1 The Indo-Europeans: Origins and Culture

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The Reconstruction of Indo-European Culture

Although the concept of Indo-European is primarily a linguistic one, it is none the less clear that merely by postulating the existence of this language we have also to postulate the existence of a homogeneous group of speakers characterized by a particular culture, as is the case with any natural language. Indo-European formed an essential part of that culture and was to some extent a faithful reflection of it. This observation has many repercussions from historical and sociological perspectives.

In other words, it was natural that almost as soon as comparative linguistics had established the concept of Indo-European (no easy feat, since it was by no means obvious that an unattested language could be posited as the basis of a language family) and had fruitfully set out to reconstruct it, linguists also began to wonder about the material and intellectual culture of the unknown peoples who had at one time spoken Indo-European. This was the origin of research into the origins and culture of the Indo-Europeans.

Normally historians reconstruct history (including cultural history) using written or archaeological evidence. However, in the case of the Indo-Europeans this is not possible, since no texts or archaeological remains have survived: scholars can study only their language, or rather only those isolated linguistic fragments offered us by reconstruction.

The Lexicalist Method

It is understandable, then, that the first attempts to recover IE culture (those made by Adalbert Kuhn in the mid-nineteenth century) employed what we may term the 'lexicalist' method: an IE word was reconstructed, and from the existence of this lexeme it was deduced that the object denoted must have existed in IE culture. Thus, for example, from the existence of the lexeme *rēg-s 'king' (cf. Ved. rāj-, Lat. rēx, Gaul. -rīx) it was deduced that the IE peoples were ruled by kings; from the existence of *ōwīs 'sheep' (Lat. ovīs, Ved. avi-, etc.) that they practised sheep rearing, and so on.

Kuhn used this technique in a series of studies published between 1845 and 1873 to produce an initial outline reconstruction of the culture of the Indo-
Europeans, portraying them as farmers and breeders of livestock, with a stable social structure and a monarchical system of government, religious, and with a strong sense of family.

Given the rather elementary nature of this methodology, it is not difficult to identify some of Kuhn’s precursors. As early as 1828, for example, K.O. Müller, a great classical philologist with wide interests in history and language, had used lexical arguments to trace the origin of the Latin and Italic peoples back to a mixture of indigenous peoples and Grecian invaders (the concept of Indo-European did not then exist). Continuing with this type of analysis, he succeeded in attributing to the first group a considerable capability in the military sphere, and to the second a gentle farming culture. The jump from lexical information to deductions about culture was made by means of the following sort of logic: Lat. *ensis* ‘sword’ has no corresponding forms outside Italy and must therefore come from the vocabulary of the indigenous peoples, who, consequently, must have been a population of warriors; on the other hand, *bos* ‘ox’ is found in Greek and must therefore be a word brought in by the invaders who are thus shown to be breeders of livestock. In passing we may note that this argument is not only extremely simplistic, but also technically wrong, since *ensis* has an exact cognate in Ved. asi- ‘sword’, so that by Müller’s own reasoning it would have to be attributed to the vocabulary of the invaders: but at that time, scientific knowledge of Indic was still in its infancy.

It is undeniable, then, that the credit for using the lexicalist method to trace the first basic outline of IE culture, solidly based on excellent etymologies, must go to Kuhn.

A comprehensive arrangement of all the results obtained from the reconstruction of IE culture appeared almost immediately with A. Pictet’s work *Les Origines indo-européennes ou les Aryas primitifs. Essai de paléontologie linguistique* (2 vols, 1859–63), a title which, significantly, was to be taken up again by Pisani (*Paleontologia linguistica*, 1938) and in a volume by Devoto (*Origini indoeuropee*, 1962).

However, the lexicalist method has very serious limitations. Above all, it is simply not true that the existence of a word necessarily implies that the object denoted existed within the same linguistic area: almost all the languages in Europe share the same term for the word ‘lion’ (these are direct or indirect reflexes of Lat. *leonem*), even though lions are not in fact found in Europe.

