did not reestablish the Brazen Serpent of Moses which his father has removed from the Temple, perhaps because “with the passage of time the worship of a deity symbolized by a serpent had become obsolete. Not so Asherah whose motherly figure must have been dear to many worshippers and whose restoration to her traditional place in the Temple was therefore considered a religious act of great importance” (Patai, 1967: 48).

It seems possible that the veneration of Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple may have been one of the contributory causes for the breakup of David and Solomon’s Kingdom. In 1Kgs 11:29-39, the Prophet Ahijah encourages Jeroboam to rise against Solomon, telling him that Yahweh will “tear the kingdom from Solomon’s hand” because he had forsaken Yahweh to worship “Ashoreth the goddess of the Zidonians.” If Ahijah hoped that splitting the kingdom would allow at least ten of Israel’s tribes to become untainted by Canaanite religious practices, he was badly mistaken — geography conspired against him. From the very beginning of the Northern Kingdom, its survival depended on close political ties with the Phoenicians — ties which finally led to Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. Although this alliance primarily produced political results, it assured the infiltration into Israel of Phoenician (read High Canaanite) artistic concepts and religious styles as well. Ahab, clearly under the influence of his Phoenician wife, “put up a sacred pole” (1Kgs 16:33) in the capital city of Samaria which continued to be a center of Asherah worship until the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 721.

It is possible that, even though the strict Yahwists considered Baal to be a dangerous rival of Yahweh, the goddess Asherah was regarded as his inevitable, necessary, or at any rate tolerable, female counterpart. 1Kgs 18:19 tells us that 450

prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah ate at the table of Jezebel, but when all 450 prophets of Baal were slaughtered at the River Kishon — and twenty years later when Jehu and the Rechabites slew all the priests and worshippers of Baal in Samaria (2Kgs 10:28-29) — no harm befell the supporters of Asherah, nor was her

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sacred pillar removed from Samaria. In 2Kgs 13:6, we read that Asherah’s sacred pole, presumably the one erected by Ahab in the 870’s, was still standing in Samaria during the reign of King Jehoahaz (814-798).

In spite of their polemics, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel supply us with the only glimpses we have of the actual details of pagan rites both in the towns and in the Temple. In Jeremiah 7:17-18 the children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women make cakes and pour libations. In Ezekiel 8:1-18, Yahweh takes Ezekiel on a tour of the pagan rituals being performed by “the house of Israel” in Yahweh’s own sanctuary, including women weeping for the Tammuz, men performing obeisance to the rising sun, seventy elders worshipping idols, and the “idol that provokes jealousy” — apparently that image of Asherah which Manasseh had set up in the Temple.

It is clear from these accounts of pagan cult among the Israelites that, in spite of the fact that they were attacked by prophets from Azariah to Ezekiel, those who worshiped Asherah in rural groves and high places (or in the Temple itself) surely thought of themselves as loyal members of the Israelite religion, and considered the goddess Asherah to be an important part of their religion. This may be difficult for us to understand today, when religions are organized by coordinating and sanctifying central authorities, but it is important for us to remember that although Israelite, and later Jewish, religious doctrines and practices have always derived from one ultimate source — the Bible — they have differed greatly over time and from place to place. Lacking a coordinating and sanctifying

central authority, their precise formulation was left to local religious leadership and that except for a brief period when the Great Sanhedrin exercised central authority in Jerusalem, heterodox practices were able to flourish simply because there was no organized religious body from which to secede or which might have cut off the offending limb. For example, "European Jews, in obedience to a certain medieval

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rabbincal authority, accepted the religious ban on marrying two or more wives, while their brethren in the Middle East continued to consider plural marriages legal, and to practice polygyny to the present time" (Patai 1967: 19).

In addition to biblical evidence for the prevalence of goddess worship among the Israelites, further confirmation may be derived from the archaeological data. Hundreds of terra-cotta plaques and figurines of nude female figures have been found throughout Palestine. Some are figures of pregnant women, others are pillar-like figurines showing a female figure from the waist up with a cylindrical base below. Those found in the Northern Kingdom are more naturalistically styled than the ones from Judah, possibly due to the Phoenician artistic influence. In Israel the figure's hands hold her breasts — or sometimes a round object, possibly a tambourine. In Judah the pillar figure, again usually with the hands to the breasts, was more common, and the finest examples of these were found in Jerusalem, dating from the 8th and 7th centuries (Mazar 1990: 501-02). There can be no doubt that these figurines played a prominent role in daily religious practice, but it is still an open question as to whether they represented the goddess herself, a priestess of the goddess, a cultic prostitute, or were talismans used in sympathetic magic to stimulate the reproductive processes of nature. In a 7th century Hebrew incantation, found in Arslan Tash in Upper Syria, the aid of Asherah is sought by a woman in delivery. Such an invocation of Asherah may have been contained in the original form of the exclamation made by Lea (Gen 30:10-13) at the birth of Zilpah's son — whom she named Asher (Patai 1967: 3536).

