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‘The Far Edges of the Known World’ Review: Ancient Strangers

On the borderlands of early civilizations, people who considered one another alien met in moments of trade, warfare or simple human curiosity.

By Michael Patrick Brady

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An ivory carving, ca. 1300-1000 B.C., from Megiddo. The city, near Jerusalem, served as a strategic bulwark against aggressors. BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The writers of antiquity thought very little of the people who lived on the fringes of their own empires and had even less regard for the societies that existed beyond them. When the Roman poet Ovid was exiled from the capital to Tomis, a far-flung settlement on the shores of the Black Sea, he wrote that it was a “bitter place than which there can be nothing more sad in all the world,” and that its residents—his new neighbors—were more savage than wolves. In the first century, the philosopher Dio Chrysostom found much to dislike about the men who had settled in chilly Olbia (near the Southern Bug river in modern-day Ukraine), lamenting that they had traded their traditional cloaks and tunics for trousers, considered emasculating in Greek culture.

And while the fearsome Scythian hordes who stalked the Eurasian steppe might show you some hospitality by inviting you to dinner, Herodotus warned that you should be prepared to have your drink served to you in a human skull.

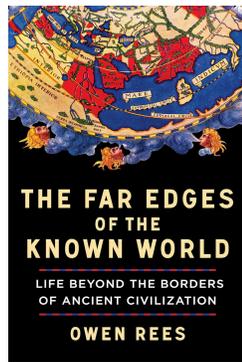
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The Far Edges of the Known World: Life Beyond the Borders of Ancient Civilization

By Owen Rees

W.W. Norton & Company

400 pages



For millennia, sensational accounts like these were all that was known about these bygone backwaters of the ancient world. But according to Owen Rees, they are more a reflection of their writers' bigoted imaginations than the truth. In "The Far Edges of the Known World," Mr. Rees, a researcher at Birmingham Newman University and the lead editor of badancient.com, a website that fact-checks common claims about the ancient world, seeks to remedy these misapprehensions. Using archaeological evidence, Mr. Rees aims to present a nuanced view of what

life was like both along and beyond the borders of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. This refreshingly original tour of the ancient world's lesser-known locales challenges readers to imagine familiar stories from the other side for a change, and only occasionally overextends by trying to rehabilitate its subjects' bad reputations.

From the Greek colony in present-day Marseille, France, down to the Great Cataract in what is now Sudan, and as far afield as Co Loa in present-day Vietnam, Mr. Rees explores more than a dozen places where the great civilizations of the past butted up against a variety of lesser-known cultures. Some, such as Megiddo, near Jerusalem, were strategic geographical pinch points, control of which served as a bulwark against outside aggression. Others, like Olbia or Taxila (in what is now Pakistan) were well-situated entrepôts that facilitated intercultural trade. Often, these sites served as interfaces between very different ways of life—on one side, a well-organized, largely settled agricultural society; on the other, atavistic nomads whose pastoralist ways of life harked back to the murky depths of human prehistory.

Mr. Rees's book shows the messiness and fluidity of life in the ancient world, where hard borders were notional at best and where cultural identities overlapped. Along Hadrian's Wall, we meet Marcus Donatianus, believed to be a North African soldier in the Roman army who led an outfit of Syrian troops that defended the wall against

incursions by Caledonian Celts during the second or third century. At Oc Eo, an important trading port near Co Loa, Roman coins dating from the reign of Marcus Aurelius have been discovered, suggesting that European merchants may have traveled as far as Southeast Asia in search of rare luxuries such as Chinese silk. And in Taxila, a place “where intellectual and artistic freedoms met with a merging of multicultural ideas and expressions,” imported Greek art inspired the now-familiar depiction of the Buddha. “The further we remove ourselves from the cultural centers of the ancient Mediterranean,” writes Mr. Rees, “the more we come to realize how flexible and malleable, adaptive even, the people of the ancient world truly were.”

While Mr. Rees is keen to dispel the myths ginned up by imperial writers, he doesn't prevaricate when the evidence shows that their fears may not have been entirely unfounded. Though he makes a heroic effort to show that the Scythians were not the one-dimensional brutes the Greeks believed them to be, he also admits that recent excavations in present-day Bilsk, Ukraine, seem to show that they really did drink from human skulls as Herodotus said.

By highlighting how cultural partisans of the past shaped how history was told, Mr. Rees aims to help readers see beyond the stereotyping that bluntly divided the ancient world into tidy categories such as civilized and uncivilized, citizen and barbarian. His book is a reminder that while neatly defined narratives may seem appealing, the truth is rarely so straightforward.

—*Mr. Brady has reviewed books for the Boston Globe and the Washington Post.*

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