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THE RELIGION OF "OLD EUROPE" AND THE PROBLEM OF THE LATER DEVELOPMENT OF THE CULT OF THE SKY GOD

*"Ancient religion is a tradition, as old,
perhaps, as mankind; but its tracks are
lost in prehistory as time scales expand."*¹

Abstract: An analysis of the evidence on the religion of "Old Europe" shows many inconsistencies in the manner that the Neolithic culture in the Aegean and wider Europe is usually defined. The conventional views on the cult of Mother Earth and the god of vegetation are not based on firm evidence; therefore, one must not exclude the possibility of a cult of a Sky God.

1. The beginning of early civilization in Southeast Europe is tied to the emergence of early farmers and agriculture in the early Neolithic Age, whose culture originates from the East, transmitted through Asia Minor.² The first settlements of farmers appear, for example, around 7000 BC in the eastern Greece and on the island of Crete.³ Archaeological findings testify to a radical transition from hunting and gathering societies to those based on agricultural and livestock in this period. It is generally accepted that the origins of the Neolithic culture lie in fertile landscapes between Iran and Jericho, which crossed Asia Minor through the Balkans, as evidenced by excavations in, Çatal Hüyük and Hacilar in southern Anatolia, where the Neolithic settlements discovered and archaeological findings in them refer to those discovered in Sesklo in Thessaly.⁴ In fact, the evidence indicates that the domestication of sheep, goats,

¹ W. Burkert, *Greek religion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985, 10.

² P. Bogucki, P. J. Crabtree (eds.), *Ancient Europe 8000 B.C.–A.D. 1000: Encyclopedia of the Barbarian World*, vol. I, New York 2004, 218–232; W. Burkert, 1985, 11; H. Haarmann, "On the Nature of Old European Civilization and its Script", *Studia Indogermanica Lodziensia*, vol. II, 1998, 126.

³ J. M. McIntosh, *Handbook to Life in Prehistoric Europe*, Oxford 2006, 29. J. McIntosh states that by 5500 BC, northwestern Anatolia was connected to Southeast Europe by a land bridge that disappeared in a flood, alongside maritime connections believed to date back to 9000 BC.

⁴ J. Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*, London 1967; *Excavations at Hacilar I–II*, Edinburgh 1970.

cattle, and pigs, as well as cereals wheat, barley, pottery, metallurgy arrived in the Balkans from the East in the third millennium.⁵ The first farmers in Greece, the Balkans, Southern Italy, and Central Europe were immigrants.⁶

Accordingly, the settlements of this culture were located in the fertile plains, and logically the oldest artefacts in Greece come from Thessaly, discovered near the village of Sesklo, which is why this period of Neolithic culture is referred in Greece as Sesklo culture. From about 6000 BC, the culture of these farmers began to spread north to Macedonia and south to Boeotia. In the same period, the culture spread to the north through the fertile plains of the Eastern Balkans, then along the valley of the Danube and Pannonia.⁷ From 6000 to 5000 BC, the population in Southeast Europe reached a noticeable cultural level, which, besides agriculture and animal husbandry, included the creation of the first urban communities larger than 5000 inhabitants and the emergence of pottery, crafts made from processed copper and gold, the production of fabric, and perhaps literacy.⁸ According to Maria Gimbutas, from whom the term "Old Europe"⁹ originated, this early civilization differs significantly from the cultural profile of the Indo-Europeans in that it lacked pastoralism as an economic model, did not domesticate horse, and had various belief systems that included a female deity,¹⁰

⁵ E. T. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*, Chicago 1964, 19–22; W. Burkert 1985, 11, n. I. 4; J. M. McIntosh, 2006, 29. Certainly the possibility remains of certain animals like wild boar and wild beef, and of some cereals being cultivated locally, especially fruits that are characteristic of a particular climate.

⁶ Indigenous peoples who lived from hunting, driven by new economic and social conditions, probably began concentrating on agriculture (J. M. McIntosh, 2006, 29).

⁷ Starchevo, Keresh, Karanovo, Vincha. (W. Burkert 1985, 11; J. M. McIntosh, 2006, 29–37).

