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The First Stallion

The lowing of cows and oxen was to be heard on the plots of the Gökhem farmers in Västergötland 5,500 years ago, along with the bleating of sheep, the barking of dogs and, in the woods around the farms, the grunting of pigs. At the same time, in the steppe far to the east, people were beginning to make use of an entirely new domesticated animal.

Of one thing we can be sure: there were domesticated horses in the region we now call Kazakhstan about 5,500 years ago. The oldest incontrovertible proof that has been found comes from the Botai culture.

The Botai people lived in the steppes north-east of the Caspian Sea. They were primarily hunters, though comparatively sedentary, and their diet consisted largely of horse meat. Over 99 per cent of all the bones found in their settlements come from horses. The Botai people rode their domesticated horses and hunted wild ones. Many of the bones from their settlements come from particularly fine-boned or gracile animals, which researchers view as an indication that they were domesticated.

There is even better evidence that some of the horses at the time of the Botai culture were domesticated. One piece of evidence is milk. Traces of fat on terracotta shards show that the pots from which they came were used to store milk. Even today, horse meat and foodstuffs made from mares' milk are part of the traditional diet in Kazakhstan and the neighbouring steppe regions.

Damage to horses' vertebrae suggests that the animals concerned carried riders. And there is even clearer proof in the marks on the tooth enamel of some horses, which were clearly caused by bridle bits. The bridles were very probably made of leather and wood, and most of the stone tools from the Botai culture seem to be designed for leather-working.

There is thus a consensus that horses were domesticated at least 5,500 years ago, and that there were domesticated horses in the northern steppes of the region that is now Kazakhstan. However, the fact that the oldest undisputed archaeological evidence comes from the Botai culture does not necessarily signify that these people were the first to domesticate horses. There may have been domesticated horses elsewhere at an even earlier stage, though the evidence is less conclusive.

DNA researchers have also sought to identify horses' origins. The focus has been mainly on examining living horses of all possible breeds. The first large-scale analyses, which were carried out in Uppsala, revealed an interesting pattern. Modern horses have a multiplicity of different mitochondrial lineages. The only possible explanation for this is that people in many different places captured wild mares and used them for breeding. In contrast, only one Y-chromosome lineage was identified. That means that wild stallions were domesticated within one area only, and that there were only a few such cases – possibly just one, in fact.

These patterns make sense if we reflect on how wild horses live in their herds. Stallions are far more aggressive and independent. Mares, on the other hand, are used to living in a group and to accepting subordination to a higher-status horse. They are typical herd animals, just as cows are. It is a fairly straightforward matter to tame a wild mare; taming a wild stallion, on the other hand, is all but impossible.

I imagine the first domesticated stallion may have been a little foal that followed his mother when she was captured by humans. The youngster must have been unusually gentle-natured. He would undoubtedly have been outcompeted by other males in the wild, and would never have had any offspring of his own. Under people's care, however, he was able to grow to adulthood and serve the mares of the herd, thereby becoming, several millennia later, the ancestral father of all the horses living today.

Unfortunately, DNA research has not yet been able to provide any more precise information about where the first stallion was caught and where people first started to breed

horses. The evidence points towards a fairly extensive region stretching from western Kazakhstan through the Russian steppe to the Volga and the Don, and possibly towards Ukraine.

One reasonable scenario is that farmers with domesticated animals spread from modern Turkey to the regions north of the Black Sea. On reaching the steppe, they faced a number of problems. There were endless amounts of excellent pasture for half the year. But the winters were harsher than they were accustomed to. Their sheep could not cope with a frozen crust of snow, and even the thinnest layer of snow prevented the cattle from grazing.

While the farmers' own animals were dying of cold, they could watch herds of wild horses gracefully scraping the snow from the pasture they needed with their hooves. When the horses needed to drink, they used their hooves to make holes in the layer of ice covering springs and streams. These horses were well adapted to living in a climate with cold winters; that was how they had got through the Ice Age so successfully in the European steppes. They were not suited to living in forests, however. When the forests emerged after the end of the Ice Age, most wild horses disappeared from Europe. It was only in the steppes in the eastern part of the continent that they were still to be found in large numbers.

