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ARCHEOlogija 48



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# ARCHEOlogija 48

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# TURINYS / CONTENT

Agnė Čivilytė	PRATARMĖ.....7 FOREWORD ..... 11
Christopher Barber Troskosky, Tianyu Chen, Katie Nicole Troskosky	ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN COMPUTATIONAL MODELLING OF THE SUB-NEOLITHIC BOUNDARY: CURIUSER AND CURIUSER DYNAMICS GOVERNING THE ADAPTIVE MORPHOGENESIS OF CULTURE.....15 ALICE NUOTYKIAI KOMPIUTERINIAME MODELIAVIME: SUBNEOLITO PARIBYS IR SMALSUMO DINAMIKOS VALDYMAS KULTŪROS EVOLIUCIJOJE .....35
Aleksander Koško, Marzena Szmyt	MARIJA GIMBUTAS AND HER VISION OF THE STEPPE INDO-EUROPEANIZATION OF EUROPE: RECEPTION, REJECTION AND REVITALIZATION.....39 MARIJA GIMBUTIENĖ IR JOS EUROPOS STEPINĖS INDOEUROPEIZACIJOS VIZIJA: RECEPCIJA, ATMETIMAS IR ATGAIVINIMAS.....53
Agnė Čivilytė, Vytenis Podėnas, Karolis Minkevičius, Heidi Luik	VĖLYVOJO BRONZOS AMŽIAUS EKONOMIKA RYTŲ BALTIJOS REGIONE: NAUJO MODELIO LINK.....57 LATE BRONZE AGE ECONOMY IN THE EASTERN BALTIC REGION: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL .....96
Rokas Vengalis, Gytis Piličiauskas, Karolis Minkevičius, Mantas Valančius, Miglė Stančikaitė, Giedrė Vaikutienė, Giedrė Piličiauskienė	NEW DATA ON THE STRUCTURE AND ECONOMY OF UNENCLOSED SETTLEMENTS IN THE LATE STRIATED WARE CULTURE: THE SKUDENIAI SETTLEMENT SITE IN SOUTHEASTERN LITHUANIA .....101 NAUJI DUOMENYS APIE VĖLYVOSIOS BRŪKŠNIUOTOSIOS KERAMIKOS KULTŪROS NEĮTVIRTINTŲ GYVENVIEČIŲ STRUKTŪRĄ IR EKONOMIKĄ: SKUDENIŲ GYVENVIETĖ PIETRYČIŲ LIETUVOJE..... 150
Laurynas Kurila	MIRUSIŲJŲ DEGINIMO PAPROČIO PLITIMAS RYTŲ LIETUVOJE: NAUJAS CHRONOLOGINIS MODELIS, PAREMTAS RADIOKARBONINIO DATAVIMO DUOMENIMIS .....155 THE SPREAD OF CREMATION CUSTOM THROUGHOUT EASTERN LITHUANIA: A NEW CHRONOLOGICAL MODEL BASED ON THE DATA OF RADIOCARBON DATING..... 181

Rytis Jonaitis, Irma Kaplūnaitė	TRACES OF CHRISTIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN PAGAN VILNIUS: THE CEMETERY ON BOKŠTO STREET.....185 KRIKŠČIONIŲ KULTŪRINIŲ ĮTAKŲ PĖDSAKAI PAGONIŠKAME VILNIUJE: BOKŠTO GATVĖS KAPINYNAS..... 203
Larissa Kulakovska	TYPOLGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INDUSTRY IN LAYER VI OF THE KOROLEVO SITE IN THE TRANSCARPATHIA REGION..... 207 KOROLEVO ARCHEOLOGINĖS VIETOVĖS (UŽKARPATĖS REGIONAS) VI SLUOKSNIŲINDUSTRIJOS TIPOLOGINĖ CHARAKTERISTIKA .....218
Baranov Vyacheslav, Ivakin Vsevolod, Shiroukhov Roman	BURIALS WITH BUCKETS AT THE OSTRIV THE 11 <sup>th</sup> CENTURY CEMETERY IN THE MIDDLE DNIPRO REGION .....221 PALAIDOJIMAI SU KIBIRAIŠ OSTRIVO XI A. KAPINYNE VIDURIO DNEPRO SRITYJE..... 262
Oleg Petrauskas, Mykhaylo Syvolap	THE MONSTROUS (MONSTRUOSO) FIBULA FROM THE DNIPRO RIVER REGION..... 265 MONSTRIOZINĖ SEGĖ, APTIKTA DNEPRO REGIONE..... 282
Svitlana Biliaieva, Natalia Danute Bimbirayte	THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA IN THE SOUTH OF UKRAINE: TYAHIN FORTRESS..... 285 LIETUVOS DIDŽIOSIOS KUNIGAİKŠTYSTĖS ISTORINIS IR KULTŪRINIS PAVELDAS UKRAINOS PIETUOSE: TYAGINO TVIRTOVĖ..... 308
Alla Valeriivna Buisikh, Dmytro Mykolayovych Khmelevskiy	THE EARLIEST FINDS OF PANATHENAIC PRIZE AMPHORAE IN OLBIA PONTICA ..... 311 ANKSTYVIAUSI PANATĖNAJOS PRIZINIŲ AMFORŲ RADINIAI OLBIIJOJE .....325
	<b><i>KITAIP APIE ARCHEOLOGIĄ / ALTERNATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGY</i></b>
Eligijus Raila	APIE KAULŲ KVAPĄ IR SKONĮ .....327  AUTORIŲ DĖMESIUI.....330  GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS.....333

# MARIJA GIMBUTAS AND HER VISION OF THE STEPPE INDO-EUROPEANIZATION OF EUROPE: RECEPTION, REJECTION AND REVITALIZATION

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*The theory of Indo-Europeanization of the continent can be seen as a focal point in all Marija Gimbutas's work and in her role in the history of archaeology. This theory has combined various directions of her interests and revealed the theoretical and methodological foundations of her research. This paper recalls the theory itself and its development, as well as its importance for European archaeology. The vicissitudes of this theory, which can be metaphorically described as the triad: reception – rejection – revitalization, illustrate the transformations of archaeology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** Europe, steppe area, language changes, history of archaeology.

