

European history in the *longue durée*

# Europe Between the Oceans by Barry Cunliffe

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Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans: Themes and Variations: 9000 BC--AD 1000*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008)

Professor Barry Cunliffe's new book is a well-informed synthesis that is based on a lifetime's work in European archaeology, prehistory and protohistory. It covers the period from the last glacial maximum to the first millennium--9000 BC to AD 1000. Nothing of similar scope and depth of learning has appeared since V. Gordon Childe's *Dawn of European Civilisation* which now is much out of date. Cunliffe's book, by contrast, reflects the great body of archaeological work conducted since the Second World War.

The book explores the history of Europe from its initial settlement in the wake of the retreating ice by the first hunter-gatherers, the appearance of the first farmers around 7000 BC, the emergence of metal working in the fifth millennium and the development of sophisticated Mediterranean civilisations with close links to the Middle East in the mid-third millennium. Cunliffe explains how these civilisations were replaced by more familiar societies of the classical ancient world dominated by the Greek city states, Carthage and Rome. He continues with the collapse of the Roman Empire, the development of barbarian kingdoms in the West and the formation of an Islamic Empire in much of the Mediterranean.

This is not a book that deals with specific societies, cultures, peoples, or civilisations such as the Greeks or Romans, the Celts or the Germans. Nor does it deal with individuals such as Julius Caesar or Charlemagne. But it provides the reader with the means to put more tightly focused accounts of these subjects into a wider historical frame of reference. In a period where history is often studied in the form of short, disconnected snippets, Cunliffe's book is invaluable in providing some context for more detailed histories. The reader is given an overview of the flow of European history through an extended period of time and a wide geographical area.

Inevitably, much must be condensed in such a wide-ranging project. Even so, there is a daunting amount of detail to be explained in dealing with such diverse material. Cunliffe succeeds admirably in conveying enough detail to give an impression of the societies he is describing, without at the same time, swamping the reader with minutiae. The text is liberally illustrated with colour photographs, line drawings and clear, informative maps. There is an excellent bibliography to guide the reader into the most recent English-language material, making this an outstanding introductory book for anyone who wants to understand the prehistory and early history of Europe.

Cunliffe is able to give such a comprehensive overview of the European past because he has a firm grasp of the material constraints and opportunities that confronted early societies in what he terms the

"westerly excrescence of the continent of Asia, which we call Europe." He describes Europe as a subcontinental peninsula with a wide variety of natural environments, within which human populations could develop many different subsistence strategies. "In no equivalent area of the Earth's surface," he writes, "is it possible to find so many different eco-zones so closely packed together."

Despite this ecological diversity, Cunliffe emphasises the integrated character of Europe and its connections to other regions. "One of the greatest natural attributes of the European peninsula," he writes, "is the Middle European Corridor leading from the Atlantic to the Black Sea. An enterprising traveller could have made the journey along it comfortably in six months."

This route, running along the Danube through the Iron Gates to Vienna, was to have a crucial role in linking East and West. The Corridor led to the river's source in the Black Forest, barely 70 kilometres from the source of the Rhine which, along with the rivers Moselle, Seine, Saône and Loire, provides the Western portion of this route linking the Black Sea to the Atlantic. To the east of this Middle European Corridor is the grassland steppe reaching to Mongolia. The points at which the major European rivers crossed this route from north to south formed foci of trade and culture which were further bound together those maritime routes along the intensely indented coast of the European peninsula.

It is possible to take issue with his identification of Europe. Should the palace civilisations of Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece be considered part of Europe, or outliers of the civilisations in the Middle East? The Roman Empire cannot be understood without including the Levant, Egypt and North Africa, which in a geographical sense are not part of Europe. But Cunliffe's emphasis on trade allows him to alter his focus in different periods so that his Europe is a flexible concept. Europe, for Cunliffe, is not radically distinct from Asia or Africa. Above all it is not confined to the political, linguistic or cultural confines imposed by later historians.

The advantage of this approach is that the emergence of the urban Mediterranean civilisations of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Etruscans and Romans is set in a broader context and made far more comprehensible as a result. The connection of the Phoenicians to Assyria and their other neighbours in the Middle East--and the impetus which those connections gave to trade and craft production--emerges as a major factor in the development of Mediterranean civilisation. The Atlantic coast was drawn into this trade network and probably provided the basis for Celtic languages to be established as a *lingua franca* along the Atlantic seaways. To the north, Etruscan artefacts have been found scattered across the North European Plain suggesting that contact was maintained with the region around Gdansk on the Baltic coast which was the source of furs

and Baltic amber.