Those who found ways of capturing and controlling horses benefited from a domesticated animal that was largely self-sufficient and provided an excellent reserve of meat during the cold winters of the steppe. And the step from providing a meat reserve to being a dairy animal was a short one.

People who are used to milking cows can learn to milk mares too. And just think what a bonus it must have been when people discovered the particular virtues of mares' milk. It contains a good deal more lactose than cows' milk and is unsuitable for drinking when fresh, particularly for people with lactose intolerance – nearly all adults at that time. But those who drank mares' milk that had been kept for a while must have felt a little bit warmer, more relaxed and more

talkative. The high sugar content of horses' milk makes it ferment easily, producing a small percentage of alcohol.

The Samara Valley, near the River Don in Russia, was the site of the Samara culture. In the valley archaeologists have found the remains of horses over a thousand years older than those of the Botai people. The remains of 10 individuals have been found at an ancient burial site. They were buried with gifts such as red ochre, broken pottery and beads made from seashells. Archaeologists have also found the heads, hooves and lower legs of two horses in the immediate vicinity of the graves. Close by lay two small horse figurines made of bone.

One interpretation is that the people who took part in the burial feasted on the horse meat, after which they laid the horses' hides, together with their heads and bones, in the graves of the dead.

The Samara people lived in the northern part of the steppe, near the margins of the forests. It is quite clear that they kept domesticated cattle and sheep, and, to judge from finds of bones in their settlements, they also hunted deer and beaver. This meant their diet included meat from both domesticated and wild animals. Many, though not all, experts are convinced that the horses of the Samara culture must have been domesticated and that they were used at the very least as a source of meat. They may also have provided milk and been ridden by the Samara people, but there is some disagreement on this.

The US archaeologist David Anthony has made tremendous efforts to locate the oldest evidence of riding. The items he and his wife and collaborator Dorcas Brown have collected include a large number of horse teeth – some of which bear the traces of a bridle bit, while others do not – which they have examined under a scanning electron microscope. They have also ridden horses using different types of bit that they believe early riders would have used. They have tested

bits made of leather, horsehair, woven hemp and bone. After 150 hours of riding, they made models of horses' teeth at the point where the bit had rested, and studied the damage to the teeth under the microscope. They then looked for similar damage to horses' teeth that they and other archaeologists had found in excavations in the steppe.

David Anthony also draws attention to the regions around the Don and the Volga. He makes particular mention of the herding culture known as the Khvalynsk culture, which occupied approximately the same area as the Samara culture, though slightly later. These two cultures, and others, gave rise to the Yamnaya (Yamna) culture, which would eventually dominate large areas of the steppe – all the way to Ukraine in the west. It is clear that horses were important to these people. This is shown by finds in their typical tombs, known as kurgans. The kurgans consisted of a pit, often lined with timber, which was covered with a tumulus made of stones and peat. There is much evidence that horses were sacrificed at such burials, as were cattle, sheep and dogs.

The Yamnaya culture took off 5,300 years ago, at exactly the same time as the farmers in the Falbygden area were most active in building megalithic passage graves. There are three factors that may explain why the Yamnaya culture became so successful and extended over such a vast area.

Firstly, the climate changed at that time. The steppes became colder and drier. Pollen analyses show that tree cover declined, while plants well adapted to a dry climate, such as wormwood (sagebrush), became more common. The steppe had never been a particularly favourable environment for cultivation, as the soil was often too dry, sometimes too marshy, and not infrequently too salty. But the spacious grasslands were ideal for animal husbandry, especially for keeping flocks of sheep, which are better adapted to a dry climate than cows.

Secondly, the Yamnaya herdsman on the steppe had a vital factor in common with the Funnel Beaker farmers of the Falbygden area: they were beginning to use oxen as draught animals, along with wheeled vehicles. We know this because

both wheels and vestiges of carts or wagons have been found in the typical kurgan graves of the steppe.