*Visuose Marijos Gimbutienės darbuose ir indėlyje į archeologijos istoriją buvo svarbiausia žemyno indoeuropeizacijos samprata. Ji sujungė įvairias archeologės interesų kryptis, atskleidė teorinius ir metodologinius jos tyrimų pagrindus. Šiame darbe primenama pati koncepcija ir jos raida, taip pat jos svarba Europos archeologijai. Šios koncepcijos, kurią metaforiškai galima apibūdinti kaip triadą: recepcija – atmetimas – atgaivinimas, dalys iliustruoja archeologijos transformacijas XX a. antroje pusėje ir pirmaisiais XXI a. dešimtmečiais.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Europa, stepių sritis, kalbos pokyčiai, archeologijos istorija.

Other distinguished scholars, such as V. Gordon Childe (1929), have endorsed the same concept as Marija Gimbutas in relation to the theory of the formation of Indo-Europeans in the Eurasian steppe zone. However, Gimbutas stands out due to the strength and structure of her ideas, along with the impressive source documentation supporting her arguments, exceeding the scope of her predecessors. Probably these are the reasons why even today, 28 years after the death of Marija Gimbutas, it is worth going back to her concept.

The theory of Indo-Europeanization of the continent was a focal point of Gimbutas's scholarly work and her role in the history of archaeology. It combined the various directions of Gimbutas'

studies, while simultaneously outlining the theoretical and methodological foundations of her research. The theory can be divided into three stages, metaphorically described as the triad: reception – rejection – and revitalization. This triad defines the transformations of archaeology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this spirit, we wish to reconstruct the origin, development and refinement of the theory itself and while assessing its importance for European archaeology, through an analysis of the original works by Gimbutas published between 1956 and 1991, as well as a collection of her texts, edited by M. Dexter and K. Jones-Bley in 1997, and including her last article, published posthumously (Gimbutas 1997). As Gimbutas was such a significant and influential

figure in world archeology, it is important to view her legacy and influence directly by studying her own words.

## 1. METHODOLOGICAL BASIS

Gimbutas used the methodological foundation of combining several research perspectives: archaeology, historical linguistics, ethnology and history of religion, with a priority for the synthesis of archaeology and linguistics.

While most Western European and American scholars narrowly defined Europe as having an eastern border located somewhere in east-central Europe, Gimbutas, who was Lithuanian, saw Europe as a continent stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to the Ural and Caucasus mountains. As a result, her research into the archaeology of eastern and central Europe was far more wide-ranging and comprehensive, with a greater appreciation of the role of Eastern Europe in the continent's prehistory – a role that was usually overlooked by other scholars. In *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe* published in 1956, Gimbutas wrote: *To the prehistorians of the western hemisphere, the prehistory of eastern Europe is known only very fragmentarily. (...) In writing this study the author hopes to overcome the political and language barriers which continually retard the growth of knowledge of European prehistory as a whole* (Gimbutas 1956, 3).

The overview of Gimbutas' keywords reveals that there were terms answering the questions: where? (East European steppe zone), when? (Eneolithic/Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age), who? (*Kurgan culture*, and its antitype – Old Europe) and how? (migrations, invasions/military expansions). Her answers to these questions revealed her extensive factual knowledge although her perceived simplifications and imaginative interpretations have prompted a strong response from fellow archaeologists, stimulating numerous

heated debates. As a result of these discussions, the theory has developed and refined over time, and has incorporated various changes which will be presented below.

Another group of keywords described Gimbutas' perception of the key features of the Proto-Indo-European community: barrow funerary rituals, domestication of the horse, pastoralism, patriarchal and warrior societies. These findings were largely derived from the interpretation of archaeological finds and observations, while Gimbutas' new discoveries were incorporated with associated source records, significantly expanding the findings.

This short overview of the primary keywords shaping Gimbutas' work encourages us to examine how selected elements of her theory have evolved from its first to final version. We have approached this task by analyzing Gimbutas' original texts in order to identify any changes in the theory. However, we are omitting the question of absolute chronology as this has changed due to the introduction of the radiocarbon method.

## 2. BIRTH OF THE THEORY

*The Prehistory of Eastern Europe* (Gimbutas 1956) shall be defined as the oldest version of the theory of Indo-Europeanization. The original description states:

*The archaeological data from the period 2,000-1,800 B.C. attest a sudden change that can be explained by movements and mixtures of culture groups. New south-eastern elements appeared in the northern Caucasus at the end of the third millennium B.C. About the beginning of the second they spread all over the north Pontic area, carried by the immigrant people of eastern Mediterranean racial type, called here the 'Kurgan culture'. In south Russia and the eastern Ukraine the new Kurgan culture with knowledge of stock-breeding and farming is represented by pit-graves and hut-graves in burial*



*mounds. (...) Furthermore, these steppe people transcended the Dnieper boundary and penetrated the western Ukraine. (...) The movements of people during the Final Neolithic and Chalcolithic changed the whole picture of eastern European prehistory. The mixture of indigenous central and northern European inhabitants with the southeastern people caused new groupings of cultures. (...) the parallel culture changes in the Near East, Anatolia and Greece and the linguistic data allow us to presume that the formalization of cultures in central and eastern Europe at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. very probable was in step with the infiltration and the differentiation of the Indo-European speaking nations in Europe (Gimbutas 1956, 12–13).*

In this version, the starting point was the North Caucasus, where the *Kurgan culture* (the name used then for the first time) was formed. Its most important diagnostic features were conducting burials in house-like structures built of large boulders or timber surrounded with boulders. Such graves were covered with barrows (kurgans). The *Kurgan culture* spread across the North Pontic area, alongside the migration of the eastern Mediterranean racial type (Gimbutas 1956, 55–56).

