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ZOROASTER AND THE LAST OF THE YAMNAYA

By Philip Stewart

Christians and Jews used to believe that the world had one language until its breakdown over the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Catholics thought the primeval language was Latin, the Eastern Orthodox claimed it was Greek, and Protestants and Jews held it to be Hebrew. When a Dutch scholar, Marcus van Boxhorn (1647), wrote that there must have been a lost language, source of Latin, Greek, Germanic and Sanskrit, he was not taken seriously.

120 years after van Boxhorn, the intellectual world had changed, and people were ready to hear a French Jesuit and Indologist, Gaston Cœurdoux (1767), renew the idea. Meanwhile, an intrepid French explorer, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, had made a hazardous journey up both coasts of India during the Seven Years War, and brought back texts of the Vedas and Avesta. He published a translation of the Avesta in 1771, which was immediately denounced anonymously as fraudulent by William Jones. Duperron became something of a hermit and worked on his translation of the Upanishads (1801). He died in 1805 and was not fully vindicated until 1830. Jones got credit for repeating Cœurdoux's discovery, without acknowledging its source, in a famous lecture in 1786.

Once the existence of a common source for most of the languages of Europe and India was established, the hunt was on for an account of it, making allowance for sound shifts (for example a theoretical **penkwe* giving Greek *penta* and Latin *quinque* for 'five'). Throughout the 1800s and 1900s, scholars studied the oldest sources, focussing at first on Sanskrit, Avestan, Greek and Latin. Twelve language branches were eventually distinguished. New material kept emerging: from Hittite and other Anatolian languages and the Tokharian languages in the Tarim Basin in the early 1900s to Minoan Greek, first deciphered in the 1950s. Other branches were already known but from less ancient writings: Celtic and Germanic in Western Europe, Baltic and Slavic in Eastern Europe, Albanian and Armenian in the South.

The most unarguable evidence of common origin is in the complex declensions and conjugations of the nouns and verbs in the oldest texts. Lithuanian proved particularly conservative in this respect, and many scholars learnt it. Shared vocabulary is used to build up a picture of the way of life of the Proto-Indo-Europeans, or PIE. There are of course common roots for family relationships, parts of the body and numerals, as is usual in related languages but, in addition, Mallory, and Adams (2006) find about two and a half thousand

shared words, for example, for mammals (62 roots, including 7 for cattle and 6 each for sheep and goats, plus horns and hooves), for foods and drinks (43 roots), for position (47 roots). Surprisingly, there is only one root for horse, **hekwos*, but PIE probably used specific descriptions for different stocks: ‘the swift’, the ‘glossy’, the ‘fearless’ and so on.

Archaeologists followed the linguists, finding relics of the oldest cultures thought to speak Indo-European languages. For example, corded-wear pottery seemed to spread through Europe at the same time as the early speakers of Celtic and Germanic languages. The hunt was on for the homeland of the PIE people. There were scholars who favoured an origin in central or eastern Europe or Iran; Colin Renfrew, 1987, argued that the languages spread with agriculture from Anatolia, but he has since accepted the growing consensus for the Pontic Steppe, north of the Black and Caspian seas. The people have been called the Kurgan Culture, from the mounds they raised over their graves, or the Yamnaya, from the grave pits (*yamna*) under the mounds. We have no idea what they called themselves, nor even whether they considered themselves a single people; their dialects must have diverged before they began to migrate.

The steppe region was fortunate with its neighbours, importing cattle and the wheel from Anatolia, bronze from the Balkans, wool-bearing sheep from Iran. Above all they learnt from their eastern neighbours, the Botai, who had tamed horses by 3500 BCE (6500 UE¹). However, the latter species had 66 chromosomes, the same as Przewalski’s horse; the PIE-speakers domesticated *Equus ferus caballus*, with 64 chromosomes. From the evidence of middens, wild horses were hunted in the steppe, but by 3000 BCE (7000 UE) they began to appear in human burials. Cowherds on horseback became the original cowboys; with ox-drawn waggons they could take fodder and water from river valleys to herds in the thirsty steppe. It was not long before warrior bands started invading Europe.

After the introduction of Darwinism, there came a dangerous tendency to see the evolution of languages as reflecting that of human ‘races’. One of the chief offenders was Ernst Haeckel (1879). At the end of his masterly study of biological evolution, he tacked on a family tree of 12 human ‘species’ divided into 36 ‘races’. His four lowest ‘species’ were woolly-haired and dark-skinned. His highest ‘species’ was *Homo mediterraneus*, divided into four ‘races’: Indo-European, Basque, Caucasian and *Hamosemiten* (or as we would now

¹ Dates BCE are given in terms of the Universal Epoch, UE, which starts in 10,000 BCE. This offers a culturally neutral format, with dates that move forward with time, and it avoids confusion between BCE and BP.

say Afro-Asian), but at least he made these four ‘races’ equal in culture. It was a picture that fitted well with European colonial empires.

