PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY (2003) VOLUME 3 PAGES 77–87

The religious use of prehistoric imagery in contemporary goddess spirituality

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ABSTRACT

For archaeologists, the principal value of prehistoric figurines is that they offer a means – however limited – into the cultures and lives of prehistoric peoples. There is a long tradition of archaeologists assuming that the figurines they unearth had a religious significance for the people who created them (since anthropomorphic figurines have a religious use in many cultures with which we are familiar). However, just as archaeologists began questioning their attribution of divine status to prehistoric figurines in the 1960s, practitioners of neopagan and goddess spiritualities – particularly those in the feminist spirituality movement – were adopting it. Moreover, in addition to describing prehistoric figurines as images of a Great Goddess who dominated prehistoric religious life, these contemporary feminist neopagans use reproductions of prehistoric figurines to inspire and enact their own spirituality. Feminist neopagan appropriation of prehistoric figurines has been problematic for many archaeologists, who quarrel – legitimately – with the conclusions feminist neopagans make about prehistory based on these artefacts. Yet, as this article argues, the contemporary religious use of prehistoric figurines should not be a matter for archaeologists to decide.

GENDER IN THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF PREHISTORY

It is perhaps a truism these days – at least in post-processual archaeological theory – that we do not go to the past so much to discover what it was, as to find out who we are. And in the highly charged case of gender, what is possible for the human race in the future feels strongly linked to who we have been in the past. This can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the voracious appetite of feminist neopagans, goddess feminists, spiritual feminists and other New Age seekers for a woman-centred, goddess-worshipping prehistory that can stand as a powerful challenge to the apparent universality of male-dominant societies in historical times. Like goddess feminists, my interest in prehistoric societies and in the archaeological discoveries and theories pertaining to them came about through my exposure to contemporary spiritual movements. In my case, as a student of religion I began to explore the emerging feminist spirituality movement in the early 1980s, and as a scholar of religion I proceeded to more extensive research and writing on feminist spirituality and on its approach to prehistory throughout the 1990s (Eller, 1995; 2000).

Among the most interesting things I learned in the course of this research was that the enthusiasm for exploring alternative relations between the sexes via the reconstruction of prehistory did not begin in the 1970s, with the second wave of feminism. Myths of women's previous power can be found around the world, particularly in Melanesia and South America (Chapman, 1982; Juillerat, 1988). The ancient Greeks found their images of

ISSN 1465-5187

women's power in a different geographical space – among the Amazons – rather than in a different chronological time. But by the late 19th century, it was quite the fashion in the West to postulate that how women and men interacted in prehistoric societies was drastically different from their relations in the present. A whole generation of Victorian anthropologists used ethnography (both armchair and in the field) to hash out matters of profound importance in their own society: namely, sex and religion.

Why this interest, then, in the late 19th century? Probably largely because of the discovery of human antiquity. Suddenly hundreds of thousands of years of human history appeared as a blank slate, begging to be written upon, where previously there had been only a scant 6,000 years of biblical time, most of it fairly well accounted for in holy scripture (Grayson, 1983). All that time opened up new possibilities for gender relations, and cast the inevitability of male dominance into question. A growing number of ethnographic reports about gender among other peoples served the same function.

With the past thus thrown open to speculative reconstructions, Victorian anthropologists fantasised a human past both appalling and alluring to them, a past in which people had sex with anyone and everyone, whenever they felt like it. This was called 'primitive promiscuity' (McLennan, 1970; Stocking, 1987). It was a system of sex relations that these anthropologists believed would have resulted in a society in which women held more power – or at the very least, channelled more power – than they did in the present. (Sir James Frazer was an exception; he regarded the stage of goddess worship as one in which women's status was abysmally low (Fraser, 1991).) The fact that women lost this power was generally deemed a good thing. Male dominance, the status quo when these anthropologists were writing, was regarded as the outcome of progressive evolutionary forces working to bring the human race to ever higher levels of development (Lubbock, 1870; Bachofen, 1967; Spencer, 1969). There were exceptions. Beginning almost contemporaneously with the publication in 1861 of Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Mutterrecht*, which served to kick off the modern era of matriarchal myth, some greeted the news of possible female-dominant or egalitarian societies in the past as proof that it could be so again, and to our benefit. Or, more strongly, they concluded that nature intended the centrality of women in human societies, and that with the proper political and cultural initiatives we could revert to the female-dominant or egalitarian gender roles for which we were designed by our biology (Stanton, 1891; Gamble, 1894; Swiney, 1908; Hartley, 1914; Gage, 1972; Georgoudi, 1992: 450).

