

RELIGIONS OF IRAN

from prehistory to the present

Richard Foltz



ONE WORLD

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For Manya

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Preface

This book emerged from a desire to build and expand upon my earlier work, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions*, which appeared in 2004. The primary aim of that book was to spark the interest of the general reader in Iran's contributions to world history; it was therefore deliberately concise in its use of the available data, while aiming for a certain accessibility of style. The present volume, twice the length of that earlier work, seeks to probe more deeply and widely, devoting ten new chapters to various aspects of Iranian religious history while revising and expanding the original nine.

In the years since the publication of *Spirituality*, my interest in exploring Iran's place in the history of religions has not waned. During this time much new research has appeared, fresh questions have been raised, longstanding notions revised. Nevertheless, the importance of Iran remains for the most part sadly underestimated in the history of religions. What I offer here is an attempt to provide an enriched introductory resource for those interested in trying to rectify this imbalance.

Another issue I hope to redress is the oft-seen tendency, shared by those who study Iran and Iranians themselves, to divide Iran's history into two distinct periods, with the Arab invasions of the mid-seventh century serving as the watershed. I believe this division is a somewhat artificial one, obscuring a considerable degree of cultural continuity. The Islamization of Iran surely represents an important transformation, but it was hardly sudden (it took at least three centuries), and over the long term it invigorated Iranian culture more than it damaged it. Iranian history, moreover, is full of transformations, some of which were arguably just as momentous. Many were instigated by similar traumas inflicted by foreign armies—Macedonian, Turkish, Mongol—yet over time became just as productive.¹

This book is presented first and foremost as a gesture of love and appreciation to the Iranian people and the rich culture they have engendered over the past three thousand years. My own immersion in this culture dates back only a little over a quarter century and was both unplanned

and unforeseen. The experience has taught me, among other things, a very Iranian respect for the vagaries of life and the ultimate ineluctability of Fate.

I have learned much during the past twenty-six years from my Iranian teachers, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and students. But for getting a cultural education, it must be said that nothing compares with living in an Iranian family. There is a Persian saying in which a young man is asked where he is from. "I don't know," he replies; "I haven't taken a wife yet." If Iran has come to feel like a second home to me—and even my home in Canada is a distinctly Iranian one, as every visitor instantly perceives—the credit surely goes in large part to Manya, my wife and muse, and to her extended family in Montréal and Tehran, who have made me feel so much one of their own.

In my studies of Iran as in life in general, Manya is my primary and most valued conversation partner. I owe a huge debt to her insights, particularly the idea that much of Iranian religiosity throughout history can be seen as circumventions and subversions of authority. She was also the first to sensitize me to the popularity of "new-age" spirituality in Iran today, alerting me to some of its more fascinating manifestations and explaining their relationship to previous movements throughout Iranian history. I am especially thankful to Manya for contributing a chapter on Iranian Goddesses, which is based on her own doctoral research. The remaining chapters, moreover, contain many ideas and analyses (not all of them credited) that were also provided by her. It is no exaggeration to say that without Manya's constant inspiration and input, this book would simply never have come to exist.

In addition, I have had the benefit of much valuable input from a number of friends, colleagues and students who took the time to read various drafts of the typescript, either whole or in part. They include: Pooriya Alimoradi, Jason BeDuhn, Jorunn Buckley, Houchang Chehabi, Lynda Clarke, Touraj Daryaee, Almut Hintze, Jean Kellens, Philip Kreyenbroek, Sam Lieu, Jim Mallory, Moojan Momen, Reza Pourjavady, Ira Robinson, Nicholas Sims-Williams, and Michael Stausberg. Their suggestions have been immensely helpful to me, but these kind and erudite individuals should not in any way be held to account for the final text, which is my responsibility alone. On the publishing side, Novin Doostdar and the staff at Oneworld have once again shown themselves to be easy and pleasant to work with, to a degree that is well beyond the industry norm.

Finally, I am grateful to my parents, Ruth and Rodger Foltz, and to my children (by birth and by marriage), Shahrzad, Persia and Bijan, for giving me a sense of my place in the world. I hope that my efforts can serve as a tribute to them all.

