



The Disappearing of the Goddess and Gimbutas A Critical Review of *The Goddess and the Bull*

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The title of Michael Balter's book, *The Goddess and the Bull. Çatalhöyük: An Archaeological Journey to the Dawn of Civilization* (2005), immediately attracts people interested in Neolithic beliefs. One assumes from the strategic word "goddess" in the title, and the book's cover—featuring the famous image of the corpulent seated woman flanked by two leopards found at Çatalhöyük—that the volume is a celebration of the ancient female-centered religion that numerous scholars believe was at the heart of ancient Anatolian culture. Instead, *The Goddess and the Bull* is another example of literature that serves to "disappear" the goddess as simply an archaeological/historical construct.

Balter's book is well written and well researched and the author has done a good job of sifting and sorting through what must have been a cubic ton of material to create a compelling story. Goddess scholars will wish, however, that he had given fair and equal coverage to theories framed by James Mellaart, Marija Gimbutas and others who see evidence for the existence and centrality of female deities in ancient religious systems. This is a highly regrettable aspect of a book that is otherwise an interesting and intelligent portrayal of some of the major trends and personalities that have shaped the field of archaeology, and the theoretical controversies regarding the excavations at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey.

The book is billed as not only the "biography" of the Çatalhöyük excavations, but as "the true story behind modern archaeology." It is actually a story that represents a deeply embedded bias now gripping Anglo-American archaeology: the paradigmatic

denial of the possibility of goddesses in Neolithic cultures. The book also attempts to marginalize and discredit Marija Gimbutas, an intellectual giant who had a profound impact on the field of archaeology and whose work continues to be the lightning rod for questions concerning the existence of female deities in the Neolithic societies of Europe and Anatolia.

In a telephone interview,¹ Balter noted that there is a near refusal among team members to acknowledge iconographic similarities between the female figurines unearthed at Çatalhöyük and the thousands of primarily female statuettes that have been found all over Europe and Western Asia. "The one thing I have a little difficulty swallowing," he said, "is that Ian Hodder, Ruth Tringham, Lynn Meskell, and others are very reluctant to see even stylistic continuities between the Upper Paleolithic 'Venus' figurines, the so-called goddess figurines that have been found at Çatalhöyük and other Neolithic sites, and similar imagery from the Bronze Age, such as from Minoan Crete and the Myceneans." He went on to say, "I do feel there has been some 'special pleading' involved in trying to dismiss those stylistic similarities, that they're going beyond the bounds of fair argumentation." Speaking about the famous figurine of the large seated woman with leopards unearthed by Mellaart at Çatalhöyük, he adds, "It's *really really* hard not to see a Mother Goddess sitting there."

So why did Balter not choose to present a more balanced theoretical picture of the goddess debate? "I made a decision basically to focus on what the

¹ Telephone discussion with the author, April 9, 2005.

people of the dig were doing and thinking,” he explains. Nonetheless, Balter participates in promoting what, to many, are distortions about both (“pre”)history and historiography.

This review will examine how such distortions are accomplished - both within the book and in the larger context of the Çatalhöyük dig - which includes the discrediting of scholars who present and interpret evidence of the existence of Neolithic goddesses. It will also consider the larger significance of disallowing the possibility that female divinity existed as a religious construct in prehistory.

Given that Hodder and other post-processualist archaeologists promote “multivocality” (the consideration of multiple viewpoints in archaeological interpretation) and “self-reflexivity” (awareness of how one’s own perspectives may color interpretation), this critique is offered to encourage a less biased perspective in crafting a portrait of life in ancient Çatalhöyük.

Çatalhöyük and the Field of Archaeology

Balter’s book begins by detailing the 1958 discovery of the site of Çatalhöyük (now dated c. 7400-6000 Cal BCE) and its excavation over four seasons from 1961 to 1964 by the British archaeologist James Mellaart. Among Mellaart’s significant finds were many wall paintings depicting hunting or ritual scenes, giant bulls and vultures, painted reliefs of leopards, and plastered wall sculptures he interpreted as “breasts” and “goddesses.” In his view, the humanlike figures with outstretched arms and legs sculpted on walls, and the dozens of female figurines that are sitting, standing, squatting, giving birth, embracing children, wearing robes and leopard skins, appearing naked, configured in “twin” motifs, locked in embrace with male figures, and enthroned between two leopards provide evidence that a “Mother Goddess” was venerated at Çatalhöyük. Mellaart brought to this interpretation his training in Egyptology and Near Eastern archaeology.