Now when this theory of past matriarchal or sex egalitarian societies was being pioneered by Victorian anthropologists, there was little to no archaeological evidence to support it. But when finds of prehistoric figurines became available, they were quickly pressed into service to confirm the theory that preceded them: that gender relations in the past were quite different from those in the present. Thanks mainly to Bachofen, and later to Carl Jung and Robert Graves, this difference was located mainly in the worship of a female deity, a goddess (Jung, 1956; Neumann, 1963; Graves, 1966). The theory that goddess worship preceded the worship of a single male god flourished among all manner of intellectuals and activists, from anarchists to fascists (Hermand, 1984; Davis, 1998: 298–299). From the time of Sir Arthur Evans's excavations of Minoan Crete at the turn of the 20th century to James Mellaart's excavations of Çatalhöyük in the 1960s, some archaeologists described female figurines as goddesses practically before they were dusted off (Mellaart, 1967; Ucko, 1968). Archaeological luminaries such as O.G.S. Crawford (Crawford, 1957) were able to see the travels of this profound religious idea, that of the Great Goddess, whenever they saw a pair of eyes depicted in the prehistoric (or historic) art of the Mediterranean and Europe (though obviously, eyes can be found on men as well as women).

So great was the rage for evidence of prehistoric goddess worship that this evidence was occasionally created where it was lacking. For example, proponents of the theory of prehistoric goddess worship had long found it frustrating that no anthropomorphic female figurines had been unearthed from British archaeological sites. They had to resort to describing standing stones, carved lines and suggestively shaped hills as symbols of

the Great Goddess. Then, in 1939, in the Neolithic flint mines at Grimes Graves in Norfolk, a female figure carved in chalk and seated on an altar with a vessel nearby (presumably for making offerings) was discovered by archaeologist A.L. Armstrong. The British Ministry of Works quickly reconstructed the site as a shrine so that visitors could witness it. By the early 1990s, though, the Grimes Graves goddess was widely regarded as a forgery. It looked freshly carved, for one thing; for another, the find was never recorded properly, and on the day the figurine was dug up, Armstrong had asked all the other senior archaeologists to leave the site (Hutton, 1997).

Working out of this European archaeological tradition, Lithuanian-born archaeologist Marija Gimbutas extended the great goddess theory by cracking the code of a dense symbolic language she found exhibited in mainly Neolithic artefacts. Whether one was looking at a female figurine, an abstract pattern of spirals and meanders or a frankly phallic object, the religion of the goddess could be seen, she claimed (Gimbutas, 1974; 1989; 1991; Knaster, 1990). Unfortunately for her academic reputation, Gimbutas was advancing these theories most determinedly just as other archaeologists were abandoning them. These theories had not been proven wrong. They could not be proven wrong. It is possible to tell a great many stories about prehistoric society and religion that do not actually contradict existing material evidence. There are better and worse interpretations of material evidence however, and the interpretation – and more importantly, the *style* of interpretation – that Gimbutas favoured was no longer in vogue when she offered it up.

At least from my position outside the discipline, it seems to me that archaeologists have to perform an extremely difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they have to be certain not to draw inferences about prehistory beyond the ability of the material evidence to support these inferences. On the other hand, they, and certainly their lay audience, desperately want to know what prehistoric societies were like. It is almost impossible to be in constant contact with the material evidence of past cultures without trying to imagine what these cultures were like. Indeed, it would be irresponsible of archaeologists *not* to try to imagine what past cultures were like. But the material record can only tell us so much; and we want to know so much more.

