Book Review

Barry Cunliffe, *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

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The Scythians is an expansive study of a lost civilization with everlasting characteristics and a rich cultural and artistic heritage. It provides a sympathetic account of a nomadic civilization encompassing a wide variety of sources. Most significantly, it utilizes interdisciplinary methodology to exemplify a model of how to research a nomadic culture doing justice to its historical understanding.

The book is arranged into twelve chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the Scythians: its people, geography, culture, military, art, and history. Rather than following a chronological format, Cunliffe focuses on tracing the evidence in historical records as well as archeological findings in compiling a picture of the Scythians as complete as possible with available material. The book is rich with visual material: pictures, illustrations, maps, images of objects and crafts, as well as an addendum gallery with ten objects presented and interpreted in detail providing depictions of the Scythian life.

The Scythians begins with a history of the archeological excavations of the kurgan burial mounds revealing glimpses into the Scythian life. Cunliffe skillfully describes a fascinating series of excavations, which increasingly complete a connection between the Pontic sites to the north of the Black Sea and the kurgan burial mounds in the Altay-Sayan mountain range. The book starts with Peter the Great's interest in and support of the excavations across the newly discovered Siberia laying the groundwork for the development of modern archeology. Cunliffe covers the stories of the leading archeologists and their fascinating findings all the way through the twentieth

century in a seamless way that attracts the reader through an easy and captivating read. The main revelation of the findings from Altays to the Crimea is the extension of the Scythians across Eurasia with representations of the same types of burials, extremely well-preserved in the Altay permafrost. The kurgans housed much of the organic material including the body of the deceased, an array of gold objects, gold applique, buried horses, animal forms, especially horse gear, and weapons.

Nomadic civilizations typically do not leave behind extensive written accounts that would help us study and understand their history and culture from their perspective. This leads inevitably to reliance on the written accounts that are available from neighboring civilizations. The relations between neighboring powers almost always include a mixture of exchange of goods, skills, and crafts, but also wars. Consequently, the nomads are most often depicted as the 'other', 'uncivilized', and 'barbarian' by their sedentary neighbors. The prejudice so deeply engraved in the written accounts almost inescapably influences how modern historians narrate the stories of the nomads. Cunliffe does a great job of deconstructing the stereotypes and reconstructing the Scythian culture with all its richness and splendor reaping through all the archeological and primary source evidence. One feature of the book, however, is its overreliance on the primary sources without enough critique. The Greek sources depicting the Scythians deeply permeate the book. Especially, Herodotus' account of Scythians is recounted almost at face value. Cunliffe does compare Herodotus's accounts with excavation evidence to prove the rightfulness of his depictions of the Scythians. While the value of primary sources cannot be underestimated, it is equally clear for a historian that these early sources must always be adapted with analysis leaving space for interpretations and factoring in the subjectivities of the primary accounts.

Making extensive use of the Greek historical narrations of the Scythians, Cunliffe provides intriguing details on the extent of the Greek-Scythian relations and how much the Scythians were involved in Greek life. The Scythians provided much of the police force in Greek cities, which could be interpreted as the military dominance of the Scythians over the Greeks, at least for a certain period. The cooperation and later battle between Philip II of Macedonia and the Scythian King Ateas is another fascinating episode in the book substantiated with primary sources as well as interpretation of archeological evidence from Philip's burial mound. Cunliffe's skillful incorporation of archeological evidence is one of the greatest features of *The Scythians*.

Cunliffe effectively places the Scythians in political and geographical context. Beyond the Greeks, their relations with the Persians, as well as the Assyrian and Urartu Kingdoms are discussed in the book. The steppe with all its features leading to nomadism is described in detail. The value and utility of the horse is addressed. The ecology and climate of the region is also brought up with an extensive discussion of the Bronze Age characteristics in the region. Cunliffe also makes use of the pollen sample studies from the region to illustrate how climate change may have affected the rise and fall of civilizations, including the Mongolians under Genghis Khan and the Scythians in the ninth century BC. Both climate change and archeological evidence strongly point to the roots of the Scythians in the Tagar culture of the late Bronze Age, extending from the Altay Mountains into northern Mongolia. Looking at the burial mounds, Cunliffe repaints the image of waves of nations migrating from Central Asia into Eastern Europe through the steppes: Cimmerians in the ninth century BC, Scythians in mid-eighth century BC, followed by the

Sarmatians, Avars, and the Huns. He correlates the changes in the cultural elements of the burial mounds with the migration of new tribes from Sarmatians to Massagetae into the Pontic territories. The strengthening Sarmatians and their westward expansion would eventually bring an end to the Scythian presence in the second century BC.

