The last ten years have seen an upsurge in the study of the feminine aspect of the sacred. Archaeologists, theologians, feminist critics, psychologists and popular writers have produced analyses of every type imaginable, and ‘the Goddess’ has become one of the buzz words of New Age, neo-pagan and certain feminist writers. By no means everything discussed here fits under the umbrella of the New Age: much of the scholarship dates from before the term was coined, and many of the writers would reject such a title. However, in its emphasis on the necessity to revitalize culture, New Age thinking in its broadest sense provides a good starting-point for examining both the historical background and the current range of thought about the Goddess.¹

The importance of New Age thinking in the late twentieth century has been widely recognized, and despite recent media attention to some of its more dramatic features, it is a phenomenon which cannot be written off as trivial (Ellwood 1992:59–60). Critics and historians stress the similarity of New Age thinking to the kind of alternative spirituality that has reappeared regularly in Western societies. Despite the essentially discrete nature of these spiritual movements, certain themes recur: for example, belief in the perfectibility of human kind, at least on the non-material plane; the direct access of all to enlightenment without the need of institutions such as priesthoods. Spirit and matter are viewed as intimately connected in a basically hierarchical, ordered, complexly integrated world (often presided over by a benign but impersonal force such as the Numen or Gaia). Priority is nevertheless given to the spiritual, and one of the aims of these movements is to open the individual’s consciousness to some kind of non-material understanding. This understanding of the complexities of the cosmos comes about through a process of initiation which, although not directed by an institutionalized priesthood, is often facilitated by contact with an intermediary being. These intermediaries take various forms: the psychopomps of the Neo platonists, the angelic beings of ritual magic, the spirit guides of theosophy,
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the aliens of modern Ufologists, and the neo-pagan gods which are a feature of late twentieth-century alternative thought. This brings us to the subject of the Goddess.

The hierarchical world-view, the link between matter and spirit, the use of personalized beings as intermediaries in initiation have an old and distinguished pedigree in this type of spirituality, and their validity depends on intuition and belief. However, at least since the eighteenth century, many alternative spiritual movements have also sought empirical validation. For example, mesmerism explained itself in terms of the theory of electricity; spiritualism sought validation in parapsychology; alternative healing frequently draws on quantum physics; and, to bring us back to the Goddess once again, much contemporary neo-pagan study draws on archaeological and anthropological work, as well as on the work of comparative mythologists. The scholarship itself is not, of course, part of the alternative world-view, but it does make significant contributions to the conceptual framework, especially in regard to notions of antiquity, and the nature of myth and how it relates to the present. My argument here is that a number of modern Goddess-studies resemble influential nineteenth-century models of culture in their use of archaeology and anthropology, in the assumptions they draw about early society, in their definition of myth, and in their conception of the relationship of the past to the present. Folklorists can make a special contribution to this debate. Ideas about the nature of culture as embodied in the writings of such men as E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer were crucial to the discipline of folklore for over fifty years, and this gives folklore a unique perspective on the conceptual models that underpin aspects of Goddess-studies. In addition, folklore studies are much more concerned with the nature of belief and can provide a framework for understanding some of the assumptions of these studies (see Dorson 1968, 1972; Wilson 1979).2

Modern feminism provides the context for study of the Goddess in the last few decades. Within the context of religion, it has attempted to rebalance or redefine the relationship between male/female aspects of the deity. Typical of this more radical feminist theology is the belief that the feminine has somehow been ‘lost’, or deliberately repressed by institutional religions with their overwhelming focus on patriarchal male deities (McCance 1990:167–73). The feminine is therefore sought outside the context of organized religion and/or historically prior to its appearance. In addition, religion and society are linked in a very direct way; the assumption being that where ‘goddesses’ are worshipped, women are empowered with a status equal to if not higher than that of men, and, further, that feminine power is ecologically harmonious and pacificist (Gimbutas 1991:vi–xi, 324; Gadon 1989:341–4, 353, 359–60; Baring and Cashford 1991:9).

