

# Matriarchy in Bronze Age Crete

A Perspective from Archaeomythology  
and Modern Matriarchal Studies

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Cover: Side panel of Ayia Triadha sarcophagus with two Goddesses being pulled by griffins. Third Temple Palace/Postpalatial period, LM IB-LM IIIB c. 1450-1350/1300 BC, sarcophagus is 0.895m in height, 1.373-1.385m in length, and 0.45m in width, limestone, found inside a tomb, Ayia Triadha, Crete. Heraklion Museum, Crete. Photograph by Dr. Mara Lynn Keller. Reprinted with permission.



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## Preface

First and foremost I wish to acknowledge my beloved parents, Marie Szymanski Cichon and John Edward Cichon, now both deceased, who fostered in me a great love of learning, and the understanding that few things in life are more important than an education. It was from my father that I also acquired my love of archaeology.

I am most grateful to my mentor, Dr. Mara Lynn Keller, for her unceasing counsel, encouragement, and support over the years. Also unfailing in their support have been my family members: my husband Nikolaos Kornaros, my sister, Alexandra Cichon, and my nephew Jade Cichon-Kelly. The encouragement of all my friends has also contributed greatly to the completion of this work.

To Marija Gimbutas, Heide Goettner-Abendroth, the scholars of modern matriarchal studies, the scholars of Women's Spirituality, and Aegean archaeologists working in the field for the last one hundred years, I owe a huge debt of gratitude for laying the foundations upon which this work is built.

Finally I wish to honor my ancestors, especially the women.

# Introduction

## Topic and inquiry questions

In this work I look at the issue of the role of the Goddess,<sup>1</sup> women, and matriarchy in Bronze Age Minoan<sup>2</sup> society and answer the question: was Bronze Age Crete a matristic, matrilineal, matriarchal, *gylanic*, egalitarian, gender diarchic, or patriarchal society, based on the definitions of those terms by Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler, Peggy Reeves Sanday, Heide Goettner-Abendroth, Shanshan Du, and Gerda Lerner? I begin with the hypothesis that Minoan Crete was a matriarchal society as defined by Heide Goettner-Abendroth. However, I also consider that my investigation might prove that such was not the case, and that another form of social, economic, political, and spiritual organization might better describe Bronze Age Crete—thus my consideration of Gimbutas’s, Eisler’s, Sanday’s, Du’s and Lerner’s terms and definitions.

Despite the fact that authorities acknowledge that women played an important role or roles in Minoan society, and that the preeminent Minoan deity was female, there is a gap in the scholarly literature regarding the role of women and matriarchy in Minoan Crete. The debate over whether or not Bronze Age Crete was a matriarchal society continues to be heated and unresolved, and thus it is the intention of this study to advance the discussion toward a more complex, detailed, and certain conclusion.

To answer my overarching question, was Minoan Crete a matriarchal society? I first consider several preliminary questions: Was a Mother Goddess worshipped as the preeminent deity of Bronze Age Crete, and if so, was Crete therefore a Goddess-centered society as well? Was Bronze Age Crete a woman-centered society? Finally, is there evidence for matriarchal or matrilineal/matrilocal customs in the archaeomythological record of Minoan Crete?

As the last sentence indicates, the methodology employed in this work is archaeomythology, the discipline founded by archaeologist Marija Gimbutas in the late twentieth century, and encompassing the fields of archaeology, mythology, linguistics, folklore, and history. It is described in detail in Chapter 2, Methodology.

To answer the first question that I have identified above: was a Mother Goddess the primary Cretan deity, and was Crete a Goddess-centered society?, I begin by carefully defining the term Mother Goddess. I do not limit the role of the Mother Goddess, as many do, simply to fertility,

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<sup>1</sup>My explanation of the capitalization of the word Goddess is found later in this chapter. In brief, it is based on several factors: she was the primary deity of Bronze Age Crete, and my understanding that although she has many manifestations, she was one Goddess.

<sup>2</sup>While I have continued to use the term ‘Minoan’ in this work to refer to Bronze Age Cretan society, I, along with many others, would like to find an alternative appellation. The term is a misnomer. King Minos, if he did indeed exist, lived several thousand years after the foundation of the first temple-palaces on Crete, and several hundred after Bronze Age Cretan civilization had been amalgamated into the Indo-European civilization that followed it. Moreover, as shall be discussed later in this work, it can be argued that only important women are present in the archaeological and archaeomythological record. Continuing to use the term ‘Minoan’ predisposes our thinking and limits our understanding. A number of scholars have come forward with alternative names for ‘Minoan’ Crete. Of those, Ariadnian seems the most appropriate to me at this point in time. For an understanding of why I favor the designation Ariadnian for Bronze Age Crete, see Cichon 2016: 78-99.



birthing, or nursing. In my definition, the Minoan Mother Goddess also embodies power and protection within all of Nature, mediates between life, death and rebirth, between the known and unknown, and is a manifestation of all the powers of Nature and the cosmos.

