



By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia

Barry W. Cunliffe

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By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean is nothing less than the story of how humans first started building the globalized world we know today. Set on a huge continental stage, from Europe to China, it is a tale covering over 10,000 years, from the origins of farming around 9000 BC to the expansion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century AD. An unashamedly big history, it charts the development of European, Near Eastern, and Chinese civilizations and the growing links between them by way of the Indian Ocean, the silk Roads, and the great steppe corridor (which crucially allowed horse riders to travel from Mongolia to the Great Hungarian Plain within a year). Along the way, it is also the story of the rise and fall of empires, the development of maritime trade, and the shattering impact of predatory nomads on their urban neighbours. Above all, as this immense historical panorama unfolds, we begin to see in clearer focus those basic underlying factors - the acquisitive nature of humanity, the differing environments in which people live, and the dislocating effect of even slight climatic variation - which have driven change throughout the ages, and which help us better understand our world today.

By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia Details

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Author : Barry W. Cunliffe

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From Reader Review By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia for online ebook

Andrew Davis says

A panoramic view of the early European and Asian civilizations. The book is well presented with many maps and colorful photos, and printed on good paper. The story focuses on the historical aspects of the past civilizations, without much reference to the latest DNA discoveries.

Mark Ross says

Fantastic. This book tied together many little pieces of knowledge I already had. There were also many things that I did not know, especially about the peoples and importance of the area from the Caspian Sea to Tarim depression. The book is a very straightforward account of the peoples and civilizations from China to Eastern Europe relying mostly on archeological sources as the author states up front. I really enjoyed this book and learned a lot from it.

David says

Barry Cunliffe's *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia* is a brilliant, if at times politically left-of-center and dry, read.

If you are looking for a sweeping read that helps explain the massive landmass between Ireland and Japan.

It concludes with the 13th Century but covers all major issues up until this time.

At times enlightening and frustrating [the maps are all on a north-south axis rather than an east-west axis and this seems to be make a political point rather than to be enlightening] Cunliffe's work is very useful and enjoyable.

Rating 5 out of 5 stars.

Highly recommended for Eurasian history buffs.

Kåre says

Bogen handler om eurasien og benytter en optik, hvor der gøres rede for forskellige civilisationers samspil med hinanden og med samfund fra stepperne. Det grundlæggende billede er, at civilisationerne er fastboende med stærk stat, hvor steppekulturerne er normadiske. Kina er mere stabil grundet geografisk adskillelse. Persien er mindst stabil og Vesteuropa udvikles senest.

Gradvist udviskes forskellene mellem normadisk og sedentær kultur.

Fra ca 1200 fremøges mulighederne for transport over vand

C viser, at den tidlige udvikling i høj grad er determineret af geografi, og klima og andre naturlige forhold. Måske viser han også, at determinismen mindskes over tid.

Som jeg har forstået antropologers beskrivelser af folkeslag/kulturer, har antropologer ikke fanget eller interesseret sig for forskelle mellem kulturer, som tilhører henholdsvis en af civilisationerne, holdsvis steppesamfund.

Bogen lapper meget over Silk roads, men er mindre spændende. Tror eksperter kan begejstres over behandlingen af tidlig tid. Fra måske 500 e.kr. bliver det meget kedeligt, idet det ene folk banker det andet osv, uden jeg gives nogen særlig forståelse for, hvad der er på spil. Pudsigt detalje: Vesteuropa blev samlet 680 til 750 af et normadisk folk, frankerne, og efterfølgende splittet op i Tyskland, Frankrig og Italien. Frankerne konstruerede deres historie, således at de skulle opfattes som romerrigets arvtager, hvilket de altså ikke var.

Paul says

I enjoyed this book because for me it struck the right balance between historical precision and readability. Excellent references to back everything up, so you know you are getting an up-to-date and sophisticated analysis. Even without speculative interpolation, Cunliffe manages to tell a compelling and coherent story. And what a story! The scope could hardly be grander, from the beginning of settled agricultural society to the middle ages. The organizing theme is the vital role played by the steppe region that extends from Eastern Europe to Manchuria as the cultural transmission belt that allowed Eurasian societies to assemble an exceptionally broad set of technologies, which in turn made these the most rapidly developing societies ever seen on this planet.

Mary Catelli says

A rather technical book about the civilizations in Europe and Asia and their technological and cultural changes and exchanges.

Full of bits like the first evidence of wheels existing (on a pot found in Poland), the way Bactria had an unusual amount of Hellenistic influence, and other such details.

Doug Gordon says

A great, sweeping history of Eurasia, covering some 10,000+ years. It was a very readable account of a very complex subject. If there is a theme, it is that nations, civilizations, and empires come and go, but commerce and the flow of goods remain. It was especially interesting that events of great significance to western history -- such as Alexander the Great and the Crusades -- are mere blips when considered in the overall flow of world history.

This was also a good lesson in geography for me and, although I often got lost in the many names of places

and peoples that appeared throughout, I did learn for the first time how places like Kazakhstan and the other "-stan" countries fit into world history. I also learned a lot more about Chinese history as well. So now there are a few dozen more places that I have to try to see someday...