Opinion varies widely, although a number of writers express disquiet with the extreme historicism of many Goddess-studies and suggest alternatives. In an article which surveys the concept of Goddess-worship in contemporary
feminist thinking, Dawn McCance considers Rosemary Renter’s position, which dismisses the cult of the mother-goddess as a false understanding of origins and states that such feminist spiritualities succumb to the suppressed animus of paternal religion (McCance 1990:172, quoting Reuter). Writers such as Carol Christ suggest that neither biblical nor prehistoric traditions of ancient goddesses are needed but that new traditions must be created (Christ 1989:240–51; McCance 1990:171). A recent study by Ross Kraemer focuses on women’s role in actual religious contexts rather than in the context of theories of primal matriarchies. Kraemer points out that the dilemma of gynocentric myths in patriarchal societies is not resolved by seeing them as a reflection of earlier, less repressive, more gynocentric societies (Kraemer 1992:208). The existence or non-existence of a unified Goddess-religion is an important issue even among writers who reject or offer an alternative (Barstow 1983:7–15; Ehrenburg 1989:63–76; Fleming 1969:246–61).

Many scholars distinguish clearly, and quite rightly, between a literal interpretation of the Goddess, and metaphorical use of the Goddess paradigm. The former accepts as historical fact that an ancient and unified system of belief and practice characterized by a matriarchal culture and centred on a powerful goddess figure existed at some identifiable historical period. The latter sees the Goddess as a non-historical archetype or a poetic metaphor. The focus here is on the former literal position, which is currently widely held.

Robert Graves’s classic The White Goddess, an influential and oft-quoted work in modern studies, provides a good illustration of some of the ideas about early culture, and of the methodology that supports these ideas.3 The work is an exposition of Graves’s poetic ideas: namely, that the inspiration for all poetry has been the feminine principle, which the author calls ‘the White Goddess’ (Musgrove 1962:3), although Graves never makes clear whether the ‘goddess’ is a metaphor or a reality (ibid.: 19). As an exposition of a personal mythology it has much in common with William Blake, but Graves’s premise that history and mythology reflect the conflict between patriarchal and matriarchal cultures coincides with an important stream in modern Goddess-studies. His work is in the tradition of Victorian synthesists—sweeping through enormous quantities of data for the pattern which informs it all. He entitled his book a ‘historical grammar of poetic myth’, in which myth is a kind of universal poetic discourse, a highly imaginative and, to a poet such as Graves, highly valued impulse of the human mind. His working methods are those of the comparativist strongly rooted in the classics. He was influenced, as perhaps no other poet at the time, by the work of Sir James Frazer (Vickery 1972:1–25). The popularity of Graves’s work stems not just from its subject-matter but from the fact that it shares, in its orientation to the past and in its attitude to myth, many of the concepts and assumptions that underpin much neo-pagan Goddess-study (Hutton 1991:145).
A good illustration of Graves’s methodology is his use of Welsh material in the discussion of the figure of Ceridwen. Welsh tradition was an important influence on his work (Musgrove 1962:56). He does not suffer from the druidic fantasies of Nash and Spence and takes account of current Welsh scholarship, such as the suggestion that Welsh poetry had a prose context similar to Irish (Graves 1961:74–8)—an innovative theory for its day. He is aware of Iolo Morganwg’s dubious sources and of W.J. Gruffydd’s theories on the relationship between medieval Welsh tales and Irish hero-tales. His command of the scholarship is impressive, and still he gets it wrong. Part of the problem with his analysis of the character of Ceridwen, a powerful supernatural female who appears in *Hanes Taliesin*, and with his study of some of the poems ascribed to the historical poet Taliesin, derives from Graves’s wildly inaccurate philological speculation. His suggestion that Ceridwen is an avatar of the White Goddess is supported by analysing the name as *cerdd*—translated as song/inspiration—and *wen* as white. Graves is depending on Macculloch here and so is not entirely to blame (ibid.: 27–30, 67). However, *cerdd* meaning inspiration is not actually attested in any of the citings in modern Welsh dictionaries, and *cerdd > cerid* is an extremely unlikely development in any case. A more fundamental problem is his attitude to the dating of the material. Graves’s source is the translation that appears at the end of Charlotte Guest’s *Mabinogion*. The texts of *Hanes Taliesin* are much later than those of the *Mabinogion*, dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, while the poems appear in an earlier manuscript, *Llyfr Taliesin*. Graves had no way of knowing this, but he automatically assumed the texts to be centuries older than their first appearance in manuscript. The prose material associated with Taliesin contains a number of wonder-tale episodes, local legends and a saucy novella tale. Nevertheless, scholars who have examined this material have persistently ignored its early modern narrative context and read it as pertaining to an ancient period in which it had a more meaningful cohesion, embodying ideas relating to metempsychosis (Scott 1930), druidic doctrine (Nash 1848), shamanism (Ford 1992) or, as here, a Goddess-myth. The assumption that non-rational features of certain texts—in this instance the shape-changing and magical activities of the characters—must belong to the past is a basic premise in nineteenth-century approaches to culture. It is rooted in the conception of contemporary rationality; therefore the non-rational features of texts such as these cannot be contemporary and need to be explained by some feature of the past. Myth for Graves is a creative impulse behind all literature, not a narrative genre. The result is a very evocative but rather imprecise category which can, particularly when applied to material with an oral or traditional dimension, become the sum of valued literary qualities or valued narrative themes and motifs. In this context the term ‘myth’ no longer relates to a category of narrative but becomes an affirmation of a story’s importance: a linguistically positive sign rather than a description.
Elsewhere Graves suggests that this myth of Mother-goddess and son, which he sees as basic to all European literature, was found among peoples living in an area Graves calls ‘the Aegean world’ prior to the second millennium BC. At this time a number of invasions occurred, resulting in a synthesis rather than a displacement, and