Describing the results of excavation at the Mikhailivka site (lower Dnieper area), Gimbutas claimed that *these people lived in fortified villages on high river banks, built rectangular houses of timber, stone and clay, and occupied themselves not only with stock-breeding, hunting and fishing, but also with farming (Gimbutas 1956, 71).*

Placing an emphasis on the dissimilarity of funeral rituals and discontinuation of material culture in relation to the earlier stage of steppe prehistory, Gimbutas noted that *the Ukraine and southern Russia, between the Dnieper and Volga rivers, frequently considered to be the cradle of the pit-grave people, cannot be held to be such (Gimbutas 1956, 73).* She claimed to have found

strong similarities between her *Kurgan culture* and the north Caucasian complex, and described how the expansion of steppe people to the northwest caused a general break in European culture.

### 3. EVOLUTION AND REFINEMENT OF THE THEORY

Gimbutas worked very intensively during the 1960s and 1970, expanding and refining her theory, as shown in the series of works published during this period (Gimbutas 1961; 1963a; 1963b; 1965; 1970; 1972; 1974).

She defined the *Kurgan culture*: *I see one large cultural bloc spread over Transcaucasia, the northern Caucasus, the eastern Ukraine, south Russia and Kazakhstan. This is what I have called the 'Kurgan Culture' (...) Culture was not uniform throughout this bloc. Two branches of the Kurgan Culture are distinguishable: one was in the Caucasus and in the area along the Black Sea coasts, the other was in the lower Volga area and Kazakhstan (Gimbutas 1961, 198).*

Her source base was extended as a result of many new excavations and studies carried out in Europe (especially east and central) and Asia. For instance, in relation to the former, she accepted a proposal by N.I. Merpert (1961) to distinguish four phases of the Pit-Grave (Yamnaya) culture and applied these phases to the whole *Kurgan culture* (Gimbutas 1961). Consequently, after Merpert, she admitted that on the lower Volga, the *Kurgan culture* probably subsisted for a long time locally and was related to the culture of Kazakhstan and the southern Caspian area.

In a book published in 1965, the *Kurgan people* were referred to as Proto-Indo-Europeans. Gimbutas gave them a synthetic description using such terms as a great expansion of the *Kurgan people from the Eurasiatic steppes. A new people may have arrived no later than 2300-2200 B.C. in the eastern Balkans,*

*the Aegean area, western Anatolia, central Europe, all of the western and eastern Baltic area, and central Russia (...). There is no other possible explanation of the great changes in cultural configurations and developments than an invasion of new people who were responsible for the disintegration of the old European cultures and for the creation of a new set of cultural groups* (Gimbutas 1965, 21). She opined that the *Kurgan people* played an important role in the rise of local metallurgy as they probably introduced the metallurgical knowledge they had gained in the Caucasus (Gimbutas 1965, 23).

#### 4. FINAL VERSION: THEORY OF THREE WAVES OF EXPANSION FROM THE STEPPES

From 1977, the established theory was successively published (Gimbutas 1977; 1979; 1980; 1985; 1986; 1991) presenting the idea of three waves of expansion from the steppes to southern, central and western Europe:

Wave #1 – dated to 4400–4300 BC; involved *Kurgan I people* from the Volga steppe; resulted in the formation of the early Yamnaya culture;

Wave #2 – dated at 3500 BC; involved *Kurgan II people* who had arisen in the North Pontic area; resulted in the formation of the Mikhailovka I/ Maikop structures;

Wave #3 – dated soon after 3000 BC; involved *Kurgan III people* again from the Volga steppe; resulted in the formation of the late Yamnaya culture.

In Gimbutas' opinion, each wave was accompanied by the processes of *kurganization*. It resulted in the formation of new syncretic (hybrid) groups with strong steppe features.

Gimbutas underlined that *there was no transplantation of the Eurasian steppe culture west of the Black Sea in toto; the process was more complex, involving the coexistence of different*

*cultural traditions, dislocations of populations, subjugations by a warrior nobility, and cultural amalgamations* (Gimbutas 1977[1997], 197). In 1985, in the comments on a Gamkrelidze & Ivanov article, she stated, inter alia, that *The process of Indo-Europeanization was a cultural, not a physical, transformation* (Gimbutas 1985[1997], 309).

#### 5. RECEPTION AND DISCUSSIONS

From the very beginning, the theory developed by Gimbutas became a theme of lively discussions. It can be said that debate was the inevitable response to the concept. The discussion centered on the theory's individual components as well as basic methodological assumptions. A particularly heated debate was provoked by the following elements: (A) definition of the *Kurgan culture*, (B) main characteristics of *Kurgan people*, (C) formative area of the *Kurgan culture*, (D) ways it spread, (E) causes and means of its spreading, (F) question of *kurganized* groups.

##### A. The *Kurgan culture* – definitions and reasons for their use

The term *Kurgan culture* was introduced as early as 1956 and was used by Gimbutas until her death. Under the influence of the discussions, she systematically supplemented and corrected its definition. The earliest version was very brief: *In south Russia and the eastern Ukraine the new Kurgan culture with knowledge of stock-breeding and farming is represented by pit-graves and hut-graves in burial mounds* (Gimbutas 1956, 12).

In 1961, she gave a more complex definition: *... I see one large cultural bloc spread over Transcaucasia, the northern Caucasus, the eastern Ukraine, south Russia and Kazakhstan. This is what I have called the 'Kurgan Culture', distinct in its burials in house-like structures or huts in kurgans,*

in its location of sites on high river terraces, its small rectangular houses with stone foundations, and its class-structured society (Gimbutas 1961, 198).