From its inception, the discipline of archaeology has tended to swing back and forth between more imaginative, speculative reconstructions of past societies and a stubborn determination to stick narrowly within what the material record can make known with a high degree of certainty. In the first half of the 20th century, grand theorising among archaeologists was generally smiled upon. Imaginative projections of prehistoric life were easily published and disseminated to a fascinated reading public. The most famous archaeologists were not those who assembled pottery shards most carefully and dated skeletal remains most precisely. Rather, they were those who could find ancient sites, dig them up, and then tell a good story about them that would make the evening newspapers. No one, it seemed, wanted to spoil the fun by pointing out that the stories being told were, in fact, imaginative projections rather than established scientific truths. At least not until mid-century and following, when the 'New Archaeology' – often called 'processualism' – came along to insist that archaeologists should confine themselves to scientifically verifiable conclusions about prehistory and leave the rest of the reconstruction of prehistoric life to novelists, who would at least be up front about the fact that they were writing fiction (Binford, 1989; Bell, 1994).

Today, many archaeologists find this narrow scientism distasteful (Hodder, 1991). Not only does it refrain from even trying to answer the more interesting questions about prehistoric societies (the questions that a general reading audience is most interested in), it also, in its rigid adherence to a scientific model for the discipline of archaeo logy, cannot see its own biases and partialities. Processual archaeology has been criticised by a new generation of archaeologists for failing to recognise its own class and gender assumptions (naively projecting them onto the past) and for so privileging the material aspects of prehistoric societies as to be blind to the very important role that symbols, thought processes and all forms of cultural construction play in the social life of human beings throughout time. Post-processual archaeologists, like the grand theorists of the early

20th century, want to tell stories about prehistoric societies, and not just present data. Unlike the grand theorists, however, they hope to be more careful and localized, less guilty of generalizing from one site or one time period to another.

Towards the end of her career, Marija Gimbutas, the 'archaeological grandmother' (Noble, 1989) of goddess feminism, sat two generations back on this map of archaeological theory. As a result, quite apart from the conclusions she drew about prehistory (that it was goddess-worshipping and woman-centred), Gimbutas was doomed to be ignored by most other working archaeologists. She was a grand theorist – an excellent one, at least in the sweep of her imagination – in the tradition of those archaeologists working in the first half of the 20th century. She synthesised enormous amounts of information, discerned patterns across an incredibly wide swath of space and time, and imagined herself capable of detecting all manner of information about prehistoric peoples' cultures and religions based on their material leavings. Naturally, processualists could see her only as a myth-maker, far overstepping the bounds of what material remains, by their very nature, can reveal about prehistoric peoples. Post-processualists, on the other hand, shuddered at the manner in which Gimbutas conflated so many different geographic locations and timespans into a single 'civilization of the goddess'.

Meanwhile, a whole generation of feminists was finding great hope for future gender relations, along with an astonishing amount of spiritual succour, in the work of Gimbutas and the many other independent, non-archaeologically trained scholars who were after the same evidence and telling the same (or very similar) stories. Postulating worship of a great goddess manifest in many forms throughout millennia of human prehistory translated not only into hope for a more sex-egalitarian future but also into increased self-esteem, and eventually into the direct religious experience of the female divine (Eller, 1995). Not only female figurines, but barely anthropomorphic carvings and completely abstract menhirs became icons of a new religion, the religion of the goddess. This religion said that it was 'the oldest on Earth', and thought it had the archaeological evidence to prove it (see, for example, Baring and Cashford, 1993; Gadon, 1989; Eisler, 1987; Biaggi, 1994; Redmond, 1997).

As feminists, those in the goddess spirituality movement cannot imagine why feminist archaeologists refuse to acknowledge evidence of the existence of prehistoric matrifocal, goddess-worshipping societies that are so vivid and undeniable to themselves. (Actually, they do offer one explanation: that feminist archaeologists are so busy scrambling after success and status on male terms, in the male-dominant bastion of academia, that they have lost sight of their own best interests as women, along with the ability to perceive evident truths about woman-centred prehistory (Christ, 1997: 34, 71).) For their part, feminist archaeologists have sometimes reacted harshly to goddess feminists, seeing them as trivializing the discipline of archaeology, irresponsibly inventing pasts that suit their personal tastes and political interests, and reproducing in the prehistoric past a set of gender stereotypes that they feel ill serve women today (see, for example, Meskell, 1995; 1998). Though not an archaeologist, I have made many of the same arguments (Eller, 2000). But in seeking to understand and adjudicate this debate, I think it is critical to make a clear distinction between two things: how goddess feminists interpret prehistoric artefacts in the service of reconstructing prehistory; and how they use prehistoric artefacts in the practice of their religion.