A review of the archaeological and scholarly literature reveals that most authorities agree that Crete was a Goddess-centered society. It is important to underscore this agreement because, as cultural historian Riane Eisler has noted, when a male god is worshipped as the primary or sole deity, men are in charge; and, where religions are Goddess-centered, the societies tend to have a female-centered social order.

Religions in which the most powerful or only deity is male tend to reflect a social order in which descent is patrilinear (traced through the father) and domicile is patrilocal (the wife goes to live with the family or clan of her husband). Conversely, religions in which the most powerful or sole deity is female tend to reflect a social order in which descent is matrilinear (traced through the mother) and domicile is likewise matrilocal (a husband goes to live with his wife's family or clan).<sup>3</sup>

Eisler's view is further substantiated by the work of anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday in her study of one hundred and fifty-six societies (to be discussed later in detail).<sup>4</sup>

While there is agreement among scholars that Crete was a Goddess-centered society, authorities differ as to whether they define the Minoan Goddess as a Mother-Goddess, and whether they believe there was one Minoan Goddess or many. The various definitions of the Minoan Goddess and the issue of whether she was one or many are dealt with at length in this work.

After defining the term Mother Goddess, I survey, analyze, discuss, and (re)interpret the archaeological artifacts, the shrines, and the religious iconography, as well as a wide range of archaeological and archaeomythological studies and interpretations, to develop in detail the criteria by which to identify a Mother Goddess, given the architecture and iconography of Minoan Crete. I then go on to discuss the methodology of archaeologists Geraldine Gesell, Marija Gimbutas, Nanno Marinatos, Marina Moss and others working in the field of Minoan religion in order to determine their criteria for recognizing the Goddess. Their views as to whether there is just one Minoan Goddess or many are presented as well. Thus Chapter 4 establishes and expounds upon the criteria by which I propose to distinguish the Minoan Mother Goddess.

Chapter 5 presents the iconographic evidence for the existence of a Mother Goddess in Crete beginning with the Neolithic and continuing through to the end of the Bronze Age. Each item—fresco, figurine, piece of pottery, seal, sealstone, or ring—is discussed in detail in order to ascertain how it fits the criteria I developed (in the previous chapter). I conclude that the Mother Goddess, as I have defined her, is primary in Minoan Crete for a period spanning some five thousand years c. 6500-1070 BC, that Minoan Crete is a Goddess-centered society, and that gods are relatively few and mostly appear late on the scene.

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<sup>3</sup> Eisler 1987: 24.

<sup>4</sup> Sanday 1981.

As for my second question, was Minoan Crete a woman-centered society?, although most authorities will concede that Crete was a Goddess-centered society, they will not agree that it was a woman-centered one as well. Unfortunately, there is no way to empirically prove a belief system—a belief in the centrality of women; or to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that matriarchy existed in Minoan Crete. I believe I have constructed a case that is plausible and well substantiated.

Since the written language for this time period has not been definitively deciphered, and such written records as exist are small in number, the evidence for a woman-centered society consists primarily of archaeological evidence, artifacts, and architecture: artistic representations such as frescoes, figurines, seals and rings, alongside the remains of temple-palaces, towns, tombs, and residences. Mythology and history provide clues as well. I examine this evidence in Chapter 6, and conclude that a plausible and highly probable case for a central role for women in Minoan Crete can be made. Chapter 7 reinforces the argument that women were central by looking at the paucity of male ruler images in Bronze Age Crete; it examines those images that have been pointed to by authorities as possible candidates for such a role; and deconstructs the arguments for male rulership.

Regarding my third question: is there evidence for matriarchal or matrilineal/matrilocal customs in Minoan Crete, Chapter 8 provides extensive archaeological evidence as well as mythological and historical data for just such customs. Having answered in the affirmative to my three query questions, I conclude in Chapter 8 that based on the evidence presented in that chapter and the previous four chapters, a plausible, and compelling case can be made for declaring that Minoan Crete was a matriarchal society based on Heide Goettner-Abendroth's and modern matriarchal studies' definitions of the term.

### **Personal relationship to topic**

I have long had a fascination with Bronze Age Crete. It stems from my first trip to Crete in 1987 when I spent a week visiting sites as a student in the six-week summer program of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. Listening to archaeologists lecturing on the sites we were visiting, I kept asking myself, yes, but what was the life of the people of that society really like? Such questions came to me, I believe, as part of my previous training as an historian of social history. Indeed that was the reason why I was attracted to the new field of social history. It sought to answer the questions I was asking: how were the people living; not just the kings and aristocrats, but everyone and most especially the women. Unfortunately, the archaeologists I studied with that summer of 1987 could not or would not explore the issues of women and men, gender relations, religion, and social life in Minoan Crete. So I was left to wonder.

For the last thirty years I have wondered and studied and read. I also had the opportunity of participating in an archaeological survey on Crete. Thus this work arises out of my studies, my inquiry, my work with archaeologist Barbara Hayden at the Vrokastro (Iron Age) site of eastern Crete, my repeated visits to Cretan sites and museums, and the many months I have spent visiting and exploring the island. It also arises out of my long-standing feminism and my immersion in the Women's Spirituality movement for the last twenty-five years. Finally, it

is a product of my interest in and study of Goettner-Abendroth's work and the work of other scholars in the field of modern matriarchal studies.