Thirdly, they were probably beginning to master the art of riding.

The combination of the drier climate, the ox-drawn wagons and horses that could be ridden brought dramatically altered conditions for animal husbandry. The Yamnaya culture, which focused more on herding animals than on tilling the soil, drew the winning straw. People could pack everything they needed into their ox-drawn wagons, including tents to spend the night in and drinking water for at least a week. This enabled them to live in the steppes for months and drive their animals on to fresh pastures. When an area had been grazed to the limit, all they had to do was lead their animals onward to new green meadows. With the help of horses, they were able to control many more cattle and sheep than before.

Before the time of horses that could be ridden, oxen and wagons, the gigantic steppe regions between the river valleys were like a vast ocean to people without seaworthy boats – infertile, impenetrable land. With the help of horses and wagons, however, the Yamnaya herdsmen could take possession of the whole steppe. Their herds grew larger and larger, while they grew richer and richer. They acquired more and more *fä*, to use an old Swedish word of ancient Indo-European origin for livestock. The word for livestock (*pekú* in reconstructed Proto-Indo-European, *pecu* in Latin) acquired an extended meaning in the colloquial Swedish *pekiner*, which became *penningar* and finally *pengar*, the Swedish word for money (English ‘pecuniary’ comes from the same root).

David Anthony has summarised his ideas in a 568-page book entitled *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*. In this work he attempts to piece together all the evidence that suggests that the Yamnaya culture, with the help of the horse, spread the Indo-European languages in all directions.

And it was not just the Indo-European languages – now including English, Swedish, German, Spanish, Russian, Persian (Farsi), Pashto and Hindi, spoken today by about half

the world's population – that were disseminated. The same applies to a whole package of innovations, including the alloy bronze, woven woollen cloth, long-distance trade, new gods, new rules on inheritance and justice, wider class divisions, worse wars, increased power for men, and more.

In short, the very society we still live in today.

David Anthony is just one in a long line of researchers to make connections between the Indo-European languages and the horse. Another of the better-known ones was Marija Gimbutas. Although not the first either, she is generally considered to be the great pioneer of the steppe theory on the origins of the Indo-European languages.

Lithuanian-born Marija Gimbutas fled via Austria to Germany when the Soviet Union invaded Lithuania during the Second World War. By her own account, she left holding the hand of her little daughter in one hand and her diploma in the other. In 1946 she received a doctorate in archaeology at Tübingen University. Three years later she moved to the US, and after a tough start – she faced discrimination as a woman and a foreigner, and had three small children – she eventually forged a long and successful career as an archaeologist. She became a professor of archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and led excavations in Greece and the Balkans for many years. She wrote a number of books that were well received in some quarters, not least by a growing feminist movement. Jean M. Auel, for instance, the author of the bestselling *Earth's Children* series of books, was influenced by her theories. However, Gimbutas also met with strong resistance from a number of her peers.

Among the basic components of her theories is the idea that hunters and early farmers in Europe up to about 5,000 years ago were essentially egalitarian and peaceful. Their religious life was dominated by belief in a powerful goddess, and their societies were matrilineal, meaning that property,

such as houses and land, was passed on from mother to daughter.

According to Gimbutas, these peaceful matrilineal societies came to an abrupt end when they were crushed by warlike patriarchal tribes that came riding in from the steppes in the east. The men on horseback brought with them Indo-European languages, which they imposed on everyone; the package also included Indo-European religion and mythology.

No one today would deny Gimbutas's encyclopaedic knowledge of archaeological sites and finds reflecting Europe's early farming cultures. What is more controversial is the notion that 'Old Europe', as she called these early farming cultures, was composed of peace-loving matrilineal societies.

She also interpreted material largely in the light of a great omnipotent goddess, whose presence she detected in every conceivable context. She believed she could discern signs of such a goddess cult everywhere: on pottery decorated with zigzag patterns, in cave art depicting circles crossed by a line and in rounded buildings. As regards the circles crossed by a line, which feature in a number of Ice Age cave paintings, many of today's researchers share her view that they may have symbolised female genitalia. However, there is quite a step from that to an omnipotent goddess. And the idea that round buildings had a similar meaning has few advocates these days.

