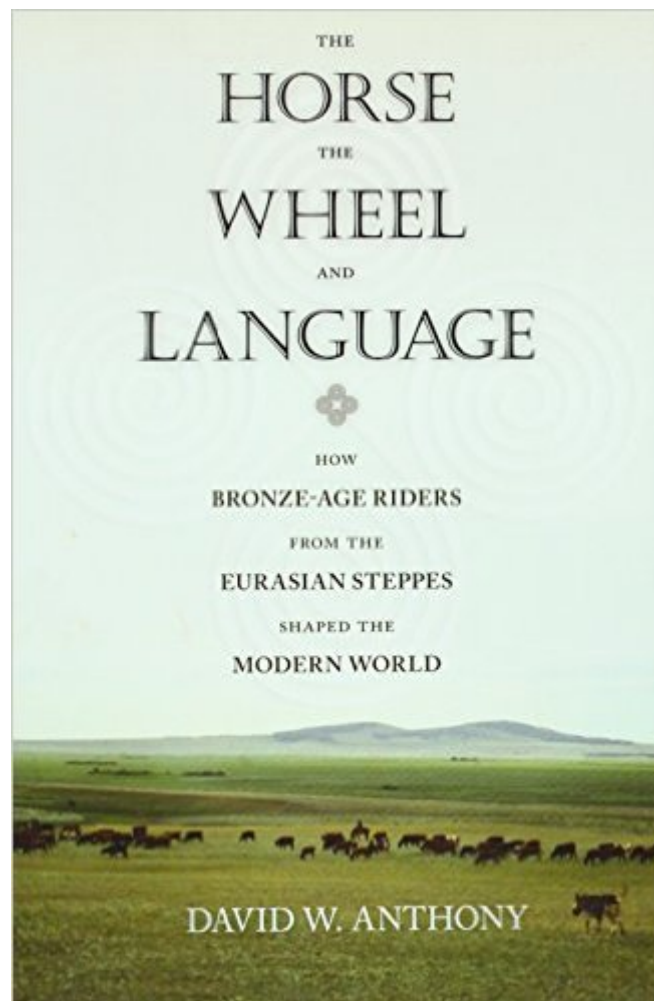


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The Horse, The Wheel, And Language: How Bronze-Age Riders From The Eurasian Steppes Shaped The Modern World



Synopsis

Roughly half the world's population speaks languages derived from a shared linguistic source known as Proto-Indo-European. But who were the early speakers of this ancient mother tongue, and how did they manage to spread it around the globe? Until now their identity has remained a tantalizing mystery to linguists, archaeologists, and even Nazis seeking the roots of the Aryan race. *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* lifts the veil that has long shrouded these original Indo-European speakers, and reveals how their domestication of horses and use of the wheel spread language and transformed civilization. Linking prehistoric archaeological remains with the development of language, David Anthony identifies the prehistoric peoples of central Eurasia's steppe grasslands as the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European, and shows how their innovative use of the ox wagon, horseback riding, and the warrior's chariot turned the Eurasian steppes into a thriving transcontinental corridor of communication, commerce, and cultural exchange. He explains how they spread their traditions and gave rise to important advances in copper mining, warfare, and patron-client political institutions, thereby ushering in an era of vibrant social change. Anthony also describes his fascinating discovery of how the wear from bits on ancient horse teeth reveals the origins of horseback riding. *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* solves a puzzle that has vexed scholars for two centuries--the source of the Indo-European languages and English--and recovers a magnificent and influential civilization from the past.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'll play the Bad Guy here, offering a more critical review than the others. Not that I disagree with the favorable reviews -- but I think that readers should realize that the book is not quite as advertised. It starts off great with Part I, which is an excellent explanation of the linguistic questions associated with Proto-Indo-European. Anthony offers the latest results clearly and thoroughly. Unfortunately, Part I is only 120 pages long. Part II, 340 pages long, is the real meat of the book. And while Part II has lots of merit, it's not at all what the title or the subtitle suggest. Part II is best summarized as "A thorough summation of the archaeological results from the areas thought to be the homeland of the Proto Indo-European peoples". Here the author departs substantially from the subject matter as suggested by the title, subtitle, and Part I. We are subjected to endless detailed descriptions of archaeological digs all over southern Russia and Siberia. We are told (many times) what the percentage of sheep/goat bones, cattle bones, and horse bones were at every site. We are told the direction in which the bodies were placed in burial, how many flint tools of each type were found, and other details that are surely appropriate for a compendium of archaeological results, but not for the larger synthesis promised by the title and subtitle. I will concede that the author does thread a larger narrative through the endless site reports. There's a section, for example, on "The Economic and Military Effects of Horseback Riding", which explains the impressive idea that the real impact of horseback riding was that it made it possible for nomads to travel further from the river valleys while grazing their animals.

In this work, David Anthony seeks to demonstrate that the original homeland of the Indo-European language family was in the Pontic-Caspian Steppes. In the process, he shows how the culture developed. This represents a significant contribution to the field and I would highly recommend it to all interested in the topic. Anthony argues that persistent material culture frontiers tend to coincide with linguistic frontiers. This suggests that a well-bordered material culture horizon ("horizon" being an identifiable pattern regarding archaeological finds) would be home to one or more languages which would be, for the most part, contained within it (or at least it would be bounded on all sides by other languages). However, since this methodology is not fully accepted yet, and since even if accepted it does not provide a 1:1 correlation of language and culture, this work should be read critically. Furthermore, a number of his conclusions appeared to me sufficiently tentative that they could not be accepted without question. This work thus needs to be read as a groundbreaking (and thus somewhat tentative) work rather than a fully authoritative account. However, despite the above issues, his proposed mappings of Indo-European language groups to archaeological horizons work surprisingly well. In some cases, the mappings seem to be hard to dispute. I am going to disagree

with a number of other reviewers on the value of minutiae in the book. While it is true that the book seems to get repetitive at times regarding goat to sheep ratios, horse to cattle ratios, burial types, etc. there is a great deal of value in providing this information.

Contrary to its subtitle, the book does not explain "How bronze-age riders from the Eurasian steppes shaped the modern world" unless your idea of the modern world is the Late Bronze Age, circa 1200 BC, which is roughly where the book ends. "Shaping the modern world" is largely limited to asserting that the occupants of the steppes spoke a Proto-Indo-European language and that subsequent speakers of Indo-European languages, like English, Latin, Russian and Hindi, have shaped the modern world. Also, they probably domesticated the horse. The book is definitely not a sweeping analysis of influences from the late Neolithic or Bronze Age to the present day. What it is, as other reviewers have pointed out, is really two works in one--an introduction to Indo-European historical linguistics and also a review of archaeology in southern Russia from the Neolithic through the Late Bronze Age. Naturally, the link is that the theorized homeland of the Proto-Indo-European speakers is the steppes of southern Russia between the Black and Caspian Seas, the Pontic-Caspian steppes. Like most reviewers, I think it does cover its two main topics well, and it makes a plausible case for the location of the homeland. Although trained as an archaeologist, Anthony provides a readable account of the development of early Indo-European languages and their theorized source, Proto-Indo-European. That is the first quarter of the book. The remainder is devoted to a detailed survey of current archaeological knowledge of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in the Pontic-Caspian steppes and surrounding areas. It's pretty dense reading at times.

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