### **Scope and limitations of the study**

This investigation focuses on Minoan Crete in the Bronze Age. While there is some discussion of the Neolithic period in Crete, and Cretan Neolithic artifacts, my consideration of the Neolithic is not nearly as comprehensive as that of the Bronze Age. Even though concentrating on the Bronze Age, this is not a comprehensive discussion of all the images and artifacts of that era. While I am well-versed in the vast array of archaeological artifacts and imagery across Crete from the Neolithic to the Classical Greek era, and have highlighted many of the key images that represent the major attributes of the Goddess(es) and the key social-spiritual roles of women in Bronze Age Crete, I have not included all of them.

I myself have not excavated in Crete, but as much as is possible I have worked with the site reports of those who have conducted the excavations. I have, moreover, visited most, if not all, of the sites discussed in this work, and viewed the artifacts examined in this study in the museums of Crete.

I have considered, but have not treated in a comprehensive way, Minoan gods or royalty. In my view, there is a small amount of evidence for a youthful god from the Neolithic onward. However, the imagery of gods in Minoan Crete is a small fraction compared to the imagery of the Goddess. Thus I chose not to focus on gods nor do a comprehensive discussion of them. As for Minoan royalty, I do not believe that Minoan Crete had kings or queens or an aristocracy. My Chapter 7 addresses the issue of the lack of ruler iconography in Crete, especially iconography of a priest-king. Nor does my research lead me to believe that there was a Minoan queen. Rather, I find evidence for councils of consensus facilitated by women elders of the society. The works of Marina Moss and Nanno Marinatos can provide those interested with an extensive treatment of Minoan gods and royalty.<sup>5</sup>

Although a part of archaeomythology, linguistics does not figure prominently in this study. This is partially because I myself am not a linguist, and partially because the written records such as we have for Minoan Crete are small in number, and there is as yet no agreement on their decipherment. I do however reference a small amount of linguistic information in this work.

Related to this issue of the lack of written records and the lack of consensus over how they are to be deciphered is the issue of social relations. There is little evidence regarding social relations in Minoan Crete because there are no written records. Thus we must learn what we can about this extremely important topic from the archaeological artifacts alone, especially the iconography, which of course is subject to interpretation.

I realize this work would be enhanced by the inclusion of more illustrations, and I would have liked to illustrate it extensively. However, I am limited by the photographs I myself was able to take (or borrow) given the difficulty of obtaining permission to publish photographs from those who hold the copyright.

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<sup>5</sup> Moss 2005; Marinatos 2010.

The state of the art of archaeology in Crete is yet another limitation of this study. I have carefully addressed the complexity of the scholarly debate, but in many cases that debate is unsettled. For example, as I detail in my Methodology Chapter and elsewhere in this work, scholars are not agreed about the date of the Thera eruption, nor are they agreed as to how or when Greeks from the mainland, the Mycenaean, arrived in Crete.

Related to this issue of the unsettled nature of the scholarly debate is the understanding that our knowledge about Minoan Crete is limited. We have access to only a fraction of what once existed, and new information, through chance finds or new excavations, could change what we know at any moment.

Within these limitations I have tried to present a well-balanced picture of Minoan Crete in the Bronze Age, and address both the pro's and con's of issues—not just the side which supports my own view. I believe I have been thoughtful and reasonable.

Finally, what I see as strengths, some might view as limitations: feminism, woman-centeredness, ecofeminism, an interest in the Goddess traditions of the world, my partiality to the theories and worldview of Marija Gimbutas, my use of the discipline of archaeomythology as my methodology, and my decision to use the term matriarchy, a term that is often misunderstood, and the definition of matriarchy as given by modern matriarchal studies.

## Key definitions

I turn now to the definitions and key terms as used in this study. In this work I shall be considering several definitions of matriarchy, that of anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday and of philosopher Heide Goettner-Abendroth, as they might be applied to Minoan Crete; as well as archaeomythologist Marija Gimbutas's definition of the terms matrilineal and matrilineal; cultural historian Riane Eisler's definitions of *gylany* and partnership society; and anthropologist Shanshan Du's definitions of gender equalitarian societies. These are discussed in detail in the following pages. I will also consider again Gerda Lerner's definition of patriarchy. It may be that one or a combination of these definitions best fits Bronze Age Cretan society.

In a paper presented at the Sixteenth Congress of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association in 1998 entitled 'Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form: An Old Debate in a New Light,' Sanday, specifically using the word matriarchy, argues that it is a construct 'based on gendered divisions in the sociocultural and *cosmological orders*. [emphasis added]<sup>6</sup> Rejecting the usual definition of matriarchy as the opposite of patriarchy, Sanday asserts that matriarchy 'has never been theorized in and of itself.'<sup>7</sup> She goes on to explain:

I suggest that the term matriarchy is relevant in societies where the cosmological and the social are linked by a primordial founding ancestress, mother goddess, or archetypal queen . . . the archetypal qualities of feminine symbols do not exist solely in the symbolic realm but are manifested in social practices that influence the lives of both sexes, not just women. These practices involve women (usually in their roles as mothers) in activities that authenticate and regenerate . . . , that nurture the social

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<sup>6</sup> Sanday 1998: 1.