R.F.
28 January 2013
9 Bahman 1391

TAXONOMY AND HISTORICAL APPROACH

The human mind inevitably circumscribes reality in order to conceptualize it. To process an idea we have to fit it into a framework, although in doing so we necessarily forfeit the big picture. When talking about a historical phenomenon such as religion, there exists a strong temptation to reify reality into a mentally manageable notion of a “core tradition” that remains in place over time and space. In the case of Iranian religion, scholars since Martin Haug in the nineteenth century and Mary Boyce in the twentieth have started from the premise that the available material should be understood in relation to a putative “orthodox” Zoroastrian tradition—whether measured in accordance with a preferred sacred text or with the claims of contemporary practitioners—an approach which led them to relegate any divergence from this contrived standard to the status of “heterodoxy,” or worse, heresy.

And yet, the more one explores and contemplates the various information history provides, the harder it becomes to force the data into a coherent and internally consistent whole. One is at times tempted to abandon such a project altogether and simply posit a given religious tradition as a collective of expressions, withholding judgment as to which form is most “authentic.” This approach has become popular in the field of religious studies, displacing to some extent the earlier tendency of starting from a body of canonical texts and marking everything else as a deviation (and thereby discounting the validity of most of the available data).

While it is unrealistic for any scholar to claim complete objectivity, I believe that it is both possible and desirable for us to remain mindful of our own cultural lenses and their incumbent biases, and to an extent correct for them in our analysis of the material being studied. One of the most common of these biases is the tendency to project contemporary understandings back into the past, leading to forced interpretations which result in anachronistic readings of history. A more circumspect approach would involve constantly reminding ourselves that the issues and values of the present age—democracy, nationalism, human rights, gender equality, etc.—are not necessarily those of people who lived in other places and times. A society can be best understood in terms of its own basic principles and assumptions, and little is achieved by measuring it against ours.

Defining Religious Tradition

The same is true for how ideas are defined, including religion. The word “religion” is itself culturally constructed, with a culture-specific etymology and historical development, and translates awkwardly into non-Western contexts. It derives from the Latin verb *religare*, “to bind,” perhaps in the double sense of that which “binds [a group together]” and that which one is “bound” to do. Scholarly understandings of

“religion” today range from the relatively restrictive definition of Jonathan Z. Smith and William Scott Green, according to which it is seen as “as system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings,” to the more expansive one of David Chidester, who considers as religious any “ways of being human [that] engage the transcendent—that which rises above and beyond the ordinary.”²

Both definitions leave considerable scope for variation and pluralism. Yet when referring to a specific religious tradition, there is always the urge to identify a particular strand as normative, which can be used to define the religion in question. This urge ought to be resisted, but then, how is one to conceptualize the religion so that it can be talked about? One solution would be to think not in terms of normative expressions, but rather threads of continuity (over time) and commonality (over space). To take one example, the sacrificial religion of the ancient Israelites described in the book of Leviticus may bear little outward resemblance to the Judaism of the Talmud, but they are connected by a continuous cultural stream. The question remains, however, of what exactly to name this continuous stream, since simply to call the whole thing “Judaism” would be highly misleading. Even today, Judaism, like all living religions, plays out in a wide range of forms, possessing a fluid range of commonalities and differences.

This is even more the case with the national pre-Islamic religion(s) of the Iranians. In my opinion, to refer to its best-known strand as “Zoroastrianism” (even if its current practitioners mostly don’t seem to mind) is as inappropriate as referring to Islam as “Muhammadanism,” and reinforces a parallel early modern European mindset. Moreover, notwithstanding the undeniable antiquity of the Avestan liturgy, the evidence for a specifically “Zoroastrian” religion prior to the Sasanian period is not very widespread, and it clearly existed alongside a number of parallel traditions, some of which it rejected and some of which it consciously tried to incorporate as the Younger Avesta shows.³

Thus, it is one thing to acknowledge the continuity of the Avestan oral tradition over a very long period of time within a particular priestly community, but quite another to imply, as many scholars continue to do, that it somehow served as a basis for the religious life of an entire society. More likely, as Bausani noted half a century ago, “we are not dealing—as some believed when these studies started in Europe—with one Iranian religion, but with various ‘religions’ or types of religiosity characteristic of one or another branch of the Iranian family.”⁴

The “Pool Theory”: Possibilities, not Essence

My own approach to the notion of “religion,” which sees the term as being, for practical purposes, nearly synonymous with “culture” and not a separate category, places less of an emphasis on providing a

description as such, than on identifying a pool of ideas and behaviours from which communities and individuals may draw in constituting their particular worldviews. I shall call this approach the Pool Theory: it posits that religion/culture is best understood not in terms of essential features, but as a set of possibilities within a recognizable framework, or “pool.”⁵ Some of these possibilities will be seen as so widely occurring as to be nearly universal, others as exceedingly rare. The Pool Theory resists, however, the assumption that near universality is proof of essentiality, since such an assumption will falsely exclude some elements from the data set.