⁸ In fact, linear characters and symbols, according M. Gimbutas (*Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000–3500 B.C.*, University of California Press, 1974; reissued with a modified title and a new introduction as *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500–3500 B.C.*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1982), M. M. Winn (*Pre-Writing in Southeastern Europe: The Sign System of the Vinča Culture ca. 4000 B.C.*, Calgari 1981), H. Haarman (1998), A. Whittle ("The First Farmers", in B. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated Prehistory of Europe*, Oxford 1994, 136–166) and others, but negated by J. T. Hooker ("The Early Balkan 'scripts' and the Ancestry of Linear A," *Kadmos* 31, 97–112) and M. S. F. Hood (*The Tărtăria Tablets*, *Antiquity* 41, 99–112).

⁹ M. Gimbutas, 1974. The works of M. Gimbutas, an archaeologist and historian of the culture of Neolithic Europe, who participated in the excavations of most Neolithic sites in Europe, had the greatest influence on European Neolithic cultural researchers in the 80s and 90s. Interest in particular increased after dendrological calibration of the previous chronology obtained by radiocarbon dating (T. Champion et al., *Prehistoric Europe*, London 1984; B. Cunliffe 1994 et al.).

¹⁰ About this peculiarity, which M. Gimbutas considers common to Neolithic Europe and Anatolia (*The Living Goddesses*, University of California Press 1991, 3), most of the works are linked (besides the above mentioned) and *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco 1989) and *Civilization of the Goddess. The World of Old Europe* (San Francisco 1991).

which would not have been palatable to the patriarchal religion of the Indo-Europeans. The findings also indicate that for about three millennia in the Neolithic Age, especially in Greece and the Balkans, there were no fundamental changes and demolitions that would refer to movements or displacements of the population.¹¹

2. Maria Gimbutas' influential theory that, unlike Indo-Europeans, the "Old Europeans" respected the great goddess Mother Earth is based on many clay and smaller stone figurines that in large part depict naked female bodies with large breasts, belly, and buttocks, found on almost all Neolithic sites in Europe.¹² Starting from the interpretation of the meaning of these figurines, Gimbutas also interprets other representations of birds, snakes, fish, bears, bees, butterflies, pigs from the same concept of a goddess who governs birth, death, and revival.¹³ The small houses where bull horns and female figurines have been found together with stoves, stone blades, and chimneys are thought to be shrines. Thus, it creates an image of an idyllic matriarchal society in which people lived peacefully and in harmony with nature, without war and violence, worshiping the woman as the immanent power of the ever-renewing nature, which creates life, growth, decline, death and rebirth.¹⁴ A small number of male and female figurines were found, which M. Gimbutas believes are a representation of the gods of vegetation, which would have been part of the cult of the Great Mother at that time.¹⁵

M. Gimbutas believes that from the Neolithic agricultural revolution and before, people were equal and lived in peaceful times. Such a way of life was not limited only to the Balkans and the northeastern Mediterranean, but was present throughout the world, and was the original culture of the great civilizations in Asia.¹⁶ This "Golden Age" was destroyed by a small group of belligerent and patriarchal nomads called the Kurgans¹⁷, originating from the Russian steppes, who descended into Southeastern Europe in on horses and war chariots¹⁸ in three waves

¹¹ W. Burkert, 1985, 11.

¹² For Macedonia, M. Gimbutas (ed.), *Neolithic Macedonia as reflected by excavation at Anza, southeast Yugoslavia*, University of California 1976; Д. Здравковски, „Култот на Големата Мајка во неолитот во Македонија“, *Folia archaeologica Balkanica* 1, Скопје 2006, 53–62; for Vinča culture, V. Markotić, *The Vinča Culture*, Calgary 1984; for sites in Bulgaria, H. Todorova, "The Eneolithic in Bulgaria," *The British Archaeological Report S. 49*, 1978; for Thessaly and general interpretations, D. W. Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines: representation and corporeality in the Neolithic*, Routledge 2005; cf. V. Kruta, *Die Anflänge Europas 6000–500 v. Chr.*, München 1993; M. Gimbutas 1974, 1991.

¹³ M. Gimbutas, 1991, 3ss.