<sup>7</sup> Sanday 1998: 1.

order. By this definition, the ethnographic context of matriarchy does not reflect female power over subjects . . . but female power . . . to *conjugate*—to knit and regenerate social ties in the here-and-now and in the hereafter.<sup>8</sup>

Sanday concludes:

In a strongly tradition-based society ultimate authority does not rest in political roles but in a cosmological order. If this cosmological order pivots around female oriented symbols and if this order is upheld by ritual acts coordinated by women whose social salience is also grounded in this order we can speak of matriarchy.<sup>9</sup>

Sanday says that in order to determine whether or not a society is a matriarchy we must also ask the following questions:

Which sex bears the symbolic and social burden for conjugating the social universe? Which sex is imbued naturally or socially with the reproductive powers that recharge the sources of supernatural fecundity? What is the gender of the dominant symbols tying the archetypal to the social? How do males and females complement one another in the political arena and how is this arena tied to the cosmological order?<sup>10</sup>

In addition to her definitions of matriarchy and patriarchy, Sanday also defines the notion of *diarchy* as ‘a complementary relation between the sexes;’ here she uses Janet Hoskins’s definition, one ‘of shared powers and oscillations in control, structured by a doctrine of interdependence and mutuality.’<sup>11</sup> However, Sanday rejects the term diarchy as appropriate for the Minangkabau people of Western Sumatra (about whom she has conducted extensive field research), and she ends her article by noting that: ‘Considerations of matriarchy, patriarchy, or diarchy should not be about which sex rules but how gender is represented in archetypal scenarios and reflected in social practices.’<sup>12</sup>

Since 1998 Sanday has reiterated and further elaborated her definition of matriarchy in two different publications: *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy*, published in 2002, and an article ‘Matriarchal Values and World Peace: the Case of the Minangkabau,’ in the 2009 anthology *Societies of Peace*, edited by Heide Goettner-Abendroth. In these works, Sanday, who has spent twenty years studying the matriarchal society of the Minangkabau of Western Sumatra, declares that we must abandon our idea that matriarchy means women’s control of political power and substitute for it the understanding that matriarchy emphasizes ‘the role of maternal symbols in webs of cultural significance.’<sup>13</sup> She proposes that matriarchy be redefined in terms of ‘*cultural symbols and practices associating the maternal with the origin and center of the growth processes necessary for social and individual life.*’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sanday 1998: 1.

<sup>9</sup> Sanday 1998: 7.

<sup>10</sup> Sanday 1998: 7.

<sup>11</sup> Sanday 1998: 7.

<sup>12</sup> Sanday 1998: 7.

<sup>13</sup> Sanday 2003: 236.

<sup>14</sup> Sanday 2003: 236.

Sanday reserves the term matriarchy for ‘structures highlighting maternal symbols and meanings.’<sup>15</sup> She believes that the maternal symbols and meanings of the Minangkabau (described below) evolve from the fact that the Minangkabau people are guided by the proverb ‘Growth in nature is our teacher.’<sup>16</sup> In nature, all that is born in the world comes from the mother. Moreover, the growth of all living beings, from rice to children, must be nurtured; thus nurturance, by both females and males in Minangkabau society, is key.

Minangkabau society is matrilineal and matrilocal. Sanday maintains that, ‘Maternal symbols related to origin and center ramify through the Minangkabau social universe.’<sup>17</sup> Bundo Kanduang, the mythical queen mother, is at the center of the Minangkabau world and that title, Bundo Kanduang, is also applied to senior Minangkabau women in their ceremonial roles. In Minangkabau society women oversee access rights to ancestral property, and all families trace their origins to a founding ancestress. Senior women are equated with the central pillar of the house which is considered its origin, navel, and ritual center. In *adat* (meaning local custom or tradition) ceremonies, which are at the crux of village social life, women are more involved than men. It is the women who fulfill *adat*. It is their ceremonial activities, and their devoted commitment to raising children according to *adat*, that ensures the stability of tradition. Minangkabau villages are known as ‘mother,’ and the cultural focus on maternal origin and center is even evident in songs which place the mother at the center of emotions.

