Writing both for scholars and a popular audience interested in movement, Elizabeth Barber documents the emergence and use of historical Eastern-European dance in *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance*. Her book, however, is difficult to compartmentalize because of the broad chronological range and the variety of topics it offers. In four sections (Dancing the Year; Bride-Dancing for Fertility; Dancing Back through Time; Gotta Dance!) comprised of several chapters each, Barber explores dance throughout the calendar year and within courtship rituals before offering their origins and original purposes. In the first two sections Barber uses “willies,” or young female spirits possessing unused fertility, to convey her story. But while willies offer the motivation to dance, they are not the dancers examined. Rather, Barber argues that small villages in Eastern Europe danced to “influence the flow of life,” augmenting their fertility (both that of their crops and population) through movement categorized as not “useful,” such as swinging, leaping, dancing, or tumbling (Barber, 2). She realizes the relationship non-useful movement has with other aspects of daily life and with rituals, and carefully places these dances within their larger context.

The first two sections offer exceptionally detailed accounts and assorted opportunities to examine the role of dance in small Eastern-European societies. In the first section, Barber not only documents every danced event throughout the calendar year, but also endeavors to explain auxiliary topics, like the origin of the calendar. Non-dance related topics are also covered in the second section, comparing the Russian tale “The Frog Princess” to rituals imposed on couples. The only danced event in this section is analyzed in Chapter 12, where Barber argues that the physically demanding line-dances performed during courtship, in which a potential husband yanks on his lover’s arm, tests the girl for the raw demands of marriage.

Serious problems arise in both the first and second sections due to her source material. Barber includes many primary sources written by ethnographers and clerical observers, but struggles with these specifically, neither using them critically nor explaining their relative chronology. Even when using sources judiciously, she fails to acknowledge that dance, like all cultural events, evolves over time. Dance is an ephemeral artifact—meaning historical dance is notoriously hard to trace or document—but when primary sources are available, they must be used carefully, not out of chronological order or interchangeably.

Despite the flaws within her first two sections, the last two sections atone for the earlier weakness. Barber traces these danced rituals to their origin, taking the reader backward chronologically. She analyzes musical patterns, costumes, and postures from the Middle Ages into the Neolithic period, where she postulates most of these traditions originated. All the danced traditions are seen in material cultural remains, including circle dances on clay sculpture, a woman with angular and upright arms on a plaque, and women with long sleeves covering their hands on clay vessels. Like everywhere else in the book, Barber provides fantastic sketches, which further clarify and highlight her purpose. By the time the reader reaches the end of Chapter 21, he will be thoroughly convinced that the movement patterns utilized by the Eastern-European dancing goddesses were employed not only by the Minoans but earlier peoples as well.

In the fourth section, Barber again uses archaeological material culture, such as domestic architecture, painting, sculpture, theaters, and pottery, in addition to linguistics, to convincingly argue that dance developed as a means to emphasize communal identity and foster emotional bonds. Barber offers compelling evidence supporting the theory that “cultural information may have found expression in mimetic dance” before speech (Barber, 339). Barber utilizes unusual
researchers in the latter sections, including Yosef Garfinkel, an Israeli ceramic specialist, and Oliver Sacks, a neurobiologist, who supplant traditional dance historians such as Curt Sachs, or more contemporary dance scholars, such as Judith Lynne Hanna or Jane Desmond. These exclusions, however, constitute only a minor flaw in an otherwise rich section.

The history of dance through more than one culture is an ambitious topic which few have attempted. However, unlike the other performance arts, such as theater or music, so little is known about dance that it can be attempted. Curt Sachs, perhaps the first and most well-known dance historian, created the field in 1963. More contemporary authors who attempt this feat usually concentrate on one particular aspect of dance, like Jane Desmond did in her 2001 study of dance and sexuality, or as Judith Lynne Hanna did in her numerous works on dance, identity and community. Other works, such as Joan Cass’s Dancing Through History or Adshead-Lansdal and Layson’s Dance History, concentrate on the advent of the more formalized and structured ballet, and offer only limited comments on earlier movement patterns. When authors do go back to earlier dance, as in Steven Lonsdale’s Animals and the Origins of Dance, they are often prone to the same faults as Curt Sachs, whose work was extraordinary at the time but lacks any critical use of myth and evidence, contributing little of substance and offering only speculation. Barber avoids this fault, exploiting hard data. Although broad in scope and purpose, she looks at a limited amount of specific movements which can be traced in the historical record. From there she theorizes meaning, as opposed to simple conjecturing, which is easy to do in so abstract a field.

Barber is a dancer herself, and as such her knowledge and love of folk and classical dance is obvious. Because this field still remains on the fringes, its acceptance will only occur when other historians, sharing in her passion, contribute additional works which exclude the gross-exaggeration and myth which has historically plagued dance scholarship. Barber offers objective analysis, primarily in her third and fourth sections, in her search for the evanescent artifacts of physical movement. Maybe with her work, it can be better understood that dance history provides an entrance into worlds of meaning, created by non-elite peoples deserving of attention, as cultural history continues to thrive.

—Sarah Wenner, North Carolina State University