

## Indo-European 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 aphthiton* 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?