This book devotes separate chapters to what appear to be the three most visible religious tendencies in pre-Islamic Iran: the worship of Mithra, of Mazda, and of the Goddess (who is most recognizable as Anahita). In accordance with the Pool Theory, they are not mutually exclusive. Zoroastrianism, in my view, is most properly viewed as a relatively late-developing sub-expression of the second of these three broad tendencies, which we can call Mazdaism—a more precise term, which also happens to reflect the actual self-identification of its pre-modern adherents. As to the contemporary forms of Zoroastrianism, once again, alongside the many obvious commonalities one also finds considerable differences, not just between its Indian and Iranian practitioners but also in terms of such basic questions as who can claim membership in the community and whether ancient rituals can be altered to better suit the present age.

What is “Monotheism”?

The very nature of monotheism tends toward another kind of back-projection. Monotheisms are notoriously exclusivist and intolerant. Yahweh is said to be a jealous god, but apparently so are Jesus, Allah, and—perhaps by contagion, since he is neither Semitic nor Near Eastern—Ahura Mazda. Since the followers of these singular deities now collectively represent most of the world’s population, it is easy to take religious exclusiveness and intolerance to be universal historical norms. There is danger, however, in allowing ourselves to assume that monotheism represents “a more advanced stage in the development” of religion, not least because a progressive notion of history is itself a cultural construct not universally shared among human societies, many of whom even today see history as cyclical or even degenerative.

If we attempt to suspend our own culturally-generated preconceptions about religion, a number of current interpretations begin to seem less certain. The oft-held notion of a global trend toward monotheism emerging during an “axial age”⁶ of “monotheistic” figures called “prophets” is riddled with problems, and only really makes sense if one has decided in advance that the facts should fit into this particular

historical paradigm. Even then, Zoroaster can be cast as a prophet and a monotheist only by applying extraordinarily broad definitions of those terms. Similarly, the “monotheism” of Moses (“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”) is relative, not absolute as one finds in later “monotheisms.”

In fact, a comprehensive view of human history would suggest that the default religious norm is in fact polytheistic and non-exclusive. Throughout the world, prior to and alongside the various monotheisms—which, by the way, historically speaking were mostly imposed by force—we find a much less restricted religiosity, where on a local level people may have their own particular favorite deity but not exclude the existence or at times even the worship of others. (The nineteenth-century German scholar Friedrich von Schelling coined the term “henotheism” to describe this phenomenon.) One can still see this approach today in South and East Asian religions, and the ancient Iranians held to it as well. Thus, the history of Mazda-worship is intertwined with that of Mithra, Anahita, and numerous other divine figures, even into the Sasanian period, when Mazdaism became the officially-approved religion for Iranians.

Orthodoxy and Power

Against this pluralistic backdrop, the emergence—or, as is more often the case, the imposition—of monotheism appears closely connected with the consolidation of power by a particular group. Accordingly, the ancient Mesopotamian god Marduk’s rise to supremacy is tied to that of the centralizing efforts of his devotees among the Babylonian elite. Cyrus the Great, living at a time when the Iranians were a newly arrived presence in the region, accommodated his religious policy to the existing situation, whereas a few decades later, Darius I felt sufficiently emboldened to assert the superiority of his preferred deity, Mazda, over the “other gods who are ...” But that was Darius’ preference, and not necessarily that of the Achæmenids as a whole. The partisans of Mazda would have to wait another six centuries before they could suppress their rivals with full government support, and even then their success would not be complete.

Mazdaean orthodoxy, moreover, like all suppressive projects, could not eliminate unauthorized views and practices, though history has long accepted its claims to have done so. While scholarship has at last begun to take seriously the multifarious religio-cultural expressions long obscured by a singular reliance on “authoritative” sacred texts for describing the world’s religious traditions, it remains difficult to form a clear picture of these alternate realities, mostly because their principal custodians have been the illiterate rural masses. Rustic societies are prized by anthropologists for the wealth of ancient rituals and beliefs they often preserve, but these are not always easy to isolate and identify.