Mellaart concluded that numerous buildings he unearthed containing enormous bull heads with giant horns mounted on the walls or on pedestals or benches on the floor were shrines devoted to the

worship of the Mother Goddess and her son, a deity that sometimes took the form of a bull, who was both her child and her lover. He saw this goddess as the prototype of Hepat, Kupapa, Agdistis, Cybele, and Magna Mater - female deities who were later venerated across Asia and Europe. He also determined that this goddess religion had been led by women, and that the entire society of Çatalhöyük had been what he loosely termed “matriarchal.”

The Goddess and the Bull next introduces British archaeologist Ian Hodder and discusses his initial embrace of “New Archeology,” a movement that was pitted against the “culture history school of archaeology” of Mellaart and others of his generation on the grounds that it was based on biased assumptions that led to unsubstantiated claims about prehistory. New Archaeology, or “processualism,” as it came to be called, demanded that archaeologists use hypothesis testing and a strictly “scientific” approach to analyzing data from the research areas of subsistence, economics, trade, and technology. Questions regarding religion and ideology were to be avoided because they would inevitably lead to unverifiable speculations.

The book describes Hodder’s eventual disenchantment in the late 1970s and early 1980s with New Archaeology, owing to his growing conviction that by focusing so narrowly on the *functions* of art and artifacts, processualists were overlooking the more profound meanings of cultural symbolism in human communities. He also took issue with the school’s claims that it was fostering “objective” perspectives, noting, in post-modern style, that scientism, too, contains its own hidden biases. Hodder subsequently became the leader of the “post-processualist” movement, which rejected the positivism and functionalism of New Archaeology. He called, instead, for looking at artifacts as “expressions of culturally framed ideas” (p. 80).²

Hodder and his like-minded colleagues stressed the importance of interpreting finds based on their archaeological context, and in maintaining a “multivocal” approach to interpretation that allowed

² For simplicity’s sake, all direct references to Balter’s book will appear in the text of this article itself, designated by page numbers in parentheses.

for multiple viewpoints incorporating self-critical reflexivity. Long fascinated with Çatalhöyük, he set his sights on applying his theories to this great and mythic Anatolian tell, from which Mellaart had been banned some thirty years before due to a controversy over missing artifacts elsewhere in Turkey. In 1990, Hodder successfully lobbied to resume the dig there, and in 1993, he began his first season of excavation.

The Treatment of Gimbutas

On page 40, Balter discusses the “controversial” nature of Mellaart’s claim that women were in positions of cultural leadership at Çatalhöyük. Balter also mentions that Mellaart’s ideas were published at a time “when feminist movements around the world were just taking off” and that his ideas were “seized upon” by Marija Gimbutas. This incorrectly conveys the impression that Gimbutas was a follower rather than a leader in the archeological field and that she was connected with “feminist movements.” In actuality, Gimbutas was surprised to discover that her ideas were important to feminists.³ During her excavations of Neolithic sites in Southeast Europe, Gimbutas came to her own conclusions that a cultural *Zeitgeist* of gender balance existed there and that a goddess or goddesses were venerated as primary deities. It is important to note that she never used the word “matriarchy” to describe the social structure of Neolithic societies.

Balter accuses Gimbutas of suffering from “nostalgia for a lost egalitarian paradise, where women were empowered rather than trodden underfoot” (p. 40). The implication here is that her theory is more fantasy and wishful thinking than rigorous analysis. Such a viewpoint contains the embedded assumption that cultures in which women were empowered have not and could not exist. It ignores an expanding body of work documenting the longstanding presence of societies in which the mother serves as the central pillar of economic and social life, and in which women and men maintain a system of reciprocal balance, cooperation, and mutual respect. Among such societies are the Mosuo of China, the Minangkabau of Sumatra, the Tuareg/Berbers of North Africa, the Akan of West

Africa, the Juchitan of Mexico, the Iroquois and Syilx of North America, the Kuna of Panama, and others.⁴

Balter mentioned, in the same telephone interview, that he had looked over Gimbutas’ *Language of the Goddess*, but that he had not read any of her other books and articles. In *The Goddess and the Bull*, however, he evinces a thorough familiarity with works that are critical of Gimbutas.⁵ One wishes that writers would not derive their primary information about theoretical works from detractors, but rather from the original publications themselves. The phenomenon of writers refusing to examine Gimbutas’ actual work and instead citing secondary-source critics (only to be cited, themselves, by others!) seems to plague many debates regarding Gimbutas.⁶

On page 84, Balter discusses the decision by Christine Hastorf, who later became Hodder’s wife, to leave Gimbutas as her Ph.D. adviser at UCLA to work with a processual archaeologist. Balter here describes Gimbutas as “an old-school archaeologist, a culture historian of the most traditional sort.” This is a curious characterization particularly since her work resembles post-processualism in terms of its rejection of econometric measures as the only valid basis for archaeological interpretation; its openness to considerations of gender relations, lifestyle, religious beliefs, and overall societal contexts in reconstructing ancient cultures; and its pioneering conclusions.