In the light of this evidence, both biblical and archaeological, for the

persistence of goddess cult in monarchical and, perhaps, tribal Israel, we can now return to a closer examination and evaluation of the material found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. Pithos A from 'Ajrud, on which the phrase "Yahweh Lord of Samaria and his Asherah" was found, includes a drawing of three cryptic figures under, and intersecting, the inscription. Two of the figures are standing, while on the right, a smaller seated figure is shown playing the lyre. The two standing figures are both distinguished by large nether appendages which could be taken for tails or exaggerated genitalia. The two standing figures are said to represent the Egyptian ithyphallic dwarf god Bes, an apotropaic figure popularly associated in Palestinian folk religion with the erotic aspects of the Canaanite fertility cults (Pirhiya Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntellet 'Ajrud)," *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982): 28), and Dever identifies the seated lyre player as "Yahweh's Asherah" by the similarity of her garments and coiffure to the almost identically enthroned representations of Canaanite goddesses found on Ugaritic plaques and other examples of well-known Canaanite cultic art (Dever 1984: 25-26).

Both the 'Ajrud and the el-Qom inscriptions refer to "His Asherah" and "Yahweh's Asherah." Is the implication that Asherah belonged to Yahweh in the sense of being his wife or consort? The Hebrew *asherah*, or more commonly the masculine plural *asherim*, can refer to an object associated with the goddess Asherah (W.J. Fulco, "Athirat," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987: 492). In fact, most of the references in the Deuteronomic corpus (eg, Deut 16:21-22 and 2Kgs 21:3) imply that the Asherah was a manmade object. Day believes that "the Asherim were wooden poles sacred to the goddess Asherah," but he argues that although it seems clear that they symbolized the goddess, the fact that they are frequently mentioned (Deut 7:4; 2Chron 43:3-4; Mic 5:12-13) alongside "graven images" as being distinct objects may imply that although they were idolatrous, they may not have been actual representational images (Day 1986: 403-04). Given the association of the goddess Asherah with the ubiquitous terra-cotta figurines of the period, it is certainly possible to agree with Fulco and Day that the Asherim were phallic stelae, symbols of human and agricultural fertility.

Many scholars prefer to understand "Yahweh's Asherah" as a wooden image closely associated with the altar of Yahweh (cf. Deut 16:21). Yahweh would then remain the subject of the blessings, but the supplications would have been performed "before the asherah in the shrine," the prayers offered to Yahweh "by means of the asherah," and Yahweh's blessings "carried out by his asherah" (Hadley 1987: 59). Thus although the inscriptions could refer to "his (wife) Asherah," they might be thought of as meaning "his asherah": the wooden image. This understanding fits the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud which might then be said to read: "blessed by Yahweh and the wooden symbol of the goddess

Asherah."

Dever, on the other hand, takes exception to what he refers to as the "minimalist" interpretation of the biblical references to Asherah as a sacred tree or an enigmatic cult-image. He believes that the inscriptions and pictorial representations from 'Ajrud (and possibly those from el-Qom) clearly identify Asherah as "a hypostatization of the Great Goddess" whose worship in ancient Israel as the consort of Yahweh was more than just a persistence of Canaanite religious practices. According to Dever, both the confusion of Asherah's names, and the ambiguity in the references to her attributes, are the result of "the near-total suppression of the cult by the 8th-6th century reformers" which resulted — Asherah's original identity having been forgotten, "not to be recovered until the goddess emerged again in the texts recovered from Ugarit" — in the references to Asherah in the Masoretic text being "misunderstood by later editors" or reinterpreted "to suggest merely the shadowy image of the goddess" (Dever 1984: 21-31).