True, large numbers of female figures have been found that may well represent goddesses. I have seen many of them at a major exhibition in London's British Museum and at smaller museums all over Europe. I have seen the 40,000-year-old Venus of Hohle Fels and female figures with bent knees and extended arms from farming settlements in Cyprus that are about 6,000 years old – not to mention hundreds of female figures from the millennia in between. At least two of the experts I have spoken to, Jill Cook of the British Museum and Carole McCartney from Cyprus, are convinced that such figures were linked with birth, fertility

and female rites. However, there are also many figures, paintings and decorations with quite different motifs, such as the Lion Man from Hohlenstein-Stadel (also over 40,000 years old), the Ice Age cave paintings of wild animals, and Çatalhöyük's murals depicting leopards. The idea that they, too, symbolise a goddess is more far-fetched.

The dominant view today is that hunting societies and the early farming societies were comparatively egalitarian in terms of social differentiation and gender relations. However, there is no convincing evidence at the present time of any matrilineal systems. This is an issue that could potentially be resolved by analyses of DNA and isotopes. Existing findings suggest that both men and women moved to other settlements. As regards the hunters from Motala, the young women seem to have moved, while the men do not. A man has been found in Hungary whose DNA set is very clearly characteristic of a group of hunters, but who apparently lived in an early farming settlement. About a quarter of the early farmers from the Falbygden area moved in from elsewhere, and they include both men and women. However, far more samples would be needed to be able to discern a pattern – if there actually is one.

Hunters and early farmers cannot have been so very peace-loving. In the Ice Age settlement at Dolní Věstonice, which dates back 30,000 years, it was common for people to hit each other over the head, leaving permanent injuries to the skull. In the Swedish hunters' settlement at Tågerup, Skåne, a young boy died 7,000 years ago when someone shot him in the back with an arrow. Many other Stone Age settlements have yielded skeletons showing injuries due to violence. A number of early farmers in Talheim, southern Germany, were simply massacred 7,000 years ago; it looks as if 34 individuals were killed on the same occasion.

The view today is that some of Gimbutas's interpretations are speculative, while others have been shown to be incorrect. However, archaeologists are beginning to catch up with her in other respects. Throughout her long career – from the Second World War to the 1990s – there were few archaeologists

who thought inward migration had had any great impact on Europe's development. Such views were referred to, slightly, as 'migrationism'. The dominant view was that human societies have the capacity to develop of their own accord, and that there is no need for anyone to come from elsewhere with innovations.

However, as we have seen, new DNA research shows clearly that immigration was hugely influential on Europe's development.

It is no mere coincidence that Marija Gimbutas came from Lithuania. She had been brought up on stories about supernatural beings in the forests. Her nursemaids told her about sacred goddesses, whom they took very seriously. Both her parents were doctors, and they took an interest in research into Lithuanian folk culture and history. Traditional musicians and experts in old folk tales often visited Gimbutas's childhood home. As an adult, she spoke a number of Indo-European languages, including German, English and Russian, and she could understand several Slavonic languages besides Russian. Her mother tongue, however, was Lithuanian.

Of all the Indo-European languages still spoken today, Lithuanian is the most archaic. Moreover, Lithuania was one of the last countries in Europe to adopt Christianity; in practice, it was not Christianised until the sixteenth century. And pre-Christian beliefs lingered on among country people for much longer. In the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, industrious folk culture researchers went around Lithuanian villages writing down old folk tales and songs. This was part and parcel of the national romantic zeitgeist. Similar material was being collected in many other places, not least in Germany.

This enthusiasm for Europe's 'original' heritage was far from unproblematic. It was to become part of the package of racial doctrines that would have such devastating consequences in the Holocaust. However, one of the positive

outcomes of the folk culture researchers' work was the extensive collection of old tales and folk songs from the whole Indo-European linguistic region that can now be studied by today's researchers.

