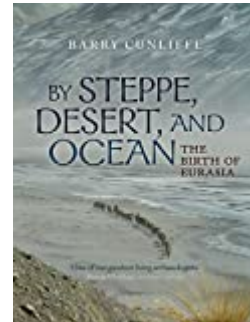




**Barry Cunliffe.** *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Maps, illustrations. 512 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-968917-0.



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## Eurasia

*By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia* by Barry Cunliffe is a pathbreaking attempt to enhance understanding of Eurasia by means of a reconsideration of focus, scale, time frame, and sources. First, the focus is squarely on steppe Asia, which is treated as a center not a periphery. Unlike much older scholarship, the book does not gaze only through the eyes of sedentary, literate states, hence see every nomad group as barbarians. Second, the book radically expands and contracts the scale of most historical studies of Asia, which either follow current national boundaries or subsume all steppe groups under general characteristics of tribes. Third, studies of the broad region generally differentiate between the prehistorical period and the historical period, based on the presence or absence of textual data. As an archaeologist, Cunliffe is at home with both textual and material evidence and, correctly, sees no reason for such a division. The author rightly takes geography seriously, carefully explaining Asia's mountains, deserts, rivers, and grasslands. He also covers in detail the various corridors through which, time after time, armies,

refugees, and trade passed.

The book follows a strict chronological schema, dividing the period from about 9000 BCE to about 1300 CE into eleven chapters. The opening chapters cover large swathes of time, the first chapter spanning 50,000 to 1000 BCE and the second, 5000 to 2500 BCE. Thereafter, chapters cover decreasing chunks of history, from the third chapter's millennium to the eleventh chapter's 150 years. At the opening and closing of each chapter, the author discusses the reasons for his periodization. Each chapter focuses on a theme: for example, change in an important technology (chariots, wagons, or irrigation), nomads and sedentary states learning from each other, or the pervasiveness of warfare.

Many of these themes could serve as useful entry points for broad discussion. I found several favorites. The author's critique of G. Gordon Childe's concept of the Neolithic Revolution centers on the many failures of village agriculture, emphasizing that domestication was not a one-way street. Another favorite was the focus on

copper, both as a necessary component of bronze and as central to the emergence of various elite lifestyles. Often the author considers the craft processes required for turning expensive materials into elegant objects. The specifics of archaeological finds could trigger a broad discussion of what was a necessity and what was a luxury in both the early and later periods. Overall, chapters would work in a course on Asian history, especially as an alternate viewpoint to a China-centered approach and an introduction to the richness of the archaeological evidence.

The author is refreshingly clear about many unanswered questions of the early period, noting that, in spite of thirty-eight theories in the scholarly literature concerning the beginning of domestication, we really do not know why it happened in various places in the world. We also do not know why, in the period covered in the book, virtually all of human migration in Asia was westward. The author's instincts are to stay close to the archaeological evidence, especially in the earlier periods. Since precious little is known of many groups beyond grave goods, the rhythm of the book includes dozens of *ârisêsâ* and *âfallsâ* with accompanying maps of the maximum extent of influence.

The book has a few drawbacks. India, in general, receives only brief mention as, for example, a destination for Chinese pilgrims or the conquered territory of the Kushans, Hephthalites, and the Mongols. There is little discussion of the Harappan civilization. The north-south Silk Road between the caravan cities and India receive little attention. In the introduction, the author eschews DNA evidence as not yet reliable enough to settle issues of origination or migration, perhaps missing the broad and suggestive findings of this rapidly developing field. Cunliffe is in the European tradition of civilizational packages (domesticated plants and animals, hierarchical social organization, literacy, and priestly and artisanal specialists), which, this viewpoint asserts, emerged only a few times, especially in western Asia and China and offered profound advantages. Archaeologists who study the Americas, of course, have vigorously opposed this viewpoint. They find domestication a complex, often local process that did not give adopters much advantage over their neighbors.

Overall, the analysis, maps, and many illustrations of *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean* provide a graphic introduction to what truly Asia-centered large-scale history might look like. It is an exciting picture.

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