



Sir Barry Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert and Ocean: the Birth of Eurasia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Print, 530 pp., US\$40.00, ISBN: 9780199689170.

Review

In this book, Sir Barry Cunliffe, Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oxford, aims to provide a general history of Eurasia from 10,000 BC to AD 1300, concentrating on the steppe regions of Central Eurasia. In doing so, he presents to a general audience the current academic trend of considering Eurasia's history in transregional context. His central thesis is that, since the periods of the earliest domestication of wild plants and animals, the discrete ecological niches in Western Asia (the Middle East) and East Asia (the Chang Jiang and Yellow River valleys) have been linked by the eponymous steppe, desert, and oceanic routes. In the course of these processes, the inhabitants of these niches have influenced and been influenced by the peoples who inhabited the regions along these routes. These steppe- and desert-dwellers have adopted a variety of economic and political forms, and have been central producers of highly influential technological developments.

Cunliffe's work is divided into thirteen chapters, which broadly deal with six socio-political processes that had a transcontinental impact. The first of these is the prolonged introduction of agriculture in the two 'regions of precocious development', Western and Eastern Asia. He attributes this development to the variety of plant life suitable for domestication growing wild there, the regions' relative inaccessibility, especially in the case of East Asia, and to a drying-up of the climate which forced the cultivation of previously wild plants. Cunliffe argues that even at this early stage the steppe corridor acted as a conduit for technologies, such as the movement of domesticated millet, dogs, and pigs.

Cunliffe's second process with transcontinental significance is the domestication of the horse. By contrast with the development of cultivation, he

argues that this process took place in the steppe regions as a development from hunting and early agriculture. The greater mobility allowed for the development of a pastoralist lifestyle, as a single herdsman could control far larger flocks. The book's third vital development relates to the increasing interaction between the steppe and non-steppe regions this allowed. This is best symbolised by the spread of another steppe invention, the chariot, to the cultures around the steppe, principally the

Hittites of Anatolia and the Shang in China. These chapters are amongst the book's best, with their concentration on the sophisticated proto-urban cultures that grew up in these zones of interaction, such as the Maikop Culture of the North Caucasus and the huge proto-towns of the Tripol'ye culture of Romania and the Ukraine. A general theme is the growth of more hierarchical polities that these two developments allowed, both within and outside the steppe.

This theme is continued by Cunliffe's fourth transcontinental process, the emergence of what he terms 'predatory nomadism', as exemplified by the Scythian cultures. Whilst some may dispute this terminology, his account of the spread from the Altai Mountains of organised nomadic polities and the cultural package they adopted is convincing. The same may be said of his description of the growing interaction between these nomadic polities and their neighbours, as epitomised by Herodotus' famous account and by the exotic goods found in the frozen burial mounds at Pazyryk, in the Altai.

For Cunliffe's fifth vital process, the rise of transcontinental trading networks, his focus necessarily gets considerably wider, with a far greater concentration on events at either end of the route later termed the Silk Road. These include the rise of the Han and Roman Empires, encompassing all Eastern and Western ecological niches. However, despite this shift in focus he does find space for the Bactrian and Kushan polities lying between these regions. This focus on regions at the ends of the trading network continues with an account of the rise of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphate, and the Tang Empire, and of the spread the world religions of Islam and Buddhism.

Cunliffe returns the book's focus to the steppe regions for the sixth and final process he identifies, the growth in power of nomadic empires. This growth in power was manifested, he argues, in the ability of the Seljuk and Mongol Empires to control not only steppe regions, but also the areas around these, notably Central Asia, Iran, and China. This once again allowed for the transcontinental mobility which travellers from Europe, most famously Marco Polo, took advantage of. Their reports of Eurasia's wealth would later spur the European drive to the East and the eventual triumph of oceanic trade routes over land-based ones. This conclusion is followed by an extensive selection of further reading.

Cunliffe's thesis, that the steppe and desert were central to the transcontinental history of Eurasia, is coherently argued. His explanations of complex historical, political and economic processes are carried out with enviable clarity, aided greatly by the book's numerous illustrations and maps. This is despite the book losing some of its focus in its later stages under the weight of historical detail. There are a few minor errors- calling the Bulgar-Slaying Byzantine Emperor Boris II rather than Basil II, for example (p. 397); however, given the huge sweep of the work its general level of accuracy is remarkable. Some of Cunliffe's deliberate omissions may not be popular, notably his exclusion of historical linguistics from the discussion; however, this decision is a brave one as it allows the archaeological evidence to speak on its own terms. One may say the same for his steady attempts to maintain his focus on the mass of Eurasia as opposed to its peripheries, notably India and Western Europe. Overall, this work provides an excellent introduction to the history of Eurasia for both students of the subject and the interested non-specialist.

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