PREHISTORIC ARTEFACTS IN GODDESS SPIRITUALITY

Beginning in the 1970s, spiritual feminists sought out the lost groves of the ancient Great Goddess by exploring art museums and archaeological digs, seeking to reveal how very pervasive this worship of the female divine was in prehistoric times. By today a whole religious culture has grown up around a carefully selected set of prehistoric sites and artefacts said to be particularly sacred to the goddess. Numerous pilgrimages to Ireland and Crete, Malta and Mexico are undertaken each year by those wishing to encounter the sacred sites of the goddess first hand (see http://www.sacredsitestours.com/, http://www.goddessariadne.org/goddesspilgrimage.htm, http://www.anatours.com, http://www.ancient

goddesspilgrimage.com/sacred.htm, and http://www.sacredjourneys.com/tours.html). Series of prehistoric images are delivered in the form of books and slide shows to spread the good news that the goddess reigned in prehistoric times – much to the benefit of human women – and can therefore return again (see http://www.suppressedhistories.net, http://www.kindredarts.com). Reproductions of these images take their place on both personal and virtual altars, and are crafted into jewellery that the faithful can wear. Indeed, some images are even more widely used. For example, in addition to appearing on book and magazine covers and in the form of reproductions, the Venus of Willendorf can be purchased as a statuette, a refrigerator magnet, a chocolate bar, a rubber stamp with inkpad, bath soap, a note card, a meditation card and, of course, as a pendant or earrings. You can buy the Venus of Laussel in similar forms or make your own version of her out of modelling clay with the help of a boxed kit titled 'Create Your Own Goddess'. Indeed, with an Internet connection and a credit card, you can soon have your own goddess colouring book or a charm bracelet from which dangles a whole series of prehistoric female figurines. Even goddesses dating from historic times are reproduced in the form of jewellery and keychains, stamps and candles (see http://www.katecartwright.com/catalog.htm, http://www.rcgi.org/catalog/, http://www.twosisterstrading.com, http://jblstatue.com, and http://www.sacredsource.com). Though the cultures that worshipped them are known to have been patriarchal, the goddesses themselves are thought to date to earlier times when the goddess in all her forms reigned supreme.

The use of prehistoric artefacts in goddess spirituality does not end with straightforward reproductions. Prehistoric artefacts are further used as inspiration for new works of art, ones that seek to bridge the ancient and the contemporary or to express the meaning these images have had for the artists who depict them. Ancient images turn up in new feminist tarot decks and calendars, and are extolled in poems and ritual chants. For example, in the poem 'Friday 13th', penned at Volos in Greece, Asphodel Long writes as follows:

> If you come upon her symbols –
> The spiral eye, breasts as knobs on a gravestone,
> Coiled serpent, bee or butterfly –
> Whose wings are her thighs, and dark body her entrance;
> If you come upon her symbols by the wayside
> Do not rush by, your mind on the bus timetable, coffee or the child's needs.
> Stop and breathe a minute. Breathe the mystery. (Long, 1998)

Performance artists impersonate ancient images, as in the photograph from a performance directed by Cheri Gaulke in 1985 titled 'Revelations of the Flesh' (Fig. 1). Visual artists reconstruct them, place them against suggestive backgrounds and sometimes portray themselves becoming or interacting with these female figures (Fig. 2).

Ancient images play a key role in the iconography of the goddess spirituality movement, but they

Figure 1. Cheri Gaulke, 'Susan Maberry as the Earth Mother on the Day After the Nuclear Holocaust', 1985 (Gadon, 1989: plate 32).

Figure 2. Maud Morgan, 'I'd Like to Go to Malta', 1985 (Gadon, 1989: plate 47).

Figure 3. 'Spiral Goddess' by Abby Willowroot (http://www3.mailordercentral.com/sacredsource/prodinfo.asp?number=ASG&variation=&aitem=3&mitem=8).

do not comprise the whole of goddess art. Contemporary goddess worshippers make new goddess images created from their own dreams and imaginations. As a celebration of the millennium, the neopagan community mounted a campaign to create new goddess art, seeking 'a Goddess on every block' by the year 2000. Many of these images can be seen online (http://www.goddess2000.org). Most work with the same artistic lexicon as that of the ancient images. For example, the 'spiral goddess' (Fig. 3), apparently originally designed by Abby Willowroot (see http://www.spiralgoddess.com), has become well integrated into the goddess spirituality community. Though it mixes several elements, reworkings of it are mainly indebted to ancient Egyptian female figurines. The arms, which are often said to be in the 'drawing down the moon' position (a neopagan ritual apparently original to Gerald Gardner, the godfather – godddessfather? – of modern witchcraft (Hutton, 1999)) are frequently raised and sometimes brought together; a spiral is added on the abdomen to symbolise growth and regeneration linked with her womb; and the legs taper together, often being completely blended to create a V shape.

