

INDO - EUROPEAN SOCIAL HISTORY

Part I : Social Structure

Part II : Gender Relations

Part I : SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Overview Linguistics and archeology are the key to what we can deduce about IE class structure. To judge from the verbal evidence there was a more or less stable class structure in place, among the principal players in IE culture. Passing over the question of time, and stages of IE development--several millennia--we can identify four classes of the 'typical' IE language group; the kingly/priestly level, in control of 'spiritual powers,' including magic; the warrior class, assigned the job of protecting the community; the class of herders and pastoralists, who provide for food and nurture; the class of 'the praisers,' and especially the 'poets,' who were responsible for sustaining 'imperishable fame.'

The kingly class All linguistic evidence points, here, to a class structure which is patriarchal (based on male authority,) patriineal (provides for succession for descendants from the male line, whether they are male or female), and patrilocal (centered around the location of the male's family). Among the elements of power, in the king's repertoire, is his special closeness to the animate power of fire, and his (or his queen's) availability to copulate with a virility assuring stallion, whose stewed remains will be distributed to the people. The Indo-European term, 'to lead away,' that is to take the bride to one's home, in marriage, is a trademark indicator of the 'kingly male.'

The warrior class The warrior class probably consisted of single young men. Evidence--archeological as well as linguistic--suggests that these men pursued warrior cult practices not acceptable to their society outside of their peer group. Traces of lupine ritualism are prominent in warrior class burial sites, and there are grounds to see this cult associating itself with wolves and dogs. The horse and the attached chariot are the essential accoutrements for this class.

Herders and pastoralists From the fifth millennium B.C.E., and probably much earlier, we have convincing evidence of a large wave of nomadic pastoralists into the steppe regions of Central Asia, as well as diffusely into Siberia and North East Asia. During the following millennia, these 'herdsmen' would supply the food, nutrition, and 'caring' stratum of the IE social group.

The 'poets' Poets were the highest paid professionals in the IE class structure, valued for their ability to confer lasting fame--in a world insecure at best, when it came to recording the prowess of the past. (That fame was called by different names in the IE lexicon--*kleos apthiton* in proto-Greek, *sravas aksiti* in Sanskrit--and was what a warrior culture was all about acquiring.) Hence, of course, the great prominence of celebratory epic poetry in archaic societies, and the widespread presence of metrical models, which accumulate inside them the passion of nomadic people for whom fame was the only security.

Reading

Gimbutas, Marija; Dexter, Miriam *Robbins, The Living Goddesses*, Berkeley, 1999.

Bojstar, Endre, *Foreword to the Past: A Cultural History of the Baltic People*, Budapest, 1999.

Discussion questions

There are dissenters, within the culture of archeologists and linguists, who dispute the whole idea of cultural reconstructions, such as that of the Indo-Europeans. Where are you finding yourself on this issue?

It is a commonplace of world literature to maintain that 'poetry' is the one path to immortality. What do you think of that claim? Has great poetry been found to confer immortality?

What kind of spiritual or 'magic' powers did the 'kingly class' possess? Where would we go to find evidence on that point?

Part II : 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 (8th 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?