the connection between the early myths of the Hebrews, the Greeks and the Celts is that all three races were civilized by the same Aegean people whom they conquered and absorbed...the popular appeal of modern Catholicism, despite the patriarchal Trinity and all-male priesthood, is based rather on the Aegean Mother and Son religious tradition, to which it has slowly reverted, than on...Indo-European warrior-god elements.

(Graves 1948)

Fascinating as Graves is, the combination of poor philology, inadequate texts and out-of-date archaeology needs to be pointed out. When, as with Graves, one has a highly speculative model based on very open-ended data, the danger is that the writer may follow personal imagination rather than provide insight into the culture from which the data comes. Nevertheless, Graves articulates a continuity between past and present; a past where the Goddess was worshipped in a unified and harmonious society and which, despite the restrictiveness of subsequent historical developments, reaches out to inform the present.

The similarity between Graves’s methodology and ideas and nineteenth-century models of social organization and myth is an important one, linking recent interest in the Goddess with a particular approach to culture (Hutton 1991:325–8). E.B.Tylor proposed a universal model for culture in which every society progresses from savagery through barbarism to civilization; from irrationality to rationality. He drew heavily on ethnological data which was becoming available in the nineteenth century, often as a by-product of imperial expansion, and he was influenced by the then current legal debate on whether early society was patriarchal or matriarchal. Tylor viewed a whole range of behaviour (e.g. folktales and folk-customs) as survivals from an earlier and less rational stage of culture which lingered on in rural areas and among primitive people (Tambiah 1990:42–51; Dorson 1968). Sir James Frazer worked within a framework of strict rationally-based cultural progression similar to Tylor’s but applied it more specifically to religious thought. Frazer located the religious impulse in the universal experience of an annually repeated agricultural cycle whose meaning was expressed in myths and rituals which reflected the yearly death and rebirth of a vegetation god. Ethnological data, here too a by-product of imperial expansion, classical literature and even the Bible, was examined for traces of this ‘primitive’ world-view. As with Tylor, this world-view gave way to a rational understanding of the world,
at least among educated, urban Europeans. However, the survivals of these primitive myths and rituals could be found among the rural folk of Europe as well as among technologically simple societies the world over (Vickery 1973:38–67).