THE INTERPRETATION OF PREHISTORIC ARTEFACTS BY GODDESS FEMINISTS

Can all these visually compelling images confirm the age-old worship of a great goddess, or the high status of human women as her priestesses? I have argued that they can't (Eller, 2000), and here I think I'm in agreement with most working archaeologists (see especially Tringham and Conkey, 1998). We don't know what these images meant to the people who created them. We probably never will. There are better and worse hypotheses, of course. The suggestion that at least some of these images had a religious function that included worship of female divinities is fairly credible to me (though perhaps as a scholar of religion I have some bias in this direction). All other things being equal, human beings will worship goddesses and sometimes depict them in anthropomorphic form. This is the rule in world religions, not the exception. And particularly in the area of the Mediterranean, which is crucially important for the theory of prehistoric goddess worship, we know that succeeding societies (those for which we have written records) constructed pantheons with a liberal number of goddesses who were often represented in statuary and paintings (more often, indeed, than their male counterparts (Burkert, 1985)).

Does this mean that every female image unearthed is a goddess, that every spiral is a symbolic evocation of her and that unless we find hordes of male images we can safely conclude that the worship of male gods was virtually unknown for these ancient societies? I think not. Reconstructing the use life of prehistoric images (whether they were burned, buried, anointed, etc.) is tricky enough; ferreting out the meaning attributed to

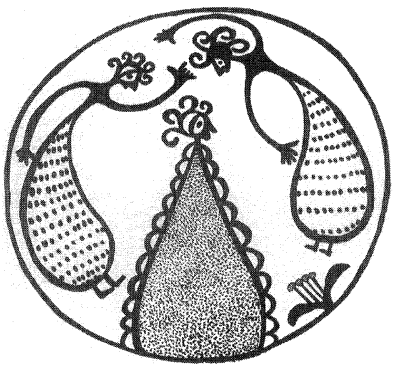

Figure 4. Minoan painting on a plate from Phaistos, c.1800 BCE (Eisler and Loye, 1990: 25).

them by their prehistoric creators is even more so. I'll limit myself to a single example here. Here is how Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), an enormously popular fictive history of goddess worship and patriarchal takeover, describes an image from Minoan Crete (Fig. 4):

> These whimsical figures tell us much of both the Minoan Cretan sense of humor and – in marked contrast to what comes later – a comfortable, nonfearful attitude toward deity ... [It] makes use of one of the many epiphanies of the Great Goddess, identified by Marija Gimbutas as the 'Bee Goddess.' In this case we have what seem to be two bee priestesses hovering about what appears to be the hive as Goddess. (Eisler and Loye, 1990: 25).

Elinor Gadon, author of *The Once and Future Goddess*, another fictive history of ancient goddess worship and patriarchal takeover, captions the same image quite differently. She quotes Marija Gimbutas:

> The earliest known reference to Persephone's abduction is a Minoan vase painting. Her companions gesture in alarm 'as she disappears into a vagina-shaped chasm in the earth. At the lower right is a fantastic, highly sexualized flower, sent up by the earth in order to lure ... [Persephone] into the trap'. (Gadon, 1989: 147).

Both of these authors believe Minoan Crete was a goddess-worshipping, probably sex-egalitarian culture. Both have been reading Gimbutas. Yet the stories they tell about the meaning of this image are as different as they can be. One woman's bee priestesses are another woman's companions of Persephone. One woman's goddess in the form of a beehive is another woman's 'vagina-shaped chasm in the earth'.