In response to ongoing queries about the name *Kurgan culture* Gimbutas explained in 1963: [It] is used as a general name for expanding eastern elements, representing the *Kurgan culture* north of the Black Sea, already mixed with the local North Pontic and Caucasian elements. The labels 'Corded', 'Battle-Axe', and 'Ochre-grave' are not sufficient and exact (Gimbutas 1963b[1997], 22).

After a few years, she added: *The name Kurgan culture (...) was introduced (...) as a broader term to replace Srednij Stog II and Pit-grave (...), names used by Soviet scholars for the culture in the eastern Ukraine and southern Russia, and Corded, Battle-Axe, Ochre-Grave, Single Grave, and other names given to the complexes characterized by elements of Kurgan appearance that formed in various parts of Europe after the infiltration of Kurgan elements from north of the Black Sea*" (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 76).

In the next works, Gimbutas tried to clarify her proposal further. In 1974, she wrote: *The term 'Kurgan' is a blanket label for a cultural tradition through time (...). It covers a number of socio-economic, stylistic, and religious elements, which argues for a genetic affinity among the many cultural complexes (...). The 'kurgan culture' is not a 'single (uniform) cultural entity' (...) There is no need to eliminate such labels as Srednij Stog II, Yamna (pit-grave), and Corded-Battle-Axe as they are necessary for the identification of specific archaeological complexes of various phases and areas* (Gimbutas 1974[1997], 181).

A more refined version was formulated in 1977: *'Kurgan tradition' is defined as collective socio-economic and ideological features observable over time and space. This tradition – characterized by a pastoral economy, an agnatically-linked, hierarchical social structure, seasonal settlements, small semi-subterranean dwellings and larger chieftain's*

*houses, diagnostic burial rites including human and animal sacrifices and symbolic systems with the sun as the dominant motif – can be traced through the millennia to each geographical region that the Kurgan people settled or each local population which they 'kurganized'* (Gimbutas 1977[1997], 197).

In one of her last works (published in 1997), Gimbutas wrote: *The term 'Kurgan culture' is used as a blanket name for the mobile, pastoral and warring tribes of the Ukrainian, South Russian, and Central Asian steppes* (Gimbutas 1997, 354).

Thus, Gimbutas propagated this collective name (a blanket name) with the intention of breaking away from archaeological taxa and moving to the level of 'real' culture and 'real' communities that once existed. These were to be the subject of her research, rather than archaeological taxa which she did recognize but considered to be of limited significance.

However, this approach was not very successful, because it raised so many objections, primarily due to this very generalized blanket name lumping together various steppe groupings of diverse characteristics.

## **B. Main features of the *Kurgan culture* people**

Now we can see that over the course of time, Gimbutas expanded and modified, supplemented and amended the set of basic diagnostic features of the *Kurgan culture* and *Kurgan people*.

In the initial version, she mentioned explicitly *graves in burial mounds created by people with knowledge of stock-breeding and farming* (Gimbutas 1956, 12). Importantly, *Grave furniture and burial ceremonialism show that this was a culture with a developed social organization and very probably with the man holding a superior position in the family* (Gimbutas 1956, 79). In subsequent works, the last-mentioned feature evolved into *class-structured society* (e.g. Gimbutas 1961, 198).

She supported this initial assessment of the economy and social organization in her next works: *These people can no longer be considered steppe nomads. They were both stock-breeders and farmers and lived in well-organized, fortified villages* (Gimbutas 1961, 193). This last observation was based on excavation results on the famous site at Mikhailivka, Ukraine (Lagodovska *et al.* 1962). Some years later, she changed her position only to adopt the previously rejected interpretation in 1970: *The economy was predominantly pastoral. Long-lasting settlements are not known* (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 77). However, at the same time she pointed to the existence of small villages and fortified settlements exemplified by the Mikhailivka site (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 82–86).

In her opinion, horses and carts were important components of the culture and economy. Social differences with the dominant role of men in society were clearly marked in burial rites. The perceived importance of the horse is based on the discoveries on the Lower Dnieper and Volga-Ural steppe, on such sites as Dereivka, or in the Samara and Khvalynsk cultures (e.g. Gimbutas 1997, 352–357).

A much more refined and complex version comes from 1974: *The whole system of the 'Kurgan culture' is not based on a single common feature ('isomorph'), the barrow (kurgan). 'Kurgan' is a name for a tradition and like many other names does not refer to one feature but to the sum of elements. Among these: a patriarchal society, a class system, the existence of small tribal units ruled by powerful 'chieftains', a predominantly pastoral economy including horse breeding and plant cultivation, architectural features such as small subterranean or above-ground rectangular huts of timber uprights, small villages and massive hillforts, crude unpainted pottery decorated with impressions or stabbing, religious elements indicating a Sky/Sun god and Thunder god, horse sacrifices, and fire cults* (Gimbutas 1974[1997], 183).

A shortened set of features was given in 1977: *'Kurgan tradition' is defined as collective socio-economic and ideological features observable over time and space. This tradition [is] characterized by a pastoral economy, an agnatically-linked, hierarchical social structure, seasonal settlements, small semi-subterranean dwellings and larger chieftain's houses, diagnostic burial rites including human and animal sacrifices and symbolic systems with the sun as the dominant motif* (Gimbutas 1977[1997], 197).

This view was developed in successive years: *The Kurgans were a warlike, patriarchal, and hierarchical culture with distinctive burial rites that included pit graves with tent-or hut-like structures of wood or stone, covered by a low cairn or earthen mound. Their economy was essentially pastoral with a rudimentary agriculture and seasonal, transient settlements of semi-subterranean houses* (Gimbutas 1991, 352).

