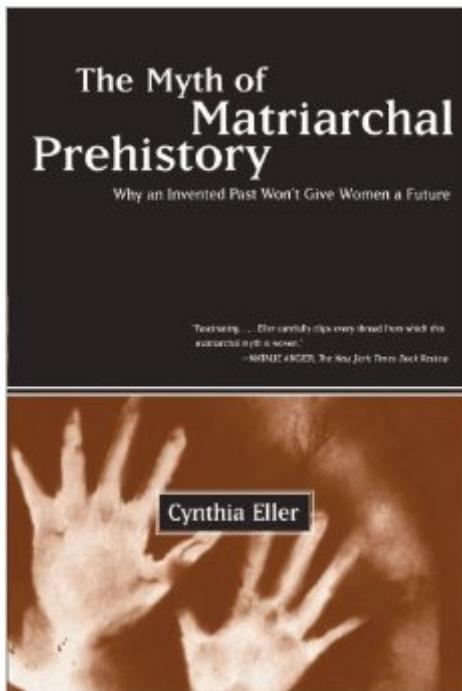


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The Myth Of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why An Invented Past Won't Give Women A Future



Synopsis

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

Book Information

Paperback: 276 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press (April 13, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807067938

ISBN-13: 978-0807067932

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (29 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #939,918 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #217 inÂ Books > History > World > Religious > New Age, Mythology & Occult #278 inÂ Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Prehistory #613 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Mythology & Folk Tales > Fairy Tales

Customer Reviews

It seems that there has been a lot of recent confusion about Dr. Eller's books, "The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory" in both its stated objective as well as its scientific accomplishment. This short review is an attempt to rectify and refute any such questions posed by reviewers who didn't seem to understand the aims of this work. Firstly, it must be understood that Dr. Eller was not out to prove that prehistory was in any way universally patriarchal. Dr. Eller is certainly aware of the many matriarchal, matrilineal and matrifocal prehistorical societies. Rather, this book is an attempt to disprove the "Universal Matriarchy" theory presented by many authors who lack that scholastic ability and scientific methodology to prove or disprove the theory. As such, Dr. Eller doesn't need to address the myriad of "matri" prefixed societies in prehistory, all she needs to do is present a few

very well-researched patriarchal societies. Secondly, Dr. Eller's work is centered around providing solid footing for feminism in the modern context. She seems to believe, and rightly to my thinking, that so long as the majority of spiritual feminist authors rely on unsound claims of a universal matriarchy that they cannot be taken seriously by either the scholastic community or the public at large. By grounding the modern feminist movement in strict scientific methodology, she is attempting to provide a secure footing for further scholarship into the realm of women's studies. Third and lastly, there also seem to be a lot of attacks, both personal and professional, against Dr. Eller and her work. These often come from the same people who then critique the acidic or condescending tone of her writing style.

The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory is a very interesting exposé of the Matriarchy Myth. You know the one. Everybody lived in perfect peace and harmony, worshipping the Goddess, until the Big Bad Patriarchal Invaders swept in and ruined everything. Cynthia Eller isn't afraid to ask the questions that seem to get swept under the rug by this theory, for example: Where is the evidence for this matriarchy? How did the Big Bad Invaders become patriarchal themselves? Is the idea of a feminine utopia sexist? And why (I'm glad I'm not the only one who has had this question) does everyone think the Venus of Willendorf looks pregnant? Eller shows that there is little evidence for an ancient matriarchy. There isn't much evidence against it, either; very little decipherable record remains. Goddess-interested researchers tend to see Goddess symbols everywhere. A straight line represents the Goddess. So does a wavy one. (I suppose my own propensity to doodle spiderwebs in the corners of my papers means I'm invoking Arachne every time I make my grocery list.) Eller shows these excesses for what they are, and shows that there is very little proof of the matriarchy theory. Even more interesting than this, though, is Eller's spotlight on the ideas behind this proposed utopia. Matriarchalists seem to believe that women, merely by virtue of being women, have certain personality traits such as compassion, cooperation, nurturance, pacifism, and a greater connection to emotions and intuition than to logic. And if women ran the world, society would reflect these traits. Eller notices, though many other writers do not, that these "feminine" traits are the same ones ascribed to women in medieval times, or in the Victorian age. Traits that have been used to bring women down.

Cynthia Eller is Associate Professor of Women's Studies and Religious Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey; she has also written *Gentlemen and s: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* and *Living In The Lap of Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in*

America. She explains in the first chapter of this 2000 book, "Why then take the time and trouble to critique this myth, especially since it means running the risk of splitting feminist ranks, which are thin enough as it is? Simply put, it is my feminist movement too, and when I see it going down a road which, however inviting, looks like the wrong way to me, I feel an obligation to speak up. Whatever positive effects this myth has on individual women, they must be balanced against the historical and archaeological evidence the myth ignores or misinterprets and the sexist assumptions it leaves undisturbed." (Pg. 7) She cautions, "Gender may in fact be nothing more than the effect of a performance (and I obviously have no wish to suggest that it is the unmediated outcome of biological sex difference), but it still has incredible social power which we ignore at our own risk. Biological, cultural, or performed, gender is very, very real." (Pg. 75) She adds, "So long as the category [gender] exists, and people are placed in it, there will be women, and they will be in need of political action directed toward their liberation." (Pg.

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