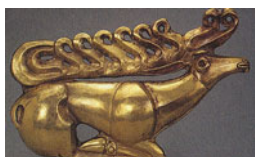


Book reviews

BARRY CUNLIFFE. *By steppe, desert, and ocean: the birth of Eurasia*. 2015. ix+530 pages, numerous colour and b&cw illustrations. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-968917-0 hardback £30.



“History”, Barry Cunliffe tells us, “is the result of the interaction between human agency and the constraints and opportunities imposed by geography” (p. 451); *By steppe, desert, and ocean* is a sustained and largely very successful effort to demonstrate this claim.

Cunliffe’s canvas is vast, stretching from Britain to Japan and from 10 000 BC to AD 1300. Thinking about linkages on this scale has gone through waves of fashion. In the late nineteenth century, many archaeologists leaned towards hyperdiffusionism, arguing that everything important had been invented just once (usually in the area between Italy, Egypt and Iraq) and had then spread outwards. By the 1970s, most archaeologists had swung towards anti-diffusionism, insisting instead that the really big things—from agriculture and metallurgy, to writing and the state—had been independently invented multiple times. More recently, however, there has been a welcome move back towards a sensible middle ground, nicely exemplified by Cunliffe’s book. He shows not only that geography—particularly the steppe, desert and oceans of his title—sometimes aided and sometimes thwarted efforts to travel and trade, but also that there was a very clear, long-term pattern of larger and denser networks of connections. In part, the book’s success is due to Cunliffe’s lucid, no-nonsense prose, which introduces order to what could easily become a sprawling chaos of archaeological detail. But what is most striking about this book is that it is truly a thing of beauty. The photographs are spectacular, and the maps clear, colourful and attractive. The author’s care over the choice of visuals, and the publisher’s care over their reproduction, could stand as a model to us all. The pictures alone justify the book’s price tag.

Cunliffe’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the material is equally impressive, particularly when he is describing

the cultures of the steppes. For anyone wanting a quick reminder of who the Pechenegs were, what the Yamnaya Complex was all about, what kind of houses we find on Cucuteni-Tripolye sites, or pretty much anything else, this book is now the obvious place to look. And for those wanting to go deeper, the suggestions for further reading are superb (I would have finished this review a lot faster, in fact, had I not felt the urge to look up so many of his recommendations).

The most distinctive aspect of this book is Cunliffe’s utter refusal to be bound by conventional geographic or chronological boundaries. Since the 1990s, global historians have written a great deal about the steppes, but usually from the perspective of the settled agricultural societies along their southern edge, devoting time to steppe herders mainly when they impacted on the stories of agrarian states and empires. Cunliffe, however, quite rightly assumes that as the steppes were the major avenue of connection, steppe societies should get the most emphasis.

The resulting shift in perspective is refreshing but will infuriate the more conventional-minded reader. I shudder to think what some of my fellow classicists will say on seeing Cunliffe boil down Herodotus’ account of the Graeco-Persian Wars to the single sentence: “Various Persian adventures against the Greeks between 499 and 478 BC [...] came to nothing” (p. 207). But on the scale at which Cunliffe is thinking, that is probably about right.

The book is very much in the tradition of Fernand Braudel, and Cunliffe repeatedly echoes the geographical historian’s famous comment that the deeds of individuals which fill the works of conventional historians are merely “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs” (Braudel 1972: 21). And yet if I have one reservation about this book, it is that it seems rather lacking in larger theories. I sometimes felt as if Cunliffe was not quite sure of what overall point he wanted to make, particularly at the end of the book, which comes with much more of a whimper than a bang. “The year AD 1300 is a convenient point at which to close this narrative”, he states: “In so many ways it marks the end of the old world and the beginning of the modern age” (p. 451).

But in what ways? Many historians would say that the real turning point in the story of global connections came not in 1300 but around 1500, when European sailors crossed the Atlantic and entered the Indian Ocean, transforming the geostrategic relations between the continents. Others would put the big break around 1700, when the gunpowder armies of China, Persia, Russia and Turkey finally succeeded in closing down the steppe highway that dominates Cunliffe's story. Others still opt for 1800 (or even 1850), when the industrial revolution made it possible for a few nations to project power globally. Each argument depends on a larger theory about the shape of world history, the workings of geography or even the fundamental properties of human nature, but Cunliffe shies away from this level of analysis.

What he does give us, however, is a magnificent and visually stunning account of over 11 000 years of human expansion. *By steppe, desert, and ocean* should become a classic.

Reference

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DAVID J. MELTZER. *The Great Paleolithic War: how science forged an understanding of America's ice age past*. 2015. xix+670 pages, 18 b&w illustrations, 9 tables. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; 978-0-226-29322-6 hardback \$55 & £38.50.



David Meltzer is at the forefront of research into the colonisation and early settlement of North America, which he superbly synthesised in his *First Peoples in a New World* (2009).

Here, he explores how the antiquity of humankind was eventually demonstrated in North America between 1862—when the Smithsonian issued a circular urging people to look for artefacts that

might demonstrate a Pleistocene human antiquity comparable to that in Europe—and 1927, when the site of Folsom, Texas, clearly showed stone projectile points among the bones of extinct bison.

And what a complex and fascinating story it is. Briefly, many thought that a North American palaeolithic had been demonstrated by 1889 on the basis of artefacts that seemed similar to 'palaeoliths' in Europe. These claims were effectively trashed in the early 1890s. There followed the 'Great Paleolithic War', with claims for human antiquity repeatedly being offered, contested and rejected, often acrimoniously, until peace finally broke out in 1927 when artefacts found embedded in the ribs of bison at Folsom were sensibly left in place so that the association could be independently verified by experts. That part of the excavation was then encased in plaster and transported intact for public display. Thereafter, Clovis and a suite of other sites clearly showed by 1941 that humans had been in North America since the late Pleistocene, and had probably entered at the end of the last ice age from north-eastern Asia via Beringia. Thus, after decades of inconclusive wrangling, the broad outline of early North American prehistory was formed in little more than a decade between 1928 and 1941, with Clovis and Folsom as the earliest components; this consensus was not disturbed until Tom Dillehay showed in the 1990s that Monte Verde in Chile was even older than Clovis in North America.

The 'Great Paleolithic War' was a complex affair that revolved around which types of evidence were conclusive, how they might be verified and by whom. It took place when palaeontology, Pleistocene geology, geochronology and palaeolithic archaeology were in their formative stages in the USA. Initially, the main protagonists, as in Britain, were amateur members of local historical and natural history societies; gradually, they were supplanted by the growth of a centrally funded professional elite in state-funded institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Bureau of American Ethnology and professional organisations such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Academy of Sciences, within which there were their own elites of fellows. There were thus institutional, as well as personal, rivalries; inter-disciplinary boundaries, as well as intra-disciplinary ones (such as tensions between State and Federal Agencies). As an additional complicating factor, many of the protagonists loathed each other.

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