

Book Review

The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance. Elizabeth Wayland Barber. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013. 429 pp.

*Reviewed by Danielle van Dobben Schoon
School of Anthropology, University of Arizona*

This book is a historical, archaeological, and ethnographic exploration of “dancing goddesses” in the agrarian communities of eastern and central Europe. (Since there is no single ‘European Dance,’ the title might have been, more accurately, ... *The Origins of Dance in Europe.*) Wayland Barber attempts to link ancient systems of belief to the evolution of dance in this region, finding evidence in archaeological materials but also in ancient mythology, traditional folktales and harvest rituals, and contemporary fairytales and dance practices. She proposes that dance is not simply an art form; it is “the essence of life itself” (2). Her thesis is that dance in agrarian communities marked ritual time and space and mediated daily existence. The reasoning behind dance was to affect an abundance of crops. She explains, “life causes motion, and motion can give evidence of life” (3). This thesis is explicated through the study of the so-called “dancing goddesses.” They are one’s ancestors and the spirits of women who died without having any children, who bless the living with fertility. According to Wayland Barber, farmers believed that dancing inspired their benevolence and cajoled them to shed their fertility on the land.

Professor Emerita of archaeology and linguistics at Occidental College, Wayland Barber is an expert on textiles and has published several books on the topic. Her previous work also reveals an interest in the role of women’s work in European culture and history, and *The Dancing Goddesses* is another contribution to that area. This is her first book explicitly addressing dance history. However, dance has been a longtime

personal passion; she founded Occidental's Folk and Historical Dance Troupe in 1971 and has been directing, teaching, and choreographing for the troupe alongside her academic career for over forty years. Written in an accessible, if not sometimes simplistic, narrative style, this book is in part autobiographical. It is the culmination of a lifetime of academic studies, inspired by Wayland Barber's personal experiences with dance. As she writes in the Introduction, "As a folkdancer I had danced beside the Dancing Goddesses all my life without knowing it" (1). *The Dancing Goddesses* is a huge endeavor over 400 pages long. Proceeding in four parts, it traces the origins of dance in Europe through the classical Greeks, the Roman Empire, and medieval times, all the way to the first agrarian societies. It is illustrated with some of the author's own photographs and line drawings, as well as maps and diagrams. It will be of interest to dance historians, folklorists, and archaeologists, as well as to the public. In the end, it is an attempt to provide a comprehensive explanation of the origins of the European worldview and the need for human movement, an interesting but perhaps overly ambitious undertaking. For that reason, this review summarizes each of the four parts of the book, guiding the reader chapter by chapter and explaining what kinds of evidence the author has amassed and her conclusions.

Part One - Dancing the Year: The Ritual Cycle of Fertility

Part one, "Dancing the Year: The Ritual Cycle of Fertility," consists of nine chapters that describe Greek, Balkan, and Russian agrarian rituals and dance customs with an eye to the role of female spirits. It also draws connections between these rituals and some current European customs at Christmas, Carnival, Easter, and other holidays. Ch. 1: Swan Maidens, Mermaids, and Tree Spirits provides evidence of a belief in female spirits who bring fertility and exist in perpetual motion, dancing in the forests and fields. Wayland Barber finds such evidence

in materials such as woodcarvings, paintings, bowls, staged performances, music, textiles, amulets, instruments, folktales, and songs. We learn about the “willies,” girls who died before having children and so had no descendants; hence, they were dangerous because they did not care about the good fortunes of those left behind or, worse, they held some kind of grudge. At the same time, these girls had never “used up” their fertility, and so could possibly be persuaded to bestow it on the community. They can change shape from young girls to fish, frogs, and birds. They wear their hair loose and long (not braided like a proper village girl or woman) which, when combed, brings the rain.

Ch. 2: Marking Time is a history of calendars. Wayland Barber finds evidence of seasonal festivals in rural calendrical devices and embroidered calendars. Many of the customs and rituals associated with farming have been lost, however; first the Christian church obfuscated the agrarian rites with the Gregorian calendar, and later television and other forms of modern entertainment replaced them. In Ch. 3: To Bring the Spring, Wayland Barber explores analogy as the basis for magical thinking. For example, the village maidens would behave like the dancing goddesses by dressing and dancing in a certain way in the spring. “As the girls dance, so may the goddesses; and as the goddesses create life by dancing, so may the girls” (39). Ch. 4: Dancing Up a Storm explains the role of virgin girls in asking the spirits for rain in the Balkan Peninsula. A girl would be stripped and then dressed entirely in leaves and paraded through the village dancing and singing. Ch. 5: Crazy Week is an explanation of Rusalia Week, when everything is topsy-turvy: spirits walk the earth in broad daylight, women rule, work is taboo, and the willies are particularly dangerous. The author offers a detailed explanation of the costumes, music, props, and beliefs involved in the week’s dance customs, and the motifs of water and hair appear several times with reference to young women and fertility.

