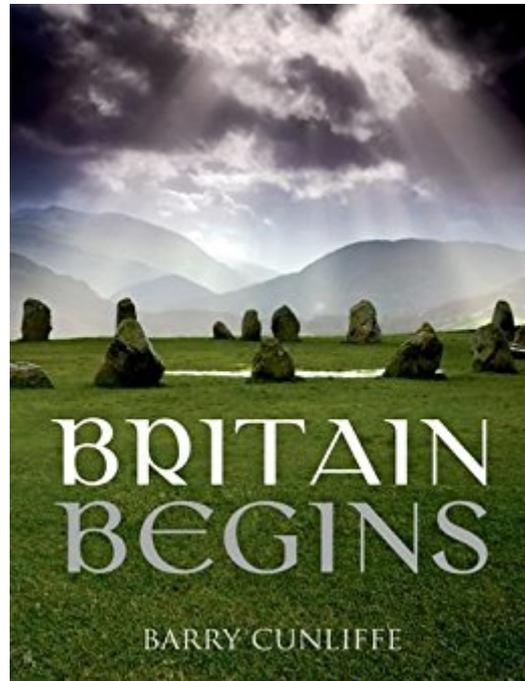


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Britain Begins



Synopsis

The last Ice Age, which came to an end about 12,000 years ago, swept the bands of hunter gatherers from the face of the land that was to become Britain and Ireland, but as the ice sheets retreated and the climate improved so human groups spread slowly northwards, re-colonizing the land that had been laid waste. From that time onwards Britain and Ireland have been continuously inhabited and the resident population has increased from a few hundreds to more than 60million. Britain Begins is nothing less than the story of the origins of the British and the Irish peoples, from around 10,000BC to the eve of the Norman Conquest. Using the most up to date archaeological evidence together with new work on DNA and other scientific techniques which help us to trace the origins and movements of these early settlers, Barry Cunliffe offers a rich narrative account of the first islanders - who they were, where they came from, and how they interacted one with another. Underlying this narrative throughout is the story of the sea, which allowed the islanders and their continental neighbours to be in constant contact. The story told by the archaeological evidence, in later periods augmented by historical texts, satisfies our need to know who we are and where we come from. But before the development of the discipline of archaeology, people used what scraps there were, gleaned from Biblical and classical texts, to create a largely mythological origin for the British. Britain Begins also explores the development of these early myths, which show our ancestors attempting to understand their origins. And, as Cunliffe shows, today's archaeologists are driven by the same desire to understand the past - the only real difference is that we have vastly more evidence to work with.

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Customer Reviews

Cunliffe is a noted archaeologist whose books are always a pleasure to read and highly informative. What I especially liked here was his examination of the possible origin of the Celtic language along the European Atlantic coastal region. It is possible that instead of the traditional view, which sees the Celtic language originating in Central Europe from Poland through Gaul and to Italy and Celtiberian Spain, that the Celtic language instead moved from the Atlantic coast, the peoples who eventually came to speak it, having come from the Anatolian region through Italy and along the Mediterranean to what is now Spain and then to the Atlantic coast; then the developed Celtic language moved to Central Europe. Cunliffe was greatly affected by the DNA analysis of Stephen Oppenheimer in reaching this view, but Cunliffe has long been an expert on the Atlantic coastal regions. Since neither Cunliffe nor Oppenheimer are professional linguists, it will be interesting to see how the linguists react to this view. Cunliffe also follows Oppenheimer in positing that the inhabitants of what is now England may have been speaking a Germanic dialect from as early as 6000 BCE or have developed one from their known frequent interactions with the mainland European Germanic dialect speakers. This would explain why Celtic has left so relatively little trace on present day English and why the Anglo-Saxon dialects became so readily accepted.. Cunliffe is less sure than Oppenheimer that we can differentiate the early Neolithic Germanic influences from the later DNA supplied by by Angles, Saxons, Frisians, and Jutes of the 5th century CE and the still later Viking influence from CE 800 on. Readers should note that these speculations take up but one chapter in a many chaptered book on early Britain.

Barry Cunliffe is one of the leading lights in the study of European prehistory. This is a wonderful (and highly readable) overview of the latest thinking about the prehistory of Britain and its environment. Thorough without being boring and overly detailed, scholarly without being inaccessible, "Britain Begins" is one of the best books on prehistory and archaeology I've read in a long time. Cunliffe brings together archaeology, climatology, geology, genetics and linguistics to set out a comprehensive view of the settlement of Britain in the late Ice Age and the societies that

subsequently arose there. A particularly nice touch is that all the many maps and graphics come out very well even in the Kindle edition. If I have one criticism, it is that I thought he was a bit uncritical of Sykes' and Oppenheimer's interpretations of the genetics. I'm no expert in the field but I know there is a bit more controversy about this area than Cunliffe's exposition suggests.

Another wonderful book from historian Barry Cunliffe, who can meld archaeology and history into a fascinating tale better than any other writer I know. This book traces the history of the British Isles from the earliest human habitation up to the Norman Conquest. Most of the book, therefore, is based on archaeological records rather than on written ones; it presents these so clearly that one can envision them, and shows how they suggest a pattern of history. There are a lot of unknowns, Cunliffe makes very clear, but there are also strong probabilities. Absolutely fascinating, and an engaging read as well

The settling of the islands that would one day come to be known as Great Britain is one of the most fascinating times of history, as so much of what would become Western Europe was shaped and formed by these early periods and yet it is also one of the lesser known periods of history. But thanks to numerous advancements and discoveries made in the fields of archaeology and genetics, Barry Cunliffe brings readers the new definitive text on the founding of a nation, people and culture. Cunliffe is a renowned British professor who has specialized in archaeology and is known for his excellent history books on early Britain and Europe, including *The Ancient Celts*, *Facing the Ocean* and *Between the Oceans*. In *Britain Begins*, he takes readers far back, starting with the myths and ancestors of Britain and then leading into shortly after the end of the last ice age, when the freezing waters retreated and Britain became an island once again. He then takes the reader down a detailed and fascinating history road addressing who the ancient Britons were, the settling of the Celts, on through the Roman invasion and ruling period, up to the Anglo-Saxon and then Norman invasions. It is rare to see a book that ends with the battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror, but this is not just any history book. Scholars and fans of the history will both delight in owning *Britain Begins* with its detailed text, numerous photos and illustrations lending visual proof and answers to a period that up until now has remained relatively unknown. Originally written on March 24, 2014

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This book is written by an archeologist (a good one at that) and thus it covers with some detail our

understanding of ancient Britain through that lens. It lacks, however, in providing additional context and generally does not provide information from other areas of study to create a fuller picture of British ancient history. The figures are typically diagrams of archeology sites, etc. It is a handsome book--beautifully put together. I disagree with describing review that it is perfect for the beginner. It has way too much archeological detail and too little contextual overview of early Britain.

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