Defining Gimbutas as “old-school” ignores a primary element of her work: her creation of an innovative methodological approach to the study of the past called “archaeomythology.” Failing to

⁴ For research on the Minangkabau see Sanday (2002); for Native American societies see Mann (2000). Also see the website for the 2nd World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, <http://www.second-congress-matriarchal-studies.com> for recent research on societies which Sanday and other scholars are calling “matriarchies” which are not “reversed” patriarchies in which women assume roles as cultural oppressors.

⁵ A prime example is Cynthia Eller’s *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future* (2000). That volume that has been rigorously critiqued by several scholars, among them Max Dashu (2005, 185-216), Kristy Coleman (2005, 217-237) and Joan Marler (2003: 109-29, 2006: 163-187).

⁶ For examples of this phenomenon, see Marler (1999: 37-47).

³ See the interview with Gimbutas in Marler (1997: 20).

mention this aspect of Gimbutas' work is a grave omission in what otherwise is a fairly comprehensive overview of major methodological developments in the field of archaeology. Archaeomythology is a multidisciplinary approach to interpretation that incorporates data from archaeology, anthropology of religion, comparative religion, cultural history, mythology, folklore, linguistics, and semiotics, among other disciplines. Gimbutas recognized, well before Hodder, that no artifact can adequately be interpreted in isolation. Not only is its context within a site important, its context within a broader web of connections – spanning the larger cultural and historical complex of which it was a part – also needs to be considered.

Using archaeomythology, she researched the inner coherence of Neolithic images and symbols found throughout much of Europe and Western Asia that had largely been ignored by archaeologists. Her methodology has important heuristic value, and its reliance on multiple data fields provides a wealth of avenues for enriching and validating archaeological interpretations. Even if one is critical of her methodology, it remains an important part of the theoretical landscape and deserves consideration in historical discussions of developments in the field of archaeology.

In Hodder's view, evidence for the presence of a Mother Goddess at Çatalhöyük is "lacking," and on page 86, Balter notes Hodder's decision to distance himself from Mellaart's interpretations. The text relates that Hodder presented his ideas publicly at UCLA only to be challenged by Gimbutas, who was a senior professor of European archaeology there. We briefly read that she "objected bitterly to Ian's dismissal of the goddess, as well as to some of his statements about the symbolic meanings of stone axes found in European Neolithic Graves." Gimbutas is caricatured here (and elsewhere) as a "bitter" woman and is placed as the person in the "one down" position in the argument; Hodder is granted the final word. Moreover, Gimbutas' critiques are portrayed to appear slightly ridiculous, and the full meat of her criticisms of Hodder's interpretations is not offered here or anywhere else in the book.

In the middle of *The Goddess and the Bull*, Balter presents a lengthy consideration of theories about

the origins of agriculture and settled life, and the nature of the Neolithic period in general. He gives considerable attention to the work of French prehistorian Jacques Cauvin, who, in the 1970s offered what Balter praises as a "novel explanation" for the advent of the Neolithic period: that it was ushered in by a "revolution of symbols" and a change in collective psychology that was expressed through religious iconography that first took the form of what Cauvin called "the woman and the bull." Cauvin saw this "woman" as being definitively a goddess at Çatalhöyük, and felt that other symbols depicted in the artwork represented a universal and abstract "language" that was linked with the numinous aspects of nature.

Aspects of these ideas sound suspiciously like those of Gimbutas who, in the late 1960s, began deciphering the "grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted" (Gimbutas 1989, xv). This "meta-language" reflected a sacred relationship between human society and the natural world. While Cauvin's ideas are taken seriously and afforded respect, Gimbutas' are not even mentioned. Instead, we hear that Hodder expanded upon Cauvin's work to create a "full-fledged model of his own" (p. 180), one that reviewed terrain in Southeastern Europe that Gimbutas had personally excavated and written extensively about. We then read of Hodder's determination that the "wild" and the "domestic" were two opposing spheres in the Neolithic psyche. There is no mention in this "true story of archaeology" of Gimbutas' alternative conception that Neolithic peoples viewed all of existence as a holistic totality. Rather than being in antagonistic relationship to the "wild," they were in respectful accord with it.

