



Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins

Colin Renfrew

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An original synthesis between modern historical linguistics and cultural archaeology concludes that primitive Indo-European language was spoken in Europe thousands of years earlier than previously assumed.

Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins Details

Date : Published January 26th 1990 by Cambridge University Press (first published October 29th 1987)

ISBN : 9780521386753

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Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : History, Archaeology, Humanities, Linguistics, Language, Nonfiction, Anthropology, Science, Prehistory



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From Reader Review Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins for online ebook

Don says

Renfrew believes that the Indo-European languages spread from Anatolia into Europe (into Greece and beyond). He says it spread with the expansion of farming. Interesting.

Guto says

Diddeall. Darllen difyr ond mae diffyg deall o newid iaith yn tanseilio'r cwbl.

Lack of engagement with and worrying lack of understanding of language change undermines the whole theory. Sadly.

- ?? ash ??- says

brought up some good questions but overall i didn't feel too satisfied with answers

Roar says

I thought this book was increadibly fascinating when I read it, but it seems that theories closer to the classical theory about the Indoeuropeans still have a stronger position.

Renée says

As not a great adherent of Renfrew's Indo-European homeland solutions through secondary literature on the subject, but never having read his work I felt obliged to give it a go

Carl says

It is an interesting problem: to look at the today's languages and try to figure out where they came from. This book concentrates on the Indo-European family of languages – the largest language family in the world, which stretches from Ireland to India – and tries to follow it back into the dark abyss of time.

I came away from the book with a lot of respect for the erudition, industry and imagination of the scholars in this area, but little faith in their results. There is just not enough solid data to work with. Lots of good ideas, and lots of good reasons not to trust them. For example, (ignoring our ample historical records) the tools of

historical linguistics were used on the modern Romance languages to guess at what Latin looked like, and there were some serious errors.

We can't be sure if the Indo-Europeans migrated from their homeland, or if the languages migrated, or even in which millennia it happened.

Maya says

I think I'm going to agree with a lot of the previous reviews that said there were a lot of problems with the book. It had a lot of good thought provoking questions but not a lot of good answers.

Anise says

Though I don't agree (in my amateur opinion) with Dr. Renfrew's ultimate conclusion in this book that Indo-European languages arose eight or nine millennia ago in Anatolia (a theory which I have read that he has modified in the years since he authored this book), this book does did open my eyes by pointing out flaws in the assumptions that went into the formulation of the competing Kurgan hypothesis. While I'm still more inclined toward the Kurgan hypothesis, it is good to keep several points of Dr. Renfrew's in mind, most notably for me his discussion of the limitations of linguistic reconstructive method and glottochronology.

Jan-Maat says

This is another one of those books which I've read and enjoyed.

The basic idea is that the dominance and spread of Indo-European languages is a puzzle, where did the first speakers come from and how did they get to be ubiquitous from Scandinavia to North India. Renfrew has a neat answer to this by suggesting that the earliest Indo-European languages were the languages of the first farmers. As agriculture can support a far larger population than hunter-gathering (or herding) this would provide an easy model for the natural numerical dominance and spread of those languages out from Anatolia/northern fertile crescent west into Europe and east into India. As natural population expansion would oblige each generation to set up a new village down the road, and so slowly, spreading out from the fertile crescent, as a corollary Basque we can understand to be a surviving language of a pre-Indo-European language speaking people who managed to adapt to agriculture before being completely out numbered by the newcomers. This in contrast to the alternative view has been that Indo-European languages were carried into their current locations by waves of horse riding invaders.

The waves of horse riding and chariot (view spoiler) charging invaders pouring down off the tartar steppe seemed intrinsically ridiculous to me, if you wanted to do it the time to launch such an invasion would be now- as we have motorways, bridges and service stations (view spoiler) while in pre-historic Europe there were instead all kinds of wet lands, ancient forests and wide meandering rivers as well as not much grazing land (view spoiler).