The idea that Jews were a uniquely evil ‘race’ has its origin in the Christian idea that they – rather than the Romans – were guilty of the death of Jesus (which was in any case supposed to be the Will of God). Once some Jews embraced the Enlightenment – a few of them even being baptised – the attack changed into a ‘racial’ one. Others had already done the damage, which was to lead to the worst crimes in European history. Richard Wagner (1850 and 1869) made an insane attack on Jewish music, and his Anglo-German son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1899) broadened it into a sickening claim that the Jews were an evil ‘race’, corrupting the civilization of the superior Indo-Europeans – the ‘Aryans’ in Hitlerian terms.

Given the misuse of the term ‘Aryan’, it seems safer to avoid using the term ‘Yamnaya’ as if speakers of Ind-European were a unified people; white supremacists are ready to seize on the idea. Although Colin Barras is clearly not a racist, his *New Scientist* article in 2019, ‘Story of most murderous people of all time revealed in ancient DNA’, comes dangerously close to identifying the Yamnaya as founders of Europe. I shall restrict the term to the PIE-speakers in the steppe or first-generation invaders and otherwise refer to Celtic-speakers, Germanic-speakers, Italic-speakers or simply speakers of Indo-European languages – IE-speakers for short. The raiders spread their Y chromosomes far and wide, but there is no suggestion that they brought their wives. For the most part they interbred with local women or camp followers, so any ‘pure Yamnaya’ genes were rapidly diluted. They did not spread because they had superior genes; they spread their genes because they had – for the time being – more effective technology. Above all, they became very successful in spreading their languages.

We know much less about their social organization or their cultures in the steppe. It is all very well to know that they talked about horses, cattle and sheep, but that tells us little about their society or their beliefs before writing was adopted a thousand years after they started to spread. At the risk of seeming speculative, I shall suggest an outline of these unrecorded factors. The Pontic Steppe extends between areas north of the Black and Caspian Seas, with the Volga to the East and the Dnieper or Dniester to the West as possible political frontiers. To North and South respectively, it is bounded by the boreal forest and the Caucasus Mountains. The climate is semi-arid, with a rainfall of about 250 mm a year and cold winters, so settled farming is possible only in the valleys of rivers and streams. The area is about a million square kilometres, equivalent to twice that of Spain or that of France and

Germany combined. There are no major obstacles to communication, but it would take a horse-rider about twenty days to go from one side to the other, given staging posts along the way, so it would not have been possible to form a single state, even if there had been an urban centre from which to control it.

We know that the PIE-speakers had kings (Latin *rex/regis*; Sanskrit *raja*), and Benveniste, 1969, stresses their role of delimiting boundaries. A hint of their possible reach is suggested by the Vedic account of the great horse sacrifice: a young stallion is selected, is richly fed, anointed and decorated and is then let loose, followed by the King's agents. At the end of a year, it is sacrificed, and any new land that it has visited is added to the kingdom. This suggests that there were a number of kingdoms in competition with each other for territory. There was probably also a problem of cattle raiding and sheep stealing across frontiers. Warfare may have been a perennial problem, with promotion of a warrior class.

80% of Yamnaya burials are of males, with weaponry in their grave goods, sometimes buried with their horses and/or chariots. Society seems to have been strongly male-dominated, perhaps with polygyny or concubinage. There is no way of knowing whether they had slaves. There were three main social classes, priests, warriors and pastors. These are identical with the three higher castes of Hindu society, and they may have been hereditary. The Amesbury Archer seems to be specimen of the warrior class, buried near Stonehenge in about 2300 BCE (UE 7700). He had arrow heads and metal-working tools, and analysis of his tooth enamel suggested that he had grown up in the Alpine region.

Language tells us nothing about PIE religion, and hardly any shared names of gods or goddesses have been firmly established. In any case, mythical beings have no fixed forms, and people easily adopt new ones from neighbouring cultures. What we can do is compare the ancient beliefs of those peoples whose languages were first written down before they were exposed to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Zoroastrianism. That limits us to the religion of the Hittites, Vedic Hindus, Greeks, Romans and early Norsemen. All of these worshipped multiple anthropomorphic deities, usually headed by a sky-father god (Jupiter, **Dyeus-Pahter*), and they often borrowed from their neighbours. They had priests, whose main business was to know the rituals and verbal formulae for animal sacrifice and to mark life events such as birth, marriage and death. It seems safe to suppose that the Yamnaya religion was similar in outline though not in detail.

