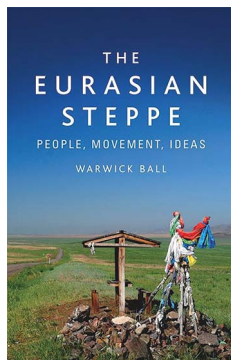


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WARWICK BALL. 2021. *The Eurasian Steppe: people, movement, ideas*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 978-1-4744-8806-8 paperback £19.99.



*The Eurasian Steppe*, an updated version of Warwick Ball's *The Gates of Asia* (2015), focuses on the so-called nomadic groups who originated in the steppe and migrated west, eventually contributing to the formation of states in Eastern Europe and Russia. Following Anthony (2007), Kohl (2007) and Cunliffe (2019) in similar summarising style, Ball dedicates his first chapters to the major archaeological cultures of the steppe and introduces scholarly debates regarding Indo-Europeans and the term 'Silk Road'. While covering such an extensive temporal and geographical scope must necessarily result in some oversimplification, Ball fails to critically define the most important terms—the steppe environment itself, the 'nomads' who inhabit it, and their 'tribal' social organisation. Consequently, the text reproduces the 'boundless-steppe-roamed-by-horse-warriors' narrative, which has been successfully dismantled by other archaeologists and anthropologists of Inner and Central Asia (e.g. Sneath 2007; Honeychurch 2015).

The subsequent chapters discuss Scythian-related Iron Age groups, the popular trope of Amazons, and the steppe's animal style art. Ball gives a good overview of Scythian(ised) cultures from Ukraine to Afghanistan, building a bridge between Bronze Age cultures and later Turkic-Medieval groups. The chapters are based on ancient texts and archaeological evidence, predominantly mortuary, but the exoticising bias and elite focus, respectively of these sources are not discussed. The 'Amazons: women of the steppe and the idea of the female warrior?' chapter, an addition to Ball's 2015 book, discusses archaeological and historical evidence for female steppe warriors, as well as the roles of Mongol and Ottoman women. The case studies are followed by a digression on western Medieval female figures and Mother Russia, framed with a rather superficial reading of gender archaeology and feminist theory. In the chapter 'The art of the steppe: from animal style to Art Nouveau', the author reviews different types of evidence and styles commonly referred to as animal style art, pointing out its Inner Asian origins and influences as seen in, for example, Celtic art. While doing so, Ball reproduces nomadic stereotypes, and positions Russian folk art as the successor of the steppe animal style, while neglecting steppe art from today's Inner Asia.

Chapters 7 and 8, with their sensationalising titles 'Twilight of the Gods' and 'Descendants of the She-Wolf', describe the emergence of the Huns, Xiongnu and later Turkic (not Turkish) Khaganates in Inner Asia. The reader gets a good sense of their relations with sedentary states of late antique Europe, Central Asia and China. The chapter would have profited from a clearer, initial positioning of these 'barbarians' in the textual sources. Chapters 9 and 10 deal with the dispersal of steppe groups such as the Avars, Bulgars, Magyars and Khazars, leading to the formation of early medieval states in Europe. This includes succinct discussion of the

processes of Slavicisation and Turkicisation, the adoption of monotheistic religions and diplomatic relations with western European kingdoms, Islamic caliphates and Byzantium. In this section of the book, in particular, concepts of ethnicity needed greater problematisation, especially in the context of rising nation-states.

The next two chapters are dedicated to the Mongol Empire and its successor states in the western steppe, notably the Golden Horde and the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates. The legacy of these steppe empires in Europe is discussed in similar fashion to the previous chapters, giving the reader a good sense of the relations and tactics of the different political entities. Here, Ball defines the ambiguous term ‘Tatar’, long used by Europeans to denote diverse groups of Siberian and Mongolian origin. The destruction brought about by the Mongols, however, is repeatedly and inappropriately referred to as a ‘Holocaust’.

In the final chapter, Ball positions Russia as a ‘modern steppe empire’, claiming that Mongol invasion and rule was a major driver in Muscovy’s rise to power and, later, the formation of the Russian Empire. Ball discusses the ‘Tatar yoke’, as it is portrayed in Russian historiography, the development of imperial archaeology (read: state-directed plundering of Scythian burials for gold), the rise of the Eurasianist movement in the nineteenth century, as well as the recent appropriation of archaeological sites such as Arkaim by neo-Nazis. Russia is treated as European throughout the book—hence the description of khanates, which were later incorporated into Russia, as European; it is only in the final chapter that Russia’s self-perceived dual nature as both European and Asian is discussed. The author omits to mention that Russia’s ‘own Orient’, in Siberia, Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia, first had to be colonised.

*The Eurasian Steppe* summarises the archaeological cultures of the steppe but neglects more recent research, notably concerning archaeogenetics, and relies on outdated references regarding ‘barbaric nomads’, which are discussed at length, while crucial terminology goes undefined for lack of space. Ball tends to glorify Russian culture while neglecting Russia’s long-standing history of colonialism in the steppe and beyond. In seeking to connect archaeological and historical information with scholarly debates—especially nationalism, ethnicity and identity, as well as popular culture—the book is commendable, but it would have benefitted from greater engagement with current research on the steppe region and the social sciences more generally.

Despite these issues, *The Eurasian Steppe* offers an accessible summary of the archaeological cultures of the steppe across a broad span of time and space. Its key contribution lies with the description of relations between the steppe groups who migrated west and the more well-known sedentary states in Europe and the Middle East.

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