¹⁴ M. Gimbutas, 1974, 324.

¹⁵ M. Gimbutas, 1999, 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. R. R. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: a Western Religious History*, University of California Press 2005, 21ss.

¹⁷ Named according to the Russian-Ukrainian name for the tumulus tombs in the southern steppes, the word has Turkish origin.

¹⁸ The following chapter will discuss raising horses and their role for military purposes.

from around 4400-4300 BC, 3500 BC, and 3000 BC. They conquered the “unprotected and peaceful people” in those areas, imposing their patriarchal way of life and religion, and their cruelty can be seen from the evidence of offering human sacrifices.¹⁹ The matricentric religion of Old Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean merged with the religion of the conquerors, but its strong influence persisted, as evidenced by the figurines found of the goddess and in that historical period of the Near East, Greece, and Rome.²⁰ In some areas like the island of Crete, the influence of the newcomers was later, so that in the Bronze Age of the Minoan society, it retained the marks of its original matricentric culture inherited from Old Europe.²¹

Nevertheless, can we accept the theory of Maria Gimbutas that in the religion of the population in the Neolithic Age of the Balkans, in Europe and beyond, can be found the worship of the Great Mother, in all its manifestations, which includes the god of vegetation?²² It is logical that after the Neolithic agrarian revolution, when the population was dependent on the fertility of the land and the commodities it produced, cultures would gravitate toward the worship of nature and fertility. According to the archaeological findings so far, can one exclude the possibility of believing in heavenly deities during this period of the development of civilization, especially on the mainland of Greece and the Aegean?

a. Analysis of the main argument – Neolithic figurines show that they encountered in Neolithic sites in Asia, Africa and Europe whose origins are rooted from Paleolithic period.²³ The interpretation that they are a representation of the Great Mother is related to the prevalence of female deities from that historical period in Greece and the Mycenaean *Potnia* (“Mistress”), which is not necessarily supported by the evidence offered in the archaeological findings. While it is true that most of these figurines depict a woman,²⁴ in most cases they are found in groups and places with no connection to possible shrines. Particularly important is the fact that their presence in Greece, especially in Neolithic sites in Thessaly, is very rare²⁵ compared to the large number of such figurines found in the Carpathian basin,²⁶ which warns that the interpretation of

¹⁹ M. Gimbutas, 1991, 351ss.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The influence of this theory is very present in Republic of Macedonia, with researchers generally accepting these views (pp. N. Chausidis, *Mythical Images of the Southern Slavs*, Skopje 1994, B. C Crvenkovska, *Mythological Labyrinth*, Skopje 2004, 39s.). The interpretation of the Neolithic figurines found at sites in Macedonia is a repetition of the views in the works of M. Gimbutas (V. D. Zdravkovski 2006, 53-62, etc.).

²³ Cf. W. Burkert 1985, 11.

²⁴ I. Hodder, *The Domestication of Europe. Structure and Contingency in Neolithic Societies*, Oxford 1990, 61.

²⁵ And their shapes are very different.

²⁶ According to which M. Gimbutas based his theory (M. Gimbutas 1974; cf. W. Burkert 1985, n. I. 8)

these testimonies must not be generalized because they are still fragmented. For that reason, the criticism of M. Gimbutas' interpretation of Neolithic figurines has been growing lately.²⁷

b. The theory that many female representations signify the dominant role of the worship of the female deity, and therefore the significant status of women in the social context, undoubtedly refers to the supposition of the existence of the matriarchy in the Neolithic Age. Apart from mythology and the memory of Amazonian society, however, matriarchy as a model of society is not witnessed in history, nor in the developed civilizations in antiquity, nor in any traditional culture throughout the history of mankind.²⁸ Therefore, after many criticisms, M. Gimbutas speaks of “matricentric and matrilinear traditions”²⁹ in her later works, which does not exclude the possible position of a man in that society. In her latest works, she defines the society of Old Europe as “matristic”, equitable and peaceful.³⁰ She finds a sacred text,³¹ older than Sumerian,³² to justify her thesis regarding symbols, signs, and various ornamental patterns found on Neolithic figurines and pottery. In these symbols and signs, curved lines, “V”, “Y”, “M”, “P”, dots, arrows, geometric patterns, and lines she sees a system of letters in the language of Old Europeans that is not deciphered.³³ Of course, knowing that without written evidence archaeological material is muted, and that her theory cannot be confirmed solely with material evidence, M. Gimbutas finds in the curvilinear lines signs of rain and female symbols in all double or triple lines, circles and crosses, and especially in single and double triangles that she believes symbolize the female anatomy.³⁴ Such an interpretation cannot be accepted, however, since it is impossible for all these ornaments and signs to represent symbols of femininity associated with the cult of the Great Mother.³⁵ Even in the megalithic altars in the temples discovered on the island of Malta, there is an emblem of the triangular female anatomy.³⁶