We are next presented with further insights on the nature of Neolithic society from anthropologist Peter Wilson, who, according to Balter, argued that Neolithic peoples organized themselves into "nuclear families." Yet again, there is no consideration of Gimbutas' theories that these cultures were collective groups that were most likely matrilineal, matrilocal, and matrifocal, not projections of contemporary Western nuclear family structure.

Balter then makes his own attempt to construct a prehistoric timeline that summarizes the developments of humanity from the rise of the primates to contemporary times. He concludes his essay with a quote from Marshall Sahlins: “Culture went from triumph to triumph . . . until it proved it could support human life in outer space” (p. 194). This is the patriarchal myth of “linear evolution toward ever greater ‘progress’” that scholars beginning with Gimbutas and continuing with historians and theorists such as Riane Eisler, Carol Christ, Charlene Spretnak, Charles Maisels and others have critiqued ad infinitum. Indeed, many social observers, whether feminist or not, are highly critical of triumphalist claims of progressivism, especially as we face the prospect of nuclear Armageddon and mass extinction. Nowhere is there mention of Gimbutas’ Kurgan hypothesis which posits that European and Anatolian cultural developments were not at all linear, but suffered disruptions and complex transformations during the process of Indo-Europeanization between 4500 and 2500 BCE (see Gimbutas 1991:32-401, 1997).⁷ The only allusion to this hypothesis is a cartoonish characterization that appears on pages 228-29: “[for Marija Gimbutas], all of prehistory was a dramatic pageantry of innovations and conquests.”

In terms of the distortion and dismissal of Gimbutas’ theories, I question Balter’s explanation that he “simply wanted to stick with the Çatal team’s story” as a rationale for not including anything substantive about her work. The very core issue of the book, as evidenced by the title, the themes, and the book’s conclusion, is the debate over whether or not a goddess was venerated at Çatalhöyük. While Mellaart recognized the implications of the female images and was not afraid to call them “goddesses,” it is Gimbutas who most fully developed and substantiated a theory about Neolithic beliefs, symbolism and social structure in Neolithic Europe and Anatolia (see Gimbutas (1974, 1989, 1991, 1999). Thus, to claim that her views are somehow peripheral to this most critical and pertinent issue concerning Çatalhöyük is to repeat the party line. Balter may not have intended to do this, but by uncritically acting as an embedded reporter, he has contributed to this distortion.

⁷ For genetic evidence supporting Gimbutas’ theory see Cavalli-Sforza (1997: 93-101).

Some of the key points favoring the existence of female deity at Çatalhöyük (and elsewhere in the Neolithic) are: 1) a significant volume of female imagery has been found at the site that far outnumbers male figurines; 2) the female imagery is iconographically similar to that of thousands of female figures found from Western Europe to Siberia, many of which have been located in association with graves and ritual areas; and 3) well-documented records attest that goddess veneration and priestesses existed from the Bronze Age on in Anatolia and related areas. These data suggest that such practices most probably had Neolithic precedents. While the Çatal team has tended to discount the sacred nature of figurines found in “midden” or non-ritual areas, theirs is a simplistic interpretation because ritual figurines may simply have been discarded after use.

Speaking to me in a telephone interview from his home in London on April 11, 2005, James Mellaart said matter-of-factly, “How can you possibly ignore all those pictures, reliefs, and God knows what – hundreds of them? If that isn’t a goddess, what *is* it? The whole thing goes back so obviously to the Paleolithic.”

When there is such strong resistance on the part of the Hodder team to note correspondences that even a lay person such as Balter can see, one has to ask: What is really going on here? Mellaart hazarded a guess: “I think Ian Hodder just wants to say something different.”

Mellaart himself continues to hold Gimbutas in high regard. “I certainly admire her work,” he said. “I sometimes feel it is perhaps a little overdone, but on the other hand if you deal with the other side they’re always saying that everything is *male*. In general I think she’s got a very strong point. And it’s very well documented.” As to why Mellaart thinks her work has been so roundly dismissed by the mainstream archaeological establishment, he answered: “Jealousy. I’m afraid archaeology is like that, like most other professions.”