Ch. 6: Flowers with Powers explains the plants and herbs that are associated with the dancing goddesses. The author shows how, across many cultures and belief systems, the bad smell of garlic or the bitter taste of wormwood is thought to repel evil, while the sweet smell of roses is attractive to benevolent spirits. Ch. 7: Midsummer Rusalii is a description of the celebration of Midsummer's Eve and Ch. 8: Friday, St. Friday is a discussion of cloth and clothing, linking to the author's expertise in textiles. The willies were connected to spinning and laundering, so these activities were apparently taboo on Fridays. The chapter continues with the history of St. Paraskevi, one of the most popular saints of the Greeks, Slavs, and Romanians, whose name is translated as St. Friday. She is a saint whose origins are unclear, but who becomes associated with women and women's work, particularly textiles and washing. She has long, loose hair like the willies and her shrines appear at springs. The last chapter of Part One, The Twelve Days of Christmas, explains the 12-day span from Christmas to Epiphany. These days see many New Year agricultural dramas across eastern and central Europe that focus on the bride and the importance of fertility.

Part Two – Bride-Dancing for Fertility

Part two, "Bride-Dancing for Fertility," is a description and analysis of the Russian fairy tale, "The Frog Princess," explored one segment at a time. The tale is about finding a potential bride for a potential groom and then testing them to prove they are worthy of marriage. Once they pass the tests, they can achieve marital bliss and live happily ever after. It is meant to be a story that represents every bride and groom. Agrarian societies emphasize the cosmic attributes of the union of male and female and, according to Wayland Barber, the Cosmic Bride is another form of dancing goddess.

Segments one through three of "The Frog Princess"

describe how the new bride is tested to make sure she has the skills for doing the necessary work of being a farmer's wife, especially making the cloth and clothing and preparing food. Ch. 12: Trial by Dancing discusses the final test of the bride: whether she can dance. Dancing apparently tested her physical strength and agility; such dances appear in contemporary folkdances like the *Khorovod*, chorus dances that are commonly performed at weddings.

In Ch. 13: The Magic Sleeve Dance, the frog princess performs magic, conjuring up apparitions of swans swimming on enchanted lakes. "If not a Dancing Goddess, surely something close to it" (183). The author finds vestiges of the magic sleeve dance in a medieval manuscript and on pagan bracelets from the 11th-13th centuries found in Kiev and offers an analysis of their magico-religious imagery. Both show evidence of traditional women's dress with extended sleeves, which prevented the bride from being able to touch anything with her bare hands. According to Wayland Barber, the long white sleeves also represented bird's wings, particularly the swan, which is a common shape for the willies to take. In Ch. 14: Second Skin, the bride's frog skin is captured and burned. The author informs us that many Eurasian folktales tell about catching and keeping a spirit maiden by stealing her second skin. A common theme in these stories is that the bride becomes a bird and flies away. The next chapter discusses the testing of the groom and also references spinning, an act that is considered magical in much of Europe, "another apparently 'unclean' female act of creation" (222), and a metaphor for childbirth. Finally, chapter 16 discusses the appearance of the wizard, Koshchey, in the Russian version of "The Frog Princess." Koshchey is called "deathless" because, according to Wayland Barber, he represents a shaman who can visit the world of the dead and return alive. But later, the influence of Christianity has him die for good, as a lesson against evil and magic. The hero kills Koshchey and rescues his bride, and we have a happy ending to our tale.

Part Three - Dancing Back through Time

Part three, "Dancing Back through Time," follows the historical connections of the lore of the dead using material culture and linguistic remains. The author suggests that this part of the book will peel away the layers of history like an onion: the first layer is Christianity, the second is the period of Classical Greece and Rome, the third is the Bronze Age, and finally is the earliest agrarian communities. She starts with the most recent evidence in Ch. 17: Medieval Traces, and then works back through Roman theater in chapter 18 and the role of dance among the classical Greeks in chapter 19. Festivals of the dead, the use of garlic for protection, and various goddesses associated with water, fish, and birds are by now familiar. Even the extended sleeves can be traced back to the Greeks. "We see, then, that many traits of the recent agrarian rituals go back two and three millennia" (290). The author follows them even further back, in Ch. 20: Back to the Bronze Age. She references Homer's Iliad, in which oral traditions from the Bronze Age were preserved, such as Ariadne, a "willylike damsel" (299), and her love of dance. The author also finds evidence of connections to Balkan agrarian customs in painted depictions of dancing from Bronze Age levels. The author insists that these dancing women were "the selfsame bird-inhabiting spirit maidens who bring moisture and fertility and whose history we have already traced from modern times back to the threshold of the Bronze Age" (300). In Ch. 21: Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture, the author argues that the evidence amassed shows that the agrarian culture focused on the female aspects, reified by dancing spirit maidens. Near Eastern agriculture spread to southeastern Europe around 6500 BC, and with it, Wayland Barber suggests, the dancing traditions.