Within the space of some 300 years, from 500 to 140 BC, the Mediterranean became home to a number of warring states vying for supremacy. A sharp divide had opened up between barbarian Europe in the north and the urban civilisations of the ancient world. This was to set the pattern for Europe until the fall of the Roman Empire and the development of the barbarian kingdoms in the West, from which feudal Europe emerged in the second millennium. Cunliffe sets this crucial transition in the perspective of the longer term developments of European prehistory.

The emergence of the Rome becomes an interlude, "a brief period of a few centuries when the power of a single city extended beyond the Mediterranean zone to embrace temperate Europe, bringing a huge territory within a single administrative and financial system. But the empire was innately unstable. By AD 300 it had already begun to fragment and the infrastructure was showing signs of failure. Within a century it was all over and the regional patchwork had re-established itself. What was left of the Empire was now reduced to an enclave in the east Mediterranean with its capital at Constantinople."

With the collapse of the unified Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, long established communication networks were disrupted. East-West connections suffered most. As relatively stable Germanic kingdoms were established, so new routes emerged around the North Sea and along the Rhine. By the time Charlemagne was crowned King of the Franks and Lombards in 800 AD, a new stability had emerged in Europe although it was soon to be subject to frequent Viking raids. But the pattern of the Mediterranean had changed markedly, with the establishment of Islamic states on the southern shores which took control of the Mediterranean islands and expanded into Spain, Italy and even made forays into France. This was the environment in which the independent city states of Naples, Amalfi and Venice emerged as centres of trade. By the year 1000, where Cunliffe's book finishes, Europe had begun to take on a different shape which was to provide the foundations of much of the Medieval period.

Cunliffe identifies two persistent themes that run through his account of Europe. One is the mobility of populations and the other is the interconnection of one area with another. "Large-scale mobility," he writes, "persistent at times, sporadic at others, was a feature of early Europe; and so it remains."

He makes a leap into the present and notes that "The flow continues today: population figures issued for 2006 show that Britain received 574,000 immigrants during the year while 385,000 residents chose to leave the country. Population mobility has always been one of the defining characteristics of Europe."

For Cunliffe, Europe throughout its history has been characterised by "intricate social networks by means of which commodities were exchanged and ideas and beliefs were disseminated." The Roman Empire gave these networks an institutional form. So important were such networks that "even states locked in mutual hostilities, like the Muslim world and the Christian empires of the Franks and Byzantines, could find ways to engage with each other commercially."

Cunliffe's history of Europe is not a history of the emergence of nation states. He has no desire to trace the history of this or that nation, or to find in the movements of population which he traces some legitimising deep history of the nation state as an institution. He never falls into the anachronism of projecting nation states backwards in time and inscribing them on the geography of Europe. His Europe, from 9000 BC to AD 1000, is a Europe without nation states, which is as it should be.

The political history of the period, when it is known, is sketched in, but Cunliffe's main interest lies in the underlying economic history. He acknowledges the influence of the French Annales School, or to be more precise, the second generation of that school which was dominated by the French historian Fernand Braudel, who stressed the importance of history of the *longue durée*. Although at 10,000 years, Cunliffe's *longue durée* is perhaps longer than even Braudel might have imagined.

For Braudel, space, geography, climate and technology were vital factors in understanding early, pre-industrial history. He was profoundly interested in material civilisation, the way in which production took place and its systems of distribution. This is a very fruitful approach for an archaeologist who must inevitably focus on the material remains of societies and civilisations that were often non-literate or only marginally literate. Cunliffe's focus is on population, the development of craft technology, agriculture and trade. As such, *Between the Oceans* provides a thoroughly up to date account of the productive forces of European societies prior to the medieval period. The value of this approach cannot be stressed enough. It is a robustly materialist approach to history that has no time for postmodern theorising. There is no fashionable phrase mongering here.

If Braudel's approach to history has its strengths, it also has weaknesses. These relate to two areas-historical change and socio-political history. Braudel was a conservative historian who, although living in a country whose name was synonymous with revolution, was averse to change, particularly sudden changes of a revolutionary character. He attempted to develop a form of socio-economic history that did not rely on Marxist concepts and stressed continuity rather than change. Braudel's method might be said to work rather better in the period chosen by Cunliffe than in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance that Braudel himself studied, but there are crucial periods in Cunliffe's time frame when the historian must account for change of a dramatic, if not entirely rapid, character.

The fall of the palace civilisations of Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece and the disintegration of the Roman Empire require historical explanation. Cunliffe says that they collapsed because they were unstable systems, but that tells us little or nothing about the specifics of either historical case. History demands that we probe the specifics of that instability, which are not only economic, but also social and political. Braudel has little to offer him here and Cunliffe tends to resort to a form of systems theory. It may have been true that Rome and the palace civilisations of the prehistoric Mediterranean were unstable, but then most social systems are, to one degree or another unstable. Despite this criticism, *Between the Oceans* is a book that will repay careful reading.



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