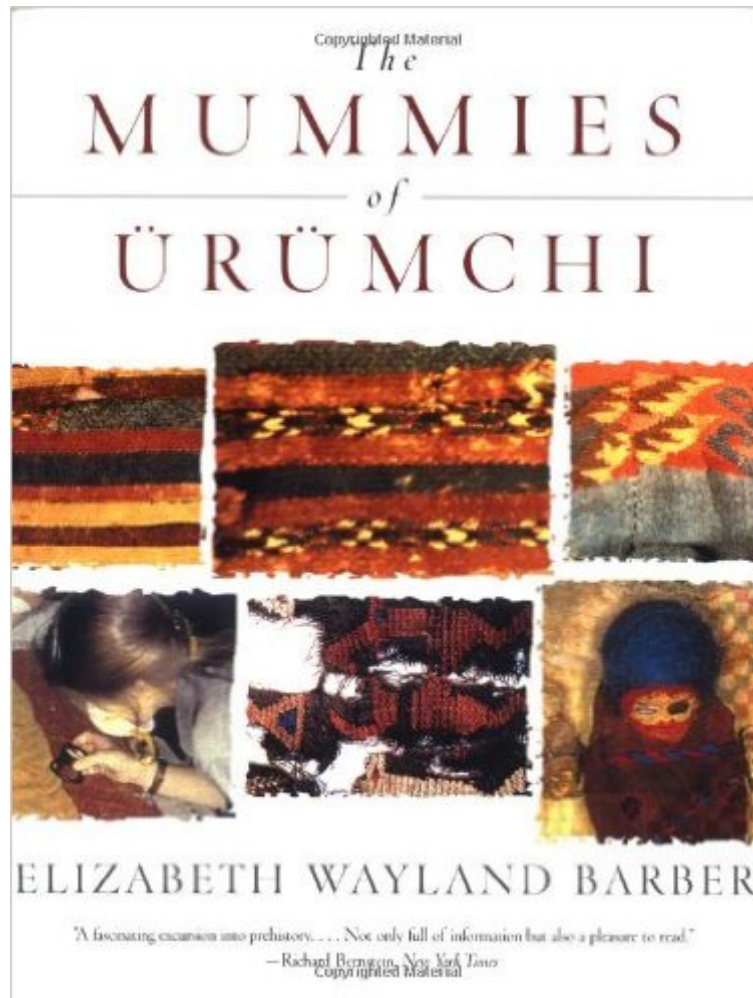


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The Mummies Of Urumchi



Synopsis

In the museums of Kucha, the windswept regional capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region (also known as Chinese Turkestan), a collection of ancient mummies lies at the center of an enormous mystery. Some of Kucha's mummies date back as far as 4,000 years—contemporary with the famous Egyptian mummies but even more beautifully preserved. Surprisingly, these prehistoric people are not Asian but Caucasoid—tall, large-nosed and blond with thick beards and round eyes. What were these blond Caucasians doing in the heart of Asia? What language did they speak? Might they be related to a "lost tribe" known from later inscriptions? Few clues are offered by their pottery or tools, but their clothes—woolens that rarely survive more than a few centuries—have been preserved as brightly hued as the day they were woven. Elizabeth Wayland Barber describes these remarkable mummies and their clothing, and deduces their path to this remote, forbidding place. The result is a book like no other—a fascinating unveiling of an ancient, exotic, nearly forgotten world. A finalist for the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize. Illustrated

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Customer Reviews

Ms. Barber has given me exactly what I hoped for with this incredible book: a plausible suggestion for the origins of these fascinating people. My first contact with the mummies of the Tarim Basin was through an article published by Discover magazine, which I have kept. After reading that piece, my imagination took off, and I found myself hauling out atlases and everything I own on the pre-history of humans. It was not until reading this excellent book that I found support for some of my inexperienced suspicions of the mummies' origins. I have learned so much from this book, from the

dispersion of Indo-European languages to the role of textiles in our human development. I love Ms. Barber's writing style; she doesn't go over the head of the layperson. She uses humor and a friendly tone, as if you were at her elbow, studying the clothing of the Charchen man. Her manner of explaining new pieces of information was very clear. It was easy to understand a previously unknown textile term, for instance, through her simple illustrations and analogies. I highly recommend this book. I eagerly await more news from the continuing excavations, and more publications from Elizabeth!