Although women are at the center, Sanday stresses that there is balance in male and female relations and both must be nurturers for society to remain stable and for growth to continue. As she writes in ‘Matriarchal Values and World Peace’:

matriarchal values grow out of a social philosophy in which the emphasis is on cooperation . . . matriarchy is not about ‘female rule,’ but about social principles and values rooted in maternal meanings in which both sexes work together to promote human well-being.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Goettner-Abendroth (the next theorist to be discussed) Sanday calls her approach ‘particularistic’—she is not a believer in evolutionary stages, rather she holds that institutions such as matriarchy are the consequence of the blending and interaction of complex structures within cultures.<sup>19</sup>

German philosopher and feminist Heide Goettner-Abendroth, who has spearheaded the modern matriarchal studies movement, has also resurrected and redefined the term matriarchy—independently of Sanday. Goettner-Abendroth has spent her lifetime studying matriarchies both in their socio-cultural and historical contexts. Pointing out, as does Sanday, that the Greek word *arché* has a double meaning, ‘beginning’ as well as ‘domination,’ Goettner-Abendroth argues that matriarchy should be translated as ‘the mothers from the beginning.’<sup>20</sup> Her ‘explication’ of matriarchy is more than a simple definition, for her goal is to set out the deep structure of matriarchal society; provide a structural definition that can form the

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<sup>15</sup> Sanday 2003: 236.

<sup>16</sup> Sanday 2003: 236.

<sup>17</sup> Sanday 2003: 237.

<sup>18</sup> Sanday 2009: 217.

<sup>19</sup> Sanday 2008: 3:194.

<sup>20</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2009: 17.

basis of a comprehensive theory on matriarchal societies to be used and developed by other researchers in the field of matriarchal studies; and to provide a hybrid methodology that is multidisciplinary. Indeed, Goettner-Abendroth has created a new paradigm which she calls the 'matriarchy paradigm.' 'The central tenet of this paradigm is that women have not only created society and culture over long periods of human history, but that all subsequent cultural developments originated there and are based on these societies.'<sup>21</sup>

What Goettner-Abendroth calls the deep structure of matriarchal societies refers to four levels of society: the economic, social, political, and cultural (including worldview and spirituality). At the level of economics, matriarchal societies, which are usually, but not always, agricultural societies,

practice a subsistence economy that achieves local and regional self-reliance. Land and houses belong to the clan in the sense of usage rights, while private ownership of property and territorial claims are unknown concepts. There is a vivid circulation of goods along the lines of kinship and marriage customs. The system of circulation prevents the accumulation of goods by one individual or clan, as the ideal is distribution rather than accumulation. . . . In economic terms, matriarchies are known for their perfectly balanced reciprocity. For that reason I define them **as societies of economic reciprocity**. [emphasis in original]<sup>22</sup>

At the social level, matriarchal societies are founded on motherhood and are based on the clan.

People live together in large kinship groups that follow the principle of matriliney, that is, relatedness based on the mother's line. The name of the clan, and all social honours and political titles, are inherited from the mothers. A matri-clan consists of at least three generations of women, plus the directly related men.<sup>23</sup>

Such societies are also matrilocal, with women remaining in the maternal home permanently and husbands moving there. Marriage between clans is either achieved through en mass marriages between clans or individual choice. What is important is that 'in this way, a society without hierarchies is shaped, one that sees itself as an extended clan. Therefore, I define matriarchies as **non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship**. [emphasis in original]<sup>24</sup>

At the level of politics, the process of decision making is also organized along kinship lines.

In matriarchal societies, political practice follows the principle of consensus which means *unanimity* for each decision. Matriarchal societies are well-organized to actualize this principle, and practice it along the lines of matriarchal kinship. . . . The source of all the politics are the clan house where the people live, and in this way, a true 'grassroots democracy' is put into practice. The foundation for this political system is an economy of reciprocity, based on gift-giving and the 'big family' of a society of matrilineal kinship.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2009: 19.

<sup>22</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2007: 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2007: 4.

<sup>24</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2007: 4.

<sup>25</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2009: 23.

Goettner-Abendroth calls matriarchies ‘egalitarian societies of consensus.’

Finally on the cultural level, matriarchies are ‘**sacred societies as cultures of the Goddess or Divine Feminine**. [emphasis in original]’<sup>26</sup> In matriarchy, divinity is immanent and feminine, and everything is sacred.

In their works, both Sanday and Goettner-Abendroth have stressed the non-hierarchical, reciprocal, egalitarian nature of the relationship between men and women in matriarchal societies. Riane Eisler, scholar, futurist and activist, offers a similar vision, but without using the term matriarchy—which she believes has a negative connotation. Eisler has developed her ‘cultural transformation theory’ which proposes that underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic models of society: the dominator model, in which one half of humanity (male) is ranked over the other (female); and the partnership model in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking. In this partnership model, diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority.<sup>27</sup> Eisler has also coined a term for this more egalitarian relationship: *gylany*.

