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[Nora Drake](#)

Spinning a Historical Tale

For centuries, silk has been associated with wealth and royalty. Lesser known, though, is the fabric's crucial role in French history — and how that reputation was cemented by women and immigrants.

In her book, “The Silk Industries of Medieval Paris: Artisanal Migration, Technological Innovation, and Gendered Experience” (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), UC Santa Barbara historian [Sharon Farmer](#) traces the roots of modern silk production in France back to medieval Paris, a bustling hub for luxury goods and fine textiles.

In the late 13th and 14th centuries, Paris was the only Western European town north of the Mediterranean to produce luxury silk cloth, for a few notable reasons. In the book, Farmer, a professor and chair of the [Department of History](#) at UCSB, argues that silk production thrived in the city due to the essential contributions of two marginalized groups: women and immigrants. That diversity, she argues, alters our understanding of both French identity and medieval gender norms.

In the book, Farmer describes the economic, social and technological reasons the silk industry flourished in one specific metropolis. “The king of France and the king of England were the two biggest consumers in Europe,” she said. “Additionally, every count and countess within France (and even as far as Holland) had multiple residences they would move between, but they would always circle down to Paris to make their purchases, especially for luxury goods. Even in medieval times, the city was known as a fashion capital.”

In the early stages of her research, Farmer was interested in refuting a commonly held historical belief that all modern French people are descended from French peasants. In the wake of 9/11 and the more recent immigration crisis in Europe, she wanted to prove that foreign labor has been an essential part of the French economy for centuries.

She began exploring a number of different commodities that were made in Paris but had techniques imported from other regions. If the specialized skill originated elsewhere, she figured, it was likely that the people practicing it did as well. It would follow that those trained workers would be an important (and overlooked) part of French history.

That's when she hit upon silk as the perfect commodity to prove her point. "Silk production always travels with the workers," Farmer explained, "because it is a continuous and extremely fine fiber that requires skilled artisans and equipment." Once she was able to find evidence of foreign silk workers living and working in Paris, she knew she had a case to make.

Farmer discovered that the high demand for expensive silk in the 13th and 14th centuries translated into an entire industry made up of specialized workers and entrepreneurs, most of them clustered in the same region of Paris.

Using a database of tax assessments to figure out who were the captains of the silk industry, where they emigrated from and who lived in their households, Farmer was able to focus her research on specific silk merchants. She was surprised to find that many of them came from Italy, and some of them were female.

French silk production offered unique opportunities for women. "Some of these women made a lot of money, enough to pay taxes," Farmer said. "A few ended up being very prominent in the field and doing direct business with aristocrats and even with the king." There were even some all-female guilds, official organizations made up of merchants and artisans, a rarity in the 14th century.

Ultimately, Parisian silk women ended up in better financial and social standing than their counterparts in other countries, and in other textile industries. "There were some entrepreneurs in the wool industry who did well, but there's very little evidence that a wool spinner achieved any kind of status," Farmer remarked. "Spinners in the silk industry could end up getting people to work for them, so they were running a whole business."

For Farmer, who spent a year in France doing research for the book, the anthropological makeup of the medieval Parisian silk industry proves the importance of both foreign skilled trade and female-produced textile work to French history as a whole, even though silk manufacturing has all but vanished from the country.

“Until the 1980s, France was still incredibly dominant in silk production,” Farmer explained. “There is still some spinning that goes on in rural valleys south of Lyon, but many of the smaller producers are being put out of the market by forms of capital globalization.”

Farmer does still see some remnants of the once-booming luxury textile industry in France. She points out that there continue to be small, specialized, family-owned shops, often run by women, that are the modern equivalent of the medieval silk merchants. “In some sense,” she said, “you do still see those same female entrepreneurs in Paris.”

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