The above description would account for the behaviour of the warrior bands who spread across Europe, Iran and India, but the history of their emigration may never be written. Were some driven out by internal conflict between kingdoms? Was there over-population or

were resources diminishing or both? Did they simply become aware of their technical superiority to other peoples? Did they have an ethos of military valour? At any rate there seem to have been a number of breakouts: perhaps before 3000 BCE (7000 UE) by the speakers of proto-Anatolian and proto-Tokharian; later by three waves to the West – by the speakers of proto-Italic, proto-Celtic and proto-Germanic – and two waves to the South-West – by the speakers of proto-Greek and proto-Albanian. To the East there were at least two waves, northwards by the speakers of proto-Balto-Slavonic, and southwards by the speakers of Indo-Iranian. The reservoir of potential migrants was not empty; the Scythians were raiding their neighbours until about 400 BCE (9600 UE). Did their cultures include an inbuilt sense of their superiority over others?

The life of Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) is hidden in the fog of unwritten history. All we have – but it is most precious – is a record of his religious teachings, first written down at least a thousand years after his lifetime. The Persian Emperor Darius I, keen to obtain Zoroastrian authority, claimed that he had lived about 600 BCE (9400 UE). On the other hand, Zoroaster's chants are in an East Iranian dialect so similar to the language of the Vedas that Sanskrit has been invoked to throw light on it, which suggests that he may have lived as early as 1200 BCE (8800UE). Even his physical location is unknown, but his language is a form of North-Eastern Iranian, suggesting that he lived perhaps as far east as Northern Afghanistan or even Tajikistan.

What is most striking is that Zoroaster seems to have been addressing the evils of the PIE raiders. He denounces their gods as demons, deplores their nomadic way of life, protests against animal sacrifice and calls for a settled way of life under a stable ruler. Most movingly, he pleads for kindness to cattle. All of this would argue for a very early date if it were not for the Scythians. Perhaps he witnessed one of the last outbreaks from the Pontic Steppe before it was finally invaded by Tatars or Mongols. However that may be, he cannot have known about the Jewish prophets, so his monotheism must have been his original thought.

According to Zoroaster, there is one creator, Ahura Mazda -Spirit of Wisdom – who is manifested in the world by six spirits (*spentas*) that emanate from Mazda. These are not anthropomorphic but abstractions of good qualities: Good Thought, Truth, Authority, Devotion, Integrity and Long Life. Three of these are masculine nouns and three feminine, but there is no suggestion that they are male or female or have any sexual relations with each other or with mortals. Authority – Khshathra – translated as 'Empire' by Duchesne Guillemin, was particularly important to the Persian emperors, whose title, Shah

(*Khshayathiya*), derives from the same root. There is also the spirit of Mazda itself, Bounteous Will, *Spenta Mainyu*, and this is opposed by Hostile Will *Angra Mainyu*. In later Persian, the latter became the Devil, *Ahriman*, who posed a problem: was Ahura Mazda, later *Ohrmazd*, responsible for this negative spirit? This personification of evil was adopted into late Judaism and Christianity, giving rise to more than two millennia of theological argument. Later followers also resurrected some of the old divinities, and Mithra and Anahita became popular in the Roman Empire (Reeves, 2020). Later Zoroastrians developed elaborate doctrines about resurrection, judgement, afterlife, Heaven and Hell.

The Jewish Exile to Babylon ended in 538 BCE (9463 UE), a generation before Darius made Zoroastrianism – more properly Mazdaism – the religion of the Empire. However, Jews also adopted the Babylonian calendar; given the proximity of Persia and the fact that many of them remained in Babylon after the end of the Exile, there was ample opportunity for the teachings of Zoroaster and his followers to influence Judaism, and hence Christianity and Islam. The wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, including many psalms, date from the last centuries BCE (the end of the tenth millennium UE) and were probably influenced by the worship of Mazda; the book of Ecclesiastes even has Persian loan-words. It is true that there was an earlier Egyptian wisdom literature, but it was polytheistic and would not have attracted Jewish writers.

Most intriguingly, Zoroaster spoke of a Saviour, *Saoshyant*. According to later Persian legend, he would be born of a virgin, who would pick up sperm while bathing in Lake Hamun at the end of the River Helmand, near the Iran/Afghan frontier. Could some female British soldier, during the recent occupation, have become pregnant with the Saviour? Now there's a fine theme for mythmakers! At any rate, the idea of a divine saviour may have influenced the early Christians. According to the gospel of Matthew, magi from the East (Zoroastrian priests, not kings and not three!) attended the birth of Jesus - the ultimate triumph of Iranian religion!

After 1492, users of Indo-European languages resumed their march across the continents, with their horses, cattle and sheep, their advanced weapons and their sense of superiority. Five languages now span the globe: French, Spanish and Portuguese (all Italic), English and Russian, with Dutch as an 'also-ran'. Only Chinese dominates an area large enough to resist. Zoroaster's echo in the form of Christianity, has spread with the languages; the world still owes much to the prophet of ancient Iran.

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