²⁷ For the various interpretations in the last decade see Bailey, D. W., *Prehistoric Figurines: representation and corporeality in the Neolithic*, Routledge 2005. Suspicions about this theory were expressed by P. Ucko as far back as 1968. (*Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt, and Neolithic Crete, with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece*, London 1968).

²⁸ As seen in the European Middle Ages, and especially in modern India, there are cultures in which the existence of many religious female representations does not imply the dominance of women in society.

²⁹ “matricentric and matrilinear” (Gimbutas 1989, 197).

³⁰ M. Gimbutas 1991.

³¹ M. Gimbutas 1989; 1999, 43ss; cf. H. Haarman 1998.

³² For which in the last two decades much is written. H. Haarman (1998, 132) even thinks that this legacy of Old Europeans was preserved in the Minoan linear letter A.

³³ M. Gimbutas 1989; 1999, 43ss.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ cf. R. R. Ruether 2005, 24.

³⁶ M. Gimbutas 1991, 263.

It is obvious that through the archaeological evidence from the Neolithic, despite all the efforts of researchers, the existence of certain cults in the Aegean and beyond the Balkans cannot be proven. Although it is likely that the first farmers worshiped deities linked to fertility and vegetation, because they depended on the earth and nature, the possibility that they also worshiped the heavens and their personified phenomena cannot be ruled out. The absence of written evidence means that the interpretations of these findings are lost forever. While it is possible to study and classify pottery from the discovery of ceramics in detail and accordingly demarcate and determine the time of a particular culture and to explore tombs, the life itself, but rituals, carnivals, dances, masks, and myths have left no traces.

c. The uncertainty of the testimonies from prehistory, of course, leaves room for different views on the origin of the population and its culture in this period.³⁷ Many factors, however, confirm the already mentioned thesis for the diffusion of Neolithic culture from Anatolia to the Balkans, after which it spread through Europe by cultivating previous settlements.³⁸ The strongest confirmation of this thesis is the application of genetic research in Europe and Asia that determines their genetic profile.³⁹ That research confirmed the archaeological, linguistic, and historical knowledge of the existence of a pre-European settlement in Southeast Europe.⁴⁰ Among the many genes identified in the European population, L. L. Cavalli-Sforza and associates localized the so-called "Mediterranean genotype" that deviated from the average genetic composition in Europe.⁴¹ According to the map where this genotype is encountered, in addition to southern Italy, the Balkans and Asia Minor, it includes southern Hungary, the Danube River valley, Moldova, and central Ukraine, which excludes the possibility that Indo-Europeans shaped this genotype because it is found in areas that were never inhabited by the Greeks. The existence of the Mediterranean genotype in Asia Minor coincides entirely with the thesis that a population of the same ethnic origin inhabited both sides of the Aegean during the Neolithic Age. This is confirmed by onomastics, especially the places and rivers that were not named using Greek language of the settlers who inhabited the area at that time.⁴² It is widely considered that the names with *-ss-* and *-nth-* formants in Greece are identical to the formants *-ss-* and *-nd-* in Anatolia,

³⁷ C. Renfrew (*Archaeology and Language. The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, London 1987) links the spread of farming to the presumed early movement of Indo-Europeans from Asia Minor to Europe since the 7th millennium BC, from which the Neolithic, Cycladic, and Minoan civilizations would have risen.