It is a universal and ever-recurring historical pattern that when urban elites attempt to impose their religious norms upon the non-urban majority, the latter find subversive ways of stubbornly maintaining their own traditions by reshaping and redescribing them according to the models of the former. The Kurdish Yezidi and Yaresan communities, who preserve traces of ancient Iranian beliefs and practices up to the present day, offer interesting case studies in this regard. It is worth remembering that for rural peoples the preservation of ancient rituals, especially those connected to the cycles of nature, was often considered by them to be a matter of life and death, since failure to properly observe a ritual could result in drought, famine, infertility, and other catastrophes.

What is “Iranian Religion”?

The question remains whether such a thing as “Iranian religion” can be said to exist in its own right. The non-sectarian tradition of the Iranian new year, Nō rūz, along with its attendant ceremonies, provides perhaps the most visible example that it does. Also, since the Sasanian period at least, large numbers of Iranians have resisted the imposition from above of any kind of state religion, whether Zoroastrian, Sunni, or Shi‘i, outwardly following the prescribed motions but privately favoring the esoteric teachings of heterodox spiritual masters. Generally speaking, an affinity for hidden interpretations (*‘erfān*) and a usually passive resistance to imposed religious authority can be considered characteristic of Iranian spirituality.

Alessandro Bausani and Henry Corbin are two well-known Iran scholars of the twentieth century who sought to identify an unbroken strand of specifically “Iranian” religiosity throughout history, though their efforts focused mainly on demonstrating continuities from Zoroastrianism to Iranian Islam.⁷ A roundtable of Iranists held in Bamberg, Germany in 1991 likewise took the continuity of Iranian religious ideas as its theme.⁸ More recently, in discussing the range of local resistance movements that emerged in Iran during the period following the Arab conquests, Patricia Crone has claimed to describe “a complex of religious ideas that, however varied in space and unstable over time, has shown a remarkable persistence in Iran over a period of two millennia.” Crone’s thesis is somewhat circumscribed, however, since she largely limits it to “the mountain population of Iran.”⁹

Numerous examples taken from the Iranian religious “pool,” including notions and customs connected with water, fire, and light, as well as marriage ceremonies and other life-cycle rituals, are often dressed up in new garb or considered simply as “old superstitions” that nobody understands or questions. Nowhere is this more evident than in popular customs associated with the countless sacred sites that dot the Iranian landscape, including transformed goddess temples such as the

Bibi Shahrbanu shrine in Rayy, south of Tehran, as well as the country's ubiquitous *emāmzādehs*—ostensibly shrines to the numerous offspring of the various Shi'ite Imams but which in former times were probably in most cases Zoroastrian fire temples or other holy sites.

One striking example of this phenomenon of unwitting preservation could be seen in a report broadcast by Iranian state television on 19 March 2012, on the eve of Nō rūz, from the shrine of Halimeh and Hakimeh Khatoon in Shahr-e Kord, in the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran. The report showed women bringing lamps to be lit at the shrine, which they would then take home again. Unbeknown to themselves, these women were most likely preserving an ancient ritual by which Iranians carried back to their individual houses a portion of the sacred fire kept at their local temple. The televised report made no such connection, but as will be obvious to the reader of the pages that follow, the belief that Iran's deep cultural continuity is both real and important underlies the writing of this book.

A Note on Transliteration

The Avestan alphabet is phonetic, making transliterations fairly straightforward. Renderings of Middle Persian are more difficult, given the notorious ambiguities of the Pahlavi alphabet. For the Arabo-Persian alphabet, an attempt has been made here to strike a compromise between adherence to a regular system of representing the various letters and representation of how words and names are actually pronounced in modern standard Persian, along with a third variable which is that some of them have established English forms. In Chapter 16, acknowledgment is made to Bahá'í usage. In sum, the transliteration choices made in this book are somewhat irregular, but hopefully not illogical.

