

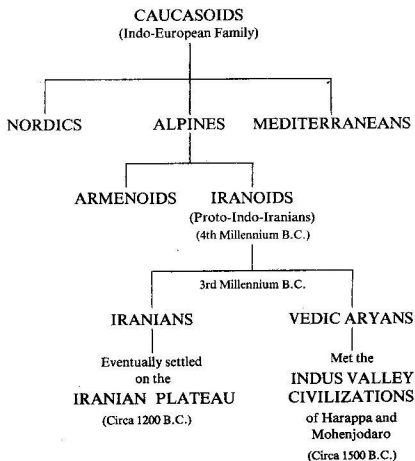
The Proto-Indo-Iranians

Indo-European Genealogy

Race

Human beings are differentiated by race and language. "A race is made up of a group of people resembling each other in certain inherited characteristics which distinguish them from other groups."¹

In remote times, both the Iranians and the Indians were part of the same tribe and were identified as the Proto-Indo-Iranians, who in turn belonged to the Indo-European family of nations.



1. *The Reader's Digest Great World Atlas*, p 127.

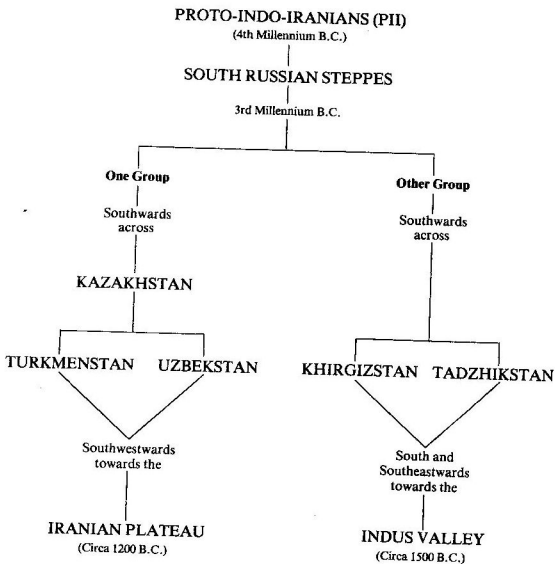
The Time and Place

Fourth Millennium B.C.

During this period, the Proto-Indo-Iranians who were nomadic pastoralists wandered and settled on the South Russian Steppes, between the river Volga and the boundaries of Kazakhstan.

Third Millennium B.C.

It is believed that early in the third millennium B.C., the Proto-Indo-Iranians drifted apart and later came to be identified as two distinct peoples, the Iranians and the Vedic Aryans.



(Refer to Map)

The Language and Literature

Their Language

Unknown by name, however considered by philologists to be the source of Avestan and Sanskrit.

Oral Tradition

The Proto-Indo-Iranians were the bearers of an oral tradition, as there was no reading or writing system in ancient times.

Their Literature

There seem to have been three types of literature orally transmitted. The Proto-Indo-Iranians are said to have had a strong tradition of—

1. Heroic poetry
2. Lyric and elegiac poetry
3. Religious and learned poetry.

The General Religious Beliefs

Their Religion

Unknown by name, but certainly included the worship and propitiation of a number of gods and goddesses. The Indo-Iranian pantheon included a number of nature divinities who were deemed to be sometimes good and on other occasions wicked.

The Proto-Indo-Iranians worshipped instinctively and often through fear, and hence excessive sacrifices and offerings were made to the different divinities to appease them. The Proto-Indo-Iranians being nomadic pastoralists, had no fixed houses of worship. Many of their gods were abstract personifications of the elements. Every force or natural element whose manifestation they could see or experience, was deified.

They did however believe in an all-pervading primitive concept of order (*Sk.rta*). The regular movements of day and night by the rising and setting of the sun, as also the seasonal changes, made the Proto-Indo-Iranians believe that

there was a force or natural law which maintained and regulated these changes. Many centuries later, this natural law came to be known by the Iranian people (in the Avestan language) as *asha*. The precept of *asha* was the precursor to the later Zoroastrian concept of truth.

The Pantheon of Indo-Iranian Worship

The three chief Asuras:

- Mitra — the Lord of Covenant/Loyalty
- Varuna — the Lord of Binding Oath/
Truth
- Asura — the Lord.