The author ends Part Three with a somewhat strange but humorous appeal to the reader to imagine along with her that we are the District Attorney's office gathering evidence

for her case—"here, not for wrongful death but for the rightful birth of the dancing spirit maidens. Who dunnit? Who begat them?" (332). She goes on to list her "witnesses" and "testimony" for their presence in the Middle Bronze Age, but asks how much earlier we might trace them back. Her answer is that "the Palaeoliths are innocent" because they were not agricultural: "no crops, no motive." The earliest farmers, however, "can't dodge suspicion so lightly." The "sparsity of evidence" might qualify this as a "cold case," she writes, but as detectives we must keep pursuing our "leads." First, she cites motive, being the fickleness of the weather and the need to appeal to the willies for divine intervention. Second, she cites circumstantial evidence, being the cereals and flax in association with the willies, the same crops that were first domesticated in the Near East. "The prosecution maintains we have located no identifiable representations of Dancing Goddesses in our Neolithic material," she writes. However, "the defense maintains we found trace after trace among the first European farmers of the specific and persistent thought patterns that these spirit maidens embody" (333). The traces of these thought patterns are in agrarian symbols and the use of dance as a means of communal bonding among agricultural communities. "If the exact notion of a willy did not yet exist in 6000 or even 4000 BC, we have at least charted the cultural river from which she soon emerged to water the struggling farmer's crops by combing her long, wet hair at his behest" (333). This attempt to convince the reader of her thesis suggests that the author herself recognizes that other scholars might question some of her conclusions.

Part Four - Gotta Dance!

Part four: "Gotta Dance!" continues to try to persuade the reader of the book's extended thesis. Chapter 22 suggests that dance must have begun sometime in the Paleolithic because only humans have brains that can "keep time," as in synchronize

movement to sound. This is useful in that it promotes coordination with each other, for example with rhythmic work songs, so dance would have been used in early agricultural communities as a cohesive force: "Dance bonds us" (351). In Ch. 23: *Dancing the Time Warp*, the author asks, "What aspects of the modern 'folk dances' of eastern and southeastern Europe can we trace back as antique inheritances?" (352). She suggests that traditional costume and dance is much like language and can be traced back through history. "The bottom line," she proposes, "is that the reconstruction methods developed by linguists are usable to determine some aspects of dance and costume history" (353), particularly with regard to rhythm and choreography. Certain choreographic templates also seem to be ancient. For example, the handholds depicted on an ancient Minoan model of four male dancers are characteristic of certain Balkan folk dances today. "All these reconstructable patterns add to the evidence that people have been 'keeping together in time' since the Paleolithic, that beliefs about the Dancing Goddesses in particular must have begun in the Neolithic with the first farmers of Europe, and that not only fragments of these beliefs but scraps even of the dances themselves have survived to the present" (362).

In the Epilogue, we read about the myth of the maiden abducted by Hades. Her mother, Demeter, searches for her daughter and neglects to make the plants grow. When Demeter is made to laugh by a woman doing a comical dance, she comes out of her grief and life returns to the earth. Who was this dancer? Not a willy, the author insists, but still a woman with the same effect of jump-starting the cycle of reproduction. This is "the nature of the Dancing Goddesses" (364).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author suggests that the agrarian cultures of Europe used narrative as a mode of thinking and interpreting

the world. For example, weddings unfolded according to a larger story of the divine wedding. "To see the coherence and logic of their approach, we have to look at the whole system." This justifies her own approach: "The Dancing Goddesses constitute a narrative view, coherent within itself, of the everyday events and needs of the agricultural life of their communities. It is not the only possible view; it is the one that happened to develop in early agrarian Europe, and it fertilized a rich tradition of dance" (368).

That humans have likely danced since the Stone Age; that agricultural communities are concerned with fertility, which is generally associated with the female; that agricultural rituals in central and eastern Europe center on asking the supernatural world for rain and the growth of their crops—all of this is both interesting and well-demonstrated in this book. But while the first two parts include rich ethnographic data and original analyses, parts three and four seem to lose track of the author's thesis regarding the dancing goddesses. Furthermore, Wayland Barber's leaps between time and place give one pause and suggest that certain details are perhaps elided. For example, in chapter three, explanations of celebrations that revolve around fertility on St. George's Day in present-day Hungary, the Balkans, and Greece are accompanied by an illustration of Venus of Lespugue, a Paleolithic carving of a woman, without explanation of their connection. Similarly, the author moves from references to the harvest scene in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to the Hollywood movie, *Michael*, for evidence of continuity between past and present. This kind of storytelling is alluring, painting broad strokes to connect language, art, ritual, music, and dance; however, while I do not dispute that these things may be connected, I question the capacity of Wayland Barber's interpretations of the archaeological record to explain, well, everything. It is not a stretch to imagine that agrarian communities might value water and fertility independent of contact with each other, or even that people might dance in groups

using certain handholds and rhythms without having any contact with others who do the same. Because the author does not explicitly describe her analysis of the evidence or draw direct lines from the materials to her conclusions, one can only trust in her expertise.