Contemporary Indo-European languages can also be compared with Old Church Slavonic, ancient Vedic scripts in Sanskrit and texts in other Indo-European languages that are now extinct. This makes it possible to reconstruct how the first Indo-Europeans may have spoken, and even how they lived and what kind of conceptual world they had.

For instance, it seems they had access to oxen, wheels, axles and wagons. 'Wheel' and 'axle' (*hjul* and *axel* in Swedish) are words with ancient Indo-European roots, as is 'yoke' (*ok* in Swedish). They can be found in nearly all branches of the Indo-European language family. 'Ard' (*årder* in Swedish) – the early wooden plough that came into use at about the same time as wheels and wagons – is another example.

Researchers have made huge efforts to puzzle out what animals and plants were to be found in the Indo-European linguistic area before it diverged into separate branches, such as Italic, Germanic, Slavic, Baltic, Celtic and Indo-Iranian. In this way, they are trying to identify the type of natural surroundings where the language first developed. They have found both wild animals, such as beavers, otters, lynxes and bears, and domestic ones, such as oxen, cattle, rams, ewes, lambs, pigs and piglets. And, as you might expect, horses are on the list. Reconstructions suggest the horse was designated by a word similar to *equus*, its Latin name.

It is absolutely clear that the early Indo-Europeans used the wool from their sheep. The words 'wool' and 'weave' (*ull* and *väva* in Swedish) have their origins in Proto-Indo-European.

There is a snag in that both *lax* (Swedish for 'salmon') and *bok* (Swedish for 'beech') are words of ancient Indo-European origin. Yet neither salmon nor beech trees were in evidence in the steppes. However, proponents of the steppe theory try to get round that problem by suggesting that the names may originally have referred to other salmon-like fish living in the rivers and streams of the steppe, and to other types of tree.

It must be more encouraging to them that the old Indo-European word for honey resembled 'mead' (Swedish *mjöd*). The cognate is still in use in countries such as Russia and Poland, both for semi-liquid honey direct from bees and for the fermented honey-based alcoholic drink we know as mead. This beverage seems to have played a key role in the feasts and rituals of the early Indo-Europeans. The fact that wild honey bees are less common in Siberia supports the idea that the first Indo-Europeans came from the European part of the steppe.

Another set of clues that can help in trying to work out where the first Indo-Europeans lived is the loanwords that entered the languages at an early stage. These give us a clue to the identity of their closest neighbours. It so happens that the neighbouring language with most impact on the early Indo-Europeans seems to be an early variant of Finno-Ugric – that is, the forerunner of the languages that would later evolve into Finnish, Estonian, the Sami languages, Hungarian, and others.

Their respective vocabularies suggest that the Finno-Ugric speakers lived in forested areas further north, while the Indo-Europeans lived in the steppe further south. Linguists may also be able to discern the influence of Semitic languages prefiguring modern Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic.

Most serious experts in recent years have agreed that the Indo-European languages began to spread out from a region somewhere near the Black Sea. Some experts think this began on the south side, in modern Turkey. However, the prevailing view is quite close to that advanced by Marija Gimbutas in her day: that the huge dominance of Indo-European speakers in the world originated somewhere in the steppe, in the region north of the Black and the Caspian Seas.

One of the people who has built on Gimbutas's legacy is her former pupil James Mallory, a US citizen who has been working in Northern Ireland for many years. He is the author of several of the weightier standard works on the origins of the Indo-European languages. For many years now he has

been the editor of the leading interdisciplinary journal in the field, *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*.

I travel to Belfast to meet him. Now a professor emeritus, Mallory has been assigned a minuscule study at Queen's University, which he is obliged to share with another retired professor. Both have brought stacks of books with them, which are crammed in along one wall. They have also attempted to create a dividing wall as best they can by placing a bookcase between their respective sections. There is no space in the little room to conduct an interview, so we go down to a ground floor café to talk.

