



# The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance

*Elizabeth Wayland Barber*

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From southern Greece to northern Russia, people have long believed in female spirits, bringers of fertility, who spend their nights and days dancing in the fields and forests. So appealing were these spirit-maidens that they also took up residence in nineteenth-century Romantic literature.

Archaeologist and linguist by profession, folk dancer by avocation, Elizabeth Wayland Barber has sleuthed through ethnographic lore and archaeological reports of east and southeast Europe, translating enchanting folktales about these “dancing goddesses” as well as eyewitness accounts of traditional rituals — texts that offer new perspectives on dance in agrarian society. She then traces these goddesses and their dances back through the Romans and Greeks to the first farmers of Europe. Along the way, she locates the origins of many customs, including coloring Easter eggs and throwing rice at the bride. The result is a detective story like no other and a joyful reminder of the human need to dance.

## The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance Details

Date : Published February 11th 2013 by W. W. Norton Company

ISBN : 9780393065367

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Format : Hardcover 448 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Anthropology, Archaeology, Folklore, Fantasy, Mythology

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## From Reader Review The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance for online ebook

### Horus says

Another good and comprehensive analysis of a particular part of history (in this case folk dancing). While the subject focusses mostly on thr Russian and slavic traditions, she also discusses the Celts and other european cultures and traces the history back through Romany, Indian, Roman and Greek influences, all the way back to paleolithic times. Besides dancing, there is discussion and theories based on linguistics, archeological finds, clothing, fairy tales and numerous other interesting tidbits. I would recommend this book to any student of dance, slavic cultures or with an interest in her other publications.

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### Elise says

A brilliant & fascinating dig into ritual, dance, deities, & folklore. Like everything else EWB has written, the prose is both scholarly & conversational, packed with witty insights & thoughtful observation.

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### Josh says

I finished this book back in the summer, but wanted to write a sorta detailed review for a while, just never got around to it.

Barber's scholarship is immense. At some moments of reading I was reminded of reading Frazer's Golden Bough: some general principle or observation is noted, then illustrated with numerous examples and instantiations. Sounds exciting enough right? But, Barber's book has some issue with structure and direction, in my assessment at least.

The general premise of the book is that throughout European cultures you see a folktale tradition of 'Rusalki' (or 'willies', 'samovila', 'mavka', etc.): spirits of virgin girls who died before marriage/childbirth. They inhabit the wilds, generally by rivers, and spend their time dancing, playing tricks on passerby's etc. Since they never bore children, they have lots of stored up, unused fertility. If you could tap into that fertility, through appeasement, tricks, etc., you could have that fertility spread to your crops and livestock. This is where the book description starts in the dust jacket, it's where we start in the first chapter, but the focus of the book soon expands greatly. Very soon and we're reading about dancing male troupes, ancient methods of marking time, and more. Barber always returns to the core theme of women dancing in order to bestow fertility in an agricultural world, but the tangents, asides, and side-paths are numerous and it makes the book feel less coherent. Of course, it's all informative and interesting, but it's often hard to make it back to the theme.

And of course, what I described so far holds for about the first third of the book. The middle is an extended analysis of the tale of the Frog Princess, and the final third is a sort of tracing of a tale of a magical animal-woman bride back through the ages to the dawn of agricultural. And again, here we take various forays into various subjects, and dancing maidens seem to feel like one facet amongst many in what seems to be a general exploration of European cultures and how their development was shaped by the need for fertility in agriculture, husbandry, and humans. Beyond the loose focus, the writing style seemed incoherent, shifting

between an almost academic analysis of the subject to a tone that clearly felt like Barber trying to reach a general audience. On top of that there were some footnotes that felt entirely extraneous and there was one instance where I double checked a primary source just out of curiosity on the matter and found somewhat trivial discrepancy between the source and what Barber wrote. I really wanted to like this book more, but these issues are bringing me to just give it 3 stars.