What both evolutionary models and modern Goddess-paradigms have in common is a view of early society as an organic whole whose cultural pattern is predictable, universal and progressive. Society evolves from simpler to more complex forms. The process of transition does not always eradicate all modes of thought characteristic of an earlier stage. They can still be identified at a later stage as non-rational survivals, obvious because they do not conform, or at least do not appear to conform, to the prevailing world-view of the culture. Indeed, so similar are the assumptions and the methodology of many modern Goddess-studies that, in her universality and persistence, the Goddess resembles Frazer’s Dying God, resuscitated once again and cross-dressed. However, there is an important difference. Whereas Tylor and Frazer both espoused models of culture which were rational and progressive, many twentieth-century studies of the Goddess view cultural change as loss of the integrity that the Goddess represents. As a consequence, cultural change becomes essentially de-evolutionary, with the past seen in terms of a lost paradise, and the future in terms of a possible utopia. Revitalization is an important aspect of feminist Goddess-theory (Townsend 1990:179–80), with archaeology and history becoming the basis for millenarian reconstruction. Gimbutas’s archaeological theories are central to this position (Gimbutas 1974; 1989; 1991). Earlier writers who espoused either cultural evolutionism or matriarchal theories are frequently quoted. Gadon, for example, puts Frazer in the matriarchal tradition by asserting that his work completes Bachofen’s task of assembling the evidence for matricity among world cultures (Gadon 1989:226). Ideas about Jungian archetypes also come into play, applying these archetypes not just to individual psyches but to culture as a whole (Baring and Cashford 1991). This need for a concrete historical and cultural context seems quite unaffected by scholarly questions about the acceptability of its assertions. The flow continues and causes one to question why writers should continue to espouse a model that rests on assumptions which are at best speculative and, at worst ‘built on sand’ (Townsend 1990:198).

It may be that in shifting the focus from ‘primitive’ societies to ancient cultures, the model is less vulnerable to assaults from ‘fieldwork’; after all, one is talking not about a living ‘primitive’ culture, whose members may reveal a world-view at variance with the assumptions of such evolutionary models, but about a ‘primal stage’ of culture whose characteristics have to be extrapolated from archaeological and historical data. However, this shift from the ethnographic to the historical alters the model very little and still demands a number of a priori assumptions about culture which are highly speculative (Townsend 1990:188–94; Hutton 1991:37–42). Goddess-religion is located in an ancient ‘Ur-culture’, no longer accessible through direct experience (see
Figure 1.1). Whether a ‘primitive culture’ located in ethnographic space or an ‘Ur-culture’ located in historic time, these models deal with the question of how past relates to the present and, by implication, how self and other are related in cultural terms. In terms of ethnographic space, the model is articulating the nature of the boundary between self and other. In terms of historical time, the focus is the boundary between past and present. We can, perhaps, better understand why these models should persist if we look at the nature of cultural boundary. Contact between groups usually results in the

*Figure 1.1* Stillness and medieval trappings lend an aura of mystery to this supernatural female in Theaker’s Edwardian illustration.
delineation of a boundary. Not infrequently, this delineation is uneven, with the dominant group applying categories related to its own idea of status quo to the weaker group, with the result that the dominant group, to a degree, determines the identity of the weaker. In effect one becomes a centre, the other a periphery.

Denys Hay has examined the historical development of European boundaries and attendant attitudes (Hay 1968), while Fredrik Barth has looked at the phenomenon in his classic study of ethnicity (Barth 1969); most recently Malcolm Chapman has applied it to ideas of cultural and historical identity among modern Celtic nations (Chapman 1992). A striking feature of their observations is that they so often ascribe ambiguous qualities to peripheral groups; qualities which can then be characterized in a positive or a negative way, but always dependent on the dominant group. For a centre which perceives itself as organized, the periphery may be chaotic (negative) or the place of free and untrammelled behaviour (positive). Similarly, a centre which defines itself as rational may define the periphery as irrational or, more positively, as emotional or intuitive. In the context of gender, a group dominated by masculine categories may emphasize feminine ones at the periphery. A good illustration of how the periphery is dependent on the attitudes of the centre is the figure of the warrior-woman, a female who crosses into a male category. Amazons were located at geographical extremes in situations of earthly paradise or precarious utopia. A key feature in this kind of ethnographic description is that the dominant group imposes an identity based on its own sense of rightness. What happens when the present attempts to link itself to the past, when one ethnic group describes another, or when the centre confronts the periphery is that the dominant identity is seen in a distorting mirror (to paraphrase Kuper), and the past, the foreign or the periphery becomes an image of what one was or has left behind and of what once was and could be again. In the context of Goddess-studies, the past becomes a template for possible renewal in the future.