It has been my experience that when practitioners of goddess spirituality have these and other inconsistencies pointed out to them, they insist that the story they tell of prehistoric harmony between the genders and with nature under the aegis of a benevolent goddess is a mythic one, told for spiritual and inspirational purposes, and not to be taken literally as an account of what actually occurred prehistorically. This is only when they are pressed, though. Prior to that, they referred to the era of prehistoric goddess worship as 'documented fact' built up by 'scientific evidence'. For example, Mara Lynn Keller, professor of Women's Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies, describes the goddess hypothesis as 'the most plausible and probable interpretation of the presently available material data' (Keller, 1997: 388). Riane Eisler laments that 'there was nothing in my education about how a Goddess Creatrix was worshiped for thousands of years, much less that her sexuality was one of the attributes that made her divine' (Eisler, 1995: 265–266) – implying that she should have been taught this, for it is certain fact. If other arbiters of historic truth – such as archaeologists – differ with the goddess hypothesis, its advocates have tended to question their motivations (see, for example, Getty, 1990: 9; Edwards, 1991; Mason, 1993: 156). Archaeologists are said to be complicit, consciously or not, in the cover-up of ancient goddess history (perhaps because the thought of female centrality or dominance in society is so foreign to them as to be inconceivable). Or, alternatively, the entire structure of 'objectivity' and 'knowledge' upon which disciplines such as archaeology rest are cast off as the pretentious posturings of the victorious patriarchs. As Heide Göttner-Abendroth puts it, 'I accept the existence of matriarchal societies, and I criticize the narrow vision of historical research which represses our knowledge of this type of society' (Göttner-Abendroth, 1987: 1). Monica Sjöö puts it more poetically. After attending a conference in England in 1993 on archaeological discoveries from the island of Malta, she composed this 'Poem in Memory of and in Tribute to Marija Gimbutas':

'Fat ladies,' he said, 'obesity,' he said
'idols with protuberances
ampleness ... bottoms ... tits'
tittering audience
sniggering at extraordinary images
carefully sculpted
in the depth of time on Malta & Gozo,
islands of the most ancient Mother.
...
Even today the children on Gozo learn in school
that a giant woman, with a child on her back,
built that great temple, dating from the 4th millennium BCE, in just one night.
It would seem that the 'ordinary' people understand what highly trained archaeologists cannot or refuse to see:
the form, voluptuous and powerful, of the Goddess who is in Herself the great magnificent life creating powers of the Earth. Through the vaginal gateways of the temples one enters into Her body to die and to be reborn. Are these archaeologists not born from a woman? (Sjöö, 1996)

THE SPIRITUAL USE OF PREHISTORIC ARTEFACTS

Not everyone who speaks of a time of ancient goddess worship, or who places reproductions of prehistoric images on her altar, is so wedded to the idea that this is exactly how history proceeded: from many millennia of undiluted goddess worship to a vicious patriarchal overthrow instituting misogyny and the worship of a male god, straight down to the present, in which archaeologists (read: agents of the patriarchy) willfully ignore and distort the copious and indisputable evidence of the era of the Great Goddess. Many practitioners of goddess spirituality *do* speak of this era in mythical, spiritual terms. Either they never believed in its historical reality in the first place or they have since become convinced that it isn't plausible and, in either case, they don't care. They think myth needn't be true to be powerful and that ancient female figurines needn't have been depictions of a goddess then to be worshipped as one now (Culpepper, 1987: 54; Wilshire, 1994: 3).

I'm quite sympathetic to this perspective. My office is full of religious knick knacks of one sort or another. I say that they're there for teaching purposes, and this is partially true, but I also just like to look at them. For example, I have a reproduction of the well-known Minoan 'grandstand fresco' from Knossos sitting near my computer. I think it's pretty. If, instead of simply admiring its beauty, I used the grandstand fresco to dream of a time of greater power and status for women under the benevolent auspices of a Great Goddess of Birth, Life and Death, would anything be wrong with that? Not that I can see. We don't know what the artist intended or what her peers saw when they looked at this fresco. If I knew for a fact that this was a painting of Athenian prostitutes who were kidnapped at the age of six years and sold into sexual slavery on Minoan Crete, that would certainly dampen my enthusiasm for this fresco. But we are unlikely ever to know anything of the sort about this image. And in the absence of that kind of knowledge, is there anything wrong, in principle, with finding spiritual inspiration or solace in ancient images?