Second, while the reconstruction of the *signifiant*, where possible, is unambiguous, this is much less true of the reconstruction of the *signifié*, which often points in a certain direction, but not without some ambiguity. Consider, for example, Ved. *sinha*- and Arm. *inj*, which both go back to an IE form, *singha*/*bos*, which had a restricted geographical distribution. (It is irrelevant that the form may in turn have been borrowed from an oriental or African language, because the loan must have taken place during the IE
period.) However, the problem is that *sinha-* means ‘lion’, while *inj* refers to the leopard: which meaning are we then to assign to IE *singhos? In cases of this sort Indo-Europeanists have tried to take refuge in the use of generic terms, reconstructing *signifiés* broad enough to include all the meanings of the words used in the comparison (which are, of course, the only real meanings): so in the above case, *singhos* might be assigned the meaning ‘large wild animal’. But is it reasonable to attribute to a language lexemes with a constantly generic, colourless meaning? On the contrary, we may be sure that the reality was very different: *singhos* must have had a precise meaning which was either retained or changed in the passage to Vedic and Armenian, but we are no longer in a position to judge which language preserved the old state of affairs and which innovated.

It is worse still when we assume with *a priori* certainty that a given word has a particular meaning and then use that assumption to draw important conclusions for the reconstruction of culture. This is more or less what happened in the case of the so-called ‘beech-tree argument’, which was used to demonstrate that the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans was approximately in what is now western Poland.

The starting point is the analysis of the lexical series formed by Lat. *fagus* ‘beech-tree’, OHG *buohha* (id.), Gk. *phegos* ‘oak’, (Kurd. *büz* ‘elm’),1 Russ. *buziná* ‘elder’ (all from *bhäwg-*). Now, since the beech tree does not naturally grow east of the Königsberg–Crimea line, it is deduced that the original meaning of ‘beech tree’ has only survived in Latin and Germanic, while elsewhere the term in question was used to denote other trees which grew locally. Since ‘beech tree’ was the original meaning, this proves both that this tree was a typical feature of the IE homeland and, obviously, that this homeland must have been situated within the area where the tree grows naturally, that is, either in Italy or the Germanic-speaking area (since the areas which are now Polish historically were German). Having eliminated Italy for obvious reasons (even at the beginning of the historical period it was still full of non-IE peoples), only the Germanic-speaking area remains and must therefore have been the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans.

It is clear that this ‘beech tree argument’ is based totally on the unproven—and unprovable—assumption that the meaning of IE *bhäwg-* is ‘beech tree’, whereas the attested languages show a variety of meanings which diverge and vary to an extent which prevents any degree of certainty in the reconstruction.

However, even when we succeed in establishing a meaning with any degree of reliability, the lexicalist method does not necessarily help us towards a true reconstruction of IE culture. Consider again the case of IE *rēg-s* ‘king’. Kuhn drew from this the obvious conclusion that the Indo-Europeans were familiar with a ‘king’ figure. But this observation does not in fact give us any more information about the world of the Indo-Europeans and its history, since the historian is interested not in the label but in the reality
behind it: what the functions were of this ‘king’; what powers he had; how he was chosen, and so on. A mere label cannot answer any of these questions.

The Textual Method
If culture is an organic entity where everything is internally coherent (tout se tient) but not everything is on the same plane, then the reconstruction of a culture should also be presented in an organic form, comprehensively and hierarchically. However, this is in fact virtually impossible if the basic working material is made up of a collection of lexemes whose meanings are now often extremely vague and where there are frequently irremediable gaps as a result of words which cannot be reconstructed.

After these initial attempts at reconstruction, carried out in broad sweeps and with pioneering boldness, the lexicalist method consequently split into two different approaches. On the one hand, scholars attempted to reconstruct anything they could, forgoing any attempt to adhere to organic structure. The culmination of this approach was reached in Schrader’s *Reallexikon* of 1901, where the individual stems are listed in alphabetical order. The second approach investigates very specific areas with broad and compact lexical evidence, allowing an organic perspective on the facts considered, even if the argument remains of necessity isolated from all the other elements of IE culture. A model of this type of study is the monograph by Delbrück (1889) on kinship among the Indo-Europeans, where he demonstrates the existence both of a patriarchal structure and of a model of organization analogous to that of the ‘extended family’ which survived in the Slavic area until very recent times.

