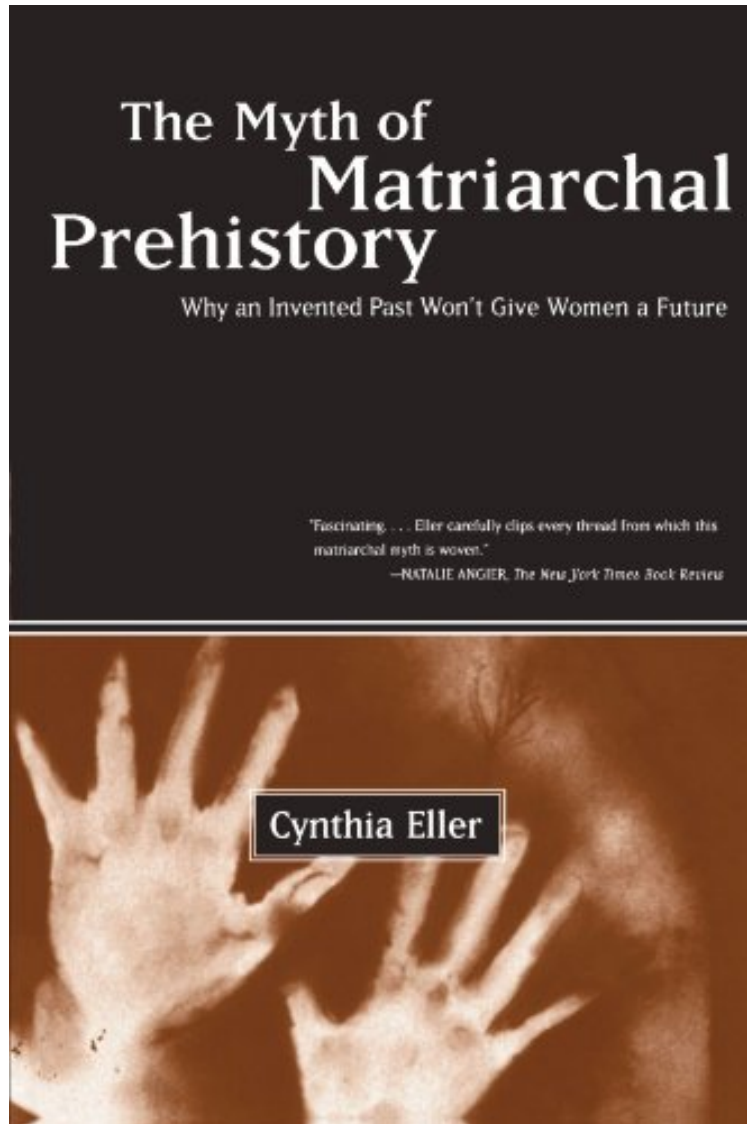


[Free] The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future

# The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future

Cynthia Eller

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**Cynthia Eller : The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future:

26 of 34 people found the following review helpful. serious investigation into a theory that is quite popular By TammyJo Eckhart Cynthia Eller is probably opening herself up to a lot of criticism when she attacks matriarchy, the