The Repression of the Feminine

I would argue that the resistance goes deeper than this. I see the dismissal of Gimbutas and theories

supporting the existence of goddess veneration and women's central role in Neolithic society as part of the longstanding (and well-documented) cultural pattern in the West of repressing the cultural significance of women. Archaeologists are authoritative creators of our cultural stories. Cultural stories have the capacity to profoundly influence the way we interpret the world around us, the way we interact with that world and with one another, and the choices we make as to which personal and collective behaviors we embrace and promote. The Hodder team is creating a cultural story that flies in the face of mountains of compelling data to assert that "there is not enough evidence to prove" that a female deity was venerated. Hodder's team may counter-argue, "Well we can't simply *invent* the goddess if she didn't exist just to make women feel better." True, but the point is: *If the Çatalhöyük figures had depicted males, there would be no question by the archaeological establishment that they represented masculine deities.*

It is important to stress that I am focusing strictly on the question of whether the goddess has *historical* reality, not whether she has *ontological* reality. In other words, whether there really is a supernatural "being" called the goddess is not the point here. The point is that to exclude the possibility that the sacred may have taken female form for the people of Çatalhöyük is to reject a valid religious construct.

Embedded in this rejection is an androcentric bias on the part of the Hodder team *against* seeing evidence for female deity in archaeological materials. Rather than acknowledging this bias, the team continues to present its epistemological stance as being somehow more "scientific" and "objective" than any other position, and thus to claim normative status for it. Because team members refuse to make explicit their own assumptions, they have fallen into the very epistemological trap that post-processualism rose up to dismantle.

Women in the Debate

To his credit, Hodder has granted goddess theorists at least limited "space" for dialog⁸ in person and via mail, and he has allowed feminist anthropological

⁸ See Anita Louise in dialog with Ian Hodder, 1998.

researchers interested in studying the dynamics of this debate to be present at Çatalhöyük.⁹ He also invited anthropologist Kathryn Rountree to prepare the text of a two-panel display for the Çatalhöyük visitor center interpreting the site from the perspective of goddess visitors. Moreover, in the summers of 2005 and 2006, international scholars who took part in conferences sponsored by *Goddess Conversations* and *Turkish Friends of Çatalhöyük*¹⁰ were invited to the site to be in dialogue with the excavation team. While such dialogues are to be commended and encouraged, the pejorative characterizations of goddess scholars in Balter's book suggest that the Çatalhöyük Research Project team does not truly afford equal status and respect to those with whom they have been in dialog.

For example, *The Goddess and the Bull* uniformly calls all goddess-oriented visitors to Çatalhöyük "goddess worshipers," although many of these visitors eschew the notion of "worshipping" entirely and are simply captivated by the possibility that ancient peoples may have acknowledged a female deity. There is no mention that quite a number of these visitors are university professors, anthropologists, art historians, theologians, cultural historians, philosophers, linguists, authors, and other professionals who possess an impressive knowledge of archaeology. There is also little mention of the fact that many of the visitors who may not be formal "scholars" have done a great deal of research in the areas of history, mythology, and archaeology and have come to the site with a substantial background on the subject.

The Women of the Çatalhöyük Team

Unfortunately, women, who make up a large proportion of the Hodder project, are also participating in the denial of anything suggesting a goddess at Çatalhöyük. In *The Goddess and the Bull*,

⁹ See, for example, Kathryn Rountree's 2003 report "Reflexivity in Practice," which addresses how the feminist agenda is being handled at the site. Interestingly, Hodder's willingness to listen to Goddess scholars at all has earned him flak from more traditional practitioners in the field who are outraged that anyone besides "trained archeologists" might have a say in the cultural story that they are developing (see Balter 2005: 246).

¹⁰ For information on the "Goddess Conversations" conferences, see <http://www.goddessconversations.com> and Ruyle, this issue.

we read, for example, about some of the interpretations of Naomi Hamilton, described as the (now former) team member who was perhaps most perturbed by New Archaeology's lack of attention to the role of women in prehistory. We learn that because Mellaart had not recorded the exact location of most of the female figurines, because such figurines represented a "small minority" of the total (I argue that most are intentionally grouped with animals and figures of "indeterminate" sex as a means of diluting the significance of the clearly female imagery), and because Hodder's new dig was turning them up in what they believed were rubbish areas, Hamilton questioned that the objects had a sacred, religious significance. As Balter writes, she proposed that these figurines "symbolized femaleness itself rather than fertility," and that they somehow represented "sex-based gender roles and the consequent social conflict this doubtless created" (p. 113). Why the assumption that gender relations were characterized by "social conflict"? Is this not a "reading back" into prehistory of social dynamics that plague contemporary Western culture? Such an approach can hardly be considered sound methodology, particularly not without at least giving a (multivocal) nod to the fact that Gimbutas posited an entirely different, woman-respecting cultural context for non-Indo-European Neolithic peoples.