The lexicalist method contrasts with the ‘textual’ method. This starts off from the premise that the Indo-Europeans handed down to their descendants not only a language but also a culture, and that this culture can be reconstructed by comparing identical or analogous cultural features in different IE cultures, as long as these are not innovative in character and are not loan elements. We therefore speak of the ‘textual method’, in so far as the elements to be used in the reconstruction are in fact preserved for us in old written texts, even although in principle we cannot actually exclude the use of contemporary information not yet recorded in writing. This method is therefore based on the analysis of content and may range from the semantic content of a single word to the structure of an entire body of literature. Consequently, it is clear that in no case is it necessary to have lexical identity of the elements which express the content. We offer here a simple example involving IE metaphor.

In ancient Ireland a stranger would be termed ‘blue wolf’, not as an occasional metaphor, but as an institutional term. In the Germanic world a criminal expelled from his tribe would be referred to as a ‘wolf’. In the Hittite laws, someone who loses the protection of the law for ravishing a woman is declared a ‘wolf’. In Vedic India, ‘wolf’ denotes a hostile stranger.
The perfect overlap of these uses can only be explained if we accept that within IE culture there was already a metaphorical use of ‘wolf’ with the meaning ‘person who is, or has become, estranged from the tribe and is hostile to it’. However, what has been preserved from Indo-European is only the content, the cultural rather than the linguistic information, since for ‘wolf’ in this sense each language uses its own term: OIr. cú, Gmc *wargaz, Ved. vrka- (Hittite has the ideogram UR.BAR.RA, perhaps to be read *uotma). That is, each language has innovated freely at the linguistic level, but not at the level of cultural content. Moreover, this cultural content is also susceptible of variation, without the original information thus being lost. An example is furnished in this case by Old Irish, which does not simply say ‘wolf’, but rather ‘blue wolf’. What is the origin of the use of this adjective? It originates in a typical historical experience of the Irish, for whom the hostile foreigner was identified above all with the British. Now the British, as we know from Caesar and Pliny, dyed their bodies blue in war and in religious ceremonies. The use of the adjective ‘blue’ originates in these practices, which were foreign to Irish culture.

**The Tripartite Ideology**

However, much more than an isolated IE metaphor can be recovered by means of the textual method. The essential starting point, in the area of culture, is the identification of the ideology, that is of the categories of analysis and judgement used to perceive and create reality. The identification and definition of IE ideology is the achievement of a great French scholar, G. Dumézil, who dedicated a lifetime of research to these problems.

Indo-European culture incorporated every aspect of reality, whether present or future, into one of three functions, namely: the sacred; the military; and the economic (the last to be understood both as production of goods and the enjoyment of anything that adds pleasure and security to life). The whole picture is composed of the coexistence of these three functions.

This ‘tripartite’ ideology survived the splitting up of the IE community by many millennia and went on to become the pattern according to which the individual peoples set up their cults, their legends and their mythologies. The oldest Roman history furnishes excellent examples of this.

When, at a very early stage, the Romans wanted to reconstruct and pass on the origins of their city, they were well aware of the need to set up a unified whole, without any imbalance in favour of one function or another. This need was met by the figures of the first three kings, each clearly expressing one of the three functions of IE ideology. Numa Pompilius, the indefatigable creator of religious cults and priestly colleges, represents the sacred aspect. Tullus Hostilius, the crude, brutal warrior, embodies the second function, the military aspect. Finally, Romulus, who protected the shepherds from robbers, founded the city and obtained wives and offspring for his men, is an expression of the economic function. In this way the foundation of Rome was
laid on a perfectly complete basis, which was a guarantee of strength and duration.

More or less at the same time as the legend of the origins of Rome was being created, King Darius the Great of Persia placed an inscription at Persepolis, in which he prayed to Ahuramazda to ward off all evils from his people. These evils are expressed by three specific elements, each an expression of one of the three functions: famine (the third function); the enemy army (the second); and the cult of false gods (the first).