In one of her final papers (published 1997), Gimbutas listed the following features of *Kurgan* people: mobility owing to the mounting and riding of horses, important role of horses and oxen in religion, rise of animal herds and pastoralism, and the rise of patriarchy and social ranking (Gimbutas 1997, 353).

In summary, the diagnostic features attributed by Gimbutas to the *Kurgan culture* and *Kurgan people* clearly evolved through time. In 1956, the brief list included features derived from graves (burials in imitations of houses, kurgans, dominant position of men in funeral rites) and domestic sites, which were actually very rare (stock-breeding, small scale farming, well organized and fortified settlements). In the 1970s, it consisted of similar traits with the addition of religious elements and changes in subsistence (pastoralism), but was formalized in a different manner and targeted more socially.

The main problem with the above definition of the *Kurgan culture* and *Kurgan people* was its

broadness. Particular traits were derived from various areas and time intervals as e.g. hut-like stone graves, fortified settlements, semi-subterranean dwellings, animal sacrifices, class system etc. As a result, this set of (potentially) diagnostic traits came to be a kind of artificial and incoherent conglomerate.

Another problem resulted from shifting too rapidly from archaeological facts and observations to their social and cultural interpretation. A case in point could be the question of social hierarchy: for Gimbutas, this was one of the diagnostic features of *Kurgan people* derived from burial data and supported by linguistic findings. However, nowhere had she conducted any analyses, or derived results which would support the terms she used: a developed social organization/class-structured society/ranking.

### C. Formative area of the *Kurgan culture*

In her 1956 book, Gimbutas identified the North Caucasus as a formative area for the *Kurgan culture*. She stated firmly that *the Ukraine and southern Russia, between the Dnieper and Volga rivers, frequently considered to be the cradle of the pit-grave people, cannot be held to be such* (Gimbutas 1956, 73).

Five years later, an important change was introduced, based on the analyses by N.I. Merpert (1961): the lower Volga steppe was considered the area of the longest local development of steppe communities (Gimbutas 1961, 194). From that time until her death, Gimbutas was strongly in favor of the Volga (Volga-Ural) area as the formative area of the *Kurgan culture* (Gimbutas 1991, 352; 1997, 353). Further research into the Samara and Khvalynsk cultures provided a source base for her claim (Gimbutas 1997, 352–358).

Interestingly, Gimbutas repeatedly tried to expand this formative area to the southeast, but

in a rather inconsistent manner. For instance, in publications from 1963, the Volga and south Siberian steppes and Kazakhstan were labeled as the starting point of the *Kurgan culture* (Gimbutas 1963a, 38). Twenty years later, she wrote: *A possible formative zone of the early Kurgan tradition seems to be located in Soviet Central Asia and south Turkmenia, which are contiguous with the steppe north of the Caspian* (Gimbutas 1985[1997], 306). However, nowhere did she study this problem in detail.

However, by the 1980s, her view of the western *Kurgan* expansion also seems to be more nuanced. For example, in 1985, she considered the question of a second homeland: *In the wake of Wave #2, the Kurganized (Indo-Europeanized) territories in central Europe formed a second homeland as it became a core from which further migrations emanated around 3000 BC* (Gimbutas 1985[1997], 309–310).

### D. Ways of spreading

This was one of the most controversial components of Gimbutas' theory, which she defined as: movements, impetus, intrusions, incursions, invasions, raids, expansions, infiltration, or just mobility. A few selected phrases can illustrate how she used these terms:

*The archaeological data (...) attest a sudden change that can be explained by movements and mixtures of culture groups* (Gimbutas 1956, 12).

*The impetus came from the lower Volga area and east of the Caspian Sea, and there must have been a kind of chain movement* (Gimbutas 1963a, 43).

*... in the northern Pontic region, remarkable changes occurred due to the intrusion of the Kurgan people from the east* (Gimbutas 1963b[1997], 19).

*There is no other possible explanation of the great changes in cultural configurations and developments than an invasion of new people* (Gimbutas 1965, 21).

... continuous waves of expansion or raids touched all of northern Europe (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 102)

It was the infiltration of patriarchal, warlike IE speakers (Gimbutas 1974[1997], 190).

... the mobility of the people due to the mounting and riding of the horse (Gimbutas 1997, 354).

These statements answer the question of how elements of the *Kurgan culture* spread. Gimbutas' position was initially unequivocal, although some nuances emerged over the years. However, she was most remembered as a supporter of military expansions that led to the conquests of other peoples and acquisitions of new territories. Her use of such military terms, only sometimes (quite inconsistently) qualified in their meaning, was common. She then explained (but only in a footnote) that *the word 'expansion' should be understood as an 'infiltration' performed by Indo-European warriors who subsequently formed a super-stratum in conquered lands* (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 113, note).

The chain of terminology she employed can be reconstructed as follows: mobility – movements – migrations – expansion (= infiltration) – invasion – raids, i.e. from a relatively neutral word to the most martial term. *Nota bene*, research on the connection between these terms and the vocabulary widespread in the media and colloquial speech during the Cold War could be inspiring.

Gimbutas never wrote directly whether she used these terms to refer to events or processes. It is worth noting that this distinction was important to her in the case of *kurganization*, which she treated as a process of transformation and emphasized this in her definition of the term (see part F below).

But what caused the mobility and the phenomena described by the successive words in the terminology chain? What were the causes of the population movements and what means facilitated them?

## E. Causes and means of spreading

There are two categories of causes of the *Kurgan* expansion in the theory developed by Gimbutas. Initially, she focused primarily on climate change (desiccation), which, combined with other conditions, was to trigger population movements. *Perhaps the desiccation of the climate toward the end of the third millennium B.C., in combination with their possession of horses, vehicles, knowledge of metallurgy, and social and economic structure as well, have to be reckoned with among the causes for their westward, northward, and southward expansion* (Gimbutas 1965, 23; cf. also 1956, 169).