Historical Timeline

ca. 4000 BCE	Proto-Indo-European speakers in Central Eurasia
ca. 2000–1000 BCE	Aryans migrate onto Iranian plateau
ca. 1750 BCE	Life of Abraham
ca. 1200–1000 BCE (?)	Life of Zoroaster (Zaraθuštra)
549–330 BCE	Achæmenid Empire
539 BCE	Conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus the Great, liberation of Israelites and other subject peoples
ca. 500 BCE	Life of Siddhartha Gautama, the “Buddha”
247 BCE–224 CE	Parthian Empire
3 BCE–30 CE	Life of Jesus of Nazareth
1st–4th CE	Spread of Roman Mithraism
ca. 100–300 CE	Mandaeans relocate from Palestine to Southern Mesopotamia
216–276 CE	Life of Mani
224–651 CE	Sasanian Empire, codification of Zoroastrianism
520s CE	Mazdakite movement
ca. 570–632 CE	Life of Muhammad
641 CE	Arabs defeat Sasanian army at battle of Nahāvand, begin conquest of Iran
680 CE	Massacre of third Shi‘ite Imam, Husayn, along with his followers, by forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid at Karbala in southern Iraq
749–751 CE	Iran-based Abbasid revolution overthrows Umayyad dynasty
816–837 CE	Rebellion of Babak
ca. 980–1010 CE	The <i>Book of Kings</i> (<i>Shāh-nāmeḥ</i>) redacted into verse by Abo’l-Qasem Ferdowsi from various Iranian heroic epics

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ca. 1070–1162	Life of Shaykh ‘Adi
1090–1256 CE	Assassins wage campaigns from base at Alamut castle
1207–1273 CE	Life of mystic poet Jalal al-din Rumi
1256–1336 CE	Mongol Il-Khan dynasty rules Iran
1258 CE	Mongol conquest of Baghdad, end of Abbasid Caliphate
1370–1405 CE	Central Asian Turkic empire of Timur Barlas (Tamerlane)
14th–15th CE	Life of Soltan Sohak
1501 CE	Foundation of Safavid Empire; formerly Sunni Iran becomes Twelver Shi‘ite state
1785–1925 CE	Qajar dynasty
1819–1852 CE	Life of the Báb
1817–1892 CE	Life of Bahá’u’lláh
1925–1979 CE	Pahlavi dynasty
1978–1980 CE	Iranian revolution; Iran becomes Islamic Republic

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Part 1

**ANCIENT IRANIAN
RELIGIONS**

The Origins of Iranian Religion

Iranian cultural identity has been strong for over twenty-five centuries, yet it remains hard to define. The notion of “Iranian” as contrasted with “non-Iranian” (*anērān*) dates at least back to Achæmenid times (ca. 550–330 BCE), but even then the Iranian lands were considered to include non-Iranians, and the relationship between “Iranian” (*aryān*) and “Persian” (*pārsa*) was, as it remains today, somewhat confused. In the famous inscriptions at Naqš-e Rostam, Darius I describes himself as “an Achæmenid, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage” (*baxāmanišiya pārsa pārsahayā puça ariya ariya ciça*).¹

It is possible, however, to point out at least two features that have been strongly associated with Iranian identity throughout history. One is land—broadly speaking, the so-called Iranian plateau, which occupies the nexus between the Caucasus Mountains, the Mesopotamian plain, and the high mountain ranges of Central Asia (Middle Persian (MP.) *Ērānšahr*, New Persian (NP.) *Īrānzamīn*). The other is language—broadly, again, the Iranian branch of the so-called Indo-European family of languages, but often more specifically the language known as Persian, which is the official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as being one of the official languages of Afghanistan (where it is called *darī*) and Tajikistan (where it is called *tojīkī*).² “Farsi” (*fārsī*) is the Persian term for Persian, like *deutsch* for German or *russkii* for Russian. The English word for Persian is “Persian.”

In past times Persian was also the administrative and literary language of non-Iranian regions such as the Indian subcontinent and Anatolia. It is important to note that Iranian identity merely requires a strong *affinity* for the land and language, since many Iranians do not live in Iran, and many others even in Iran speak (or write) Persian only as a second language.

INDO-EUROPEANS AND THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS

In Iran's case, land and language came together during a period some three thousand years ago, following several centuries of southerly migration by nomadic bands of Proto-Iranian speakers from their previous home in western Siberia.³ These ancient Iranians, including the ancestors of the Medes, the Parthians, and the Persians, came into contact with the existing inhabitants of the regions south of the Caspian Sea, such as Hurrians, Kassites, Elamites and others, with whom they mixed and who eventually became Iranicized. Further east, some of their Indo-Iranian cousins became integrated into the more advanced Central Asian society, as attested by remains found within the Bactriana-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), while others continued their south-eastward migration into the heavily populated Indian subcontinent.