It is clear that a great deal of prophetic energy was spent in polemic against these predominately material, and thus relatively superficial, aspects of popular Israelite cult activities. To our modern sensibilities, the most significant difference between Yahweh and the other deities of ancient Palestine lay neither in ritual nor in the physical trappings of shrines and altars (almost none of which, Israelite or Canaanite, has survived into our time), but in the "ideology and morality, which was developed in Yahweh's name by the great Hebrew prophets" (Patai 1967: 37). Far more constructive, in the development of a deity with sufficient staying power to survive into modern times (Nietzsche notwithstanding) are those biblical polemics directed against the characteristically Canaanite idea of a god like Baal, who was by nature primarily immanent in humanity and therefore subject to its flux. In contrast, Yahweh was comfortably assimilated to the more transcendent El, and continued thereafter to develop into an even more consummate deity. Consider 1Kgs 19:12: a god that doesn't have to shout may be considered to have serious longevity potential.

Why then were the Hebrew Prophets so hostile towards Asherah? Perhaps they considered the worship of Asherah an abomination because, if for no other reason, it was a cult that originated with their Canaanite neighbors, and any and all manifestations of Canaanite religion were, for these stern Yahwists, strictly anathema. Another reason, and one that seems especially unfortunate from our perspective in this age of psychological insight, was that the prophets seemed determined to stamp out those religious practices that involved or implied sexual behaviour. Apparently, ritual license was a common element of Canaanite religious life. We know from the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod 32:6) that sexual rioting was the traditional response to the exhibition of statuary symbolizing Canaanite

deities. Pilgrimages by women to holy places for the purpose of removing the curse of barrenness, a popular biblical activity, seems innocent enough until we read the prophetic condemnation of the *qedeshim*, the sacred male prostitutes belonging to the fertility cult which centered on the goddess Asherah. It certainly seems possible that the services of these *qedeshim* were made use of by childless women who visited their sanctuaries in order to become pregnant (See 1Sam 1:9-20 for a possible example).

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Cultural competition and a fear of sexual misbehaviour aside, there may have been a more serious reason for the aversion that the prophets felt toward the cults of Asherah and Baal. The Hebrew Prophets frequently denounced the practitioners of Canaanite religion for sacrificing their own children as votive offerings to their gods. It is certainly possible that these accusations were only an ancient manifestation of the universally persistent, if paranoid, belief that rival societal elements practice inhuman rituals. In fact, no physical evidence of human sacrifice has been found in Palestine, and what actually occurred may have simply been a dedication in fire (M. Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and Its Background," *Ugaritic-Forschungen* 4 (1972): 141-42). Biblical references to human sacrifice, among both the Israelites or the Canaanites, are not uncommon. Although Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:30-40), was probably not literally sacrificed, but committed to some sort of life-long dedication in the service of Yahweh, we also have the ritual slaying by Samuel of King Agag "before Yahweh at Gilgal" (1Sam 15:33) as an admonishment to Saul, and the sacrifice of the eldest son of the king of Moab upon his city wall in order to turn the tide of battle against the Israelites: "Alarmed at this, the Israelites withdrew" (2Kgs 3:27).

Archaeological findings do exist of votive child sacrifice in the Punic outpost of Phoenician culture in North Africa (Day 1990: 834), and a connection, admittedly tenuous, exists between the cultic practices of Carthage and those of the Canaanite world. That link depends in part on the equation of the Punic goddess



Tannit with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, but the identity of these two deities is far from being universally agreed (Day 1986: 404). Maier, however, does equate Tannit with Asherah. He states unequivocally that Tannit is Asherah/Qudsu and identifies her as a Semitic divinity who is older than Punic civilization (Maier 1986: 115).

Tannit's name is related to the word for "dragon," so that she would be "the One of the dragon" or "the Dragon Lady"; an epithet similar to a meaning of Asherah's title: "the Lady who treads on the sea (dragon)." Because of these

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"marine connections" Tannit could be identified with Asherah, "The Lady of the Sea" (John Betlyon, "The Cult of Asherah/Elat at Sidon," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 54). According to Day, however, Tannit has more in common with Astarte than with Asherah, but at least one inscription from Carthage clearly differentiates the two, so Day concludes that Tannit is either "a form of Anath or an independent deity" (Day 1986: 397-98). At any rate, the question of Tannit's equation with Asherah may be moot in this regard because, according to P. Mosca, Tannit's name appears only sporadically in Punic sacrificial inscriptions, and that "It was Baal Hamon who was ... the head of the Punic pantheon, and it was primarily to him that children were sacrificed" (see Maier 1986: 159-60n282). So although it is possible that children were sacrificed to Canaanite deities in ancient Palestine, no supporting archaeological evidence has been found, and the theories of identity that link actual evidence of sacrifice with the goddess Asherah are weak.