theory itself and those who argue it. However she does a good job of looking at the evidence on both sides of the issue. This book is best not because of the evidence but because of its understanding of why the theory of matriarchy is so powerful and pulls at so many women (and men, too, though that isn't really the focus of her work). Usually matriarchy is either ignored, rudely dismissed using sexist statements, or happily accepted but Eller's commentary really tries to get to the heart of the controversy without name calling or belittling sides. As a feminist and a scholar, I appreciate her work. 53 of 74 people found the following review helpful. The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory By Silver Elmi I first want to say that I feel that the author is intelligent, and that she did her research and knows her topic. She seems to be a feminist who understands women's and feminist issues in modern America. This book is worth reading for anyone who has read a lot of the feminist pre-history Goddess material but has not read those who argue against it. It's good to read another side. There is definitely not actual proof that there was worldwide Goddess worship and that women had higher status in ancient times, and since some women act as if the evidence is proof, it's good to have books like this that point out that the evidence can be interpreted in other ways. That said, though, it seemed that Ms. Eller was bent on proving that the feminist Goddess theories are quite far-fetched and ridiculous. I believe I read the book with an open mind, and at times she almost had me agreeing with her. But in the end I felt that she stretched her ideas as much as she accuses those she is writing about of doing. I didn't like her derisive tone that began with the title. There are very few women who espouse the ancient Goddess material who call that time a "matriarchy", and over time that term has been quite rejected. It is a slap in the face, first of all, to, right in the title, call the Theory a "Myth" and then to call the myth one of "Matriarchal Prehistory", since that is NOT what those she is directly arguing against call it. In fact, the writers she is railing against also reject the term "Prehistory". Then, throughout the books, she lumps these theorists together constantly, calling them "feminist matriarchalists". This seems like a deliberate insult, since she seems quite familiar with their writings and must know that they reject this term! And many of the women she writes of have different theories and at times disagree with each other. Then she starts off the book hinting that it's possible that Jesus really lived and that the Jews were once slaves in Egypt, without actually saying, as she does about Feminist Spirituality, that there is actually no real evidence that Jesus actually lived or that the Jews were slaves in Egypt. But she has a hands-off approach to their religions, because they are faiths. Yet, there are some women who have taken on Goddess worship as a religion, some because of theories of ancient history and some independent of it, and others who simply believe in a history of Goddess worship but haven't made a religion of it. She lumps these three groups together and throws in some examples that would sound far out to mainstream people, making fun of the religious beliefs, which she said she wouldn't do in regard to people of other faiths. This is a bit unfair. In every religion there are people whose behavior would seem strange to those outside of it, but that is a different matter than the history of the religion. (I want to add that I think she is incorrect in assuming that most Christians know that there is no real evidence that Jesus lived, or that most Jews know that there is no real evidence that they were once slaves in Egypt. Most people just do not really study the true history of their religions.) She is correct when she speaks of Marija Gimbutas in that Marija's ideas of what she uncovered are theories, and Marija, in the style of most archaeologists of her time, speaks as if her ideas are facts. Of course in Marija's details there were probably quite a few that are not correct, and she expected them to be built upon. But her general theories about Old Europe are as plausible as any others. And I think Ms. Eller is incorrect in saying that Maria was influenced by all the support she received from those in the women's spirituality movement. Even the feminists who were closest to her said that Maria was a bit put off by all the attention, even though she was very gracious, and what she really wanted was the respect of her colleagues on her new ideas. (Before that time she had been highly respected, and still was in general.) Brian Swimme, in an interview by Bellini productions, points out that Albert Einstein, regarded by many as the greatest scientist of the 20th century, came up with his theories before there was any data. When questioned about how he came up with them, he became quite adamant that "imagination is more important than knowledge." He had a feeling about things. I once read that Einstein said to his friend Charles Hapgood, "you know, Charlie, if I told the world how I really got my theory of relativity, they would lock me up.... I was sitting in my garden and my flowers told me." Of course Einstein had years and years of study and scholarship behind him before his flowers told him this. And so did Marija Gimbutas, before the figurines began to speak to her of history. She had years of the study of folklore, mythology, but most of all, she was a very respected expert in archaeology and linguistics, reading 20 languages. If anyone had the mind to sort out symbols found archaeologically, it was her. But I think she also just had incredible intuition, as if the pieces spoke to her of the past. I realize that Cynthia Eller probably doesn't think this way, and I respect that. I respect that she doesn't believe that the Goddess theories have enough evidence to even make them plausible. But I think that they do. And in addition to that, in the last decades there have been so many of us who have had dreams and begun doing art (including myself, in both respects) that had the same ancient Goddess symbols that appeared in archaeology, long before we had read any of the history and theories. I began to have an urge to pray to the Goddess, and had dreams and painted symbolism YEARS before I began to discover books by Merlin Stone, Monica Sjoo, Eliane Eisler, Carol, Christ, Marija Gimbutas, etc., etc. When I read the first book, I was AMAZED at how this all tied in with my personal dream work. And I know that many, many others have had similar experiences. So, it's not just that we read these theories and then based a religion on them. As Vicki Noble says, she and her women's group were doing rituals before they had ever