³⁸ O. Dickinson, *The Aegean Bronze Age*, Cambridge 1994, 32.

³⁹ L. L. Cavalli-Sforza et al., *History and Geography of Human Genes*, Princeton 1994.

⁴⁰ which is particularly important for the research in this work.

⁴¹ L. L. Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994, 293ss.

⁴² cf. F. Villar, *Los indoeuropeos y los orígenes de Europa. Lenguaje e historia*, Madrid 1991, 64ss.

which comprise many toponyms and confirms the existence of the pre-Greek substrate in the Aegean and Anatolia.⁴³ The largest number of these names are found in the historical period in Caria, Crete, Thrace, Thessaly, Macedonia, and Troas.⁴⁴ The existence of a special subsection of settlers, with its own culture, presupposes a religious tradition that had its own characteristics that were probably also common for the population in the Aegean and Anatolia.

d. Without a doubt, the theory of M. Gimbutas on the invasion of nomadic, militant Kurgan horsemen⁴⁵ against unprotected and peaceful Old Europeans is not supported by reliable evidence. Many archaeologists, who continued the excavations of Neolithic sites, noted that M. Gimbutas neglected the evidence for the existence of fortifications, inequality, and human sacrifice because they did not coincide with his theory.⁴⁶ It also rejects the possibility that the attacks of nomadic tribes influenced this population in the development of military defenses to protect their settlements and property. These settlements were almost certainly the target of permanent visits from neighboring nations, and it is difficult to accept the assumption that they were attacked only in one period and from one direction, such as only from the Russian steppe as to M. Gimbutas maintains. It is impossible to assume that war was unknown to Old Europeans during the Neolithic Age, only to be introduced by Indo-European peoples. The thesis of a peaceful, god-fearing, and matriarchal society that was destroyed by patriarchal warlike tribes from a specific area with a completely different culture cannot be considered historically accurate.⁴⁷

⁴³ M. Finkelberg, *Greeks and Pre-Greeks. Aegean Prehistory and Greek Heroic Tradition*, Cambridge 2005, 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, especially maps 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b. Probably a part of that population was not assimilated by Indo-Europeans, but some of them managed to preserve its uniqueness. Perhaps the memory of ancient historians for the old Pelasges testifies to the descendants of this population.

⁴⁵ On the problem of the extraordinary connection of pastoralism with Indo-Europeans, E. E. Kuzmina, "Origins of Pastoralism in the Eurasian Steppes", M. Levine, C. Renfrew, K. Boyle (ed.), *Prehistoric steppe adaptation and the horse*, University of Cambridge, 2003, pp. 203–232.

⁴⁶ R. Tringham, Dusan Krstic (ed.), *Selevac: A Neolithic Village in Yugoslavia*, Monumenta Archaeologica 15, Los Angeles 1990; D. W. Anthony, "Nazi and Ecofeminist Prehistories: Ideology and Empiricism in Indo-European Archaeology," in P. Kohl and C. Fawcett (eds.), *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, Cambridge 1996, 1–32; R. R. Ruether 2005, 27.

⁴⁷ M. Gimbutas compares the Kurgan invasion of the peaceful and unsaddled population in Southern Europe to the Spanish horsemen who quickly defeated the peoples of Central and South America who did not have war horses (1991, 252). But, from what is known about the civilization of natives in Mexico and Peru, although they did not have chariots (they did not use the wheel for vehicles) and did not use horses, they still had more than 1000 years of developed, patriarchal, militaristic, and class society that practiced the offering of human sacrifices. Such comparisons indicate that the development of societies in antiquity can not be tied only to having or not having horses. How can the theory of M. Gimbutas explain the strong fortifications of the Mycenaean

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centers and the "cyclopean ramparts"? The Indo-Europeans planned to remain in those areas for a long time and wanted to strengthen their rule. But from whom did they defend themselves? Is it from the peaceful world an indigenous population? From whom did other nations learn the skill of building such massive defense systems? Why is there no evidence of such fortifications in the Russian steppes from which the invasion began? Certainly the scant evidence can not answer all these questions, nor can they confirm the "convincing" thesis of M. Gimbutas.

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