Keith Currie says

This is a remarkable book. In its ambition, its scope and its production values Barry Cunliffe's study is extremely impressive.

Some years ago I very much enjoyed reading his 'Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek' which now reads as a minor foothill to the mountain range of this volume. Make no mistake, despite its chronological range of over 10,000 years, this is no light skim through the centuries. It is a detailed, highly readable account of the geography, archaeology and history of Eurasia from China in the East to the fringes of Europe in the west.

Not the least of the pleasures of this book are the many maps, all in full colour, all with their orientation putting the 'European peninsula' at an unusual angle for the Eurocentric reader. This alone creates a sense of perspective which provokes thought. These maps wonderfully trace movements and settlements of peoples, topographical aspects, the rise and fall of political empires, the spread of plague and disease, beautifully capturing the inter-connectedness of Asia with Europe – Eurasia.

There is much to learn here and a marvellous amount of scholarship on display, but the book is straightforward to read and always tells a fascinating story. For me the most interesting parts were those dealing with classical to medieval times, but I enjoyed all parts, including the prehistoric. East-west movements and less commonly, west-east movements of people and peoples are explained through the geography of the continents. Thus historical events which loom large in European history, such as the crusades, can be seen for what they were – a side-show, even if they had a lasting effect for future generations.

The book contains a wide choice of gorgeous illustrations and photographs, more to be expected in a coffee-table book than a scholarly volume. These pictures enhance the text wonderfully. It is really evocative to look upon a series of photographs of Palmyra, read about the city's importance to east-west communication and trade and think about what has happened there in the past few months of 2015. One wonders too about the current state of other sites such as the Greco-Macedonian foundation of Ai Khanum in Afghanistan.

Cunliffe's book shows the cross fertilisation of ideas, discoveries and knowledge over the centuries, the mixing of race, religion and culture, the importance of understanding this, and how all these could have positive effects in the future. I looked for and found a reference to Menander (not Meander, p.256!), the Greco-Macedonian king of Bactria, a man of European descent who embraced Buddhism, in a land which is now almost wholly Muslim.

Jan says

An extremely dense but satisfying read.

Maya says

Everyone knows that no matter what Professor Cunliffe writes about, something is always going to learned. This book is no exception.

I loved all the maps and illustrations and photographs that helped bring across the points that professor Cunliffe was trying to get across. But most if all I liked the information presented.

This is a book that shows the history and interactions between east and west. It is a book about connectivity and exchange of ideas. But mostly it is a book about Eurasia that is not Euro-centric and everyone should really read it.

Rex Bradshaw says

"History is far more than a series of events and the biographies of big names; it is the subtle interweaving of human actions spread over vast landscapes and through deep time creating a dense fabric, every thread of which has significance. The wonder of it all lies in how interconnected everything is."

Sir Barry Cunliffe's overview of the development of political and cultural networks across Eurasia is staggeringly successful for its tremendous scope. With just the right amount of illustration and anecdote, Cunliffe surveys the rise and fall of various civilizations from one end of the world's largest continent to the other, from prehistory up to the revolutions of the fourteenth century. His title reflects his interest in viewing the continent as a dynamic whole, shaped by its unique geography. Steppes, deserts, and oceans all served at various times as barriers between civilizations and as connections and meeting-places. It is restless Central Asian nomads, not kings of Europe or emperors of China, who receive the most extended attention in Cunliffe's chapters, as he weaves together cultural motifs and enduring patterns with long-term transformations.

Archaeological evidence and travelers' narratives make frequent appearances; his willingness to get particular with the sites, climate features, and commodities that constituted the environment of Eurasians is one of the things that lends such color to his account. So his tour in passing introduces us to "the beauty of a Song bowl, the behaviour of wild horses on the steppe coming down to drink in the evening, the statue of the mathematician al-Khwarizmi in Khiva, [and] the name of a Viking scratched in runic script on a balustrade in the Hagia Sophia." Cunliffe allows all of these things to interact and so draw us in to the grand theater of the past.

On almost every page, Cunliffe mentions an exquisite character, location, cultural feature, or story that makes one want to pull up Google or check his bibliography for more. It would be easy to complain about what Cunliffe chose to leave out--century on century goes by in his mere 500 or so pages. But this should not obscure his accomplishment, which is suited to anyone desiring a broader and more complete understanding of the roots of world civilization.

Jill Cordry says

This is an incredible book with wonderful maps and pictures. Most of all, Cunliffe is a wonderful writer for the lay reader. I only wish he had written a sequel. I can't recommend this book highly enough!

Martin says

Fantastic book. A broad sweep through history, eye-opening in its coverage of cultural, economic, and military trends in Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and China, up to the age of Columbus.

Newel K Brown says

an excellent presentation of the material. I would recommend it to any historian

or one interested in the history of this globe on which we live. Five stars. The book contains an exceptional bibliography plus other helps in the selection of additional research.

Marcia says

Wildly complicated history described with such clarity.
Wonderful book.
