

On the Origin of Women Geologists by Means of Social Selection

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The history of the geosciences is always perceived as a history of male scientists; but once women are included in geo-historical research this reveals how much women have helped to shape geological history in various roles.

This poster, contributed by INHIGEO (The International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences) illustrates this forgotten history of women geologists using an evolutionary "time-spiral", a familiar icon to geoscientists. Thus "Precambrian" corresponds to a long and barely known Prehistory, when geological knowledge mingled with mythical or religious ideas or with craft-traditions of mining and alchemy. During the 18th century women appeared as keepers of natural history collections, some of them even becoming the nucleus of today's museums.

The beginning of geological research in a modern sense and thus the beginning of Geological History dates from around 1800. While, as in Germany, the early professionalisation of geology effectively precluded any collaboration by women, the non-professional culture of natural sciences in Great Britain stimulated a local "Cambrian Revolution". Women appeared in number as assistants to father, husband or brother, as field geologists, collectors, taxonomists, editors and draughtswomen. The "impact" of later professionalisation in Great Britain during the second half of the 19th century then led to the "extinction" of these early female scholars. Only with the opening of universities to female students did this population of women geologists slowly increase again. The number of these professional female geoscientists was strongly modulated by local cultures of science and socio-political climates.