These migrations highlight why it is a mistake to equate language with ethnicity, since when different human groups come into contact they typically blend their traditions over time, but with some cultural artefacts—for example, the language of one group—eventually taking over at the expense of the other. We should therefore understand that Etruscans, Aztecs, and others did not “die out” or become exterminated, so much as adopt the language (Latin, Spanish) and many of the customs and beliefs of their conquerors. The same is true for the ancient inhabitants of the Iranian plateau. What is less apparent are the influences that went the other way, from conquered peoples to their conquerors, but in many cases these can, at least to some extent, be surmised.

Since historically speaking this process of encounter and mutual influence ultimately takes the form of infinite regression, the same remarks could be made about the constitution of prehistoric peoples of the Central Eurasian steppes, whose ethnic or racial homogeneity cannot be presumed. Their culture must already have been a composite of previous encounters between distinct groups of people, including the inhabitants of the so-called BMAC.⁴ But beyond a certain point, the details disappear over the horizon of history like a ship sailing into the sunset.

Thus, in attempting to reconstruct the cultural and belief system of the Iranians' prehistoric ancestors, we must be content to abandon our quest for “ultimate” origins and focus our attention on the period about six thousand years ago (give or take a millennium or so), long before these peoples began their migration into what is now Iran. By applying the methodologies of historical linguistics to literary vestiges which survive in various languages of the so-called Indo-European family (which includes the Germanic, Celtic, Romance, Greek, Slavic, Iranian, Indic, and many other branches), and combining this understanding with archaeological evidence from areas where these languages came to be spoken, scholars have begun to form a picture of the culture of

the prehistoric steppe peoples who spoke the ancestor language now referred to as “Proto-Indo-European,” or PIE.

For example, common derivations of the name for the sky god worshiped as “Father” (**ph₂tér*) by the PIEs, **deiwós*,⁵ can be found in many Indo-European languages: *Ju(piter)* in Latin, *Zeus* in Greek, and *Tiw* in Old English—Tuesday (Tiw’s day) being originally devoted to him. The Iranian and Indian variants, *Dyaos̄* and *Dyáus(-pitar)*, respectively, refer to a deity who had become remote and was no longer worshiped by the time the Avestan and Vedic texts were composed. Other common roots suggest elements of the PIEs’ technology (**k^wek^wlóm* → “cycle”, “wheel”), economy (**g^wōus* → “cow”), environment (**bherh_xǵos* → “birch [tree]”), and so on.

The Aryans

Efforts have been made to reconstruct the PIE language itself; its grammar as well as its vocabulary, through comparisons of later languages which are genetically related, and projecting back in time transformations that are known from the laws of linguistics. However, since the PIE language was never written, such attempts are ultimately speculative.

Among the hundreds of Indo-European roots reconstructed by modern scholars, one finds the word **h₄eryos*, likely meaning “member of our own group.”⁶ A later Indo-Iranian form, **arya*, seems to have acquired the meaning “noble,” and became the principal self-designation (that is, Aryan) used by the ancestors of Iranian-speakers, who also applied the term to the lands where they eventually settled, which they referred to as *Airyānəm vaējah*. (The Vedic term *Āryavarta* has the same meaning, and the Irish name for Ireland, Eire, from the Old Irish *aire*, “freeman,” may reflect a similar notion.) In Middle Persian the term became *Ērān-vēj*, which is today’s Iran. Thus, etymologically, “Iran” means “Land of the Noble.”

Attempts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to construct a theory of racial superiority on the basis of a purported “Aryan” heritage constitute one of the most egregious examples of how history can be abused through inappropriate back-projection. Ironically, during the earlier part of the nineteenth century, European scholars searching for an “original” Indo-European homeland tended to favor the Indian subcontinent, based on their assumption, now regarded as inaccurate, that Sanskrit represented an older form than other ancient Indo-European languages. By the end of that century the pendulum had swung the other way, with racialist theories resisting the notion that European civilization might owe anything to the non-white peoples they had colonized. Still later, with the reassertion of Indian (and specifically Hindu) identity in the wake of independence, within India

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an “indigenous Aryan” theory was championed once again, though it has not gained credence outside the subcontinent.⁷