Peter Burke, in his assessment of centre-and-periphery dialectic in historical writing, emphasizes that one of the problems is that it is used sometimes in a geographic context and sometimes in a metaphorical one (Burke 1992:79–84). Boudica and Cleopatra in their different ways indicate peripheral dependence on central, in this case Roman, attitudes, and how metaphorical and actual peripheries can become intermingled. Boudica’s geographical context takes on a metaphorical dimension. As Celt, she reflects ambiguous Roman attitudes to the Celts as a whole. Although dangerous, a woman warrior, there is something of the glamorous, seductive female and the noble savage about her. Her anger is, after all, sparked off by the rape. Cleopatra’s character is less ambiguous but equally mixes geography and metaphor. Her geographical context has
overtones of luxury and decadence. She is not a victim of aggression but is, rather, a menace to the Roman males who come within her orbit. There is a clear gender dimension as well in that both women usurp male roles, leading (male) armies against (male) Romans. Both stories are told from the Roman point of view and therefore control the characterization of the periphery, which is geographical, metaphorical and gendered.

This fusion of actual and metaphorical is prevalent among writers on the Goddess. What is basically a metaphorical periphery—alienation of the feminine—is being given historical reality in the so-called Goddess religion of the past. Validation of a perceived need to emphasize the feminine is being expressed in terms of historical actuality, and the need for validation too often outweighs other factors. A kind of metaphorical myth is created in which the sense of female alienation within a maledominated culture is reversed. Alienated feminine sensibility and survivals of Goddess-worship may be marginalized by modern male-dominated society, but the survival of the Goddess and her religion links this periphery with the past, in which the feminine and all it embodies were central. Because the feminine was central before, it possesses the ability to be central again:

The new knowledge of our past now being reclaimed signals a way out of our alienation from one another and from nature...this new spirituality [and] reconnection with millennia-long traditions of respect and reverence for our Earth Mother...may be a key to the more evolved consciousness.

(Campbell and Musés 1991:19–20)

The history of the discipline of folklore presents a salutary experience of the tenacity of such models. Many critics emphasize that there can be no objection to the Goddess-myth as an image for women. The problem is with the reification of the model in cultural/historical time, the assertion that the Goddess once existed in a more feminine, more pacifistic, more ecologically sound world (Gadon 1989:226, 228). One historian has noticed how quickly the two sides reach an impasse (Hutton 1991:144); it is nearly always on whether the Goddess actually existed in particular historical contexts and whether the sources used can legitimately constitute proof for her existence (Fleming 1969:252). The historical dimension in Goddess-studies is supplied by archaeology, often controversial, but certainly up to date. The ethnographic data, however, is still folklore-as-survival, usually drawn from rural areas or from areas remote from mainstream cultures, a method no longer acceptable to professional folklorists.

Even more problematic is the fact that the sources for this material are the very nineteenth-century works that created the evolutionary approach. These evolutionary/survivalist explanations of human society have been superseded by modern anthropological research. As Kuper says:
The rapid establishment and the endurance of a theory is not particularly remarkable if the theory is substantially correct. But hardly any anthropologist today would accept that this classic account of primitive society can be sustained... The term implies some historical point of reference... a type of society ancestral to more advanced forms and there is no way of reconstructing prehistoric social forms, classifying them and aligning them in a time series. There are no fossils of social organization.

(Kuper 1988:7)

Yet the publication of books which say exactly this has continued unabated. Margaret Murray’s Neolithic fantasies border on the absurd when looked at in the light of the actual documents of witchcraft (Russell 1972:20–43). Murray suggested that witchcraft was the survival of a Neolithic religion centring around the worship of a god and attendant goddess whose followers were persecuted by the Christian Church. Yet this has had little effect on the development of modern wicca, or its adoption of the Goddess-paradigm (Starhawk 1989:199, 213; Gimbutas 1991:209–10; Adler 1986:41–135, 176–232, 445).

