Neal Ascherson. *Black Sea.*

Laurence G. Wolf

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The simple title, “Black Sea,” indicates nothing of the richness and complexity the author presents. The reader is, oddly, given no list of chapter titles, only the simple trifurcation into Introduction, Black Sea and Epilogue. It is only in the last, the eleventh chapter, that the sea itself is finally discussed in the shape of a well informed ecological evaluation. So this is really not a book about the Black Sea. It is about the histories of the peoples who have lived on its shores and in its hinterlands.

This is an interesting way to bring a reader historical and ethnic fact and fable, based not on any one era or people, but on a geographical region, the center of which is not land, but sea. It is a region whose histories are really little known in the west despite its role in classical antiquity, and, at least for the British, the vicissitudes of the Crimean War. Of all the people in this complex drama – the Greeks, Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Huns, Abkhazians, Georgians, Lazi, Mingrelians, Ossetes, Slavs, Jews — to mention only a few — only the Turks of modern Turkey are somewhat less attended to. Generally one learns a great deal drawn from archeology, legend and history.

What one learns is not only interesting trivia, like the item about the 5,500 Sarmatians dispatched to Ribchester, England, by the Romans in the 2nd century, AD, and whose descendants were still there in the 5th century. What subsequent fate did they meet? Or broader topics, as in the case of the “barbaric” Scythians and the reduced status of women as societies shifted from a nomadic to an agricultural base. Nor does Ascherson hesitate to relate these matters to parallel phenomena elsewhere in the world. We are treated to a side trip involving the adventures of the Polish hero-poet, Adam Mickiewicz; more centrally, Herodotus, Rostovtzeff, Gimbutas and others also appear, as well as considerations of core/periphery relationships. While the book is, in part, a travelogue, with interpersonal and land-
scape details one would expect in a well-written, serious travelogue, it is also loaded with insights about how human beings and their societies behave under various circumstances, which might well benefit professional social scientists.

In this reader’s opinion, Ascherson writes well. “The site of Olbia is 200 kilometers west of Odessa, a journey across gloomy flatness with nothing to look at until the road ends, the car stops, and you step out into a fresh south-east wind coming off the water. It looks like the sea, but it smells like a pond. This is the liman, or estuary-lagoon, of the Bug River, where it joins the estuary of the Dnieper and then flows into the sea. This is fresh water, where pike-perch thrive, which becomes brackish only when the southerly gales stack up the river-flow and drive salt water upstream as far as the Olbia ruins. But the rivers are so huge that their far shores are no more than dim lines drawn on the horizon with charcoal.”

Olbia began in the early sixth century BC. And on you go, led by the author through the history of Olbia, and, on other pages, to many other places and peoples.

Civilizationists may well enjoy this unique volume as a delightful divertissement, but if they are at all interested in this part of the world, or in any region in which cultures and civilizations meet in conflict and symbiosis, then this is a worthwhile volume.

LAURENCE GRAMBOW WOLF