



Elizabeth Wayland Barber

Obituary, Irene Good (1958-2013)

Dr. Irene Good was widely known for her pioneering work on archaeological textiles, especially in the area from Central Asia to the Near East and the Indo-Iranian borderlands. She worked to develop new applications of biochemical techniques to the study of severely degraded archaeological fibers, especially silk and wool, and to explore what she termed a “palaeo-environmental perspective”. Her goals were to understand better the local ecologies of production, the procuring of fibers and dye materials, and how to differentiate local from non-local sources of these. She also worked to untangle the history of the early use of silk fibers.

Dr. Good received her doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999, becoming an Associate of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, in 2001.

During this period she curated important textile collections at the Peabody, won a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on a major study called A “Social Archaeology of Textiles”, and directed a new archaeological survey in Tajikistan. She was then invited to pursue her research in the prestigious Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, at Oxford University, where she remained until her final illness. She had almost completed a book entitled “Cloth and Carpet in Early Inner Asia” for Brill’s Inner Asia Series.

My husband Paul and I first got to know Irene in 1995, working in Ürümqi as a team on the magnificent wool textiles of the naturally preserved Bronze Age mummies found in the Uyghur Autonomous Region. Dr. Victor Mair had invited Irene and me to spend a





month in Ürümchi analysing as many of the earliest textiles as possible, being almost the only scholars he could find in the USA who were crazy enough to specialize in something as perishable as prehistoric cloth. And we each had the same reaction: “If you have invited *her*, why do you need *me*?”

But upon arrival, we were grateful for each other’s company. Working conditions were difficult, time was very short when stacked against the vast amount of material to be studied, and we meshed beautifully in our work habits. Although we had divided what we were to study according to our special fields and training, we could easily help each other if one of us got overloaded. Irene was pure delight to work with: knowledgeable, systematic, careful, never territorial, with an impish grin and a wicked sense of humor that kept us all laughing despite the stress. For example, on the next to last day, which as usual went from 6 AM to 8 PM, we had run out of the chocolate we had brought from the USA. Crisis. So Victor dispatched Paul to the nearby open-air market with a paper bearing the Chinese characters for “sweets” and instructions that, once he attained the candy counter, he would just have to hunt for what might be chocolate, since sugar-candy is not a big item there. When he returned, Paul crept up behind the two of us, who were hard at work, and waggled the chocolate over our heads. Irene looked up and instantly began to whimper and whine, making little clawing motions toward the candy like a frustrated puppy, while I caught the cue and joined in. Everyone burst out laughing. Such was life with Irene.

Another source of compatibility was the almost parallel paths that had led me and Irene to archaeological textiles. Both of us were the daughters of physicists, entailing an upbringing full of sciences; in fact, both fathers had spent a year in Neils Bohr’s laboratory in Copenhagen (in the 1930s and 1960s respectively). Irene was about 8 when they lived in Copenhagen, and it was seeing all the archaeological textiles in the National Museum of Denmark there that hooked her on studying such things. I was 12 when my father took our family to Strasbourg for the year and *I* became hooked on both archaeology and folk textiles. In fact, we both looked and acted enough alike that people would start guessing whether we were sisters.

Because Victor was using his grant money to bring as many study-teams as possible to work on the Tarim mummies, he was extremely frugal—highly laudable, but sometimes leading to merriment, especially from Irene. Thus when Victor needed a haircut, he went to the local barber-college, where someone trimmed his hair on the top at the back closer than a golf green. That evening, walking to dinner behind Victor and me, Irene and Paul noticed a man passing by who had a small bald spot in the same place. “Oh,” said Irene sweetly, “that man went to the same barber as Victor!” But, of course, she was as grateful as the rest of us to Victor for making that remarkable study-trip possible: it changed our professional lives.

Irene passed away quietly in Boston on Sunday Feb. 3, 2013, of cancer. She is survived by her mother, sister, and two children, Ianna and Stephen.