Figure 1.2 Sorcery depicted as a powerful female by Howard Pyle (1903). Such images have been taken in a more positive direction in modern feminist interpretations of the Goddess.
Modern folklore theory suggests a reason why this impasse occurs which can present a somewhat more positive approach than the catalogue of outmoded theories and poor methodology so often levelled at Goddess-studies. The Goddess is only the latest manifestation of a view of culture which suggests a Golden Age whose real meaning was suppressed subsequently by some powerful, restrictive force, but whose message has managed to survive and to reveal itself to the favoured few. This combination of lost paradise, conspiracy theory and remnant of initiates who can bring about transformation is heady stuff. What seems to be happening here comes very close to classic definitions of superstition, in that these models present an alternative causality and are dealing with belief but are not in any real sense a cognitive description of culture. This is not to say that such descriptions are

Figure 1.3 In Batten’s illustration (1892), the giant’s daughter, as Mistress of Nature, protects the hero and commands the birds to do her bidding.
not valuable or stimulating. The historicization of the Goddess-metaphor presents conceptual and methodological problems, but the fact that the Goddess-metaphor is described in terms of cultural actualities is a fascinating example of identity creation. The centre/periphery dialectic establishes boundaries and, by extension, a sense of identity, and presents a framework in which it is possible to understand why these models mix ethnographic and historical material. Locating the Goddess in an actual past provides an apparently factual and secure basis for revival, and survival through time is the link (Townsend 1990:180–2; Gadon 1989:369–77; Baring and Cashford 1991:666–81). Attitudes to the past affect the delineation of the feminine in the present, and its proposed development in the future. The temporal boundary of past and future is breached by the alleged existence of a past Goddess and her survival into the present. The spatial boundary of feminine alienation can also be breached by the same means. Survivals of ‘goddess-religion’ among modern peripheral groups are an assurance that the feminine has not been completely repressed and can provide a link between past and future.

Space does not permit a thorough examination of all, or even a representative sample, of contemporary Goddess-studies, but one of the most influential writers in this debate is undoubtedly the late Marija Gimbutas. The first systematic, book-length exposition of Gimbutas’s ideas appeared in 1974, entitled *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*. It was one of several important works which argued for the indigenous identity of European culture. Various factors had begun to call into question the idea of diffusion from cradles of civilization, and Gimbutas gave archaeological credence to some of these new ideas. She drew heavily on Neumann’s study *The Great Mother* (1955), although, unlike him, she located the Goddess in a concrete cultural context and suggested that late Palaeolithic religion was dominated by powerful mother-goddesses and that women were prominent in that culture. Controversy continues as to the extent to which one can reconstruct complex religious ideas from archaeological sources, and indeed how far some of these artefacts can be interpreted at all (Ehrenburg 1989:23–38; Hutton 1991:32–44; Mallory 1989:234–43). Gimbutas, however, presents a coherent, stimulating and vigorously argued synthesis even though academic criticism of the evidence for a mother-goddess had been voiced by archaeologists several years prior to Gimbutas’s first book (Fleming 1969:255) and that evidence continues to be reassessed (Ehrenburg 1989:63–76).

Gimbutas, however, expanded her argument, placing increasing emphasis on a unified Goddess, more powerful than any male god, who dominated Palaeolithic and Neolithic religion prior to a series of invasions by Indo-European peoples with their patriarchal institutions. In *The Language of the Goddess* Gimbutas claims to have ‘Widened the scope of descriptive archaeology into interdisciplinary research [leaning] heavily on comparative mythology, early historical sources, linguistics...folklore and historical
ethnography’ (1989:xv, 342). These last two categories include ‘the ancient beliefs that were recorded in historical times or those that are still extant in rural and peripheral areas of Europe removed from the turbulence of European history, particularly in Basque, Breton, Welsh, Irish and Scandinavian countries (ibid.: xvii). Her use of ‘ancient beliefs’—i.e. folklore—is frankly problematic for the reasons outlined above. Few references are supported by documentation, and the bibliography contains very little modern and mainstream folklore research, and far too much fringe and outmoded nineteenth-century material.

