

The Strategic Partnership of Man and His Horse

by Joaquina Pires-O'Brien (July 2010)

Book Review of *The Horse the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*

by David W. Anthony

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David W. Anthony is a professor of anthropology at Harwick College, a small private college in Oneonta, NY, who has conducted extensive fieldwork in Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan. His book *The Horse the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, published in 2007, is a well organised synthesis of the theory that places the location of Proto-Indo-European in the steppes of southern Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan. He accompanied closely all the archaeological work being carried out in the Eurasian steppes as well as the research on the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European by comparative linguists. His account swings backs and forth from linguistics to archaeology with his personal interpretation of the archaeological-anthropological cultures at the centre of the theory.

Although Europe and Asia form one super-continent, there is an extensive mountain chain separating them -- The Urals, which spans in the north-south direction for more than 2,000 km; they are crossed by a seven thousand long belt of steppes that stretches from Eastern Europe on the west, between Odessa and Bucharest, to the Great Wall of China on the east. The Urals make east-west migration difficult but not impossible, except in the five year period just after the end of the last Ice Age, when the Black and the Caspian Seas on its West side, formed a huge body of water that isolated the inhabitants from either side of what is known as the Ural-Caspian frontier.

The region West of the Urals and north of the Black and the Caspian Seas, referred to as the Pontic-Caspian frontier due to the region above the Black Sea being known by the ancient Greeks as *Pontus Euxeinus*, is the supposed original place of Proto-

Indo-European, the language that originated the 12 branches of the Indo-European language family which in turn originated the languages that originated Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. The precise area is that of the steppes that extend east ways from southern Ukraine and Russia to Kazakhstan. This theory is known as the Kurgan theory, in reference of the Kurgan culture that formed the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European. It surpassed the alternative Anatolian theory proposed by Sir Colin Renfrew, which links the expansion of language to the expansion of agriculture. There are two problems of the latter theory, which places the first separation between the parent Indo-Hittite language and Proto-Indo-European between 6,700 and 6,500, when the Anatolia farmers would have migrated to Greece. The first problem is that the presence of carts in Europe only appears in the archaeological record around 3,500 BCE (Before the Common Era). The second problem is that around that time when the first carts appeared, the Indo-European language should have been more diversified and rich for it would be over three thousand years old.

Anthony's book contains a massive amount of evidence obtained from archaeology, comparative linguistics, anthropology and geography, including 24 pages of notes on the sources used in each chapter and 38 pages of references. He also took the painstaking job of cross-referencing a variety of sources to compile the tables and to prepare the illustrations he used to build his case. The illustrations include all sorts of maps, diagrams of excavation sites and settlements, ceramics, tools etc. One illustration I found interesting and gruesome compares the maces (large hammers used to crack heads of cattle) of Old Europe, Suvorovo Danube and Transylvania and the Pontic-Caspian steppes.

The big picture that Anthony so well manages to deliver includes the notion that archaeology is not just bones and fragments of objects. There are the thousands of old inscriptions in ceramic fragments which archaeological linguists must decipher, catalogue and compare. Dead languages are reconstructed by contrasting preserved scripts with living 'fossils' of live languages – recognised through their irregular forms. As Anthony explains, the process of discovery of the homeland of Proto-Indo-European started by seeking the earliest phase of Indo-European, that is, the oldest of the Indo-European languages. It is a complex process that involves

examining the ancient vocabularies preserved in the archaeological record or reconstructed by some indirect means.

The oldest branch of Indo-European was Anatolian, from which stems three branches: Hittite, Luwian and Palaic, all of which extinct. Of these the best known is Hittite, which was spoken by the Hittite Empire. Central Anatolia, a region that comprises Kayseri, in modern Turkey, was occupied by the Hittites as early as 1900 BCE, although the Hittite empire there was created later, between 1650 and 1600 BCE. The dating of Proto-Anatolian was estimated at 3,400 BCA, based on the date when Luwian and Hittite would have separated. The next question was when did the root of the Anatolian branch separated from the rest of Proto-Indo-European.

In the 'Old Europe' that existed before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, there were farming communities in the Danube valley which were "technologically advanced and aesthetically sophisticated". In the Eurasian steppes just north of the Black Sea, lived a culture of Neolithic pioneer herders that arrived there at around 5,800 BCE and whose cattle could have originated from the Danube valley, through the Caucasus Mountains. The harsh environment of the Eurasian steppes "*laid the foundation for the kinds of power politics and rituals that defined early Proto-Indo-European culture*". Their social organisation gradually became more complex and their culture prospered. They could convert grass, make textiles, tents and clothing and how to produce yogurt and cheese. They even composed poetry and valued it as a currency. In contrast to them, on the East side of the Urals, which had been cut off from the West side by the large sea that appeared after the last Ice Age, lived a much more primitive human society whose inhabitants rejected the domestication of cattle and remained foragers for the next few thousands of years. Both societies West and East of the Urals remained separated from the civilised world for thousands of years, until the society on the West acquired the habit of horseback riding and created a corridor connecting themselves to the other civilizations.

Anthony's account describes the construction of maps of the various regions of the ancient world showing where there were horses and carts, from bones (especially teeth) and wheel parts preserved in the archaeological record. After the peoples

who lived west of the Urals developed the habit of horseback riding, sometime before 4,200 BCE, a corridor of transcontinental communication was created putting an end to their isolation from the civilised world.

The oldest reconstructed Indo-European languages such as Imperial Hittite, Mycenaean Greek and the most ancient forms of Sanskrit (or Old Indic) allowed scholars to describe their cultures as “militaristic societies that seemed to erupt into the ancient world driving chariots pulled by swift horses”. The chariots empowered the Proto-Indo-European culture to penetrate into Old Europe at about 4,200 BCE and to spread themselves to the rest of the continent. The archaeological record shows that the old warfare was firstly based on chariots and that the cavalry of mounted archers only appeared around 800 BCE. It also shows that between 1700 and 700 BCE the chariots were the favoured weapons of pharaohs and kings throughout the ancient world, which in turn suggests that the Indo-European speakers could have been the first to have chariots.

Anthony’s account of the Kurgan theory that places the oldest speakers of Proto-Indo-European in the Eurasian steppes is fully documented by the archaeological record and is consistent with all other historical evidence. The association between man and his horse made all the difference not just in surviving but also for the development of the intellect. He shows how the same warriors in horse driven carriages who created havoc as they penetrated into Europe could also sing, give prayers to their gods and praise their past heroes in epic oral poems. Anthony’s narrative showing how the horse and the cart gave the inhabitants of the Pontic steppes the edge to survive and thrive is a well documented work of synthesis and one of the most fascinating reads that I have discovered in recent years.

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