*Gy* derives from the Greek root word *gyne*, or ‘woman.’ *An* derives from *andros*, or ‘man.’ The letter *l* between the two has a double meaning. In English, it stands for the linking of both halves of humanity, rather than, as in androcracy, their ranking. In Greek, it derives from the verb *lyein* or *lyo*, which in turn has a double meaning: to solve or resolve . . . and to dissolve or set free. . . . In this sense the letter *l* stands for the resolution of our problems through the freeing of both halves of humanity from stultifying and distorting rigidity of roles imposed by the domination hierarchies inherent in androcractic systems.<sup>28</sup>

In Eisler’s perspective, seemingly irrational historical events can be understood as ‘the tension between organized challenges to traditions of domination . . . and enormous dominator resistance.’<sup>29</sup> Her research also illustrates the pivotal importance of the fact that how a culture structures the most fundamental of human relations, the relations between the female and male halves of society, structures everything else about the society.<sup>30</sup> In Eisler’s model a dominator system is characterized by top-down authoritarianism in both the family and state; the subordination of the female half of humanity to the male half; and a high level of fear and institutionalized violence. The partnership system, on the other hand, exhibits the following configuration: a more democratic organization in both the family and state or tribe; the equal valuation of men and women, and of stereotypically feminine values (such as caring and nonviolence) whether they are embodied in women or men; and a less violent or nonviolent way of life, as violence will not be needed to maintain hierarchies.<sup>31</sup>

Lithuanian-American archaeologist, and founder of the discipline of archaeomythology, Marija Gimbutas, adopts Eisler’s term *gylany* in her work with the pre-Indo-European societies of Old Europe/Anatolia and she employs the terms matrilineal and matristic as well.

<sup>26</sup> Goettner-Abendroth 2007: 6.

<sup>27</sup> Eisler 1987: xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Eisler 1987:105.

<sup>29</sup> Eisler 2008: 44.

<sup>30</sup> Eisler 2008: 44.

<sup>31</sup> Eisler 2008: 44-45.



Gimbutas was a pioneer in the study of the symbolic imagery of the earliest farming peoples of Europe. Examining thousands of sculptures, vessels, and pieces of cult equipment from the cultures of Old Europe, southeast Europe and Anatolia, c. 6500-3500 BC, as well as settlement patterns, social structures, and burial evidence; and using other component disciplines of archaeomythology: linguistics, mythology, and historical research, Gimbutas developed a worldview which is made up of four parts. The first is an understanding that the sacred source of life in Old Europe was venerated as a female, a Goddess, who was one with Nature, and manifesting in three aspects: as Life-Giver, Life-Taker, and Regeneratrix; the second, the deciphering of a complex system of symbols related to Her worship in Her three aspects, the 'language of the Goddess'; the third, a reinterpretation of Neolithic Europe and Anatolia as peaceful, egalitarian, matrilineal, and artistic, as 'a true civilization in the best meaning of the word';<sup>32</sup> and the fourth, an explanation of how and why the civilization of the Goddess was amalgamated into the patriarchal civilizations that 'conquered' it. The third point above speaks to Gimbutas's view of the social structure of Old Europe/Anatolia (which includes Bronze Age Crete), which she believed mirrored sacred beliefs.<sup>33</sup>

Gimbutas defined matrilineal as 'A social structure in which ancestral descent and inheritance is traced through the female line.'<sup>34</sup> She called this social system 'matristic,' and defined matristic as 'a matrilineal "partnership" society in which women are honored but do not subjugate men.'<sup>35</sup> Explaining her use of these terms rather than the term matriarchy, she writes:

The difficulty with the term matriarchy in 20th century anthropological scholarship is that it is assumed to represent a complete mirror image of patriarchy or androcracy. . . . We do not find in Old Europe, nor in all of the Old World, a system of autocratic rule by women with an equivalent suppression of men. . . . I use the term matristic simply to avoid the term matriarchy with the understanding that it incorporates matriliney.<sup>36</sup>

Gimbutas died in 1994. If she were still alive today, I believe she would revise her stance on the term matriarchy. Indeed, although she never used the term, her description of the societies of Old Europe/Anatolia closely resembles the definitions of matriarchy proposed by Sanday and Goettner-Abendroth.

Several other definitions I shall consider, as they might apply to Bronze Age Cretan society, are those developed by Shanshan Du in her works *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs*, published in 2002, and 'Frameworks for Societies in Balance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Gender Equality,' published in 2009. In her earlier work Du, as a result of her anthropological field research with the Lahu people in southwestern China, identifies three types of gender equal societies. A gender equalitarian society is 'one whose dominant ideology, institutions and social practices

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<sup>32</sup> Gimbutas 1991: viii.

<sup>33</sup> While the term 'Old Europe' is generally understood to encompass the Neolithic period 6500-3500 BC, Gimbutas did include Bronze Age Crete in the term. In the *The Civilization of The Goddess* she writes, 'Old European culture continued on the island of Crete for several millennia longer than on the mainland' (Gimbutas 1991: 344). In *The Living Goddesses* she says, 'Minoan culture had deep roots in Old Europe and Old Anatolia' (149). She adds, 'Minoans continued the Neolithic artistic and goddess-centered cultures. . . . With the fall of the Minoan culture (1450 BCE), the last of the Old-European-The old Anatolian civilizations disappeared' (Gimbutas 1999: 150).

<sup>34</sup> Gimbutas 1991: 433.

<sup>35</sup> Gimbutas 1991: 433.