This has an all-too-familiar ring to the folklorist. It focuses on rural and fringe societies as preserving survivals of earlier periods because they are outside mainstream culture, which, by implication, is dominated by patriarchal institutions: ‘Belief in the Deer-Mother…was strong for many thousands of years. In European folklore, especially the Irish and the Scots, we can still find references to supernatural deer and deer-goddesses etc’ (Gimbutas 1991:225–6). This mirrors a technique favoured by Victorian synthesists, flitting from period to period and from culture to culture with no indication of context. The argument uses analogy and suggestion but offers no supporting evidence, simply assuming agreement on the reader’s part. This tendency is, not surprisingly, more pronounced in recent popular works than in Gimbutas’s scholarly articles, but it is these popular works that are so influential on other studies on the Goddess. In discussing the bear-goddess imagery in Gods and Goddesses, Gimbutas merely hints at survivals in modern European folklore (1974:190, 200). Her discussion of the same image in Language of the Goddess is more pointed. Examples of ‘folk-memories’ mix in with archaeological finds, with no attempt to establish a logical timeline. Because they are folk-memories, they can be listed together and become evidence for survival of the overriding image of the Goddess (Gimbutas 1989:116, 134). No consideration is given to the possibility that customs can originate in modern times; nor is there any attempt to establish the reliability of information. References to sources are absent; nor does the writer question how widely these customs and beliefs were practised. References to stories and customs taken out of context from second- or third-hand sources is simply not acceptable in the context of modern folklore studies. Similarity of form across culture and through time does not necessarily mean similarity of function, and the assumption of survival of belief and practice, ipso facto, down through the centuries is questionable. For a folklorist aware of the history of the discipline, this is very much re-inventing the wheel, and one which proved square the first time. For Gimbutas, the world of the Goddess, firmly set in Palaeolithic/Neolithic Europe, was an organic egalitarian one ruptured by the Indo-European/Kurgan invasion. Inherent is an idea of early cultural unity comparable to that of the evolutionists. On this point Gimbutas seems to shift ground. Cultural unity is not universal per se, as the ostensible
context of her researches is European, but, at least in her popular books, she ultimately adopts a universalist approach (see Gimbutas 1991:324).

The structure of this argument is very revealing. Gimbutas’s folklore references are either from areas on the fringe of modern Europe, or remote in time. Although she is arguing for a pre-Indo-European Goddess-culture, she nevertheless manages to include people like the Celts among those who are at the periphery, away from the turbulences of European history, despite the fact that other scholarly arguments see the Celts as central to the Indo-European way of life (Chapman 1992:14–23). What is happening here is the construction of a periphery which embodies all the positive factors of the ‘lost paradise’ of the Goddess—an insistence that it did survive on the margins of patriarchal culture. In this way a context is set up from which the lost paradise can be revitalized as the centre. The revitalization elements in this model, and the historical/cultural dimension, depend on each other: the historical reality of the Goddess needs to be established, because if the Goddess did not exist she cannot survive and there is little basis for revitalization.

One of the effects of survivalist models is that the data is not really assessed but fitted into a pre-existing framework. For a number of Goddess-studies this is perfectly acceptable, since the model of egalitarian past and future revival is what is important, rather than the details. The past becomes a template for the future, and this self-contained position need only build on its assumptions, not question them. In her analysis of attitudes to calendar customs, Georgina Boyes points out that one of the effects of survivalist models was to seek for the meaning of custom not in its socio-cultural context but in an undocumented area of the past. In effect, this gives precedence to the hypothetical ‘prehistoric’ form over the actuality of contemporary performance (Boyes 1987/8:88–96). This may help to explain why such uncritical methodology characterizes Goddess-scholarship, despite the fact that it is so often thoughtful and positive towards ‘folk’-groups. Because a particular aspect (the prehistoric origin) is given a priori status, a consideration of the modern context is redundant. The right to endow meaning is wholly in the hands of the observer (ibid.: 88–96), and therefore Goddess-studies can point out so-called folk-survivals without even considering other factors. For the researcher such as a folklorist, used to dealing with the whole context, this use of material appears uncritical. Indeed, in many Goddess-studies scholarship from the last two decades, where just these objections to nineteenth-century cultural models have been discussed, is noticeable by its almost total absence.

A recent article on the influence of cultural-evolution theory on the development of folklore studies in Britain makes this point in a slightly different context (Bennett 1994:3). Cultural evolution gave British folklorists a genuine basis for the scientific validity of folklore. Folk-tradition was a kind of fossil record of primitive culture on the analogy of geology or anthropology (ibid.: 15–17). The dilemma Bennett identifies is that space (contemporary folk-traditions) had to be treated as time (primitive culture); modern folk-traditions
were the survivals of primitive culture. Once this link was broken, folklorists had to re-think completely the theoretical basis of their discipline.

