



Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years - Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times

By Elizabeth Wayland Barber

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"A fascinating history of...[a craft] that preceded and made possible civilization itself." ?*New York Times Book Review*

New discoveries about the textile arts reveal women's unexpectedly influential role in ancient societies.

Twenty thousand years ago, women were making and wearing the first clothing created from spun fibers. In fact, right up to the Industrial Revolution the fiber arts were an enormous economic force, belonging primarily to women.

Despite the great toil required in making cloth and clothing, most books on ancient history and economics have no information on them. Much of this gap results from the extreme perishability of what women produced, but it seems clear that until now descriptions of prehistoric and early historic cultures have omitted virtually half the picture.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber has drawn from data gathered by the most sophisticated new archaeological methods?methods she herself helped to fashion. In a "brilliantly original book" (Katha Pollitt, *Washington Post Book World*), she argues that women were a powerful economic force in the ancient world, with their own industry: fabric.

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- Rank: #83009 in Books
- Brand: Elizabeth Wayland Barber
- Published on: 1996
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .90" w x 5.50" l, .65 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While men dominated early agriculture, women for millennia took primary responsibility for sewing, weaving textiles and making clothing. In this beautifully illustrated study, Barber (*Prehistoric Textiles*) retrieves an important chapter in the history of civilization by drawing on archeological evidence, ancient texts, myths and linguistics to reconstruct women's paramount role in the fiber arts until the start of the late Bronze Age, about 1500 B.C., when, Barber observes, the advent of commercial textiles brought men to the looms. In prehistoric Europe, women invented elaborate textiles with complex designs; women of ancient Anatolia ran cloth-making establishments. Barber begins her saga with the description of a Paleolithic "Venus figure" that dates from about 20,000 B.C. and is carved wearing a skirt woven of loose strings. Ranging from Egypt to Greece to Sumatra, covering the period from 20,000-500 B.C., Barber illuminates women's changing social status as makers of cloth and clothing.

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From Library Journal

In this age of ready-to-wear clothing and shopping malls, we sometimes forget that for the first 20,000 years of human existence, all textiles—from everyday clothing to ship's sails—were made by women (and sometimes men) who used a hand spindle to spin threads and a loom to weave the threads into cloth. As an archaeologist and a knowledgeable weaver capable of reproducing the cloth remnants she is studying, Barber is ideally qualified to investigate early textile production and its relation to women's changing roles in ancient societies. Here she reconstructs the history of textiles (primarily in Europe and the Near East), based on the hard evidence of archaeology, geology, art, and ancient texts. Her approach is scholarly yet presupposes no practical knowledge of textile production on the part of the reader. Highly recommended for academic and larger public libraries.

Janice Zlendich, California State Univ. Lib., Fullerton

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From Kirkus Reviews

Employing diverse, thorough methodologies and research sources, the author of *Prehistoric Textiles* (not reviewed) traces the roles of women and cloth through 20,000 years of history. Prehistoric women primarily worked with food and clothing, neither likely to survive the elements, and male historians traditionally felt little need or desire to write about cloth and textiles; thus, much of women's work history has been lost, and we are left with few details for reconstruction. However, Barber's innovative research found that "data for ancient textiles lay everywhere, waiting to be picked up." By reproducing remnants of ancient cloth and garments, she also reproduced women's actual labor, which often required hours upon hours of tedious, painstaking work. Her justification for the assumption of female responsibility for cloth rests on their childbearing and -rearing duties. Women needed to stay close to home, and they required work compatible with youngsters running around—labor that could be interrupted when necessary. According to Barber, women held important positions in society as the primary producers of clothing for millennia, even into the age of emerging capitalist economies. She also deduces, from the patterns and designs of ancient material, that clothing for both sexes served as a visual means to communicate such information as fertility and marital status. (For example, many skirt remnants hold designs assumed to follow the shape of and emphasize the pubic bone.) Although this seems a logical conclusion, there's not really any empirical evidence for it. An important contribution, in terms of both historical material and interpretation, to the study of women's work.

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Users Review

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John Alfaro:

Precisely why? Because this Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years - Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap the idea but latter it will jolt you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book adjacent to it was fantastic author who write the book in such amazing way makes the content interior easier to understand, entertaining approach but still convey the meaning totally. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This book will give you a lot of rewards than the other book have such as help improving your proficiency and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to hold up having that book? If I were you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

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Shawna Vaughn:

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