<sup>36</sup> Gimbutas 1991: 324.

value its male and female members equally, regardless of the roles they play.<sup>37</sup> The three types are: dyadic, or gender similarity (in a later article, discussed below, Du changes this term to gender unity); gender complementarity; and gender triviality (differences without significance). In 'Frameworks for Societies in Balance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Gender Equality,' Du adds a fourth type: maternal centrality.

This fourth type of gender equal society, maternal centrality, 'greatly overlaps'<sup>38</sup> with matriarchy as defined by Sanday and Goettner-Abendroth. Du defines it as follows:

Typically associated with societies that are characterized by matrilineal descendant rule and matrilineal residence pattern, the socio-cultural framework of maternal centrality tends to highlight gender difference . . . the symbolism of this model tends to elevate the female principle over its male counterpart. . . . The principle value of this framework is placed on the characteristics that are commonly associated with maternity, such as life-giving, nurturance, connection, and harmony.<sup>39</sup>

Du stresses that despite the fact that in such a system the mother is favored, it does not mean that the male is subordinate.

Gender complementarity is the perception of the two sexes as 'different-but-equal.'<sup>40</sup> Du believes that the framework of gender complementarity generates equality between men and women by promoting symmetrical reciprocity of the two sexes. She finds it similar to maternal centrality because it symbolically highlights the differences between the sexes and institutionalizes gender separation in social and economic spheres. In contrast to maternal centrality, however, gender complementarity does not favor female gender symbolism over male.

Gender triviality is the third type of 'egalitarian framework.' In this framework, men and women are equal because of 'the gender-blind attitudes of the dominant ideologies and institutions.'<sup>41</sup> Neither sex is judged more significant than the other, and 'gender itself is ignored.'<sup>42</sup> Du has found that gender trivial societies highly value individual autonomy and collective cooperation.

The final type of egalitarian framework is gender-unity, what Du had previously called dyadic or gender-similarity. Such societies 'minimize the symbolic and social significance of sex differences.'<sup>43</sup> Du's research and fieldwork have focused on just such a society, the Lahu people of southwest China. The worldview of the Lahu highlights similarity and harmony between males and females. This is apparent not only in daily activities, such as childcare, domestic chores, subsistence work, and leadership, but in their cosmology as well where the supreme godhead is a male/female dyad.

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<sup>37</sup> Du 2002: 9.

<sup>38</sup> Du 2009: 257.

<sup>39</sup> Du 2009: 257.

<sup>40</sup> Du 2009: 258.

<sup>41</sup> Du 2009: 260.

<sup>42</sup> Du 2009: 259.

<sup>43</sup> Du 2009: 260.

I will consider whether Minoan Crete might better fit into one of Du's categories than into the categories of matriarchy, or *gylany*, or matrilocal/matrilineal/matristic. I will also consider if her investigations might prove fruitful for understanding the status of women in Minoan Crete.

Finally, I want to define patriarchy. As has already been stated several times, patriarchy is generally understood as male power over—male political, social, and economic power over women and children. Sanday defines it as 'father-right'; 'a code word for male tribal leadership';<sup>44</sup> exclusive male rule.<sup>45</sup> Eisler refers to patriarchy as 'a social system ruled through force or the threat of force by men.'<sup>46</sup> Patriarchy is an example of Eisler's dominator society or model. These generally agree with the view of cultural historian Gerda Lerner, who defines patriarchy as:

the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power.<sup>47</sup>

For the purposes of this study, I will be using Lerner's definition of patriarchy. In this investigation I shall be re-evaluating whether ancient Crete is to be considered a Goddess-centered society that is also a male-dominated society, as interpreted by the majority of archaeologists at this point in time. Their views I will consider more closely in Chapter 8.

To summarize, I will be examining five different definitions to see which might best apply to Bronze Age Crete: Sanday's and Goettner-Abenroth's definitions of matriarchy, Gimbutas's definitions of matrilineality, matrilocal and matristic, Eisler's partnership society or *gylany*, Du's gender equal society; or Sanday's, Eisler's, or Lerner's definition of patriarchy. I anticipate my research will show that one of the definitions of matriarchy; matrilineality, matrilocal and matristic; *gylany*; or gender equal rather than patriarchy, best describes Crete from the Neolithic until at least c. 1450 BC.

### **Explanation of capitalization of Goddess**

I would like to explain my capitalization of the word Goddess(es) and the use of lower case for the word god(s). In Minoan Crete, the Goddess was the primary deity. Thus, I believe that capitalizing the word Goddess(es) reflects the Goddess's central significance in Bronze Age Crete where the male deities were of secondary importance. Moreover, my studies have led me to conclude that in Bronze Age Crete one Goddess in many manifestations was worshipped. Since I understand the Minoan Goddess as one Goddess, I believe the term should be capitalized. I am aware that there is disagreement among Aegeanists on the issue of whether there was one Goddess or many Goddesses. Some of those who are of the opinion that the ancient Cretans worshipped one Goddess, capitalize the term Goddess, while others do not. Among those authorities who see Crete as worshipping many Goddesses, the term is not capitalized.