In spite of whatever reasons the Yahwists had for condemning her, be it

inter-cultural rivalry, sexual prudery, or the (possibly paranoid) fear of diabolic ritual slaughter, the worship of Asherah, "which had been popular among the Hebrew tribes for three centuries" before the establishment of the monarchy, continued to be celebrated with such persistent enthusiasm that, during the 370 years in which the Solomonic Temple stood in Jerusalem, the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple for no less than 236 of those years, "opposed only by a few prophetic voices crying out against it at relatively long intervals" (Patai 1967: 49-50). Although Athirat/Elat/Asherah had played a relatively minor role in classical Ugaritic mythological texts, she went on to become an extraordinarily popular and durable deity. The diffusion of the cult of Asherah (from Hierapolis and the Near East to Spain) and its endurance (from the second millennium to the Christian Era) are remarkable enough, but even more impressive is its basic consistency over the centuries (Maier 1986).

Whether the Asherah referred to the Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions is the consort of Yahweh or a cultic object associated with his worship, it seems clear that, in spite of the intensity and increasing frequency of the prophetic demand for the worship of Yahweh as the one and only god, the Israelites combined the worship of Yahweh with that of Asherah — along with other, originally Canaanite, gods and goddesses — in many places and times from the earliest days of Israel in the land of Canaan down to the destruction of Jerusalem, and thereafter, at least, in Egyptian exile. A small remnant of Judah, languishing in exile in Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, delivered the most poignant defense of Asherism recorded in the Hebrew Bible. When Jeremiah attempted to convince them that the national catastrophe which had befallen them was a punishment for their love of idolatry, and that they would perish in Egypt if they did not repent (Jmh 44:15-19), a great crowd of men and women rejected Jeremiah's admonition, saying that as long as they had offered libations and made cakes for the Queen of Heaven that their lives had been safe and full, but since the rites they celebrated had been outlawed they had been destitute and had "perished either by sword or by famine."

If we are to apply Newman's standard of "chronic vigour" as one of the marks that distinguishes a genuine religious practice from a corruption, the ancient Hebrew veneration of Asherah would certainly pass the test. The recent culture-wide increase in the appreciation of the feminine and the resulting insights have gone a long way to explain the persistence of Asheran devotion in ancient Palestine: the intrinsic value of the feminine in our image of the divine.

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The Rose Beyond the Grave

by Evan John Johns

When I was discussing ‘clan’ matters with some American visitors a few years ago, we reached a point where, if we were to go on talking, a single red rose would then have to be placed upon the table. This was done, and from that moment on, everyone present was honour-bound never to repeat anything said at that table to any outsider. For what was discussed was now *sub rosa*, literally, “under the rose.”

This equation of the rose with secrecy goes back to Pagan Roman times, supposedly when Cupid gave a rose to Harpocrates, god of silence, to symbolize concealing the secrets of Venus. Hence early Christians rejected the rose as a decorative motif because of its associations with Roman depravity. Yet the rose crept back in, as in the ‘rose windows’ of many medieval churches, not to mention the rose hip’s utility as an inexpensive and ideally shaped material for making rosary beads—reinforcing its name, which comes from the Virgin Mary’s allegorical ‘crown of roses.’

Among occultists, the rose symbolizes secrets of the mysteries. In the case of my own tradition, the Clan of Tubal Cain, it is also associated with the grave. Many of us hope and believe that there is another life beyond the grave. Some Pagans cast their ‘Summerlands’ as merely a more kindly version of this present world. In my tradition, we believe that we are reborn time and time again, each life shaped by the way we lived our past life, until in the end we become spiritually advanced enough not to have to return to this world. Instead, we are absorbed into and become as one with the Godhead that first seeded this earth with fragments of itself, each fragment becoming an individual soul.

Still, no one as yet has offered concrete and irrefutable proof of life after death, such as would stand up in a court of law. No matter our religion, no matter how much we delve into our innermost being to dredge up past-life experiences, in the end all that we have left is our personal belief in the existence of a soul and of a life beyond the grave. Only when we cross from life to death can we find the true answer to the secret that we call ‘The Rose Beyond the Grave.’