An analogous dilemma seems to exist in Goddess-studies. An actual Goddess-religion in the past is the basis for revitalization in the future. The ‘evidence’ for the Goddess presents many of the same problems as the existence of ‘survivals’ did for nineteenth-century folklorists. Located spatially in the remote corners of the present, survivals, whether of primitive custom or of benign Goddess, are the assurances of the validity, indeed the very existence, of the past. The use of the metalinguistically positive term ‘ancient’ in these writings is too common to need exemplification. When these ancient practices can be linked to customs practised by, for example, Celts, who have long held an important place in discussions of cultural antiquity, or to native American cultures, with their overtones of noble savagery, the discourse itself carries the argument. Thus the imagined past and the surviving present become a hope for the future. Only when one begins to look at the kind of specifics mentioned above is the flow interrupted and the shortcomings of this model as a description of actual culture revealed. Perhaps this is why, as Hutton points out in his study of modern paganism, the same writers appear time and again in the bibliographies (Hutton 1991:144), and why, as Clark, Luhrmann and Adler have noted, modern fantasy fiction plays a large part in the conceptual landscape of the neo-pagan world (Clark 1991:188–9; Luhrmann 1989:87–92; Adler 1986:445).

Here, perhaps, some resolution between the demands of scholarship and the elegiac quality of this writing is possible. The Goddess-model operates on the level of symbolic discourse (Tambiah 1990:23). The periphery is metaphorical rather than historical. If we look at the Goddess-paradigm as an exercise in creative history, then we are looking at a view of the past which, however it may fail academic criteria, presents a powerful image of feminine cultural identity. In the case of the Goddess, the fact of survival, followed by suppression and then transformation, is extended to the gender she represents. Her original context embodies the qualities lacking in some current situation, and her restoration transposes these qualities to her present. The link is her survival, the assurance that her power is eclipsed but not really diminished. Once something becomes a survival it is automatically powerful and mysterious. Emphasis upon the past in any form strengthens the notion that the corporate nature of society is the result of historical process. Groups often attempt to lengthen their historical traditions as a means of validating a cultural identity, and dissatisfaction with present situations can be expressed imaginatively by recreating a past (Wilson 1979:446). Vickery demonstrates in his study of Frazer’s work that, whatever its shortcomings as anthropology, it continues to be a compelling literary statement (Vickery 1973:132–44). The same may be
said of the Goddess: survivalist thinking is about preserving the power of the past.

The mechanics of this argument will undoubtedly always cause disagreement. However, the discipline of folklore can contribute much to the debates engendered by modern Goddess-studies. It can, and indeed must, identify the fallacies of the model, both in its a priori assumptions about the nature of culture and in its uncritical methodology; but, in its concern with the mechanisms of belief, it can provide a more positive understanding of the conceptual framework of modern Goddess-studies.

NOTES

1 Different writers attribute somewhat different qualities to this figure, but there is widespread agreement that she represents a universal concept of some kind. For this reason I use upper case for her supposed title, the Goddess.

2 The most influential works have been E.B.Tylor’s Primitive Culture and J.G. Frazer’s The Golden Bough vol. III: The Dying God. Frazer is more directly relevant here as he is still cited as an authoritative source in many works on the Goddess, despite the availability of other pertinent consideration of his assumptions and working methods. See Downie 1970:85–93; Ackerman 1987; Fontenrose 1971:25, 34–5, 50–60.

3 Equally popular among modern Goddess studies are Bachofen 1967, and Neumann 1955 on matriarchy. Graves is used here because he, more than the others, relies on material that can be considered folklore.

4 For the various meanings of the name ‘Keritwen’, see Bromwich, 1978:308. Although a possible explanation for the element of the name could be ‘fair and loved’, Ifor Williams pointed out that the original form may have been cyrridfen, cyrridben: i.e. hooked or crooked woman. See Thomas, 1966: s.v. cerdd.

5 Lauri Honko discusses just this problem in relation to the Kalevala: see Honko 1990:182.

6 Space does not permit a critique of these models, but see Harris 1968:142–216; Lowie 1937:63–127; Fontenrose 1971:25, 34–5, 50–60. For archaeology and neo-paganism generally, see Hutton 1991; Bennett 1994; Boyes 1987/8:5–11; and Wood 1992 for folklore categories applied to the problem.

7 A list of Professor Gimbutas’s publications can be found in Palomé 1987:384–96.

REFERENCES


