This book is about the earliest historical Central Eurasian steppe people, the Scythians, including their Scythian-speaking relatives the Cimmerians, both in Central Eurasia and among the ancient Persians and others in the West as well as among the Chinese and others in the East.

The Scythian Empire covered a vast territory and the ruling Scythians interacted with subject peoples in much the same way in each place, so the Scythian heritage lived on in regions far from each other which long remained out of direct contact with the rest of the world. It is thus perhaps no one’s fault that the connections among them have been so completely overlooked. I have aimed to rectify the situation and show what the Scythians accomplished. While working on the book I discovered many other notable, even exciting, things that have also been widely missed. Sometimes previous writers already touched on them, but their findings have been lost in a sea of scholarship from one or another perspective, while other things seem not to have been noticed at all by anyone before.

Partly because of the vicissitudes of history, in which earlier periods are less well supported by good data than more recent periods, shifts in scholarly interests have occurred over time and space. Work on the Scythians, the Medes, and the first (Achaemenid) Persian Empire, as well as the first (Ch’in) Chinese Empire, among other related topics, is thus extremely spotty. The Scythians are today almost exclusively the province of archaeology and art, along with some historical anthropology and sociology. Much of the writing on them is quite negative in tone. The Scythians are roundly condemned, often in terms that are unacceptable today for a living people, and the idea that the Scythians actually established anything resembling an empire is beyond imagining.
for most writers. Many have argued that the (Scytho-)Mede Empire is a fiction. The Ch’in Empire remains one of the least studied and least understood topics in Chinese history. And the Achaemenid Persian Empire is a major topic for several fields, but much of what has been written even recently about its foundations is based more on traditional beliefs than on good data and analysis.

In addition, the topics and associated data that archaeologists, historians, Iranicists, and Sinologists think are important have received quite a lot of attention, while those that they consider unimportant have languished, or they have been completely ignored, so that these topics are not much more advanced than they were half a century or more ago. This is especially true of almost anything related to the languages. Although there are linguists and other scholars who specialize in Iranic languages, linguistics as a whole is little known (and mostly avoided) by historians today. However, a great deal is actually known, or knowable, about the Scythian language, so we have more good hard data for Scythian history than it seems anyone ever suspected—more than enough to show that they founded the first true empire, and the biggest one for over a millennium, which stayed united for as long as most of the later and better known steppe empires.

Some Scythian-related topics have already been examined by many scholars, and are certainly interesting and important, and even well known. But I do not work in the biobibliographical approach and leave most such topics to others who are interested. Instead, I have chosen to focus on misunderstood or neglected topics, and especially fully unnoticed ones, which are therefore new, regarding the early Scyths and the Classical West Scyths, Scytho-Medes, and East Scyths (Hsiung-nu) and their relations with their neighbors the Greeks, Assyrians, Persians, Chinese, and so on. This history is connected to the later history of Central Eurasia and its relations with the peripheral peoples of Eurasia, on which my own previous publications largely focus.

Because of problems with the kinds of data and scholarship available, the many questions that need to be answered, my own limitations, and production issues, this book is organized in a somewhat novel fashion, with the most crucial notes retained as footnotes, and further details or
lengthier discussion given in endnotes. The chapters are mainly topical, so the narrative threads in them sometimes overlap.

In addition, although I have been generously given extra time to write, the times themselves changed drastically during the writing, above all from a terrible pandemic. Because it restricted me and many other fortunate ones to home, I was often forced to make do with sources already available to me, preventing me from consulting many good studies new and old. That made the book more of a challenge than I expected when I began the imperial-sized task of writing it many years ago. It has also taken longer to finish. I hope my loyal readers find it worth the wait.