



Book Reviews

ON THE OCEAN: THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE ATLANTIC FROM PREHISTORY TO AD 1500 BY BARRY CUNLIFFE

Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2018. 631pp, extensively illustrated in colour, hb, ISBN 978-0-19-875789-4, £30.00

This 600 page book, lavishly illustrated with some 322 colour photos, maps and plans, outlines the impact of sea-faring on the development of Mediterranean and Atlantic communities from the earliest evidence of sea travel in the Palaeolithic to the 16th century AD when the limits of the Atlantic were first charted.

It is perhaps hard to believe this is one of the first books to consider the relationship between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean through time. For too long approaches to these two seas have been separated by established, and entirely artificial, divisions in academic study between Mediterranean specialists on the one hand and 'Old World' European on the other. All the more surprising given that both seas flow into each other and, as Cunliffe demonstrates in this book, the histories of the peoples on either shore are unquestionably linked.

Cunliffe's approach is of course necessarily selective and his skill, as always, lies in knowing exactly what detail to leave in and what to leave out. As he has done in his previous books on early Europe, he sees geography (physical, cognitive and political) as the essential factor in shaping the development of human societies. That is not to say he is overly deterministic in approach – human action is front and centre in his narrative – but for Cunliffe geography provides the framework that constrains and empowers that action.

He begins in Chapter 1 with a fascinating account of human attitudes to both seas over time. His focus is on the perception of the sea as a motif as expressed through various stories, folklore and mythologies that developed along the coasts. For Cunliffe these sources demonstrate how coastal communities assigned status to maritime travel and to the individuals who took to the sea itself. Encountering new people, places, technologies, knowledge and beliefs all worked to enhance individual status, as demonstrated in the heroic stories of Jason and the Argonauts, Herakles, Odysseus, Telemachus at Nestor and even Alexander the Great. Cunliffe extends this 'heroic' status of the marine traveller to the Nordic sagas, the accounts of

the crusades, the conquistadors and the status accorded to the navigators of Africa, the Indian Ocean and then the Atlantic. He considers the effect of the sea on belief systems through time balancing contrasting perceptions of the sea as a potentially fatal unforgiving environment, a motif for death, with those of the sea as providing opportunity, a life giving force. As he states simply 'the sea gives, but the sea takes'. Descriptions of the impact of the daily occurrence of the sea sinking into the sea on the cosmologies and ritual monuments of prehistoric Atlantic communities are particularly engaging in this chapter. I was also amused to read (as someone who grew up on the west coast of Scotland) that the Arabs referred to the Atlantic as the Sea of Perpetual Gloom!

Although at times he perhaps over romanticises the attitudes of humans to the sea, his attempts to try and understand what drove people to take to the sea in the first place, to risk their lives in this often hostile environment, are absorbing. Most controversially, he argues that a thirst for discovery is a genetic human trait, one that drives the development of sea-faring. For him humans are 'hard-wired for exploration' and that it is this 'restless mobility that distinguishes the human race from all other animals'. This human drive for discovery and exploration is a theme that runs through the book.

The geography of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean is described in detail in Chapter 2 alongside a consideration of the effects of winds and currents on navigation in the two seas. Comparing the enclosed and tide-less Mediterranean with the very different open ocean conditions of the Atlantic goes some way in explaining not only the establishment of two very different sea-faring traditions but also of differing mind sets. Sailors operating in the calm, enclosed waters of *Mare Nostrum* needed a completely different set of practical, mental and emotional skills from those sailing the rough, apparently limitless Atlantic.

Then we set sail. Over the next ten chapters – with a brief respite to consider ship technology in Chapter 7 – Cunliffe charts human developments along the two seas over some one hundred thousand years. Its breath-taking stuff covering the arrival of modern human groups up to the establishment of European kingdoms and trans-Atlantic trade routes in the 16th century AD. Cunliffe's geographical lens focuses on different areas, constantly shifting scale and periods to highlight particular points. Always ensuring we stay on course, he unravels coherent interpretive strands from complex archaeological and historical data, including enough detail and specific examples to underpin his argument and keep the reader engaged. As befits a maritime perspective, contact and trade pervade the narrative; the sea viewed as a facilitator for change through the movement of people, objects and ideas.

Standing back from the detail allows Cunliffe to express numerous long-term insights on western European developments. For most of the prehistoric period, for example, the Atlantic influences the Mediterranean more strongly rather than vice versa, as seen through the distribution of megalithic monuments and bell beakers. The seas are only properly united from the beginning of the first millennium BC first through the activities of the Phoenicians, establishing colonies the length of the Mediterranean and linking with Atlantic networks along the coasts of Portugal and North Africa. Cunliffe stresses, quite rightly, that the achievements of the Phoenicians have long been underestimated by scholars more concerned with Greeks and Romans. Of the latter he charts their extraordinary maritime story, taking to the sea somewhat reluctantly against Carthage but then adapting quickly to eventually control the whole of the Mediterranean even though they never become quite at ease with the open conditions of the Atlantic. From the end of the Viking period he begins to chart the commercial impetus of Europe to reach the Orient making sense of the disparate evidence for the medieval maritime world. Cunliffe argues it was the intensification of fishing expeditions, driven by the need to feed a growing western European population, which directly helped to forge a strong maritime capability in the region by the late medieval period. A capability that was the combination of the technologies and traditions of both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and ultimately enabled western Europe to cross the Atlantic Ocean and discover the New World.

To help us visualise space as people in the past may have done Cunliffe uses his now trademark device of presenting maps in a different orientation and perspective than normal to challenge our 'comfortable geographical complacency'. All of the maps in this volume are aligned with west at the top of the page, 'giving prime place to the setting of the sun' and allow us to take a 'sea-wise view of the world'.

In common with his previous books there are no footnotes or references in the text. There is an extensive guide to further reading at the back of the book but it is still frustrating not to be able to quickly track down the source of an idea or comment while reading the text itself. The usual argument is that this is done to keep the prose flowing and free from scholarly clutter for the general reader but such a view can be questioned given the spate of recent, very successful popular science books that are easy to read but have full bibliographies and footnotes.

In placing the sea, or rather sea-faring, at the centre of his narrative Cunliffe is able to present an exciting new angle on European history where Europe is conceptualised as a peninsula between two seas. In doing this, he could be accused of not considering the terrestrial elements of the story fully, particularly the influence of land and river routes across this peninsula. However, this would be unfair. The book is not intended to be a definitive or exhaustive history of the two regions. Instead *On the Ocean* is about overcoming the bias of traditional land based

narratives, emphasising maritime Europe and what this reveals about our past. As such it is an important and enjoyable book, and one that deserves to be widely read.

Jon Henderson

Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Nottingham

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Editor