

**Barry Cunliffe, Facing the Ocean - The Atlantic and its Peoples 8000 BC - AD 1500. Oxford University Press. Glasgow 2001, 600 p.**

Considering that over 70 percent of the surface of the earth is covered by seawater, it is something of a miracle that the literature pondering the interaction between the development of man and the proximity of the ocean is no more extensive than it is. Recently, however, the number of such published works has been increased by the well-known Oxford professor Barry Cunliffe, who has written a book entitled *Facing the Ocean*. In this work he attempts to analyze the effect of natural wealth of the Atlantic on the peoples of western Europe living on its shores. His basic idea is to illustrate how the sea has given the men who have inhabited its shores a mind-set and a frame of reference of a special, maritime kind. This, in itself a quite plausible assumption has subsequently made the wealth of the Atlantic area spread over Europe through the resultant navigation and trade, allowing cultural systems to develop. In the introductory chapters, Cunliffe discusses this interconnection, then switches over to a popular account of the main outlines of European history from 8000 B.C. to 1500 A.D. At the close of the book, he finally returns to the original discussion. Briefly put, the middle chapters rather confusingly contain little more than a chronological repetition of established archaeological and historical facts whose relevance to the main theme is hard to see.

This rather over-simplifies the whole process of cultural development, in view of the fact that an evolution of this kind is dependent on many different factors. It is hardly possible to isolate just one of them. No doubt the ocean is responsible for certain aspects of cultural development, but it is not likely that other factors, such as the degree of solar warmth and light, can be neglected. For instance, when Cunliffe talks about the wine trade of the Romans and Phoenicians, it is clear that without a climate favourable for viticulture no such trade could have existed. Somehow the author fails to establish a convincing correlation between the alleged cause and effect. On the other hand, in presenting his chain of thoughts, he clear-

sightedly agrees with Fernand Braudel's declaration in 1988 that "history is not made by geographical features, but by the men who control or discover them". This approach would have made the story contained in Cunliffe's book very interesting indeed, had he compared the maritime, Atlantic area of Western Europe with the less maritime one of Eastern Europe. This despite the fact that the length of his period, 9500 years will give some readers misgivings. Even half of this era would have called for a substantial effort when trying to gain a good command of the vast literature dealing with various aspects of what is known about human life in the periods and areas under discussion. Personally, I felt a great confidence in Cunliffe's ability to make a good selection of the literature necessary, in noting that he had added one of Braudel's ideas to those of his own while discussing the sources. Archaeologists making use of the notions of historians (or vice versa) are, amentably, not very frequent. But the complex of problems involved in the development of human cultures may not be as simple as many would be led to think by reading Cunliffe's book. I might add that Braudel also says that the study of civilization involves all the social sciences, of which archaeology is one (*A History of Civilizations*, Paris 1987:19). Another scholar, Lewis Binford (1983:53) in *Debating Archaeology* writing of the influence of climate maintains that "Cultural systems are not closed ideological structures. They are thermodynamic systems." I think this is worth reflecting over, since what Cunliffe shows may be only one side of the coin. It is well known that in social history there is seldom one single cause of a phenomenon, but several ones.

I am afraid that Cunliffe has unsuccessfully tried to solve only a partial problem and a special case. Loosely knit together with a fabric of archaeological facts of doubtful relevance it fails to convince. The main problem with this book, to my mind at least, seems to be that it falls between two stools in trying to popularize the past while attempting to make serious scholarship at the same time. For a reviewer, it is not possible (nor very fair) to judge the two kinds of approach by the same standard. I do not mean to belittle the

importance of popular interpretations of the results of scholarly work. On the contrary, I find them most useful and also very difficult to do well. But I certainly feel that combining the two in the same work is a mistake.

To return to the discussion about the impact of the environment on human development: there is no reason why the degree of solar heat (or the lack of it) in different latitudes would have less influence along the Atlantic coast than anywhere else. This includes not only agriculture and the products that can be extracted from the soil, but, in extreme northern climates it can restrict navigation and maritime trade in cold winters. In the northern Baltic, for instance, seafaring was impossible during most years in history until the introduction of mechanical icebreaking in the late nineteenth century. For instance, during the end of Cunliffe's period (A.D. 1500) most of the Baltic waters were icebound and the shores completely isolated in winter. For the present reviewer, who together with his Nordic colleagues has given these questions of seafaring in Northern latitudes much thought, these aspects seem to be of particular interest.

Seafaring is a very international business. The Baltic (especially the southern part) therefore contains well preserved organic remains from medieval ships originating from most European nations, which two or three medieval cogs from the south of Sweden indicate.

Arabian coins in great numbers have been found on the Baltic island of Gotland. Roughly 40 000 such coins dating from the years between 860 and c. 1100 A.D. have been discovered on this island alone. All these have probably found their way to Gotland with returning Viking traders who travelled the Eastern way to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean along various Polish and Russian rivers, dragging their light ships over the portages. There was definitely a lasting contact between the Baltic and the Mediterranean in this period. Cunliffe's book contains a whole chapter, *The Coming of the Northmen*, in which a lot of information is given on the belligerent Vikings who took the Western route to France, England etc. But about the peaceful traders who went southwards the Eastern way he says nothing, which not only can be considered as an omission, but also as another reason for the inclusion of the Baltic in the Atlantic system. After all, it is a bay of the ocean.

There is also a more general problem with this book. It becomes apparent as soon as the reader has turned a few pages that it lacks references, and tracing the original sources is therefore very difficult. Admittedly, the author has appended a guide for further reading at the end, which contains a list of literature in which the subjects dealt with in the various chapters are discussed. He admits, though, that an unreferenced text can be frustrating to anyone who wants to follow up a particular point of interest, but adding that he always has found the *main function* of an author to be the "creation of a text which can be read, and if possible one which can be read with pleasure" (my italics).

I must admit that I find it a bit difficult to agree with this last remark. The purpose of references (as Professor Cunliffe certainly knows) is of course to provide the reader with information on the facts and sources given in the text rather than "trying to impress him with the outward and visible symbols of erudition" (p. 569). What one kind of reader views as a book that can be read with pleasure, another will look upon with disappointment. This book is clearly written more with the general reader in mind than with the scholarly one. The style is brilliant, sometimes bordering on the poetic, which up to a point increases readability. The text flows smoothly and elegantly (perhaps at times a trifle too elegantly) over the glossy pages, aided by very good pictures and maps, chosen with care and skill.

There is, of course, no such thing as a good book until we specify the purpose for which it is satisfactory or unsatisfactory. From the viewpoint of the general reader this one may be excellent. A fascinating story, well told, with no unnecessary footnotes. Perhaps few of the readers will care much about the fact that many of its elements are based on the work of others. But for many professionals, familiar with Professor Cunliffe's earlier, brilliant work, the reaction will be one of disappointment.

Christian Ahlström  
Puistokatu 7 B  
FIN-00140 Helsinki  
Finland