In later works, owing to changes in absolute chronology, the economic and demographic factors came to the fore: *The increasing herds and population, the appearance of vehicles and fighting carts, and the use of horses for riding obviously were decisive factors for the expansion of the Kurgan warrior nobility* (Gimbutas 1970[1997], 112).

However, one gets the impression that the reasons for the expansion did not attract her attention in particular. She was much more interested in the factors and agents that made the expansions both possible and successful. In her opinion, these factors were social and cultural innovations: new ideas (warriors as a privileged group in the community), social solutions (mobile groups of people without stable settlements) and technological innovations such as the use of horses for riding, knowledge of metallurgy as well as carts (e.g. Gimbutas 1965, 23; 1970[1997], 77–82). All these factors led to the restructuring of society, economy, and religion in all areas infiltrated by *patriarchal, warlike IE speakers who were transported by horses and vehicles* into Europe (Gimbutas 1974[1997], 190). The domestication of the horse played a decisive role (Gimbutas 1977[1997], 198; cf. also Gimbutas 1997, 354).

## F. Kurganized groups

*Kurganization* is another important term created by Gimbutas. In her view, it was intended to describe the process of amalgamation or hybridization and mutual influences which took place as a result of interactions between the *Kurgan people* and local (autochthonous) communities (e.g. Gimbutas 1965, 23; 1973[1997], 129; 1974[1997], 190–192). In short, this process was a synonym of Indo-Europeanization (Gimbutas 1973, 129; 1985[1997], 310).

As a result of contacts between these two groups, a number of new units (groups, communities) were formed that had steppe and local traits in their culture, social organization, and religion. However, according to Gimbutas, elements from the *Kurgan culture* played a leading role in these emerging hybrids (syncretic units). The process of *kurganization* can be traced archaeologically because it has left traces in material culture.

The issue of *kurganization* was discussed in numerous works by Gimbutas. According to her, new cultural units, which crystallized after the Wave #2, were essential to the question of the ethnogenesis of Indo-European speaking groups in Europe. In her opinion, *The Kurgan incursions produced a hybrid culture. The interplay between the two social, economic, and symbolic systems characterizes the east central European cultures after the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC* (Gimbutas 1985[1997], 309–310).

Perhaps the most complex definition was given in 1977: *We speak of ‘waves’ and ‘repercussions’ and do not apply the ‘Kurgan’ label to cultural complexes of the Danubian basin and northern Europe formed after the arrival of Kurgan people. There was no transplantation of the Eurasian steppe culture west of the Black Sea in toto; the process was more complex, involving the coexistence of different cultural traditions, dislocations of populations, subjugations*

*by a warrior nobility, and cultural amalgamations* (Gimbutas 1977[1997], 197).

One of the broadest and most expressive perspectives is adopted in one of her last books (Gimbutas 1991, 366–393). There, the set of cultures *kurganized* in the wake of expansion Wave #2 included: Cernavoda, Baden, Coțofeni, Globular Amphora, Horgen, Remedello, Rinaldone, Corded Ware, Vučedol, etc. The composition of this set as well as at least some assessments been questioned from the very beginning as the proposed set includes very different units and for some of them the term *kurganized* is clearly exaggerated or inadequate. But this is a matter for a separate study.

## G. Methodological basis

Gimbutas’ methodological base prompted discussion, too. As mentioned earlier, a synthesis of archaeology and linguistics was of major importance to her.

A brief but essential text published in 1974 presented the main points of Gimbutas’ theory in a syncretic form, including its methodological base, i.e. a synthesis of archaeology and linguistics: *The methods of archaeological reconstruction that make PIE an historical reality are multifaceted and no less painstaking than linguistic ones. These essential prerequisites for reconstruction are: 1) The study of substratum cultures; 2) Tracing cultural continuities back from known historical IE cultures to prehistoric periods; 3) The identification of a certain culture at a specific time and geographic area which is definitely relevant to points 1 and 2; 4) The recognition of specific PIE cultural elements; 5) The recognition of non-IE components in Europe and the Near East; and 6) The attempt to understand the process of hybridization of PIE and substratum elements* (Gimbutas 1974[1997], 180).

However, doubts appeared whether linguistics and archaeology (meaning language and material

culture relics) could be combined at all. The answers to this question were ambiguous.

## 6. REJECTION: COMPETITIVE THEORIES

All these debatable questions drew both supporters and opponents of Gimbutas' theory. The former continued the studies on the steppe origin of Indo-Europeans, trying to bypass the weaknesses of Gimbutas (Mallory 1989; Anthony 2007). However, there were considerably more opponents, including both archaeologists (Renfrew 1987; Häusler 2003, here more references) and linguists (Diakonov 1985; Gamkrelidze, Ivanov 1995). They were particularly active in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during a period when various positions and concepts were presented in the discussions on the processes of Indo-Europeanization, which will not be discussed here in detail.

The distance and even resistance of archaeologists to Gimbutas' theory was caused by the issues already touched upon before. These are mainly:

- abuse of the phenomenon of migration as the basic factor of cultural change
- little evidence for large and multiple migrations from the steppe zone in different directions
- insufficient source foundation for the distinction of the *Kurgan culture*
- inconsistency regarding the diagnostic features of the *Kurgan culture*
- ad hoc selection of individual features, later formed into artificial sets, and then used to put extensive interpretations on them
- lack of critical analysis of archaeological data.

These issues were closely related to the theory developed by Gimbutas, but some concerned archaeology as a science. This can be illustrated by the example of migration. In 1990, David

Anthony noticed that *Migration has been ignored by archaeologists for the last two decades* (Anthony 1990, 895) after many years of free use and abuse of migration in archaeology. However, a reversal took place in the 1990s (Kristiansen 1989; Anthony 1997; Burmeister 2000; Dergachev 2000). Migration then ceased to be the approved explanation for cultural change (cf. Rouse 1986). It took several important anthropological studies (e.g. Lewis 1982; Kelly 1983; Kearney 1986; Kelly 1992 etc.) and above all new research methods for the issue of migration to return to the mainstream of archaeology. However, it is now obvious that the complexity of migration – as well as mobility – requires holistic research and creates new profound links between archaeology, anthropology, biology, geography and other scientific disciplines (Gregoricka 2021).

