

Summary 13: Back-tracking from Babel

The theory that culture change was caused by an invading horde which replaces the original population runs through 19th Century and early 20th Century pre-history like a Wagnerian *leit-motif*. You soon get to recognise it and even to suspect it reflected not what really happened but the ideologies of the those times of imperial power and military ambition. The same explanation was put forward when experts in linguistics were seeking to explain how the Indo-European family of languages reached Europe. It was said Kurgan hordes on horseback had invaded from Asia ~2,000 BC, bringing what linguists call PIE — Proto Indo-European — with them. Late finds in archaeology and the translation of ancient languages unknown in earlier decades meant this theory had to be abandoned. An alternative was postulated by Lithuanian-born Marija Gimbutas who suggested the Indo-Europeans originated in the Russian steppes. Later, in 1985, Georgian linguists Gamkrelidze and Ivanov suggested the homeland was somewhere on the Armenian plateau while Russian linguist and historian Igor M. D'iakonov, after an extensive survey of both the linguistic and archaeological evidence, *On the Original Home of the Speakers of Indo-European*, in which he proposed that the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European was to be found in the Balkan Peninsula. Then, in 1988 Colin Renfrew published his seemingly heretical book, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*. He proposed that the Indo-European languages were brought to Europe by the people who brought us agriculture from Anatolia because farming allowed the immigrant communities to support much larger populations so that they rapidly out-bred and absorbed the aboriginal Mesolithic inhabitants. More recently Professor Kalevi Wiik at Tuku University in Finland has also proposed an origin in Southeast Europe but aroused considerable controversy when he also suggested the Finno-Ugrian family might have been northern Europe's oldest languages. Out of about 700 million people who speak Indo-European languages today, about 97 % are Europeans and of these, about 3% (22 million) speak one of the Finno-Ugrians languages, including Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian.



Wiik argued that from ~23 KYA to 8KYA, Europe was divided into three main regions: those marked on his map as Ba and U were populated by hunters of large animals, abundant then but many of which are now extinct. These people, he says, spoke languages related to Basque and Finno-Ugic respectively. Wiik's Region X on the other hand, was inhabited by hunters of small animals and was fragmented into areas where smaller unknown languages which have since disappeared. By 5,500 BC the extinction or reduction in the numbers of large animals in the Ba and U regions meant that the inhabitants had to change to hunting

smaller animals while the inhabitants of Region X survived by developing agriculture and the other blessings of the Neolithic. It was here, in the Balkans, Wiik hypothesised, that the Indo-European languages were born, serving there as a lingua-franca and gradually diffusing outwards to include the other regions. Then, in 2003 by Gray and Atkinson tested two theories, the 'Kurgan expansion' and the 'Anatolian farming' hypotheses. This research strongly supported the Neolithic dispersal theory ("NDT") in that it showed the Indo-European languages diverging from the earlier Anatolian ones in what was almost certainly a Balkan homeland.

The Palaeolithic Continuity Theory: Although still controversial, this theory successfully explains much without needing to postulate an invasion. One of its proponents, Mario Alinei suggests that invasions by warrior hordes was part of 19th and 20th century imperial ambitions and racial theories. When these became unpopular after WWII, Maria Gimbutas replaced the

Germans with the Balkan elites as the PIE Battle-Axe super-warriors. He and his colleagues argue instead that **Indo-European was essentially the very long-term evolution of the indigenous culture or cultures of the Palaeolithic**. They contend this is demonstrated by a substratum of words and grammatical structures which reflect *the awakening and developing of human conscience and cultural activities of an already separated and independent language phylum*. The great age is demonstrated for example, by a word for *dying* (PIE base **-mer*) being common to the whole IE family but words for *burying*, a practise which emerged later, differ from language to language. Also, words for typical Mesolithic inventions (eg bow, various tools etc) are different in each IE group, proving that by Mesolithic time IE languages were already differentiated. The linguistic analysis corresponds closely with what we should expect if one or more populations speaking the same language –such as the Proto-Indo-Europeans or the Proto-Uralic people- had first spread to Europe from Africa, and then had broken up into different groups as a result of their exposure first to different ecological niches, different social networks and different neighbours....

The Palaeolithic Continuity Theory has several corollaries, one important for us in the next session is that the *'mysterious arrival' of the Celts in Western Europe is replaced by the scenario of an early differentiation of Celts, as the westernmost IE group in Europe. Western Europe must of course have always been Celtic, and the recent prehistory of Western Europe - from the Megalithic culture through the Beaker Bell to the colonialistic La Tène - must have all been Celtic. Consequently, the duration of the colonial expansion of the Celts was much longer than thought, and its direction was from West to East and not vice versa.*

Cory Panshin and the Language Families of Eurasia: In her excellent on-line essay called *The Paleolithic Europeans*, Cory Panshin takes the argument even further back when she identifies a language group earlier than Indo-European called the **Eurasiatic** group which if it is authentic, *is so old that the commonalties among its members have been reduced to a small core of basic vocabulary plus certain grammatical elements*. However, she says, this group was preceded by an even older group called **Dene-Caucasian**. Remnants of this ancient family include Basque while others are found east of the Black Sea in the Caucasus Mountains, in Pakistan and in Siberia and finally, in the modern Sino-Tibetan family, which includes Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese. As peoples spread out across the world, the Dene-Caucasian split and Eurasiatic developed among those following the River Don into Europe (other Dene-Caucasian speakers went east travelling from Siberia and into the Americas where Dene-Caucasian is represented among Inuit and native Amerind speakers).

Panshin suggests that there were two expansions of language across northern Eurasia during the Paleolithic, one during the Aurignacian ~ 40 – 45 KYA, the other with the Gravettian around 29 KYA. It is likely that any Aurignacian linguistic unity would have been broken up before the LGM, some people going east, to the area stretching from the Volga River to the Ural Mountains where they would have been the speakers of proto-Uralic and proto-Altaiic. Those who remained on the Don and then turned towards the west would have been the speakers of proto-Indo-European.

Panshin also draws attention to the Palaeolithic settlement of the unglaciated part of Ireland and like the Palaeolithic Continuity theorists, suggests a greater role for Celtic in the history of Indo-European in Europe, joining them in postulating a west-to-east spread and not *vice-versa* as traditional theories demand.