If we believe in the existence of an immortal soul, we are faced with the question of what happens to it after death. Since every religion offers its own version of the afterlife, they cannot all be right—or can they? One of my first lessons in the Craft dealt with this very subject. I was told, “For many eons the human spirit had no abode, then finally by desire to survive [it] created the pathway into the Otherworlds. Nothing is got by doing nothing, and whatever we

do now creates the world in which we exist tomorrow. The same applies to death: what we have created in thought, we create in that other reality. We should remember that Desire was the first of all created things.”

If this be true, then there can be as many Otherworld Places of the Dead as there are religions, and each one will be equally valid in its own right without denying or contradicting the validity of others created by the collective minds and desires of a religion’s followers. If a small group of rail enthusiasts believe firmly enough in a heaven where all the trains are steam-powered, run on time, and never have problems with the wrong sort of snow or leaves on the line, then it would exist, because their desires would have brought about its creation. Likewise, because we want to believe in reincarnation, therefore it exists, because we have used our God-given gifts to create our own eternity.

My Craft teacher Robert Cochrane once said, “When I am dead, I shall go to another place that myself and those who have gone before me have created. Without their work it would not exist; it was their faith that built it, and it is my believing in it that will secure my inheritance.” This place is none other than the Castle that spins without motion between two worlds. When we wish to express this graphically, we use the symbol of a castle surrounded by a wreath of red roses.

If you can look out over the ocean towards the setting sun, you may see this place, a place dream-woven by visionaries of old and handed down to us in poetry, there where the sky and water meet—if you have the eyes of a seer, the heart of a poet, and an intense longing in your soul to find it. Sit on a cliff top on a warm summer evening, looking at the clouds low down on the horizon. Gradually out of the haze you see the dark island at the castle’s base begin to form. Then the pinnacles take shape, stained red by the setting sun. For a while the castle hangs there between the twin worlds of heaven and earth, yet joined to neither one; then slowly it fades into the coming night. Others may tell you that you saw only a trick of light playing on a cloud formation, but deep inside you know different. You have seen the place where your soul will journey when it is time for you to “go into the golden sunset and into the golden rest.”

All well and good, but is looking at castles in the clouds of any practical use? It is when combined with the ritual called “The Chapel of the Grave,” a ritual which can produce a different theophany of the castle, which is part of the lifelong work of contributing to the creation of the clan’s Otherworld.

Think of a ruined chapel, long deserted by any congregation, lying abandoned and empty of any spiritual feeling. Your working group will be the one to reawaken the latent power within its walls. Inside the chapel, to the left of the building’s east-west centre line, is a shallow open grave, with its head toward the east. This recreated grave will serve as the ritual’s focal point.

But if the “Grave” is an abstract concept, why seek to recreate it? We

You see between the Otherworld trees a pure white light, and in its midst is a naked woman mounted on a horse. What you are seeing is Truth naked and unadorned, manifesting itself as the Lady surrounded by the brilliant light of inspiration. It is then that a voice tells you, "Here comes the lass - let us worship Her."

within the Clan of Tubal Cain see this effort as part of our clan mythos. Years ago, so the story goes, when the "clan" was a clan, three separate groups within it each had custody of one specific mythically important site: the Cave of the Cauldron, the Chapel of the Grave, and the Stone Stile. I would hesitate to say whether this was literally true or not, but my teacher, Robert Cochrane, was particularly interested in ritual workings done underground in caves. I have many memories of crawling around underground looking for a suitable place.

At the same time, we were also on the lookout for a ruined barn or cottage that we could convert into a 'chapel.' It had to have the remains of four walls but no roof. We knew what we wanted because we had seen it all before as guests of another coven. The 'chapel' exists and the 'grave' exists; and even though there were minor differences between their version of the Rose Beyond the Grave and ours, the basic belief that the Rose is the symbol of what lies beyond this life was the same. In fact, it was at that self-same grave that I first made the statement of belief formulated by Robert Cochrane: "When I am dead, I shall go to another place that myself and those who have gone before me have created. Without their work, it would not exist. It was their faith that built it, and it is my believing in it that will secure my inheritance."

In the rite, the 'grave' is on an East-West axis with its head at the Eastern end. This arrangement shows that only the living can greet the morning sun, while the souls of the dead follow the path of the setting sun into the shadowlands that lie beyond the horizon. So ingrained is this arrangement in most people's minds that a common euphemism for death used to be, "Old So-and-so has gone West."