Thus, for some years it seemed that the steppe theory was only one of the many theories of Indo-Europeanization. But the situation has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 7. REVITALIZATION

Some weaknesses of Gimbutas' theory (still weak source evidence, lack of critical analysis of archaeological data) have spawned many new research projects and intensive field research. They have been centering on the East European steppe and forest-steppe zone, as well as the Caucasus and the forest zone. Numerous old materials have been reanalyzed. Many new complexes have been examined with multi-faceted methods. Last but not least, new bio-archaeological studies have become an integral part of archaeology: first of all archaeogenetics and stable isotope analysis, including strontium.

It is a paradox that these new bio-archaeological methods have brought about the return to migration as one of the most important factors of genetic (and therefore biological) change,



translated directly into cultural and linguistic change. Moreover, they seem to support Gimbutas' principal thesis about the influx of people from the steppe to the center of Europe. Of course, this is not a direct return to Gimbutas' theory as such (cf. Anthony 2022). After all, no man ever steps in the same river twice.

This can be exemplified by a paragraph from one of the important papers published in recent years: *Western and eastern Europe came into contact 4,500 years ago, as the Late Neolithic Corded Ware people from Germany traced 75% of their ancestry to the Yamnaya, documenting a massive migration into the heartland of Europe from its eastern periphery. This steppe ancestry persisted in all sampled central Europeans until at least 3,000 years ago, and is ubiquitous in present-day Europeans. These results provide support for a steppe origin of at least some of the Indo-European languages of Europe* (Haak et al. 2015, 1).

However, a number of questions arise, including such as:

- Can we speak of massive migrations on the basis of the current state of research?
- Can genetic changes be directly equated with linguistic and cultural changes?
- Are not such terms as 'western hunter-gatherer ancestry', 'early farming ancestry', 'steppe ancestry' an oversimplification in relation to our knowledge of prehistory?
- Can it be argued that the much-criticized term *Kurgan culture* has been replaced by another blanket catchword: 'steppe ancestry'?
- How should we integrate archaeological and biological data, both being complex and not easy to interpret?
- Does aDNA data really explain the Indo-Europeans' origins?
- Top scholarly journals need great story titles. But perhaps the impact of these 'great stories' on archaeology is too strong?

We do not have easy answers to these questions, but it is worth noting that similar ones appear in ongoing and lively discussions (e.g. Vander Linden 2016; Heyd 2017; Klejn 2017; Klejn et al. 2017; Kristiansen et al. 2017; Furholt 2018; Furholt 2019a; Furholt 2019b; Furholt 2021). We do not intend to address the various threads of these discussions in this article, although we agree do with those who see the need to rethink archaeology paradigms in the context of the archaeogenetics experience. In the cognitive perspective, we are indeed in the process of the "third revolution" (Kristiansen 2022) and – given the experience so far – we should approach it cautiously. It is also clear that the results of ancient DNA analyses can be variously interpreted, not necessarily one-sidedly (cf. Furholt 2021).

We believe that in archaeological reflections, it is worth remembering the experience gathered during many years of use and development of radiocarbon dating, which caused the "second revolution" in archaeology (Kristiansen 2022). No doubt, this continues to be a highly inspiring, and very useful method which continues to develop and has become an integral part of archaeological research and sets the standard. However, no one claims that it solves all archaeological problems, even chronological ones.

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## MARIJA GIMBUTIENĖ IR JOS EUROPOS STEPINĖS INDOEUROPEIZACIJOS VIZIJA: RECEPCIJA, ATMETIMAS IR ATGAIVINIMAS

Aleksander Koško, Marzena Szmyt

### Santrauka

Marija Gimbutienė nebuvo nei pirmoji, nei vienintelė archeologė, palaikiusi indoeuropiečių formavimosi Eurazijos stepių zonoje koncepciją. Tačiau M. Gimbutienė savo idėjoms suteikė ypatingą formą ir joms paremti sukaupe išpūdingą šaltinių bazę, viršijančią jos pirmtakų darbą. Visuose M. Gimbutienės moksliniuose darbuose ir indėlyje į archeologijos istoriją buvo svarbiausia žemyno indoeuropeizacijos samprata. Šios koncepcijos, kurią metaforiškai galima apibūdinti kaip triadą: recepcija – atmetimas – atgaivinimas, dalys iliustruoja archeologijos transformacijas XX a. antroje pusėje. Straipsnyje primenama pati koncepcija ir jos raida, taip pat jos svarba Europos archeologijai.

Kalbant apie metodologinį M. Gimbutienės koncepcijos pagrindą, svarbiausia direktyva, kuria ji vadovavosi, buvo kelių tyrimo perspektyvų sujungimas: pirmiausia archeologijos ir istorinės kalbotyros, etnologijos ir religijos istorijos. Jai buvo labai svarbi archeologijos ir kalbotyros sintezė. Antrasis M. Gimbutienės metodologijos bruožas – ryškus nukrypimas nuo populiaraus Vakarų Europos ir Amerikos mokslinėje literatūroje siauro požiūrio į Europą, kurios rytinė siena dažnai buvo kur nors Rytų ar Vidurio Europoje.