It would be impossible to understand the culture of the Indo-Europeans, and that of the individual IE peoples in antiquity, without constantly bearing in mind this ‘tripartite ideology’. We know, for example, that at Rome, at a time preceding written records, Jove, Mars and Quirinus (the so-called ‘pre-Capitoline triad’, earlier than that formed by Jove, Juno and Minerva) were worshipped in the Capitoline temple. Why this choice? Clearly because Jove, father of the gods and of men, expressed the first function; Mars, god of war, the second; and Quirinus, god of fertility, the third. This temple was thus the only one that united all of the functions and so it came to represent the religious and moral centre of the city, unlike the other temples, which were dedicated to individual deities and thus expressed only one of the functions.

However, it is necessary to stress the fact that, contrary to what Dumézil himself once claimed and to what some scholars still try to maintain, this tripartite structure did not actually imply the existence of three separate castes (priests, warriors, farmers/breeders of livestock), since the trifunctionalism is only a category of the perception and interpretation of reality, not a division of a social kind. Only at a relatively late stage and only in a few areas of the IE world (India, and to a much lesser extent, Iran) did the three-caste system come to develop, a system to which a fourth, highly disdained, caste must be added, made up of subdued and impoverished natives. But this is an independent, secondary development, which plays no part in the framework of IE culture.

**Indo-European Institutions**

For the sake of clarity and brevity, an analytical outline of several individual but essential elements of IE culture is presented below: it should constantly be borne in mind that these were never considered to be independent elements and that the task of scholars, rather than continually attempting to isolate new elements, consists in recovering the organic structure of IE culture; isolating the links which, within the framework of a unitary system, relate the individual elements to each other; and recovering the depth and function of each of these in relation to that cultural system.

**Religion**

Symptomatic of the problems is the fact that, despite the attempts of many scholars, we have so far been able to reconstruct the name of only one deity:
Gk. Zeus, Ved. Dyau-, Lat. Iu(ppiter), Hitt. šiuš (however, this is not a proper name, but means ‘god’), which all suggest an IE form *Djews.

The reason for this gap in reconstruction lies in the fact that in this religion what was important was not the specific figure of the individual god, but rather the function which he represented, so the IE peoples were able continually to create or appropriate new deities from outside (thus forgetting the old ones), the only condition being that each one of them should clearly fulfil the function of the god whom he had just replaced. This attitude, where it is not the name but the function that counts, is also shown in historical times in the so-called interpretatio Romana of foreign pantheons: each time the Romans came into contact with the religion of a ‘barbarian’ people, they gave to each of its gods the name of the Roman deity who in their opinion fulfilled the same function. Thus in Tacitus, for example, Gmc *Wodanaz, *Dunaraz and *Teiwaz become Jove, Hercules and Mars respectively.

Moreover, the inherent limit of the lexicalist method in cultural reconstruction becomes apparent in the case of the reconstructed form *Djews, as has already been made clear. In fact, even if the signifiants correspond perfectly, the religious elements referred to do not correspond. In Rome and Greece, Jupiter and Zeus are the supreme deities, the perfect expression of the first function; but Hitt. šiuš has become a generic term for any god and even in the oldest texts Ved. Dyau- appears as a cultural relic, whose sex even was not known.

The identical nature of the old religious systems of the IE peoples is thus not a matter of worshipping the same gods, but rather of dividing the members of their pantheon into the same tripartite schema: gods of the sacred, gods of war, gods of well-being. From this point of view, then, Mitra and Varuna, the Vedic gods expressing the first function, are perfectly comparable with the Roman Jupiter and with the Germanic Wodanaz who in their respective pantheons fulfil the same function.

The world of the gods represents a purely objective element in IE culture, a world to which man stands in a utilitarian relationship rather than one of love or emotion. A typically Christian concept such as ‘the love of God’ would have been incomprehensible to an Indo-European: man did not love the gods and the gods did not love man. Between them, however, transactions of mutual benefit might be conducted: man would offer up a sacrifice to a god, who in his turn would grant what had been requested. It should be noted that these requests were never of a metaphysical nature, but always concerned goods and benefits in life: health, abundant livestock, obedient and sturdy sons, victory in war, and so on.

