

Barry W. Cunliffe. *Britain Begins*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 568 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-967945-4.

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Published on H-War (July, 2018)

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Britain Begins is the most recent of Barry Cunliffe's many books on the prehistory and early history of Europe and Eurasia, addressed to a wide, educated audience and not just to specialists. This is a work of comprehensive and readable *haute popularisation*, and as such it cannot be beat. Cunliffe treats the story of Britain and Ireland as a whole from 12,000 BCE when the first settlers arrived in what would eventually become the islands of Ireland and Britain after the glaciers receded, to about 1100 CE, the beginning of the Norman era in England. The book is divided into fourteen chapters, generally chronological, ranging from the earliest times to 1100. Several topical chapters called "Interludes" are interspersed, among which are treatments of the genetic composition of the early British and Irish populations, a discussion of the development of language in the islands (specifically Celtic), and a discussion of religion in the Iron Age. The book begins with a fascinating discussion of previous scholarship on British and Irish antiquity from classical authors through the medieval and early modern periods to the twentieth century.

In this book, Barry Cunliffe (is there a prehistorian anywhere with more appropriate initials?) employs a vast array of evidence of all types, including of course archaeology, his area of expertise; literary texts; linguistics; genetic evidence;

geology; and ecology. This account of early Britain and Ireland is of course heavily archaeological at the beginning. In the later periods literary sources predominate and form the backbone of the narrative. As soon as written sources such as Caesar and Gildas come to be available, archaeology takes a back seat. Dependence on literary sources is especially noticeable in chapter 11, where Cunliffe discusses the Roman period in Britain.

This book is an example of "Big History": not, to be sure, the *biggest* history that looks at the universe itself on a cosmic scale, but big enough as a synthetic history to draw a sizeable picture, treating major themes in the *longue durée* of the human presence in Ireland and Britain. Cunliffe makes it clear from the outset that he is consciously writing an origin myth for the peoples of Britain and Ireland. In the preface he writes that he intends "to offer a narrative of the first 12,000 years or so of the British and Irish based on current understandings" (p. vi)—that is, to write an archaeologically and historically based origin myth. Part of this project is his explicit survey in the first chapter, "Myths and Ancestors," of previous understandings of the early history of the islands from classical times through modern archaeology. The earliest interpretations of the history of Britain and Ireland, which persisted until quite late in the twentieth century, depended al-

most entirely on a narrative of successive invasions from the continent of a variety of racially distinct peoples who brought in a new culture. The Beaker Folk, for instance, were succeeded by the early Celts; the early Celts by continental Celts; they in turn by the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and, eventually, the Normans. Cunliffe emphasizes the “movement of peoples” rather than invasions alone. This interpretive approach is certainly preferable; not everything boils down to warfare, but warfare can still be described as “movement of peoples.” Cunliffe interprets early history and prehistory through this lens: the origin myth of the Irish and British peoples is a tale of successive waves of migration rather than merely of invasion.

There are issues with the comprehensive “Big History” approach, though, and I will take up some space here addressing them. Cunliffe necessarily writes with a broad brush. It is also necessary that his approach oversimplifies the history. The attempt to tell a story of British and Irish development over ten or twelve millennia is too broad—there is too much information to integrate into a single theme. He cannot tell either the unique history of individual sites or the history of western Europe of which Britain and Ireland are parts. For one thing, regional variations within a cultural period make it impossible to say much definitively. For instance, for the tenth century BCE, diversity across the islands makes it difficult to write a single story: Cunliffe’s comment, “(t)here was ... much regional variation born of geography and climate, yet the period ... was a time when very similar values and technological skills embraced the islands and the adjacent continent ... ” (pp. 252-53) is so general a statement as to mean very little. In particular, archaeology needs more interpretation than do written records, since it does not contain its own narrative. Cunliffe’s comment about the purpose of henge monuments at the beginning of the Bronze Age (“the possibilities of speculation are endless,” p. 183) shows how limited an understanding archae-

ology can sometimes provide. Examples could be multiplied; it is a characteristic of Big History that a single narrative is almost always too general to mean much.

One result of Cunliffe’s broad brush is the assimilation of Ireland’s history to Britain. Including Ireland in a history that is explicitly of “Britain” has historiographical and, perhaps more prominently, political implications. For quite a long time, Irish historians have avoided using terms like “British Isles” to describe Ireland and Britain together. Cunliffe is certainly not unaware of this. The very title of the book, though, implies that Ireland is part of Britain, effectively making the Irish material secondary or supplemental—in any case, distinct from the British norm. In fact, this is really a history of Britain (or of England, actually) with other areas appended. The British narrative is the default. However, the two islands do not have the same cultural history. Britain is like continental Europe and not like Ireland in several contexts: see for instance the discussion of lowland Britain at the beginning of the Roman period, when southeastern Britain was culturally tied to Roman Gaul. The Home Counties are described as “Core,” England below the Trent/Severn line as “Periphery,” and everything else as “Beyond” (map, p. 367). Ireland is not even mentioned. Likewise, Cunliffe divides Iron Age Britain into three zones (p. 303), none of which includes Ireland. In Cunliffe’s overarching narrative Ireland is swallowed up by Britain, and so Ireland appears (if at all) as part of the British story; specifically non-British Irish history is elided. These are important issues in scholarship and in political views of scholarship.

Despite the limitations inherent in telling a story of thousands of years in a single volume, Cunliffe has given an excellent introduction to the period or perhaps more correctly, periods under consideration. In other works of this sort, details are often passed over, but while Cunliffe does not get into the nitty-gritty of archaeology and histor-

ical scholarship, he manages to combine thematic concentration with an eye for the telling detail. This is especially true in the early parts of the book, dependent on archaeological evidence. The book is superbly produced and is clearly and engagingly written. The illustrations, many of which have appeared in Cunliffe's earlier books, are terrific and very helpful. Readers, particularly the readers for whom the book is designed, educated laypeople and students, will find much to learn here and can confidently use this book as a springboard to further study.

Note

[1]. See Barry Cunliffe, *Europe between the Oceans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), and *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Citation: John Higgins. Review of Cunliffe, Barry W. *Britain Begins*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2018.

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