Although the controversy over Indo-European origins remains a live one, continuing to treat it as a competition is surely a misplaced endeavour. Despite nineteenth-century European romanticism on the subject of Aryans and apart from the obvious perversions of the term perpetrated by the Nazis, PIE society seems a peculiar choice as an example of early “civilization,” since by the standards of their own time they were far less “civilized” than the various societies—Old European, Minoan, Mesopotamian, Indus—they appear in many cases to have subdued. (One should note that “civilizations” are almost always brought down by “barbarians.”) Moreover, from a twenty-first century perspective the most distinguishing characteristics of this society, which include patriarchy, aggressiveness, social stratification, and illiteracy, would hardly offer an inspiring model, although Christopher Beckwith has recently made a grand attempt to rehabilitate them.⁸

Probable Homeland and Cultural Features

Based on the available linguistic and archaeological evidence, it seems most likely that the PIE-speaking peoples lived in the area of the southern Russian steppe, ranging from what is now Ukraine to western Kazakhstan.⁹ Recent research has supported an alternate theory previously advanced by Colin Renfrew, placing the PIE homeland in Anatolia several millennia earlier, but even if true this could represent merely an earlier stage in their migration history.¹⁰

Their mixed agricultural and pastoral nomadic existence was precarious even by prehistoric standards, since they occupied lands subject to an extreme continental climate of very cold winters and very hot summers, along with very little rainfall. They were a people living on the margins, both literally and metaphorically. To the great civilizations with which they were contemporary—those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus valley, and eventually China—they were entirely peripheral, though there must have been some occasional contact with Mesopotamia across the Caucasus Mountains. And in terms of their subsistence lifestyle, the harsh ecology of their environment must have kept them more or less constantly on the edge of survival.

It may be assumed that the particular life circumstances of the PIE-speakers significantly influenced their culture and belief system. This hypothesis is consistent with much of what survives as distinctively Indo-European elements in the worldviews of historical cultures (especially where these survivals seem more compatible with the realities of steppe pastoralism than, say, those of agrarian India or even worse, industrial Germany!). Indeed, part of the enterprise of reconstructing this ancient

culture, in the absence of any documents of its own, entails resituating what appear in their later forms to be anomalies—as with the Hindu *soma* and Zoroastrian *haoma* rituals, which must be performed without access to the original sacred substance, or the horse sacrifice, which was abandoned for scarcity of horses—into a putative “original” context.

According to the views of most contemporary anthropologists, pastoralism is said to have developed after agriculture, and not before it.¹¹ Presumably the ancestors of the PIEs practiced agriculture, but having experienced the ecological constraints of their steppe environment, many of their descendants largely abandoned tilling the soil in favor of a pastoral nomadic economy augmented by raiding. They did keep domestic animals, especially cattle and sheep. Indeed, wealth and social status were apparently measured mainly in terms of cattle ownership. (Even much later in Ireland, *bo airig*, “cattle-owning,” was the Celtic term for a freeman.) The PIEs endowed the act of cattle raiding with a sacred importance, and raids were accompanied by a variety of rituals which included the drinking of intoxicating beverages. The oldest such drink was apparently mead; later they discovered wine and the mysteriously hallucinogenic *soma*.

Sharing their grassy landscape with grazing animals also provided another boon to the PIE peoples: at some point, perhaps five and a half thousand years ago or even earlier, it occurred to someone that horses could be ridden.¹² The oldest evidence for horse domestication, in the form of bit-worn jawbones, comes from northern Kazakhstan and has been dated to approximately 3,500 BCE.¹³ To the PIEs would seem to go the credit for initiating the world’s first great revolution in transportation technology, an innovation that would be central to their eventual success in spreading out and conquering much of the world. No wonder that the horse would become, alongside the bull, one of the most significant symbols in PIE religion, attested in copious examples of later Saka gold-work, the Greek myth of Apollo, the Vedic horse sacrifice, and elsewhere.

If the domestication of horses made PIEs the ancient world’s most mobile people, their eventual mastery of metallurgy gave them the edge—a sword’s edge, more often than not—over those with whom they came in contact, even when their opponents were more culturally “advanced” by almost any other measure. Again, ecological factors, so cruel in some respects, favored the PIEs in others. More so than any other human group of their time, PIEs were blessed by their proximity to horses—which enabled them to extend their range and speed beyond what any prior human group had known—and, in the Ural and Altai mountains, to copper, tin, and eventually iron ore which could be smelted into durable weapons. A climate that offered only limited agricultural potential ensured that a constant need to attack and steal from others would be a permanent feature of the PIE economy.