read Marija's work, and they were amazed that she gave them historical evidence of what they were doing. But I know that many people in our culture do not believe in this type of coincidence and in the power of dreams and symbols, etc., and I respect that stories of this nature will not convince them. There were so many, many things in Cynthia's book that I felt did not prove her point, or that showed that it was more important to her to make fun of the feminist beliefs than to allow any possibility that they might be possible. She claims that certain things are central to feminist Goddess beliefs, that are actually not the least bit central, for example, that men were ignorant of their role in conception. This has been acknowledged as one of many possible explanations, but is absolutely not central. On page 49 of the paperback, she makes great fun of the fact that the supposed origin of the Kurgan or Indo-European people was the Russian steppes. She is very sarcastic about this being on the fringes of the globe and then says that she doubts that the "narrators of the myth" even know where the Russian steppes are. She says that maps are rare in "feminist matriarchal literature". This is so far from the truth that it seems she chose to just state a lie. (There are correct maps in almost all of the books. The women who write them are very knowledgeable scholars, most with their PhD and years of scholarship, many university professors like herself.) But then later in her book, in chapter 8, she herself builds quite the case that the original speakers of the proto Indo European language, who later spread them to many parts of the world, were from the Russian steppes. And that the domestication of the horse and the wheel both came from that area originally, also. She then quotes Colin Renfrew to support her thesis, which seems somewhat irrelevant, because he, unlike Ms. Eller, believes that Indo-European language came from Turkey with agriculture, which she basically refuted. Where I think Ms. Eller's argument was the weakest was about feminists' claims about mythology showing some history. Her one main anecdotal example about a myth that had formed in recent times did nothing to weaken the hypothesis of Goddess feminists. She ignored evidence that often older mythology shows the goddesses in these myths WERE considered more to be all powerful before the new gods came in and showed that they were evil and needed to be put down. I do respect that Ms. Eller does not find enough evidence to believe the feminist goddess theories and chooses not to believe them herself. And I think she is right that arguing with those who do not think the evidence is strong is not helpful. What is necessary is that we truly give women equal power, and that we protect our planet. I do think the two are connected, because as long as some men think that they have the right to dominate nature or women or anyone, we are in big trouble. (I don't like how Ms. Eller made fun of the "dire environmental consequences" that eco-feminists predict in their books, because the scientific facts are definitely there for that!!) It is also very important, though, as has been pointed out by all of the feminist scholars that Ms. Eller is referring to, that we do not assume patriarchy when we look at other cultures or the past, because then we often miss a truth we might not see. Feminist Goddess spirituality is not for all feminists, nor does it need to be. There is room for all types of personalities in feminism. And Carol Christ points out in *Rebirth of the Goddess*, as Cynthia Eller does in this book, that labeling certain traits as "masculine" and some as "feminine" may not be helpful, as both women and men run the gamut on all traits. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Poor Science, Lacks Credibility By Janet C. The main problem with this book is that it's based on Eller's ideological views, rather than on firm archeological evidence. One example will suffice: Eller cites Marija Gimbutas as an example of a matriarchalist when, in many interviews and written works, Gimbutas expressly rejects the use of the term matriarchy. Gimbutas prefers to speak of pre-Indo-European Neolithic societies as "balanced," rather than matriarchal. Eller, however, needed a straw man -- or, in this case, woman -- to knock down, so she distorts Gimbutas's theories and turns her into a proponent for matriarchy. If Eller could not correctly explain the views of Gimbutas, a revered archeologist who has written far more books, reports and articles than most in the field, how can we trust her to get anything else right? This book lacks credibility.

According to the myth of matriarchal prehistory, men and women lived together peacefully before recorded history. Society was centered around women, with their mysterious life-giving powers, and they were honored as incarnations and priestesses of the Great Goddess. Then a transformation occurred, and men thereafter dominated society. Given the universality of patriarchy in recorded history, this vision is understandably appealing for many women. But does it have any basis in fact? And as a myth, does it work for the good of women? Cynthia Eller traces the emergence of the feminist matriarchal myth, explicates its functions, and examines the evidence for and against a matriarchal prehistory. Finally, she explains why this vision of peaceful, woman-centered prehistory is something feminists should be wary of.

Fascinating. . . . Eller carefully clips every thread from which this matriarchal myth is woven. -Natalie Angier, *The New York Times Book Review* "Passionately argued, engagingly written, this vital book is certain to inspire wide-and much-needed-debate." -Publishers Weekly (starred review) "[An] engaging critique of a popular but perhaps self-defeating belief." -Mark Odegard, *Utne Reader* "In unraveling the pretensions of matriarchalists, Eller seeks to show that wider matters are at stake. . . . Matriarchal myth, [she] argues, is actively harmful at worst and at best unnecessary." -Lawrence Osborne, *Salon.com* About the Author Cynthia Eller is the author of *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, a *Choice Outstanding Academic Book* of 1994, and of *Conscientious Objectors and the Second World War*. She is assistant professor of women and religion at Montclair

State University.