Renfrew points out that in her Kurgan hypothesis Marija Gimbutas at once invented the ur-phantasie of the cold war and told her own life story - ie peace loving Marija was swept westwards from her Lithuanian heimat fleeing from incoming eastern invaders with their militaristic ways, fancy weaponry, and strange new ways of honouring their dead leaders(view spoiler). However we can equally take Bryan Ward-Perkins' argument from *The Fall of Rome And the End of Civilization* and apply it to Renfrew (view spoiler) historians working today after a long period of European peace, integration and economic security can be suspected of wanting to find models or previous examples for peaceful European integration and development in the past, even amongst sword wielding Visigoths and Vandals(view spoiler). More subtly perhaps we're inclined to read the familiar present on to the distant past rather than accepting it *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, the slightly awkward problem if even if one were so inhuman as to be value neutral we still would not know what actually happened due to absence of evidence. Equally people being what they are, the big questions remain the interesting ones. Were our ancestors canny farmers who only ever lifted an axe to fell a tree(view spoiler) or were they glorious freebooting horse riders who took what they wanted from hapless pedestrians and then boozed all night, with no fear of hangovers.

Recently there have studies, at least according to all mighty Cloud God Wikipeadia(view spoiler), that purport to show that genetics proves an influx into Europe at least from the steppe of presumed proto-Indo-European speakers (view spoiler) the sample size of 67 looked small to me, but then there probably isn't an abundance of material and in any case genetics determines language no more than you have to speak Korean to watch a Korean made television. Peter Heather in *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* has a discussion about languages - it is a struggle to find an example of the language spoken by a minority group completely replacing the language spoken by a majority, even though as with Norman-French or Afrikaans it can function as the language of an elite ruling over a numerically dominant group speaking their own languages(view spoiler). Perhaps today with radio, television, state education and the pull factors of a modern economy to do this it might be possible, although as far as I understand there still are Kurdish speakers in Turkey. In prehistory I suppose one way to accomplish this would be a rather exhausting process of (view spoiler) mass extermination, or perhaps more reasonably that both cattle herding chariot using incomers and early farmers spoke closely related languages with the incomers simply contributing their terms for axles and yokes and what have you to the developing linguistic porridge. No doubt over time further complexities will emerge to delight and bedevil the curious observer.

Of course it is all gloriously confused because we can only see what people spoke once we get literate societies, which is to say extremely recently compared to the long silent reaches of prehistory.

Taylor says

The early chapters provide quite a thorough introduction to the state of the art of historical linguistics and to Indo-European scholarship, and for that content, the book has interest and value.

Without studying as extensively as has Renfrew, however, a casual reader may find that his arguments lack the evidence he seems to demand of earlier scholars in the titular fields of study. Perhaps the evidence exists among the massive collection of bibliographical data from which he includes rather vague excerpts, but if this book happens to serve as an introduction to the subject, I'm afraid Renfrew's criticisms and proposals may seem speculative and even a bit petulant.

Worthwhile, but not definitive.

A. says

Review: Archeology & Language by Colin Renfrew

Having a modest facility in language and an interest in archeology, I anticipated reading this book, which is primarily concerned not with language in general, but our language family, the Indo-European. I am sorry to report that I had to force myself through this very boring book.

Dr. Renfrew lays out a scenario for the distribution of the Indo-European language family which radically challenges the majority of linguists, archeologists, and sub-specialists with the merest of speculations. Perhaps others will enjoy this book, some, possibly may be persuaded, but I was not.

Mr. Graziano is the author of From the Cross to the Church. The Emergence of the Church from the Chaos of the Crucifixion.

Kevin Rohan says

I, for one, am convinced of Renfrew's "first farmers" argument explaining the spread of the Indo-European languages throughout Europe. Obviously, there are some holes in the argument (and how could there not be?), but this is still a worthy read and an excellent counter theory to Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis. Highly recommended to anyone interested in the "Indo-European problem".

Christopher says

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LANGUAGE is Colin Refrew's presentation for laymen of the problem of the linguistic affinity of most of the peoples of Europe and ancient Western Asia. Written by a scholar influenced by Britain's current disbelief against historical migrations, Renfrew argues that common linguistic elements spread through the ancient world not through the sudden invasion of a single people, but through the peaceful spread of agriculture out of Anatolia.