Balter also quotes Hamilton as stating "the figurines may also be demonstrating their challenge to fulfill other roles in society" (p. 114). So they were Neolithic feminists, then? There is no consideration of the cross-cultural iconographic similarities between the Çatal figurines and others found throughout Europe and the Near East, and no consideration of somewhat later evidence that women did indeed fulfill "non-traditional" roles (by today's standards), as in Mesopotamia, where they were priestesses. In my opinion, such narrow, post-modern renderings dull and obscure the richness of these archaic worlds and create distorted interpretations.

In an online video clip of the Science Museum of Minnesota, Hamilton states, "I want to know whether people were divided into men and women [at Çatalhöyük]. That's the main question that concerns me" (Hamilton n. d.). This clearly reflects another contemporary trend in academia: the fear of identifying women too strongly with their biological

functions to the point where any meaning or significance attributed to biology must be erased. Does such questioning of the biological categories of "man" and "woman" make any reasonable sense when female figurines unearthed at Çatal are abundantly breasted and buttocked, and when anthropomorphic images are frequently portrayed in splay-legged positions echoing a traditional birthing posture found the world over?

The Goddess and the Bull recounts that another team member, Ruth Tringham, had an insight about the necessity of reconstructing a past that was actively created by real people, not simply toolmakers engaged in economic activity. Tringham confesses, "My wish to retain respectability and credibility as a scientific archaeologist was stronger than my motivation to consider gender relations," and she laments, "Why have archaeologists produced a prehistory of genderless, faceless blobs?" (p. 234). One can understand the professional pressures on women such as Tringham who operate in male-dominated fields. But what is puzzling is why Tringham held the view that archaeologists produced "a prehistory of genderless, faceless blobs" when she had previously worked closely with Marija Gimbutas whose approach to prehistory was precisely the opposite.

The Dig Team's Attraction to the Goddess

Although members of the Çatalhöyük excavation team purport to distance themselves from goddess-historical narratives, they seem to have an ongoing attraction to goddess themes. When the team from the University of California at Berkeley, headed by Ruth Tringham, arrived at Çatalhöyük for the 1997 season, Balter describes that an elaborate tent shelter was erected for them that Tringham promptly named the "Goddess Pavilion." To inaugurate the building, two students molded a goddess figure around a bottle of whiskey and one team member stepped forward with some offerings to the goddess, which she described in her diary as "fruits of the earth (domestic, apples and pears), flowers of the field (wild), remains of creatures of the sea (a fossil coral), the earth (a string of snail shells), and the sky (and owl feather)" (p. 240). This is certainly odd behavior for an archaeological team that Balter maintains evinced no spiritual leanings toward any

sort of “goddess” whatsoever. Why was the name “Goddess Pavillion” chosen by an archaeologist who has done her utmost to distance herself from the pro-goddess theoretical camp? Is this simply a form of “light humor” or even thinly veiled sarcasm, or is something deeper at work? Balter hints at the latter in describing the phenomenon of the “goddess” as having become a sort of unifying emblem for the entire excavation team:

From the very beginning of the Hodder dig, the most visible symbol had been the Mother Goddess. Of course, most of the archaeologists questioned the claims that James Mellaart and Marija Gimbutas had made about goddess worship at Çatalhöyük. No one on the team was a practicing goddess worshiper, or at least no one admitted to being such. Yet the goddess was everywhere. Her image was on the dig house, on Mellaart’s birthday cake, on the project’s official stationery, on the Çatalhöyük Web site, on the official visitor’s guide to the excavations. At one level, it was all a joke, but all jokes have their serious meanings. . . (257).

Shortly thereafter, Balter recounts how the 1997 team created a regular Thursday night costume party in which all members actively participated. One night Tringham came dressed as the Mother Goddess.

Perhaps the most interesting example of carnival-like behavior appears at the very end of the book where Balter offers a brief transcript of a mock wedding ceremony that Hodder, “officiating” as “priest,” performed for two recently engaged team members:

IAN: We have come together in the presence of the goddess to witness the marriage of Ayfer and Can and ask her blessing on them. The next bit, I want you to know, came from a real goddess Web site -- this is a direct quote:

Marriage is a commitment to a spiritual journey and a life of becoming, a partnership with the earth, a nurturing of who we really are. It combines two separate parts into one.

So, may the goddess protect you and keep you fertile. . . . [I]n the name of the goddess, the bull, and the holy vulture, I pronounce you man and wife (327-28).

One hardly knows what to make of this. Whether this indicates a form of affectionate respect or disrespectful lampooning, it is fascinating from a psychological perspective to witness Hodder’s compulsion to “play-act” the role of sacred priest of the goddess. One wonders: What is really going on here?

