

Indo-European Economic Innovations

Overview By the early second millennium B.C.E. the nomadic Central Asian steppe people we call the Indo-Europeans-- Proto-Indo-Europeans, when we want to emphasize the original stock of the group--had taken over much of Europe and Central Asia. Our evidence for the existence and historical importance of these people, whose sway eventually covered an area reaching from the British Isles to China, is of several sorts: linguistic, archeological, aesthetic, by references made by other cultures. The difficulties involved, in pinning down the details of this loose and scattered civilization, can be suggested by the fact that their origins melt into both a much earlier timeframe than the second millennium B.C.E.--possibly even back to the seventh millennium-- and, at the latter end of their existence, that they melt into Vedic, proto Greek, and Celtic cultures. In other words the PIE's were a loose, often hard to define, but influential stage in the formation of a broad cultural band reaching from China to Western Europe.

Economy: linguistic evidence Much of the original evidence, for the existence of the Indo-Europeans, derives from the history of language. Starting in the 18th century C.E. in Europe, several observant antiquarians of language began reflecting on similarities among words and word clusters in a wide variety of older languages--ranging through Celtic, Vedic, Proto Greek, and including, say, languages like Lithuanian, Albanian, or the languages of the Anatolian plateau. Among the similarities noted, a large number lead to clear indications about the economic base of the Indo-Europeans. While their origins identify them as nomadic horse riding pastoralists, who gathered their food as they wandered, these people were, by the second millennium B.C.E., basically agriculturalists given to stockbreeding, as well as horsemen relying on that speedy source as their mobile attack force. From various kinds of linguistic evidence we can conclude that the Indo-Europeans had in their prime proficient skills in bronze casting, wheeled vehicle construction, to establish traction, oxen to pull wheeled vehicles with, and lynch pins and hubs for promoting vehicle efficiency. This short list of linguistic deductions could be prolonged, and would lead to an astonishingly rich set of prompts for understanding the basics of PIE economy.

Economy: non verbal evidence. Archeological, funerary, artistic--relief freezes; all these forms of evidence, over a vast time frame (as said above) and almost world wide geographical spread, underpin the basic economic picture sketched above. The physical/aesthetic evidence left by the IE's depicts or points to the kind of nomadic pastoralist, frequently warlike horseriders the linguistic evidence supports. Scenes of sacrifice, of traditional 'proto Russian style' burial sites, and of wheeled vehicles all add into the larger picture of this diffuse but coherent group.

Reading

Renfrew, Colin, *Archeology and language: the Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, London, 1987.

Cavali-Sforza, Luigi; Selestad, Mark; *Genes, People, and Language*, Harmondsworth, 2000.

Discussion questions

What do you think about the linguistic evidence used for discovering clues of the IE economy? Does that kind of evidence, which is our primary fine-tuner for understanding the IE's, seem to you potentially convincing and sufficient?

How much have we learned about the IE economy from our linguistic hints? Can such hints help us to understand issues like wealth-distribution or marketing practices?

Was there IE coinage? If not, what kind of barter system lay at the center of IE economy?