On one hand, it is nice to see a challenge to Marija Gimbutas theory, which got increasingly weird the longer she articulated it, that the Indo-Europeans were bloodthirsty patriarchal invaders who swept into matiarchal and peaceful old Europe introducing war. Renfrew, however, goes to far in the opposite direction and the work has serious problems, many of which are common to the works of Renfrew's school. The author has no problem speaking of the occupation of the Carpathian basin by the Magyars, and presumably he believes in recent Turkic migrations, but he refuses to accept migrations in pre-historical times. One of his three points against an South Russian origin is simply "It is a migrationist view." The Indo-Europeans are a people uniquely identified with horsemanship--look at the popularity horses in Greek and Germanic onomastics, and the words for "axle", "yoke", and "horse" itself are common to nearly all branches, so moving over long distances would certainly be within their reach. Yet, Renfrew asserts that there is no evidence that horsemanship was important to ancient speakers of IE languages.

Renfrew is also not a very committed historical linguist. His presentation of family trees is overly simplistic, with flat-out inaccuracies such as saying that German is descended from Gothic and all of the Slavonic languages from Old Church Slavonic. He seems to be quoting mostly from introductory handbooks of comparative IE linguistics instead of speaking from deep personal familiarity. The only authorities I would really trust to present this material are either amazing polymaths who are simultaneously excellent archaeologists and linguists, or archaeologist-linguist collaborations.

If you are interested in the fascinating question of IE origins and the various solutions which have been proposed, I'd recommend J.P. Mallory's **IN SEARCH OF THE INDO-EUROPEANS**, which is not perfect but does a good job of showing many viewpoints.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in December 1999.

It is very obvious that Romance languages such as Italian and Spanish are very similar, and the reason that this is the case is not hard to find - Roman domination leading to Latin dialects becoming the main languages spoken over much of south western Europe. It was only from the beginning of this century that scholars began to realise that many more languages were related to a lesser degree, covering most of Europe and, surprisingly, India - the Indo-European group of languages. This realisation immediately begs the question of what the reason for this might be, and this has been the subject of much speculation ever since.

By the thirties, the theory that became the consensus view was established. This was that there was a single race, the Indo-Europeans, which had, at some point in the prehistoric past, suddenly exploded from their homeland (thought to be in the Russian steppes) and established rule over a large area, changing the local language through a process known as "elite dominance". This theory rather unfortunately gained the attention of Adolf Hitler, and formed the justification (such as it was) for his view of the Aryans (from the name Aryas given to Indo-European speakers in the Sanskrit oral tradition in India) as a superior race.

By the seventies, the traditional view was strongly questioned, though the alternatives presented also seemed rather implausible. The problem is basically that the connections between the linguistic and archaeological evidence is tenuous at best, and often involves circular reasoning (the linguistic ideas are assumed when the archaeology is interpreted, and the results are then cited as evidence for the linguistic theory). Many of the arguments originally used to establish the theory are now considered simplistic, such as the assumption that a change in culture (in the archaeological sense of a distinctive style of surviving material goods) implies a change of language, and vice versa. In particular, no real evidence has been found of the destruction that would accompany a successful invasion of the type proposed.

Renfrew used this book to propose a new theory, one which seems a lot more convincing than those it sought to replace. Instead of elite dominance, which doesn't always change the language (think of India post independence, for example), he looks at other mechanisms by which the language of an area could change.

His theory is to do with the ways in which agriculture could well have spread in the early Neolithic period. Instead of conquest, this would have been more by infiltration as each successive generation created new fields a few miles beyond their parents'. As agriculture would have brought a vast increase in population density, the dominant language of a region would become the farmers', rather than that of the hunter gatherers they replaced. Pockets of non-Indo-European languages in Europe - the Basque still survives;

others such as Etruscan were still spoken in historic times - mark places where the Mesolithic peoples learnt agriculture for themselves.

Renfrew puts forward many arguments to support his hypothesis, but the most telling is that it doesn't suffer from the problems of the standard theory. He says that it is untestable, but I suspect that useful evidence could perhaps today be obtained through DNA testing of prehistoric human remains.