When the ritual cup is dedicated and the libation poured, it is always to the West and to the Lady of the Castle herself. Unlike those coven rites in which the Guardians of the Quarters are invoked by prayer and supplication, the quarters for this ritual are hallowed by sprinkling each in turn with 'charged' or sanctified water from a bowl, using a lustration brush made up of twigs. First, the Magister

(priest) sprinkles a few drops of water into the grave and then drops in a single red rose with its flower pointing to the head. Then the rest of the gathering step across the open grave and gather round the fire. (Once they have stepped across the grave, they have placed themselves 'under the rose' and are sworn to secrecy about what manifests in the circle.) The quarters of East, South, and West are then hallowed, but North is not included, for when the grave is hallowed, we consider North to have been hallowed as well.

We dedicate the eastern quarter to the Young Horned King of the dawn sunrise, son of the bright morning star and lord of the East. South is dedicated to the Golden-haired Goddess of the corn whose spirit is chased around the field by the reapers until she is at last trapped in the final sheaf to be cut. West, of course, is under the sway of the Prince of the Underworld, the dark lord of the mound through whose realm the 'westbound' soul has to pass on its way to the Castle. Finally, the gathering is sprinkled with a little of the water and the Maid (priestess) pronounces a benediction upon them.

Without breaching the pledge of the rose too much, I can categorically state that one of two things will happen when the group starts pacing a slow, widdershins 'Mill': either nothing, in which case everyone would have had a pleasant but innocuous evening out, or they will hear a newborn baby crying. This crying signifies the waking of the primal spirit from the Great Silence which we see as the beginning of all matters spiritual. Next, everyone becomes aware of the presence of the Old Man himself: he is the messenger of the Goddess, and even though he has the power to take other forms, there is no mistaking the feeling you get in his presence. You know you are definitely seeing the Master. As Cochrane once put in a letter to the ceremonial magician W.G. Gray, "I was hauled out of myself," and this is really what happens. You are hauled out of your body into an Otherworld greenwood and find yourself alongside the Master ready to bend your knee to the Lady. You see between the Otherworld trees a pure white light, and in its midst is a naked woman mounted on a horse. What you are seeing is Truth naked and unadorned, manifesting itself as the Lady surrounded by the brilliant light of inspiration. It is then that a voice tells you, "Here comes the lass — let us worship Her."

Then all of a sudden there is a jerk and a crash, and you find yourself back in your body, still pacing the Mill which of its own accord starts to wind down, leaving all who have seen Her not only physically drained but trembling as well with a combination of awe and fear, for they have seen face to face the cosmic power we call Truth.

The rite's final part turns toward the West. The participants stand on the Eastern side of the fire while the Magister and Maid are in the West. They then dedicate the bread and wine as usual with this difference: they sprinkle the bread

with salt, symbol of human labour, before it is served. After everyone has taken a bite of bread and sip of wine, the Maid fills the cup once more and holds it aloft in dedication to the Lady of the Castle, where we hope one day to find rest before rebirth, and to the souls of those gone before us, who by their actions created this sacred place. She then empties the cup on the ground in libation, after which the Magister calls down a blessing in the Goddess's name. Then everyone, except those whose job it is to retrieve the ritual articles and douse the fire, leaves the circle by recrossing the grave and then gathers at the place where the feast will be held.

The ritual stang used in our clan's rituals represents the single path of enlightenment or death. The promise of the rose then becomes the soul's journey after death. To us, this journey takes the soul along the path through the Underworld to the banks of the timeless river that is the boundary between this world and the next. Wide and slow-flowing, it washes away all earthbound memories and desires, leaving the spirit clean once again. Far out in this river, whose opposite bank can never been seen or reached by us under normal circumstances, is the island on which stands the three-towered castle. Perched on a rocky outcrop with a path snaking up from a desolate plain covered with stunted bushes to its gate, it is what the soul will see as it is carried there by the hooded silent ferryman. Once ashore, the soul starts walking towards the castle. Then the miracle of the Rose occurs; the wastelands start to bloom again with blood-red roses until the castle itself seems to be set in a red sea of flowers, and the soul instinctively knows that the Goddess, true to Her word, has "gathered it up home again."

How can we be so sure of this? I can only state what I was told when I joined the Craft: "For many eons the human spirit had no abode, then finally by desire to survive [it] created the pathway into the Otherworlds. Nothing is got by doing nothing, and whatever we do now creates the world in which we exist tomorrow. The same applies to death: what we have created in thought, we create in that other reality. We should remember that Desire was the first of all created things." It was our desire to live beyond death that created this sanctuary of the soul; and as a way of reinforcing this belief, we use both the symbol and the ritual of the Chapel of the Grave.