The three Lords jointly were believed to be responsible for the natural order in the world.

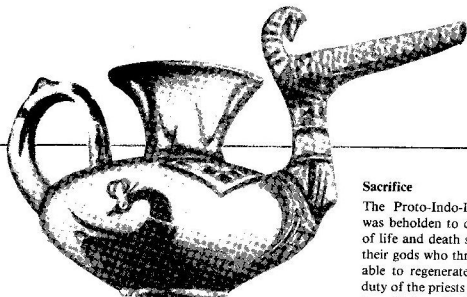
The Proto-Indo-Iranians considered a promise and its enforcement as an extension of the natural law (*Sk.rta*), as it was seen necessary to maintain some kind of basic order in their otherwise turbulent society. Mitra became the Lord of Contract and Varuna became the Overseer of Solemn Oaths. Both these pledges it is believed, contained a latent power which consequently gave Mitra and Varuna divine status.

A System of Ordeals

In the case of a dispute involving a breach of contract or oath, the pledges to Mitra and Varuna were tested by means of a fire or water ordeal, which the accused was made to undergo. If the accused survived the ordeal, the person was deemed to be innocent.

Their Cult Gods

Fire, Water, Haoma (plant/priest) and Gēush Urvan (the soul of the cow) were some of the important cult divinities worshipped by the Proto-Indo-Iranians. The two most popular divinities were Fire and Water. The Fire god was offered dry fuel, incense and animal fat, whereas the Water goddess was propitiated with milk and the sap from the *haoma* and pomegranate plants. Haoma and Gēush Urvan



Vase used for ritual offering (c. 1000 B.C.)

were invoked together and offerings of blood sacrifice were made to them.

Their Nature Gods

These were the personifications of certain physical phenomena, and so the Proto-Indo-Iranians worshipped the Sky, Sun, Moon, Stars, Earth and Wind.

The Social Pattern

The Proto-Indo-Iranian society appears to have been a bipartite one, with the priests being a socially distinct class from the rest of the people. Being nomadic pastoralists, their wealth was seen to be in the cattle, sheep and horses that they herded. They seem to have followed a patrilineal system within their society.

The World View

The Proto-Indo-Iranians believed that the world was created in seven stages. They thought that the sky was a huge stone shell in which water was contained; the earth they believed was a flat disc which floated on the water. Upon the earth they believed grew the first plant, after which appeared a single animal and later, the first man and woman. The last creation was fire, whose source was the sun which stood still at noon, as they thought the world to be initially motionless.

The Proto-Indo-Iranians strongly believed that their gods offered the first triple divine sacrifice of a plant, animal and man, after which the cycle of life is traditionally held to have begun.

Sacrifice

The Proto-Indo-Iranians believed that man was beholden to continue the natural process of life and death started by their gods. It was their gods who through a divine sacrifice were able to regenerate life. Hence it became the duty of the priests to re-enact the first sacrifice by offering plants and animals in order to ensure that the continuity of the life cycle was maintained. The act of sacrifice was done in the belief that benefit to man would accrue, both in the seen and unseen worlds, and that the spirit of the creature upon death would merge with the god-head.

The Concept of Death and the Hereafter

Death was looked upon as a natural process in the cycle of life. The Proto-Indo-Iranians strongly believed in an after-life doctrine, according to which they thought that the heroic spirits of the dead lingered upon the earth for three days and then retreated underground into the Kingdom of Shadows which was ruled by Yama. Hence they buried their dead at the bottom of deep shafts covered by earthen burrows.

Unusual Customs

Bull's Urine

The Proto-Indo-Iranians used bull's urine as they believed that it contained divine powers which were held to be of a spiritual and medicinal nature. The bull's urine was also used by them for inner bodily purity as well as outer ritual purity.

The Dog: Man's Best Friend

As nomadic pastoralists, the Proto-Indo-Iranians found the dog to be a trusted loyal companion and a help in their daily lives. They also believed in the spiritual importance of the dog, who was seen to be the living intermediary between the visible and invisible worlds. As a result, they held that the soul of the dog was linked with the soul of man - a concept which entered Zoroastrianism many centuries later.