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## **CarolynKost says**

Barber, Professor Emerita of Archeology and Linguistics at Occidental College, sets out to document the origins of dance in the region ranging from Crete through the Balkans to the Baltic. In the effort, however, she spans not only her native disciplines but also women's herstory, the social sciences, ethnology, and folkloristics to systematically explore the gestalt of agrarian culture, from folktales and ballads, herbalism and textile arts, to courtship and marriage rituals, as well as dance, and proves that "'perishable' customs and beliefs can survive for millennia."

Part I examines the functional origins of dance in the region of interest. Most important among these is the appeasement of the spirits, especially ancestors and the volatile spirits of maidens who had died before giving birth, as their fertility remained latent and transferable to the earth if placated, but their power could be destructive if not. Dance served as part of the rituals that marked time, often as sympathetic magic, inducing the earth to perform in various ways mimicking or responding to the actions of the dancers. It also established and affirmed the bonds of community that are so important to survival particularly in agrarian societies.

Part II uses the folktale *The Frog Princess* to reveal the role of dance and women's arts to prove the bride's fitness for marriage and likely fertility. In agrarian cultures, fecundity was paramount to provide extra hands for labor and marriage often took place only after the bride proved fertile by pregnancy. (Christianity was largely an urban phenomenon and its valuation of virginal brides was limited in its influence).

In Part III, extensive archaeological evidence traces the rituals and beliefs discussed in the previous sections back to the Age of Rome, Greece, and the Bronze Age. Part IV, the shortest chapter, draws upon social and cognitive sciences to answer the question of "Why dance?" Why? Because we are hardwired for rhythm, because we feel solidarity moving together, because "our brains go into ecstatic hyperdrive when several cognitive systems [muscular, emotional, etc.] get fully synchronized, all firing in unison."

This is an eminently readable, though primarily scholarly treatment. It is extensively researched, and the detail and various versions of the practices and folktales can be either tedious or engrossing, depending on one's disposition. This is an essential addition to Dance Studies and Women's Studies collections and belongs beside the work of Marija Gimbutas and Mary B. Kelly's *Goddess Embroideries* series.

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## **MJ says**

Author taught linguistics, archaeology, and cognitive science and has gathered together what is known and conjectured about the origin of European dance. A lot of it went over my head but I loved her piecing together what is know about women and dance in her areas of expertise...and she has a sense of humor.

Off to look for *Women's Work: the first 20,000 years*.

## **Kathy says**

fascinating compilation of traditions and legends, especially from Russia and all of eastern Europe. a lot to wade through, even more to digest....found myself wondering if the "string skirts" are somehow related to the corn dollies, etc...

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## **Tiffany Johnson says**

Having studied Middle Eastern culture and history extensively, I didn't think that Ms. Barber's tome would have many surprises for me. I was wrong! From the earliest civilizations, we learn that dance was used to promote unity among farming communities, that dancing spirit maidens living in deep woods were said to promote prosperity and abundant crops in nearby villages, and that indeed dance was a means of communication long before language evolved.

Rather than separating cultures and ideas, Ms. Barber seeks to find connecting threads between communities and civilizations, even those living in different times and across continents. She is successful, using evidence from potsherds, paintings, writings and peoples whose oral traditions have preserved a long and enduring practice of dancing rituals.

As a dancer, this book had particular interest to me. Throughout my studies in dance, I never understood that the particular pattern on a costume held deep cultural significance, or that a movement in a dance I performed had been passed down for generations to have a physical effect in the outer world. Therefore, this material utterly fascinated me. My understanding of why I and other peoples have and have always had an insatiable need to dance has been greatly furthered due to Ms. Barber's research and work. I am indebted to her and her willingness to cross cultural borders, to journey to the beginning of civilization where dance first began.

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## **Alesa says**

This book is an archeologist's ode to her passion for Eastern European folk dance. Parts are erudite, and full of fascinating facts about the region's culture and history. She explains, for instance, why the colors of white, red and black are so popular. Why embroidery goes around the neck and sleeves (to protect the wearer from evil spirits), why some dances go clockwise and others the reverse, why dances from some regions have "regular" beats, such as 3/4 or 4/4, and other regions have odder ones like 7/8, 9/8, etc. Why Western Europe does partner dances, and Eastern Europe does line dances.