We rewrite the meaning of images all the time. Even important religious symbols, such as the Christian cross, undergo changes in meaning across different populations and down through time. No one suggests that we should stop displaying crosses because what they meant to the first generation of Christians is not what they mean to us now. And it hardly seems fair to me to suggest that prehistoric images belong only to 'scientists', to those who use the images to try to accurately reconstruct prehistory. They belong to all of us. Obviously the original Venus of Willendorf cannot be passed hand-to-hand so that every living human can partake of a tactile interaction with this piece of our shared human past. But neither should archaeologists have the uncontested corner on the market when it comes to speculating about what prehistoric artefacts mean, let alone deciding how reproductions of them can be used (Rountree, 2001).

In fact, many archaeologists have been quite respectful to goddess feminists' interest in their excavations and have listened patiently, if not always sympathetically, to their interpretations of the material record. For example, under the direction of Ian Hodder, the current excavations at Çatalhöyük have made provisions for visits from goddess pilgrims and for the dissemination of discoveries to interested non-archaeologists, espe-

cially goddess feminists (Hodder and Louise, 1998). Similarly, Kathryn Rountree reports that goddess pilgrims are well tolerated in Malta, by archaeologists as well as by ordinary citizens (Rountree, 1999). Like archaeologists working in Israel, for example, many archaeologists working in lands where goddess interest runs high have learned to make allowances for the religious sensitivities of those for whom that land and the cultures buried beneath its ground are sacred. Still, there remains a pervasive disrespect among archaeologists for the sensibilities of goddess feminists. This is understandable, certainly: goddess feminists regularly accuse archaeologists of stupidity and bad faith, if not calculated denial of scientific facts in an effort to shore up a struggling patriarchal world system. And they do all this while cheerfully ignoring the disciplinary standards that archaeologists struggle to maintain in their interpretations of the past.

Given that goddess feminists often remark that archaeologists are biased and can't be trusted to understand the results of their own investigations, should goddess worshippers be given the opportunity to conduct their own archaeological digs? Well, it wouldn't be the first time that an untrained amateur put her spade in the ground with her conclusions about what she'll find there already unshakeably seated in her mind. No prehistorian is entirely without bias, completely free of prejudice regarding human history. Still, collectively, we should try our hardest to proceed with care, caution and an open mind when we investigate human prehistory. Government funding and irreplaceable prehistoric sites shouldn't go to the highest bidder or to anyone who can tell a fanciful story about their religious connection to that site. (To my knowledge, goddess worshippers have never proposed that they should excavate prehistoric sites, only that they should be kept apprised of findings from such sites and be able to offer their own interpretations.) It seems to me that there is a role here for training and expertise, and governmental decision-making that may not be uniformly pleasing to all parties.

Clearly not everyone can have equal access to the process of recovering our prehistoric past. Not everyone wants to. But when it comes to displaying, enjoying or revering prehistoric images whose original meaning is unknown, that's everyone's game. We may legitimately quarrel with the particular religious worldview of someone who spins out their own spiritually significant stories about an ancient object. For example, I and others have critiqued goddess feminists for working with an overly narrow definition of femaleness when they imagine prehistoric matrifocal, goddess-worshipping societies (Meskell, 1998; Eller, 2000). But this is essentially a theological and political debate. On the other hand, it seems to me that the fact that goddess feminists want to tell such stories, to enshrine such objects on their altars and in their hearts, is their prerogative. Archaeologists are, of course, free to dispute the historical accuracy of the stories goddess feminists tell. In all fairness, they probably should if goddess feminists are presenting their stories as historical truths about human prehistory and archaeologists do not feel they can, in good conscience and with adequate attention to the evidence, support those claims. However, if goddess feminists are not directly arguing about historical facts, but merely finding inspiration, personal growth and a vision for the future in their interactions with prehistoric sites and artefacts, archaeologists should not attempt to dissuade them. Archaeologists are, of course, free to roll their eyes, as those of more secular persuasions often do toward the more religious, but they are hardly in a position to dictate what feelings prehistoric artefacts should or should not inspire in others – or whether that reproduction of the Venus of Laussel should be displayed in a coffee-table book on Paleolithic artefacts or on an altar surrounded by shells, feathers, flowers, candles and tarot cards. Once historical claims are set aside, the use of prehistoric artefacts by goddess feminists in their art, poetry, imaginations and meditations is quite plainly a question of religious freedom, one where scientific privilege holds no place.

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