Numerous fortified settlements also provide glimpses into the lives and trades of the Scythians. Established around the seventh century BC along the Dnieper River, these grand scale establishments were surrounded by enormous defensive structures. They typically contain evidence of iron smelting, using timber available in the area, for purposes of weapons, horse gear, and cauldrons. Bulk storage of grain and areas reserved for pastureland reflect the nomadic characteristics of the Scythian culture. These settlements indicate the presence of lively marketplaces for goods traded across the region and especially with the Greeks.

Tracing the artifacts from graves, the book makes a compelling case for Scythian expansion beyond the Carpathian Mountains into Eastern Europe. Ample amounts of artifacts denote an undeniable presence and influence of Scythian culture beyond the Pontic steppe: arrows, quivers, short iron daggers, iron battleaxes, scale armor, shields, horse gear, bronze mirrors, kettles, ornaments, and gold animals. Scythian cultural elements were found further into Europe including Poland and Slovakia indicating extensive trade and military contact at a wide scale.

Another fascinating point of interaction came with the Celts in the fourth century BC. They were displaced in Europe and pushed to the East to meet the Scythians around the Danube. Cunliffe traces the Scythian artistic style, specifically the animal art, in the evolution of the Celtic artifacts, such as pottery, flagons, and weapon decorations. The most astonishing example is an extremely similar depiction of two fearsome birds, found both on a shield excavated near River Thames and on wooden carving of a horse bridle excavated in a kurgan in Central Altay. Even though Cunliffe points out that there is no written evidence for Scythian presence beyond the Carpathians and all evidence is archeological, there is indeed an indication of possible Scythian reach into Western Europe. Numerous Anglo-Saxon historiographers mention the possibility of Scythian origin for the Picts, who were settled in north and east Scotland. While this theory is mostly discredited, the similarities between the Scythians and Picts are too numerous to underestimate it. From the art forms to love for the horse, nomadic lifestyle to the tattooed body (hence the name Pict), Scythian influence or a possible extension of a group of Scythians into Scotland deserves attention. Cunliffe's evidence from River Thames and his later reference to 5,500 Sarmatians sent by Romans to Britain (Ch. 12) only strengthens the image a prevailing influence of the Central Asian nomadic cultures across a much larger geography than is typically imagined.

Cunliffe follows the Persian name, Saka, to refer to the Scythians in Central Asia. He discusses extensively the influence of the Achaemenid Empire over the Central Asian Scythians. The burial mounds in the southern steppes of Central Asia provide ample material exemplifying the extensive exchange of goods, ideas, and artistic styles between the Persians and Scythians. Thus, a major point of the book is the mobility of peoples and goods at a vast scale. All the influences between cultures, Persian, Indian, and Chinese goods that are extracted from kurgans in Altay Mountains or the Scythian animal art influencing the Celtic crafts, according to Cunliffe, point to the mobility of peoples across Eurasia. People moved across geographies, boundaries, and borders and this mobility initiated cultural exchange beyond our imagination.

The Scythians presents a thorough picture of this nation's traces through the abundance of archeological evidence, which primarily depends on burial mounds, as well as a detailed recounting of primary documents, mostly relying on the Greek sources. Considering the lack of written sources left behind by themselves, the book does what one can hope most for. While the study of archeological evidence constitutes the strength of this volume, its thorough review of the written Greek sources, as well as engagement with carbon dating, pollen sample studies, and environmental analysis, enriches it with interdisciplinary methods. The Scythians will certainly continue to fascinate researchers as there is so much more to find out. One can only imagine what other burial sites might present us in terms of additional details on this powerful civilization of the steppes. Cunliffe's account is an excellent presentation of what we know of the Scythians thus far.