

## Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan Hypothesis and Indo-European Studies

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It is difficult to measure how extensive an impact any one scholar has had on a specific field. Not only are her or his publications relevant, but more important is the response of other researchers within the discipline. Sometimes, the influence of particular views is even made deeper by the dissenting opinions they have triggered or the continued investigations they have inspired. Nowhere are these considerations more valid than in the case of Marija Gimbutas.

The earlier work of Marija Gimbutas, on the Balts and the Slavs, led to the two brilliant monographs in the series *Ancient Peoples and Places* (1963 and 1971). Beside rich archaeological and prehistorical data, *The Balts* contain a remarkable synthesis of her views on Baltic religion, which she later expanded in several contributions drawing, with independent thoughts, on the works of Biezais. It also exemplifies her mastery of Baltic linguistics and toponymics, nourished by the best sources (Buga, Gerullis, Vasmer, Todorov, Trubachev, and others).

Similarly, her work on the Slavs takes into account the best of prior research (e.g., Niederle, Kostrzewski, Lehr-Splavinski, and Jazdzewski) when she investigates the origin of the Slavs and situates them in the framework of her thoroughly elaborated Kurgan hypothesis (perhaps best represented in the series of papers published in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, which she co-founded and supported

actively all her life). Here again, she coordinates linguistic data with the results of archaeological findings, displaying a sound scepticism versus the Balto-Slavic hypothesis:

The question of unity or parallelism. . . is mainly a matter of terminology and chronology. Judging from archaeological evidence, the period of convergence must have ended in the first half of the second millennium BC, and in the long history of relationships between the Baltic and Slavic languages there were periods of complete independence and parallelism (Gimbutas 1971:25-6).

Her position is comparable to that of G. Devoto versus the alleged unity of Latino-Faliscan and Osco-Umbrian.

An outstanding synthesis of her views on Proto-Indo-European (PIE) was given in a paper to the Third Indo-European Conference in Philadelphia in April 1966 in which she spoke of the existence of a fairly homogenous culture in the Pontic and Volga steppes during the fifth and fourth millennia BC, from which all the later manifestations of the so-called Kurgan culture emerged. Archaeological data were not yet clear on its formation, but there seemed to be a Mesolithic group in an originally limited area between the Don and the southern Urals. As early as the fifth millennium BC, it is supposed to have had domesticated horses at its disposal, and in the following millennium, it is

deemed to have introduced wheeled vehicles in the steppe area.

Resorting to linguistic paleontology, Marija Gimbutas tried to reconstruct the economy, habitation pattern, social organization and religion of these Proto-Indo-Europeans; she showed that the faunal and floral remains (in particular, the nomenclature of trees and wild animals) point to the forested conditions and milder climate of the Pontic steppe area at that time. The principal activity of the Proto-Indo-Europeans was apparently cattle and horse-raising; agriculture was coupled with stock breeding. These people entered the metallic age with copper in the fourth millennium BC. It can be surmised that they acquired the skill of navigation earlier, using boats on the Black Sea, as well as later in Mediterranean, Aegean and Adriatic waters. The dwelling quarters of the ruling elite of their basically caste society grew from hillforts to elaborate palaces; the rest of the population lived in small villages. Kinship terminology points to patriarchal, patrilocal, exogamous families who worshiped their gods in the open. Elements of their religion included frequently practiced sacrifices, a particularly strong belief in an afterlife, reverence of zoomorphic deities and homage to the divinized sun, thunder and fire.

With increased mobility, growing herds and population, the Kurgan warrior nobility strove for expansion, hence a series of movements took place towards the Balkano-Danubian area during the first half of fourth millennium BC, whence they conquered northern Europe. During the second half of fourth millennium BC, they moved towards Transcaucasia, Iran and Anatolia and, ultimately, to the Aegean and Adriatic areas, Syro-Palestine and possibly Egypt (c. 2500-2000 BC). The penetration of Indo-European peoples was an infiltration in which they subsequently became the dominating superstratum of large, overwhelmed territories.

While a number of scholars, especially in this country, took over Marija Gimbutas' views lock, stock and barrel, she was less fortunate in Europe, where British archaeologists were strongly reluctant to subscribe to the "Kurgan Hypothesis." Some echoes were found in Germany and France. Nevertheless, the opposition had to cope with her ideas, and much of the discussion that ensued has been rooted in them.

There has been quite a bit written since the sixties on the wheeled vehicles, and the main issue remains the date of their introduction. David Anthony has thrown new light on the domestication of the horse and has located it as well in the Pontic steppes. A Symposium in Berlin (1992) reexamined the whole issue on which the late Hungarian paleozoologist Sandór Bokonyi also made major contributions. The question of kinship was reexamined by scholars like Emile Benveniste and Paul Friedrich who showed that it followed the Omaha system of cross-cousin marriage. The issue of PIE trees which Friedrich had tackled at the same Third Indo-European Conference (1966), was reexamined and expanded by him in a later book (1970). The disputed question of PIE pastoralism, studied by the anthropologist Ward Goudenough at the same Conference, received a lot of attention, the gist of which was to strengthen the argument in favor of a strong co-existing agricultural element, which was confirmed by the pioneering work Daniel Zohary and Maria Hopf (1988).

In 1984, the monumental work of Thomas Gamkrelidze and Vyacheslav Ivanov brought the whole question of Indo-European migrations back into the frontline of the discussions; they had already presented the main ideas of their theory in a series of journal articles which were strongly attacked by their St. Petersburg colleague I. Diakonoff and by Marija Gimbutas. The essence of the whole debate was the hardly

acceptable roundabout routes the authors postulated for the diffusion of the Indo-European tribes from a minor Middle Eastern homeland. But the most unfair attack against the views of Marija Gimbutas was indirectly launched by Colin Renfrew in his book *Archaeology and Language* (1987), in which he promulgated that the PIE diffusion went on a par with the expansion of agriculture from the "fertile crescent" in the Middle East. Arrogantly rejecting all the data of linguistic paleontology and comparative religion, he advanced absurd theories on such items as the Hellenization of the Greek peninsula or the constitution of the Celtic ethnic community. There were also debates on the location of the PIE "Urheimat," with some echoes of the old Nazi hypothesis of a European origin. But after all the dust settled, the main tenets of Marija Gimbutas' theory remained valid: 1) the Proto-Indo-European culture, essentially patrilinear and patrilocal, spread from humble beginnings, at least four millennia BC, all over Europe, the Middle East, the South-Asian subcontinent and even Chinese Turkestan in steady waves of diffusion; 2) the domestication of the horse and, secondarily, the introduction of wheeled vehicles facilitated this diffusion; 3) it is possible to capture, through artifacts as well as the archaic lexicon, the main

tenets of PIE civilization, as Benveniste and the French school (Dumézil, Sergent, Haudry, and others) have demonstrated; linguistic paleontology provides reliable clues on the ecology of its homeland; 4) the Pontic steppe area is a quite plausible location for the original core of the Indo-Europeans.

Much remains to be done, for sure, but with the research and publications of Marija Gimbutas, Indo-European studies have taken a gigantic step forward. To promote progress in this area, she also took it upon herself to organize several significant Indo-European Conferences like the one in Dublin, Ireland (1989), whose proceedings appeared under her special editorship in a set of issues of *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Until her last days, she worked on setting up the 1994 Vilnius Conference in her dear Lithuania. Fate did not allow her to see its brilliant conclusion, but such enterprises will remain a permanent testimony of her devotion to the field of Indo-European studies.

To summarize: In all respects, Marija Gimbutas' work constitutes a durable, major milestone in Indo-European studies.

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