Recent Evidence Validating Gimbutas

Hodder has recently determined from excavation evidence that men and women enjoyed a kind of egalitarian society at Çatalhöyük. Referring to the January 2004 issue of *Scientific American*, Balter recalls Hodder’s revelation that “it was unlikely that Çatalhöyük was the kind of matriarchal society that James Mellaart and Marija Gimbutas had imagined” (p. 290). In Hodder’s own words: “We are not witnessing a patriarchy or a matriarchy. What we’re seeing is perhaps more interesting -- a society in which, in many areas, the question of whether you were a man or a woman did not determine the life you could lead” (pp. 290-91). Although Hodder attempts to discredit Gimbutas, she never envisioned the kind of “matriarchy” that Hodder is implying here, in which women dominated men. She actually refused to use the term “matriarchy” in her writings, and always posited that Neolithic society was mother-centered and characterized by gender balance. Thus, Hodder’s statement about Gimbutas needs to be corrected, and acknowledgement should be made that he is in fact validating what Gimbutas was saying all along about social relations in Neolithic Europe and Anatolia. In *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991: 324) Gimbutas writes:

Indeed, we do not find in Old Europe, nor in all of the Old World, a system of autocratic rule by women with an equal suppression of men. Rather, we find a structure in which the sexes are more or less on equal footing, a society that could be termed a *gylany*.

Another set of interesting finds may also be moving the dig more in Gimbutas’ and Mellaart’s direction. In 2004, team archeologists unearthed two female figurines from grave areas. One is of the corpulent type with hands cupping her breasts, echoing the style of both Paleolithic “Venuses,” abundant Neolithic images from Southeast Europe, and

Mesopotamian “fertility” figures. The other is more schematic and similar to Neolithic Cycladic and Cypriot figurines (see Nakamura and Meskell 2004). Hodder has long said that he would be more convinced of the presence of the goddess at Çatalhöyük if female figurines were to be found in sacred contexts, such as graves. Nevertheless, he has carefully stated that because these newly uncovered figures were found in grave “fill” that was “disturbed,” they may not be bona fide grave goods and therefore they cannot be unequivocally interpreted as sacred figures, or goddesses.¹¹ So the dance continues.

Some of the figures unearthed from the 2005 season, several of which are prominently photographed in the Çatalhöyük 2005 Archive Report (see Meskell and Nakamura 2005). continue to strongly resemble those found throughout Old Europe from the Neolithic period that Gimbutas and others have identified as sacred female icons. Although in some cases the gender of the newly found figures is ambiguous (i.e., they lack any clear indication of breasts or vulvae), their overall contour, shape, and incising are nearly identical with those of figures from other Neolithic sites that clearly *are* female, and their body shapes evince the kind of corpulence more closely associated with female than male anatomy (i.e., in some cases steatopygia). One particularly remarkable find is a figure of a robust female with large breasts and stomach whose navel appears to protrude, a condition the excavators note sometimes occurs in pregnancy. Her very thin arms with delineated fingers fold up to rest on her breasts. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this figure is her back: it is portrayed as an articulated skeleton with a modeled spinal column, a pelvis, and scapulas that project above the shoulders. Individual ribs and vertebrae are depicted through horizontal and diagonal scoring. Meskell and Nakamura conjecture that this figure, found “in an ashy area. . . with a large amount of ground stone, grinding stone, and a mace head,” depicts “a human, hybrid representation perhaps of life and death.” Such an interpretation echoes the contention of Marija Gimbutas that the goddess represented the death function as well as the functions of birth, nurturance, and life, an assertion

she demonstrates with ample iconographic examples throughout her work.

Michael Balter believes that time may be the arbiter of the debate. “Based on what I know of him for the past seven years, I think that if Ian thought there were compelling evidence that a Mother Goddess was worshipped at Çatalhöyük, he would change his mind.”¹² Given the slow and methodical pace of the current dig, it may be some time before we find out. Meanwhile, one hopes that Hodder, Balter, and others associated with the Çatalhöyük excavation will begin to engage in the kind of self-reflexive, multivocal consideration of prehistory for which Hodder has become known. This will require developing a more egalitarian relationship with goddess-oriented theorists, and publicly holding goddess theoretical perspectives as valid possibilities alongside their own. It will also require giving the work of Marija Gimbutas the same kind of fair and equal treatment in public communications related to the project that has been granted other pioneers in the field of archaeology, and crediting her appropriately where her theories are validated by new discoveries at Çatalhöyük. To fail on these counts is to engage in questionable academic ethics and a kind of science that may well go down in history as myopic, limited, and obsolete.

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¹¹ Hodder made this remark at a book-signing for *The Goddess and the Bull*, Cody’s Bookstore, Berkeley, CA, April 18, 2005.