My favorite parts of the book, however, and the ones that will stick most in my mind, are about Balkan dances themselves. As an avid folk dancer in my teens, I had an intuitive understanding of the sacredness of these dances. Barber explains where this comes from, namely the ritual nature of the dances themselves, which were used to ensure fertility and connect with earth and water goddesses.

She had two quotes in the book from William McNeill, author of *Keeping Together in Time*, about the psychological effects of soldiers marching together. I absolutely loved these, because it was the first time I had ever seen anybody describe the magic of moving in unison with a group of people -- in the case of dancing, to timeless tunes and rhythms:

"Marching aimlessly about on the drill field, swaggering in conformity with prescribed military postures, conscious only of keeping in step so as to make the next move correctly and in time somehow felt good... A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual... It was something felt, not talked about ... Moving briskly and keeping in time was enough to make us feel good about ourselves, satisfied to be moving together, and vaguely pleased with the world at large."

"the emotion it arouses constitutes an indefinitely expansible basis for social cohesion among any and every group that keeps together in time, moving big muscles together and chanting, singing, or shouting rhythmically. 'Muscular bonding' is the most economical label I could find for this phenomenon, and I hope the phrase will be understood to mean the euphoric fellow feeling that prolonged and rhythmic muscular movement arouses in nearly all participants in such exercises."

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that exactly what a person feels in something like folk dance?

I will keep this book as a reference for a long time.

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### **Michele says**

If you read this book, you will be enlightened about history, anthropology, folkways, language, the lives of women, and dance. Barber takes us from current-day Balkan people back through medieval times to the Romans and Greeks back to Bronze and Neolithic times. This is a readable, though scholarly treatment. It is extensively researched, and the detail and various versions of the practices and folktales can be either tedious or engrossing, depending on one's interest level.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

As anyone who has ever sung a work song while digging knows, communal song and dance are a community bonding activity that channels energy. Barber looks at Eastern European folk dance and triangulates it with folklore and archaeological materials, especially textile and pottery designs, to make the case that it is a very stable transmitter of useful information about the calendar, work techniques, the natural environment and cultural values--which often boil down to "don't marry anyone stupid or too delicate to shovel goat shit or we'll all die".

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### **Kelly says**

This is one of those "unified theory of everything" books that kind of rearranged my brain. It's most of the mythic themes I've been obsessed with for decades, all tied together into a coherent whole.

Two more things that come to mind: I wonder if Baba Yaga's rotating hut is at all connected to the Celtic revolving castles, which I've seen theorized as barrow mounds that only let the light in one day a year, like on the solstice (like Brugh na Boinne). Also, of the two most famous Cretan snake goddesses, one of them's in the Mother position and one in the Maiden position (and I've seen it suggested that she might have originally been holding a thread, not a snake). I feel like poking some more in those directions.

Anyway, though, the book was totally engrossing, and made me want to take dance classes.

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### **Danielle says**

Amazing anthropological work on the origins of folk dance and folklore in Eastern Europe.

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### **Salena says**

I loved reading this book! I learned so many incredibly interesting things, and I would say my biggest takeaways were how much folklore has been lost in the last few hundred years, but also how deep the roots of folklore go. So many parts of our lives are influenced by this history in ways it isn't always easy to see without the framework of that folklore to guide you. For example, I never knew that there was an actual folkloric history to Yankee Doodle and his macaroni. I am surprised by seeing how much more full this awareness can make my life, and how I can begin to see this history in parts of our lives she didn't even mention, like the long short walk of our modern brides down the aisle or even the folklore and symbolism in Christmas carols. I also really enjoyed her argument that we allow the folklore to live on, but not for adults. We give it to the children--hobby horses and dances in circles and Santa Claus as examples.

I definitely recommend the book.

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### **Kirsten says**

Loads of information, some gets repetitive.

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### **Natasha says**

Interesting ideas but I felt that it was a bit repetitive.

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