During the mid-1960s, Evan John Jones found the coven of Robert Cochrane, a creative figure in British Witchcraft. After Cochrane's death in 1966, Jones and others continued and expanded Cochrane's tradition. He has authored or co-authored three books: Witchcraft: A Tradition Renewed (1990), Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance (1997), and a third now in progress in collaboration with Chas S. Clifton. An earlier version of this article appeared in The Cauldron 78 (1995).

BOOK REVIEWS: Two Roads to Magical Herbalism

A Compendium of Herbal Magick

Paul Beyerl

Custer, WA: Phoenix Publishing, 1998
Paperback, 528 pp, index, B&W illustrations. US \$24.50

Psychedelic Shamanism

Jim DeKorne

Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics, 1994
Paperback, 155 pp, index, color photographs, B&W illustrations. US \$19.95

Reviewed by Chas S. Clifton

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Writers of nonfiction often say that their books are made up of other books. That statement acknowledges the necessity of research. When it comes to herbalism, however, an unfortunate tendency at least three centuries old leads writers to take the saying too literally. Too many Pagan writers just recycle older published material without ever getting their hands dirty in the herb garden — or at least they convey that impression.

Of course, one of the joys of 'magical herbalism' Wicca style is apparently that nothing needs to be tested. A writer can compile all the older material that he or she can lay hands on and produce a work full of "Legend has it ..." and "It is said that ..."

Consider part of Paul Beyerl's entry for basil in his new *Compendium of Herbal Magic*: "It is believed that Solomon chose sweet basil when making his ritual asperger to use in his temple." The writer's use of the passive voice ("It is believed") is a tipoff that he takes no responsibility for the accuracy of his material nor even feels obligated to tell his reader where it came from.

Beyerl also refers to his plants as "herbes." Evidently the silent final 'e' is there to make his reader feel Olde Englisshe or some such thing. In North America at the close of the twentieth century, who needs this?

In Beyerl's case, he mainly recycles his own *Master Book of Herbalism* (Phoenix 1984) and an even older work, Mary Grieve's *A Modern Herbal*, first published in 1931. Grieve combined plant descriptions, culinary and medical

uses and a bit of folklore for each herb she described in her two-volume work, but her research was state-of-the-art in the 1920s. Herbal knowledge has progressed since then, and older is not necessarily better.

Perhaps we have two adjacent issues here, medicine and magic. If you want to learn the herbal medicine of your region, then start by finding recent, informed books, seminars, and so forth particular to it. For instance, Michael Moore's books and workshops are unsurpassed for the American Southwest and Southern Rocky Mountains. (Visit his Southwest School of Botanical Medicine on the Web at <http://chili.rt66.com/hrbmoore/HOME PAGE/HomePage.html>) Another good western North American starting point is Gregory L. Tilford's *The EcoHerbalist's Fieldbook: Wildcrafting in the Mountain West* (Mountain Weed Publishing, 1993).

To keep up with current research, consider a subscription to *HerbalGram*, magazine of the American Botanical Council, whose motto is "Educating the public on the use of herbs and phytomedicines." This quarterly magazine costs \$25/year from the American Botanical Council, P.O. Box 201660, Austin, Texas 78720 (www.herbalgram.org).

A good history of herbal medicine is Barbara Griggs' *Green Pharmacy* (1981, 1997) which includes material on the differing legal status of herbal medicine in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia.

When it comes to magic, however, recycling reigns. Here Beyerl barely improves on Scott Cunningham's sketchy and derivative *Magical Herbalism* (1982) and *Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (1985). *Magical Herbalism*, for instance, lists basil as having the basic powers of "protection, intellectual, manifestations" and suggests: "Carry the buds to mend a broken heart. Burn to set up a material basis in which spirits may manifest during ceremonies of this kind. Add to love and protection sachets." Cunningham's larger encyclopedia adds instructions for using basil in love divinations and claims that whether a sprig of basil withers in someone's hand tells whether that person is "chaste or promiscuous." It also "is used to keep goats away from your property, to attract scorpions, and to prevent inebriation." (The passive voice again.) Did the late Cunningham ever compare basil's power to a four-foot wire-mesh fence as a goat-stopper? Did he ever desire scorpions in his home? We will never know.