¹² Telephone interview with Michael Balter, April 9, 2005.

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Response from Michael Balter:

Let me start by saying that I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Marguerite Rigoglioso's very interesting critique of *The Goddess and the Bull*, as well as her kind words about the book. I am also gratified that she found it worthy of critiquing in the first place. I am going to keep my remarks brief because I think that my overall reaction can be summed up quite easily.

Rigoglioso is correct in pointing out that my own views differ somewhat from those of Ian Hodder and many members of the Çatalhöyük team, insofar as I find it hard to ignore what seem to be strong stylistic similarities between female figurines from time periods spanning many thousands of years. In this regard, she quotes me accurately. However, her quotation of my statement that it is really, really hard not to see a Mother Goddess in the figurines seems out of context. While I do not deny having said such a thing, I would have meant that it is hard not to see her because we have been primed by Marija Gimbutas, James Mellaart, and other scholars sympathetic to the Goddess interpretation to see her. But that does not mean that the archaeological evidence is persuasive that a Mother Goddess was worshipped at Çatalhöyük. In her critique, Rigoglioso provides no convincing evidence for this, indeed no real evidence at all. Rather, she concentrates on my treatment of Gimbutas and my failure to fairly convey Gimbutas' views.

Rigoglioso notes with skepticism my claims that I was simply conveying the team's attitude towards Gimbutas and her ideas, and argues that I went further and participated in what she sees as an attempt to marginalize Gimbutas and her contributions. There may be some truth to this; but if so, it would be because I also find Gimbutas' arguments for Mother Goddess worship to be

unpersuasive, for similar reasons to those put forward by Hodder and his colleagues. The fact that there are stylistic similarities over a long period of time in the figurines suggests at most that there might have been a continuity of meaning, but what that meaning was needs to be addressed rigorously. It could have been a Mother Goddess, or it could have been something else, and the meaning could have changed over the ages despite the stylistic similarities. I agree with the Çatalhöyük team that there is no clear evidence for what this meaning was, and that Gimbutas' arguments are unconvincing for the reasons that others have put forward in greater detail.

I also think that there is clear evidence that Gimbutas had a romantic and idealized notion of prehistory as I stated in my book. A reading of her introduction to *The Language of the Goddess* makes her position clear, and I would invite those not familiar with this to have a look at it and decide for themselves. So while I may be guilty of caricaturing Gimbutas to a certain extent, I would argue that her own views and writings have made it difficult to avoid doing so in the light of today's more rigorous archaeological analyses.

Finally, I am happy to see Rigoglioso state clearly something that she and I definitely agree about, and which we discussed in our telephone interview: The question of whether or not a Mother Goddess was worshipped in prehistory is entirely separate from the religious question of whether such a deity does or does not exist. Those involved in Goddess worship and other forms of spirituality would do well to keep this distinction clear in their minds when they look for support for their beliefs at prehistoric sites like Çatalhöyük

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to comment, and congratulate Rigoglioso on a stimulating and interesting article.

Counter Response by Marguerite Rigoglioso:

While I appreciate Michael Balter's point about the meaning of the figurines needing to be "addressed rigorously," I feel, once again, that it is essential to uncover the biases of those who are making interpretations. The ultimate purpose of my article

is not to "provide evidence" for Gimbutas' theories, as that has been eloquently accomplished, for example, by Carol Christ, Naomi Goldenberg, Joan Marler, Mara Lynn Keller, and Charlene Spretnak in their respective articles in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12, 2 (Fall 1996). Rather, my purpose here is to expose the epistemological biases of those associated with the excavation at Çatalhöyük, whose interpretations currently enjoy hegemonic status. I believe it is only by looking our biases straight in the face and acknowledging what personal and cultural conditionings may have shaped such biases that we will be able to make any meaningful and productive constructions, interpretations, and truth claims. That obviously applies to those on all sides of the argument.

Response from Ian Hodder:

In this detailed review, Marguerite Rigoglioso does a very good job of making her point in an effective and fair way. This piece is a useful contribution and I will be thinking on it further as the work progresses.

Marguerite Rigoglioso is a Ph.D. candidate in humanities at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she earned an M.A. in philosophy and religion, with a concentration in women's spirituality. She is a faculty member at Dominican University of California where she is helping to establish a new program in women and gender studies. Ms. Rigoglioso has participated in archaeological excavations on the island of Pantelleria, for which she received funding from the John Anson Kittredge Educational Fund. Her academic articles have appeared in various publications, including the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, where she received honorable mention for the journal's New Scholar Award.