Mallory grew up in California. He studied history and subsequently worked in the military for several years before ending up in UCLA as a doctoral student. Gimbutas was both his mentor and his landlady. He and other postgraduates got to live in a little cottage on her land. They paid a peppercorn rent, and their rental contract provided for them to help out on Gimbutas's plot by weeding and chopping wood.

That was in the early 1970s. Gimbutas was regarded at UCLA as mildly eccentric, with her strong Lithuanian accent and all her amber jewellery. But she was a highly respected archaeologist, and her knowledge was considered to be almost encyclopaedic. Her teaching was solid, but old-fashioned. Lectures consisted largely of rattling off a plethora of details of different archaeological cultures, while the students took notes and copied down patterns and shapes. It provided an excellent foundation, says Mallory, but he is glad he learned from other tutors about modern scientific method: how to set up hypotheses and test their validity through investigation.

It was on a dig in the Balkans that Mallory first heard Gimbutas talk about the omnipotent goddess of whom she believed she could see so many signs. The more emphasis she placed on the more polarised students and other archaeologists became in their views of her. Some saw her almost as the goddess she described, while others increasingly distanced themselves from her.

Mallory himself appears to look back on his old tutor with affection and respect, though also with a certain

distance. Her theories about how steppe cultures spread the Indo-European languages have experienced a revival today. However, Gimbutas's claims that earlier farming cultures in Europe were so very peaceful have not stood the test of time. Whether inheritance was essentially matrilineal before the Indo-Europeans entered the picture is an open question.

We sit talking in the café for a few hours, and Mallory is very friendly and open. But he is noticeably uncomfortable with some of my questions when I get on to the subject of how the far right have influenced research into the origins of the Indo-Europeans.

However you look at it, there is no denying the subject has attracted many nationalists, anti-Semites and racists over the years. For example, the owner of *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, which Mallory edits, is a controversial American called Roger Pearson. While he was listed as a member of the editorial board, some researchers refused to work with the journal. There are a number of reasons why they regard Pearson as politically unacceptable. One is that he set up the Northern League for North European Friendship in the late 1950s. The League's influential members included Nazi Germany's leading 'race biologist', Hans F. Günther.

Roger Pearson is nearly 90 now. He has undergone several heart bypass operations, and he is no longer listed as a member of the *Journal's* editorial board. Mallory makes it clear to me that he totally disagrees with Pearson's views, such as the supposed existence of races hypothetically linked to different levels of intelligence. However, he believes democracy should allow researchers to write about crackpot theories, including politically sensitive ones. Moreover, if Pearson did not publish the *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, who would? Mallory hopes to see one of Pearson's sons take over soon.

I have never heard anyone claim that Marija Gimbutas herself was a fascist. Yet she worked together with Pearson and other researchers who have been accused of being fascists, anti-Semites and Nazis. And there is a passage in her book *The Language of the Goddess* that gives me pause for thought.

In the final summary, she refers to two periods in the history of Europe that she regards as particularly dark, particularly from the point of view of women. One of them was the Christian Inquisition of mediaeval times, when many women were put to death as witches. The other was Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union, under which millions died. She makes no mention whatever of Nazism, Hitler's Germany or the Holocaust.

When we return to Mallory's study, he opens the book. He has never before noticed that Gimbutas referred in her summary to the Soviet Union, but not to Nazi Germany. After pondering this for a while, he admits it looks peculiar. His conclusion is that Gimbutas was strongly affected by her own experiences as a young woman fleeing the Soviet troops. She was a Lithuanian nationalist, and her homeland was occupied by the Soviet Union. Yet she spoke and read Russian, and she cooperated extensively with leading Soviet archaeologists – at the very height of the Cold War.

However, it is clear that Gimbutas's experiences as a young refugee coloured her views on how the Indo-European languages arrived in western Europe. In her conceptual world, they came with hordes of warlike men who swarmed in from the steppes to the east 5,000 years ago.

Reality was probably somewhat more complex. But despite her emotional overinterpretations, Marija Gimbutas was a pioneer, and the most recent research confirms her ideas on a number of issues.