Sadly, Beyerl's and Cunningham's common style is the norm in Pagan writing on magical herbalism. As a reader, I miss one thing: the voice of experience. I would never want to trust any physical ill to a herbal practitioner who had never tried his or her own preparations; likewise, I miss the "I did it and this is what happened" component in books such as *A Compendium of Herbal Magick*. Other writers on herbalism can and do take that step. For an example, read Matthew Woods's *Seven Herbs: Plants as Teachers* (North

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Atlantic Books, 1986). Woods does not merely copy the words of bygone experts such as Paracelsus and Nicholas Culpeper, but he also tests them against his experience (Is Artemisia really an herb of Venus?) and provides case histories of healings. For another approach to learning directly from plants rather than from someone else's books, read Stephen Buhner's *Sacred Plant Medicine* (Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996).

Good writing on magical herbalism can be found, but it seems to be coming from outside the capital-P Pagan community. Jim DeKorne's *Psychedelic Shamanism* serves as an example. Subtitled "The cultivation, preparation, and shamanic use of psychotropic plants," it was published by Loompanics Unlimited, "sellers of unusual books," (P.O. Box 1197, Port Townsend, Washington 98363).

The way that DeKorne treats the tricky psychotropic Solanaceae (belladonna, datura, and so forth) indicates the depth of his research. Cunningham, after giving an unattributed legend in his *Encyclopedia* about "the priests of Bellona" drinking a belladonna infusion in ancient Rome, goes on to write: "In the past [belladonna] was used to encourage astral projection and to produce visions, but safer alternatives are available today and belladonna is best avoided." He suggests using datura "to break spells by sprinkling it around the home. It also protects against evil spirits. ... A few datura leaves placed on the crown of a hat protects [sic] the wearer from apoplexy as well as sunstroke." His shamanic advice: "Do not eat."

Beyerl skips belladonna altogether. He lists datura (as "jimsonweed") in two long lists of 'Magickal Herbes' and 'Visionary Herbes' but says only this in its individual entry: "In some of the shamanic cultures of northern Mexico and in some of the religious which pay homage to the Universe with peyote, jimsonweed is held in poor esteem, believed to be an herbe which is used by negative practitioners. Established lore does not recommend this herbe for use."

And what is a 'magickal herbe'? To Beyerl, "A Magickal Herbe is one which, well, has magick! ... primarily, a Magickal Herbe is used to bring about change."



Someone wishing to practice shamanic witchcraft might be looking for a little more information than that. They may, like Jim DeKorne, “be interested in the Mystery of consciousness, and ... use shamanic substances and techniques to help [them] access states of awareness that are not easily available by other means.”

Psychedelic Shamanism offers such a reader an entire chapter on the belladonna alkaloids, on top of six preceding chapters discussing shamanic models of reality and the hypothesized existence of plant-based “allies” or teachers, “entities of the imaginal realm.” This, not list-making, is writing about magical herbalism.

DeKorne goes on to suggest the Solanaceae’s association with “aggressive female sexuality, a mystique which, in common with the *femme fatale* and witch archetypes in general, is almost the defining characteristic of the ancient goddess religions,” including, he adds, some of the more violent manifestations of the worship of Kali. “The consistency of these themes suggests that the entities associated with the belladonna alkaloids are primordial earth-forces (always symbolically female) which have been brutally and systematically repressed in human consciousness for literally thousands of years.” Perhaps, he suggests, this explains why most accounts of datura trips by Western male writers are so negative, yet “both female witches and New World shamans maintain a respectful affinity for the plant.” DeKorne goes on to provide cultivation instructions for several Datura species and includes descriptions of his own and others’ experience with it — even though he admits that it is a plant agent he normally avoids.

His other chapters discuss in similar detail ayahuasca and similar plant combinations, psilocybin, and various lesser-known “minor psychedelics” obtainable from plants. His references range from famous ethnobotanists such as Richard Schultes to Kabbalists, Gnostics, shamans of various cultures and their anthropological interlocutors, as well as modern advocates of entheogen-based exploration such as Terence McKenna and Alexander Shulgin. I am still waiting for the Wiccan magical herbalists to reach out as far, instead of recycling a narrow Renaissance tradition of plant correspondences. But meanwhile, it’s time to go water the Datura.

Chas S. Clifton lives in the Wet Mountains of southern Colorado. He edited Llewellyn Publications’ Witchcraft Today series and co-authored with Evan John Jones a new book, Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance, also from Llewellyn.