CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE GENESIS OF THE INDO-ARYANS

As it has been already noted, the problem of the origin of the Indo-Iranians may be treated only as a part of the common Indo-European problem. A complex study of the origin of all three groups of the Indo-Iranian family is a strict requirement. These groups are: 1) Indo-Aryans, 2) Iranians, including the eastern branch – Scythians, Saka, Chorasmians, Sogdians, Bactrians and others, and the western branch – Medes, Persians, and Parthians, and 3) Dards and Nuristanis (Kafirs).

When ascertaining the ethnic identification of the bearers of a given archaeological culture, the linguistic data are of course of crucial importance. The analysis of the language and the written tradition makes it possible for us to reconstruct the type of economy characteristic of the modern speakers of this language. Thus an opportunity arises for comparing the data of this reconstruction with the archaeological record. The archaeological data show where and when such a type of economy existed. If the results do not conflict the use of a series of verification methods allows us to correlate an ethnos with a given archaeological culture (Kuz'mina 1981; 1986).

A well-known fact should be taken into account is that agricultural and stock-breeding vocabulary (including words for bull, horse, cow, sheep, goat, and their young), names of metals, and words for wheeled transport are common-IE terms (Schrader 1926). The archaeological data witness the existence of the IE dialect continuity in the epoch of the spread of the productive economy. What should be noted here is that the disintegration of IE unity took place not earlier than the emergence of wheeled transport (i.e., at the end of the 4th and the 3rd millennium BC). The extensively long duration of IE unity suggested by some specialists should therefore be rejected.

The most important factor in the history of the Indo-Europeans, especially the Indo-Iranians, is the domestication of the horse, the horse cult and horse sacrifices being particularly significant (Ivanov 1974). The area of the horse in the 5th–4th millennia BC was in the steppes from the Danube to the Urals where the earliest horse bones in settlements have been discovered, as well as, most importantly, ritual complexes associated with the horse (Kuz’mina 1977; 2001c; 2003).

The other crucial factor in Indo-Iranian history was the use of the horse-drawn chariot and its cult. Chariots are many times described in the Rigveda and Avesta: gods ride in chariots over the sky; so do kings and warrior-charioteers.

According to the archaeological data, chariots appeared in Greece in Mycenae in the 16th century BC (Nefedkin 2001), in the Near East in the 17(18)th–16th centuries BC, though battle carts with equids were known earlier (Moorey 1996; Oats 2003), in the Urals in the 17(18)th–16th centuries BC (traditional chronology) or in the 21st-18th centuries BC (calibrated radiocarbon dates) (Gening 1977; Smirnov and Kuz’mina 1977; Kuz’mina 1994a; 2001b). The period of Indo-
Iranian unity in the homeland is synchronous with the spread of the chariot, i.e., the first quarter of the 2nd millennium BC. The partition of Indo-Iranian unity took place already in the homeland. This is evidenced by the fact that in the Finno-Ugrian languages there are loanwords having specific traits which distinguish between an Indo-Aryan and Iranian language (Abaev 1977; Antilla 2000).

The terminus ante quem of the disintegration of Indo-Iranian unity and the separation of the Indo-Aryans is the 14th century BC. In 1370 BC a treaty between the king of Mitanni, Mattiwa (old reading Kurtiwa), and the Hittite king, Suppiluliumas, was concluded and there is an oath guaranteed by a series of gods including such Indo-Aryan divinities as Indra, Mithra, Varuna, and Nasatya. In the 14th century BC in the Hittite city of Bogazkoy a trainer from the land of the Mitanni named Kikkuli composed a treatise on horse training where he employed numerous Indo-Aryan terms (Thieme 1960; Mayrhofer 1966; 1974; Kammenhuber 1968). The first time the Indo-Aryans appeared in the Near East dates, however, from the 17th century BC when the Hurrians (non-IE) came from north-east Anatolia and founded the Mitanni kingdom. It was dominated by Indo-Aryans who had brought chariots, blood-horses, and the skills of horse training. The names of Mitanni kings known from documents of the Tel-Amarna archive in Egypt and from the cuneiform texts and seals of the Near East are Indo-Aryan. The Indo-Aryans formed elite charioteer squadrons (Yankovska 1979; 1981; 1987). Judging by the descriptions of their dress and weapons, which included a hood, a bow, and a quiver with shaft-hole arrows (Zaccanini 1978), the Aryans had come to Mitanni from the steppes. None of those features were known in the Near East but had analogues only in the steppes. This is an elite dominance migration pattern: the dominance is secured by the introduction of new chariot battle tactics. The dominant group was presumably small and soon assimilated.

The other chronological milestone of Indo-Iranian history is the 9th century BC when in the Assyrian and Urartian annals Iranian names, ethnonyms, and toponyms were recorded for the first time on the territory of Iran. The movement of the Iranians to the Iranian Plateau is believed to have started in the 11th century BC. Earlier Iran was inhabited by non-IE peoples such as Elamites, Hurrians, Kassites, Manna, Kuti, and Lulubi (Luckenbill 1927; Herzfeld 1941; 1968; D’yakonov 1956; Aliev 1960; 1962; Grantovsky 1979; 1998).

These indisputably established historical facts provide the foundation for reconstructing the history of the Indo-Iranian peoples by means of archaeology.

During the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millennium BC a sequence of migration waves can be traced in Central Asia and north Afghanistan. More precisely, it was a gradual advance to the south of separate groups of the steppe population. In north Bactria three cultures emerged: the BMAC, Andronovo, and Bishkent. There is good reason to suppose that there were several types of migration that left different archaeological traces in the south.

Is Vedic archaeology possible?

Under this title W. Rau (1977) published an article where he stated that an archaeologist could find in India only traces of short-term Aryan camps with only a handful of fragments of hand-made pottery. But is it really so? Below we attempt to answer this question by reviewing the evidence for material culture, behavior, and anthropological and genetic data.