A rather good look at a very interesting mystery of pre-historic European migrations. Central to this has been the discovery of mummies some three to four-thousand years old who possess what is termed a "Caucasian" appearance, both biologically and culturally. Elizabeth Barber is an expert on ancient textiles and the first part of this book, involved in a description of mummies' textiles (from observations made on a visit there) is in her element and makes what could have been a dreadfully tedious description quite lively. It ends up being the best discussion in the book. In fact I give this book an additional star over other scholarly books of this sort - rather bland usually - for causing me to read with deep interest page after page about what is really an analysis of textile stitching. After describing the better-preserved mummies and analyzing their goods and textile weaves and patterns, she then approaches the whole question of their origins and especially in whether one can link this culture to the theoretical proto Indo-European language-speakers. At this point there is an interesting but rather plainly-written collection of a good deal of information provided by explorers into the region, and comparisons to other cultures such as the Celts, and some linguistic analysis. Although it kept my interest, the jumping between time, place and peoples could sometimes be confusing. And I kept having to search through the maps to remember where we were in relation to where, as these parts of Asia are not very familiar to us. It lacks at the end a good tie-up of loose ends or a summary, that seems required after such a lengthy heaping of theories.

This was an impressive text. I am not personally knowledgeable about textiles, although my mother an artist who is a consummate spinner and weaver is, and so I have come to have an appreciation for the weaver's art through my association with her. I was especially impressed by the authors' thorough knowledge of the craft and of the archaeological implications of the textiles preserved with the famous Urumchi mummies of the Tarim Basin of the Taklimakan Desert. These naturally preserved bodies, like the freeze dried mummies of the Andean mountains and the Early Bronze age body found frozen in an Alpine glacier, provide archaeologists with direct information about the

health, genetic relationships, and cultural affinities of the people in these regions. In particular the Urumchi mummies are unique in that the population appears to have been caucasian rather than oriental, suggesting early settlement of the area from the West. Prior to the discovery of these bodies, it had always been assumed that the cultures of the East and the West had developed in relative isolation with respect to one another. Now it is clearer that the human populations of both areas were in far greater contact and that there was significant potential for both genetic and cultural exchange, with ultimate implications for the later civilizations that developed in each. With their intensive evaluation of the fiber crafted cultural remains entered with the bodies, the Barbers' add fine points of detail to what is known about the people of the area and of their likely origins. The book clearly illustrates the value of textiles in the approach to archaeological problems.

When most people think of mummies, they think of ancient Egypt, or maybe South America. In truth, mummification can occur whenever the conditions are right, and the arid Tarim River basin in Western China has revealed a large number of mummified bodies, thousands of years old. What sets these mummies out from others is their probable ethnicity. The author displays with great lucidity the thesis that these people were not Asian at all, but rather were closely related to the Celts. She does this by covering a wide range of available evidence, such as funeral practices, cloth, and language, as well as looking at the geography of the region and extrapolating as to how it may have affected the patterns of settlement three thousand years ago or more. At the end, I was convinced by her arguments, and in the process gained a better appreciation of the Celts, whom I had assumed I understood reasonably well. This is only possible because of the author's breadth of knowledge and research, well presented in a sparsely worded style. This book is a great combination of popular science and academic scholarship. I like it the more as the author has the intellectual honesty to admit the points on which her thesis may be lacking in evidence. This does much to inspire confidence in the work as a whole. Having just finished reading *Tournament of Shadows*, I prefer this book for its coverage of the Tarim River basin by far.

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