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<sup>44</sup> Sanday 1998: 1.

<sup>45</sup> Sanday 1998: 1.

<sup>46</sup> Eisler 1987: 105.

<sup>47</sup> Lerner 1986: 239.

Of course the larger context in which the issue of a single Cretan Goddess or many Goddesses is held, is that of the controversy that ranges across numerous disciplines, as to whether or not a single Goddess in her various manifestations was worshiped in the Neolithic. I am a proponent of the argument that such was the case. I am especially persuaded by the theories of Gimbutas whose work demonstrating a Goddess-centered culture in Neolithic Old Europe, including Crete, has already been and will be discussed in detail in this work. This is an added reason that factors into my decision to capitalize the word Goddess.

Finally, my personal beliefs enter into my choice to capitalize the word Goddess. In my spiritual practice it is a Divine Female that I envision and it is a Divine Female that I pray to and commune with. While I do not claim that the Divine Feminine is superior to or more important than the sacred masculine, it is the Divine Feminine that is of the uppermost importance in my life and for this reason also I capitalize the word Goddess.

### **Significance of the study: academic, social, personal, and spiritual**

#### ***Academic significance***

The academic significance of this work is to be found in several areas. First of all, I believe this research has advanced the debate over whether or not Bronze Age Crete was a matriarchal society, a debate that has been heated and unresolved, toward a more complex, detailed, and certain conclusion. Advancing that debate was one of the stated intentions of this study.

This work also provides a very different perspective of Bronze Age Crete than that usually found in academic writings on Minoan Crete. It contributes not only to a better understanding of Minoan society, but adds to our knowledge of ancient women-centered, Goddess-centered societies in general.

Additionally, this investigation is of significance academically because it combines two relatively new fields of academic study, archaeomythology and modern matriarchal studies, to examine an issue that is of interest across the disciplines of archaeology, mythology, history of religion, anthropology, Women's Spirituality and women's studies. It is illustrative of the way in which the two fields can be used in combination to address issues of interest to scholars.

This work is also of academic significance because it advances the field of archaeomythology, illustrating how archaeomythology's use as a methodology can expand the academy's knowledge of both the spiritual and material aspects of ancient societies.

Another contribution is my construction of a set of characteristics for identifying a Mother Goddess in the iconography of ancient Crete. This is detailed in Chapter 4.

Finally, this study contributes to the field of modern matriarchal studies because it provides a picture of a woman-based culture in pre-patriarchal Europe--Minoan Crete--that is based on rigorous academic scholarship, not on fantasy; adds a voice to those who would argue that one can make a plausible case for the existence of pre-historical matriarchal societies; and familiarizes scholars and non-academics alike with the field of modern matriarchal

studies, Sanday's and Goettner-Abendroth's definitions of matriarchy, and a more complex understanding of how matriarchy is not simply the reverse of patriarchy.

### ***Social significance***

I believe this work provides evidence for scholars and the general public alike that will enable them to understand that the theory of the existence of ancient matriarchy is not simply a fanciful concept, but has a basis in reality. Such knowledge may help people to envision and perhaps work, in a more hopeful way, toward a different sort of world than now exists, one that exhibits equality between the sexes, a balanced economy, peacefulness, and puts the spiritual rather than the material at the center of human concern. Gerda Lerner noted, 'The system of patriarchy is a historical construct; it had a beginning and it will have an end.'<sup>48</sup> This work gives some notion of what history might have been like before the historical construct of patriarchy, and of what society's goals and values might be once it comes to an end.

### ***Personal and spiritual significance***

On a personal level, researching, writing, and refining this work has allowed me to further ground my own belief in a Divine Female in material reality. It is important to my own spirituality that I can find evidence for the existence and centrality of a Female Divine in Old Europe for that is the area of the world from which my ancestors came and where my roots are.

It is also personally significant to me that I am able to ground in academic scholarship the understanding that at least one matriarchal society existed in the past. As a woman and feminist, I am heartened by the knowledge that human history sustained a balanced, egalitarian, peaceful, woman-centered, sacred society for several thousand years.

### **Conclusion**

This introductory chapter has set forth the issue I look at in this study: the role of the Goddess, women, and matriarchy in Bronze Age Crete; stated my relationship to the topic; defined the key terms to be used; and addressed the limitations and significance of this work. The question I set out to answer was: Is Bronze Age Crete a matriarchal, matrilineal/matrilocal/matristic, *gylanic*, gender equal, or patriarchal society? I detailed the lines of approach I will follow to answer that question.

The conclusions I have drawn as a result of my research are presented in Chapter 8. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the bulk of the evidence in support of my conclusions; Chapter 2 describes the methodology utilized to analyze the data and arrive at my conclusions; and Chapter 3 gives the historical background to the more than century-old matriarchy/patriarchy debates. Chapter 1 will now review the literature of Women's Spirituality, modern matriarchal studies, archaeomythology, and Aegean, particularly Minoan, archaeology.

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<sup>48</sup> Lerner 1986: 198.