

The
MUMMIES
of
ÜRÜMCHI



Elizabeth Wayland Barber

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Frontispiece: This reconstructive portrait of the Loulan Beauty shows the woman shown in plate 9 wearing her hide skirt and moccasins, her shaggy woolen blanket wrap fastened at the shoulder with a long wooden pin, and her feathered felt hood. She is winnowing wheat with her winnowing tray, while the wheat basket and comb found with her lie by her knee. Grazing in the background are some woolly sheep at the Bronze Age stage of development, portrayed on the basis of Soay sheep (a breed abandoned on islands off the coast of Scotland by Bronze Age farmers and corresponding to the fleece type known from Bronze Age textiles). Ephedra bushes appear in the middle distance. Illustration by Kelvin Wilson, Rotterdam.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	11
1. Mystery Mummies	17
2. A Man with Ten Hats	23
3. Plus Three Women and a Baby	47
4. The "Beauty of Loulan"	71
5. The Early Explorers	89
6. Tokharians and Other Hairy Barbarians	111
7. Hami and Hallstatt	131
8. The Oasis Hoppers and Their Kin	149
9. Pulses in the Heart of a Continent	169
10. Sands of the Silk Road, Sands of Time	197
<i>Notes on Sources</i>	215
<i>Bibliography</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	233

Sixteen pages of full-color photographs appear following page 64

Preface

MY SINCERE thanks go first to Dr. Victor Mair, for making it possible for our group to travel to Ürümchi to study the mummies and their clothing; to Dr. Dolkun Kamberi and the Ürümchi Museum, for generously arranging for us to study their treasures; and to Irene Good as well as to Mair and Kamberi, for their support and good company during and after the expedition and for the use of their photographs. For reading and commenting on the manuscript at various stages, my warm thanks go to Paul Barber, Victor Mair, Harold and Virginia Wayland, Joseph Birman, Sharon Sprague Morgan, Ann Peters, and my long-suffering editor, Edwin Barber. Their comments, although not always incorporated, were most helpful, smoothing the text and saving me from many an egregious error. Errors that remain of course are to be laid at my own door; opinions and interpretations, where not referenced to others in the sources at the back of the book, are my own as well.

Several illustrations were subsidized by the Louis and Hermione Brown Humanities Support Fund, through Occidental College. Warm thanks to Gary Lyons of the Huntington Gardens, Pasadena, for locating samples of ephedra in the Desert Garden despite 110-degree heat; to Dale Gluckman, for the repeated and often prolonged use of her books; and to Susan Wadlow and Rodrick Owen, for helping me with the plaited bands. Bob Turring of Caltech graphic arts patiently built most of the maps for me on his computer system, while Kelvin Wilson created the frontispiece bit by bit via many E-mails and mail packets between Pasadena and the Netherlands.

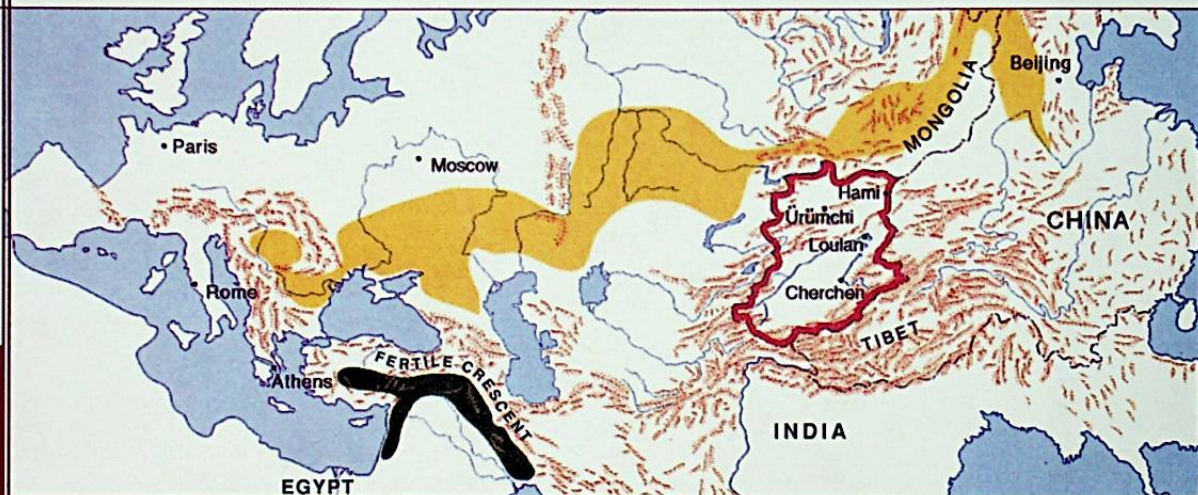
In the museums of Ürümchi, the wind-swept regional capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China—what we know as Chinese Turkestan—a collection of ancient mummies lay at the center of an enormous mystery. Some of Ürümchi's mummies date back as far as 4,000 years—contemporary to the famous Egyptian mummies, but even more beautifully preserved, especially their clothing. Surprisingly, these prehistoric people are not Asian but Caucasoid—tall and large-nosed and blond with thick beards and round eyes (probably blue). What were these blond Caucasians doing in the heart of Asia? Where did they come from and what language did they speak? Might they be related to a “lost tribe” of Indo-Europeans known from later inscriptions? Few gifts are to be found in the graves of Ürümchi, making it difficult for archaeologists to pinpoint cultural connections from clues offered by pottery and 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, one of the world's leading scholars on ancient textiles and author of *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, describes these remarkable mummies, their clothing, their sheep-herding ways, and their path to this remote, mysterious, and forbidding place. She pieces together their history and peculiar Western connections from both what she saw in Ürümchi and the testimony of explorers who traveled along the Silk Road a century earlier. The result is a book like no other—a fascinating and informative unveiling of an ancient, exotic, and nearly forgotten world.

Advance Praise for *The Mummies of Ürümchi*

“Elizabeth Barber takes us on a fascinating journey to a remote part of arid Western China. Here 4,000-year-old mummies chronicle ethnic diversity along the ancient Silk Road that linked East and West for many centuries. Barber’s complex detective story melds remarkably preserved woolen textiles with the latest medical technology to illuminate a little known chapter of Central Asian history.”

—Brian M. Fagan, author of *Time Detectives*



Ürümchi and Western China (*outlined in red*)

“*The Mummies of Ürümchi* is a brilliant and highly readable book by the world’s foremost authority on ancient textiles. Those who read it carefully will not only gain a clear understanding of the nature and significance of what is arguably the finest collection of prehistoric textiles in existence; they will also receive a lucid, insightful exploration of the surprising origins and broad cultural interactions of the Bronze Age peoples of Central Asia.”

—Victor H. Mair, University of Pennsylvania

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