

Barfield, Thomas. *Shadow Empires: An Alternative Imperial History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. v+366. Hardcover, \$35.00

Thomas Barfield's *Shadow Empires: An Alternate Imperial History* might be more accurately titled *Shadow Empires: Alternative Imperial Models*. Barfield's long record of anthropological work in the steppe lands of western China formed the foundation for his new categories of analysis for empires—endogenous (primary) or exogenous (secondary). Barfield is more interested in these exogenous polities, or as he terms them, shadow empires. These states emerged in the periphery of well-entrenched primary empires and operated in very specific ways based on their political and economic goals. *Shadow Empires* is less of a narrative history of any particular empire and is more akin to a series of vignettes based on a multitude of case studies across time and space. Barfield uses these examples to illustrate his imperial models and to encourage historians to look beyond Rome when building their comparative histories.

Shadow Empires is divided into seven chapters, each detailing one of his imperial models. According to Barfield, there are five exogenous types of empire: maritime, nomadic steppe, periphery, nostalgia, and vacuum. Each chapter highlights a few examples, generally beginning with an ancient model, i.e. Athens, and then comparing it to a more modern empire, such as the British East India Company in Mughal India. Each imperial type comes with a very specific definition, a checklist of sorts to help the reader classify what they are dealing with. Maritime empires are, of course, based on naval power, but Barfield argues that most importantly, they are concerned with the trading of goods, as opposed to the producing of those goods. Nomadic steppe empires are based on their ability to harness the power of cavalries to build their empires, while nostalgia empires exist simply because people want to believe that they exist. Periphery empires grow alongside endogenous empires, eventually eclipsing them

and, in some cases, becoming so strong that they overtake the neighboring empire. Finally, vacuum empires exist in sparsely settled forested regions, specifically in northern and northeastern Europe. Within each chapter, Barfield does not attempt to create a new historical narrative; rather, he highlights specific political and economic circumstances that pushed each exogenous empire to fall into one of these categories.

Barfield acknowledges as much in his preface, saying that “specialists will complain that they [his narratives] are woefully inadequate, while those not already immersed in the scholarly literature may consider the level of detail too high” (xii.) However, that does not mean that Barfield’s work is without merit. He is ambitious in scope, covering ancient empires in Asia and Europe, and his work on ‘forgotten’ empires on the Eurasian steppe is quite interesting. He moves beyond the traditional empires many historians use for comparative purposes—Rome and the Mongolians under Chinggis Khan and instead highlights less well-studied empires that might prove more fruitful in comparative exercises. Despite his grand ambitions, Barfield still manages to, rather bewilderingly, leave out large swathes of imperial history. The Americas hardly rate a mention, as does any empire south of the Sahara Desert.

Certainly, no monograph can be expected to create new insights into the many empires Barfield does discuss, but at times the complicated model system he creates does tend to elide the lived realities of these empires. These case studies can flatten differences and complications that existed within each polity. Imperial history is a messy business, but the nature of the book demands that this messiness be smoothed away at the edges in favor of a cleaner narrative that fits the model. Barfield is an excellent writer; both general readers and specialists alike will find new insights and engaging prose in *Shadow Empires*. Of course, the academic reader will also

find points of disagreement and oversimplifications within their own specialization, which is to be expected in such a wide-ranging book.

Amanda Ford
Associate Professor of History
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN