

## Indo-European Gender Relations

**Overview** Language, once again, provides the leading clue to our understanding of women's roles in IE culture. The clue-providing role of language can assume many forms: language can help us to identify terms for social prominence, for administrative authority, for all those relationships that grow up within the family, then within larger social units, like the tribe. Archeology is also a resource for the recovery of PIE women's roles, yet because the archeological evidence provides us only with the sexuality and not the gendered role, of archaic bodies, it cannot penetrate as deeply as language, into the IE implications of 'being a woman.'

**The marriage rite** The locution for the marriage rite always attributes to the male the role of 'leader of the woman to his house,' an action after which the woman remains with the family of her new husband. The rite, as described, always confines the woman to the passive role.

**Male and female in PIE linguistics** Despite claims that there is a powerful strain of 'goddess-power' in PIE culture areas, and despite works like those of Marija Gimbutas, which celebrate the anti-patriarchal drives which she sees among the earliest Indo-Europeans, the dominant read on IE culture is that it was severely patriarchal--descent through the male line--and patrilocal, meaning that the married couple always settles in the home of the male. The father serves as a firm disciplinarian--as we see by juxtaposing IE usage in a number of languages--though the strength of the female is shown in a 'negative fashion.' It is shown by the close bonding of children to uncles (mother's brothers), nephews (sisters' children), or maternal grandfathers. While one's fathers' brothers are father enforcers, for IE males, and are all about control, mothers' brothers, uncles, and nephews are outside the 'patriarchal control system,' and can be thought of as loveable and fostering. The other familiar support system for females appears to be one's sisters' sons, who like mother's brothers are outside the patriarchal system. There is no common word for 'marriage' in IE, and no common term for 'husband' or 'wife,' though there was a common term for 'widow,' 'widhewa.'

**Some literary fall out that reflects the mother's indirectly fostering role** The benignity of the female, in PIE culture, is most clearly shown by the close relation of the mother's brother, sons, or even grandfather, to the mother's children. We can see this relationship in some of the greatest archaic epic. Cu Culainn, the hero of the Ulster cycle (around 1st century C.E.) of poems is trained and nurtured by his maternal uncle; Roland (*Song of Roland*: 1040-1115 C.E.) rises to the height of his strength and power, at the behest of his maternal uncle Charlemagne; and Beowulf (8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) takes his power from his maternal grandfather, Hygelac, whose daughter is Beowulf's mother. These literary texts probably reflect perspectives embedded in IE gender attitudes.

### Reading

Gimbutas, Marija, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*, San Francisco, 1991.

Mallory, James, P.; Adams, Douglas Q., *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, London, 1997.

West, Martin Litchfield, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 2007.

### Discussion questions

Is the influence of women in your own culture often hidden behind the culture's ways of describing itself--say as virile and aggressive? Do you see any parallel here with the IE cultural situation?

What special importance does the maternal uncle have in IE cultures?

We are amply aware of the existence of a female goddess of the dawn, in IE religion. But have we further evidence of women as deities in that religion?