Seniausioje indoeuropeizacijos sampratos versijoje (1956 m.) pradinis taškas buvo Šiaurės Kaukazas, kur susiformavo *kurganų kultūra* (bendras stepių kultūrų pavadinimas nuo V–III tūkstantm. pr. Kr.; tada pavartotas pirmą kartą!). Ji paplito Šiaurės Pontiko regione dėl rytinės Viduržemio regiono rasinio tipo žmonių migracijos. Nuo septintojo iki aštuntojo dešimtmečio vidurio išleistų

darbų serija autorės koncepciją sistemingai pratęsė ir patobulino, pradėdant 1977 m., kai jau suformuota koncepcija buvo sėkmingai paskelbta. Jos centre glūdėjo idėja trijų ekspansijos bangų iš stepių į Pietų, Vidurio ir Vakarų Europą:

1-oji banga, datuojama iki 4400–4300 m. pr. Kr., joje dalyvavo I kurgano kultūros žmonės iš Volgos stepės;

2-oji banga, datuojama 3500 m. pr. Kr., joje dalyvavo II kurgano kultūros žmonės, kilę iš Šiaurės Pontiko srities;

3-ioji banga, datuojama netrukus po 3000 m. pr. Kr., joje vėl dalyvavo III kurgano kultūros žmonės iš Volgos stepės.

M. Gimbutienės nuomone, kiekvieną bangą lydėjo *kurganizacijos* procesai. Dėl to susiformavo naujos sinkretinės (hibridinės) grupės, turinčios stiprių stepių bruožų.

M. Gimbutienės sukurta koncepcija nuo jos pristatymo tapo tema audringoms diskusijoms. Galima sakyti, kad diskusijos buvo neatsiejami jos palydovai. Jos buvo susijusios su atskiromis koncepcijos sudedamosiomis dalimis ir pagrindinėmis metodinėmis prielaidomis, pvz., migracija kaip esminiu kultūrinių pokyčių veiksmu. Koncepcija yra kritikuojama dėl didelių ir daugybinių migracijų iš stepių zonos skirtingomis kryptimis įrodymų trūkumo, nepakankamo pagrindimo šaltiniais *kurganų kultūrai* išskirti, nenuoseklumo dėl *kurganų kultūros* diagnostinių savybių, *ad hoc* atskirų savybių pasirinkimo, vėliau virtusių dirbtiniais rinkiniais, o tada naudojamais plačiam jų interpretavimui ir kritinės archeologinių duomenų analizės stokos.

Paradoksalu, kad dėl šių naujų bioarcheologinių metodų grįžimas prie migracijos, kaip vieno iš svarbiausių genetinių (taigi ir biologinių) pokyčių veiksnių, tiesiogiai virsta kultūriniais ir

kalbiniais pokyčiais. Be to, jie tarsi palaiko pagrindinę M. Gimbutienės tezę apie žmonių antplūdį iš stepių į Europos centrą. Žinoma, tai nėra tiesioginis sugrįžimas prie M. Gimbutienės koncepcijos.

## MARIJA GIMBUTAS AND HER VISION OF THE STEPPE INDO-EUROPEANIZATION OF EUROPE: RECEPTION, REJECTION AND REVITALIZATION

Aleksander Koško, Marzena Szmyt

### Summary

Marija Gimbutas was neither the first nor the only archaeologist who supported the theory of the formation of Indo-Europeans in the Eurasian steppe zone. However, Gimbutas gave a special form to her ideas and amassed an impressive source base to support them that exceeded what her predecessors had done. For all Gimbutas' scholarly work and her role in the history of archaeology, the theory of Indo-Europeanization of the continent was a focal point. The complete theory, which can be metaphorically described as the R-triad: reception – rejection – revitalization, illustrates the broader transformations of archaeology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article recalls the theory itself and its development, as well as its importance for European archaeology.

Apparently the most important directive Gimbutas followed in relation to the methodological foundation of her theory was the joining of several research perspectives: first of all, archaeology and historical linguistics, as well as ethnology and history of religion. She placed particular emphasis on synthesis of archaeology and linguistics. The second feature of Gimbutas' methodology was a definite departure from the narrow approach to Europe – popular in Western European and American scholarly literature – whose eastern

border was often located somewhere in east-central Europe.

In the oldest version of the theory of Indo-Europeanization (1956) the starting point was the North Caucasus, which was where *Kurgan culture* originated (the blanket name for steppe cultures from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. BC; the name was used then for the first time!) was formed. It spread across the North Pontic area owing to the migration of people of eastern Mediterranean racial type. A series of works published in the 1960s until the mid-1970s brought a systematic extension as well as refinement of her theory. Starting in 1977, the already formed theory was successively published. In its center lay an idea of three waves of expansion from the steppes to southern, central and western Europe: Wave #1 – dated to 4400–4300 BC, involved *Kurgan I people* from the Volga steppe; Wave #2 – dated at 3500 BC, involved *Kurgan II people* who had arisen in the North Pontic area; Wave #3 – dated soon after 3000 BC, involved *Kurgan III people* again from the Volga steppe. In Gimbutas' opinion, each wave was accompanied by the processes of *kurganization*. It resulted in the formation of new syncretic (hybrid) groups with strong steppe features.

From the very beginning, the theory developed by Gimbutas became a theme of lively discussions.

It can be said that debate was inseparable to the theory, in relation to its individual components as well as basic methodological assumptions, e.g. migration as the crucial factor of cultural change. Criticisms leveled against it included insufficient evidence for large and multiple migrations from the steppe zone in different directions, lack of sufficient source basis for the distinction of the *Kurgan culture*, inconsistency regarding diagnostic features of the *Kurgan culture*, ad hoc selection of individual features, later formed into artificial sets, and then

used as a basis for extensive interpretations, and lack of critical analysis of archaeological data.

Paradoxically, these new bio-archaeological methods have brought about the return to migration as one of the most important factors of genetic (and therefore biological) change, translated directly into cultural and linguistic change. Moreover, they seem to support Gimbutas' principal thesis about the influx of people from the steppe to the center of Europe. Of course, this cannot be interpreted as a direct return to Gimbutas' theory.

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