In other words, the sacrifice was really a full legal contract which represented a sort of ‘payment in advance’, a do ut des from which the god could not withdraw. The extreme formalism which characterized the sacrifice and the related prayer is also typical of legal contracts. Everything would become null and void, for example, if the person praying did not use the
correct name of the god or pronounced the prayer wrongly. In the oldest Vedic and Avestan texts the person praying specifies that he is using ‘words pronounced correctly’ and in Rome and Greece we find frequent precautionary formulae in which, after the invocation of the god by name, there follows the phrase ‘or any other name by which you wish to be called’.

**Sacrifice**

The Vedic world records the sacrifice of Primordial Man, the first, exemplary victim, from whose severed limbs all physical and social reality originated; the liturgical texts, in their turn, recognize man as the best and most acceptable of victims. The Indic world was thus permeated at the level of myth and theological doctrine by reminders of human sacrifice, which certainly existed in the IE period. Moreover, it is difficult to find any IE peoples who were not still practising it in historical times. We have certain evidence of it with reference to the Celts, the Germani, the Slavs and the Scythians: this ‘barbaric’ custom that scandalized the Greeks and the Romans was in fact only the continuation of an IE custom which, as such, must also have been practised at some time by the Greeks and Romans. And there too, in fact, we find fairly clear evidence of human sacrifices.

In Greece this evidence exists at the level of the myth: in order to ensure the safe departure of the fleet heading for Ilium, Agamemnon promises to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Naturally, the matter has a happy and civilized ending (Iphigenia escapes and a deer is sacrificed instead), because Greek culture could not attribute so terrible a custom to such an illustrious person. But it is clear that a promise of this sort would have made no sense unless it were formulated within the limits of contemporary customs.

At Rome, both Livy and Plutarch mention that in the third century human sacrifices were still made when the city found itself in situations of extreme peril; moreover, Plutarch adds that this custom still survived, but was veiled in state secrecy.

Human sacrifices were thus a very real part of life in the IE world, which gave them up reluctantly, at a late stage. Alongside these there must also have been animal sacrifices made according to precise rules, although we are no longer able to reconstruct these. Not all animals, for example, were suitable for sacrifice: it is probable that only domestic animals were suitable, which suggests a connection with the types of animal rearing which were practised. Consequently, the pig could be sacrificed in Rome (remember the *suovetaurilia*), but not in India, where it was not reared.

An essential point as far as both sacrifice and, in more general terms, IE religion are concerned, is that the deities were thought of exclusively as male. This androcentric conception of the gods is preserved in its purest state in India, where all the great deities are male, and female deities appear only as personifications of natural phenomena which are grammatically feminine in gender (e.g. Night, Dawn) or as the wives of the males, in which case they
are such insignificant figures that they do not even have names of their own, but take the name of their husbands: the wife of Varuṇa is Varuṇānī, the wife of Indra is Indrānī, and so on.

The great female deities only begin to appear when the IE tribes come into contact with cultures where the woman had a relevant position: figures such as Juno or Aphrodite or the Great Mother of Uppsala are certainly not Indo-European in origin. This male-based structure of the original IE pantheon obviously reflects the social and family structure of that society, to which we shall return later.

The Afterlife

As we have seen, IE religion aimed only to guarantee worldly goods in this life and did not pose metaphysical questions. It was therefore neither in a position to respond to man’s deepest existential needs nor to foretell what awaited him after death. Alongside the official religion, but not in opposition to it, there developed theories and faiths which placed the relationship between men and gods on a different basis and tried to perceive man’s ultimate destiny.

In this area the cult of the Mothers is of relevance. This cult is attested in the Celtic, Germanic, Baltic and Vedic worlds: the Mothers are loving deities who protect their faithful, bestowing salvation and plenty on them. The anomalous character of this cult with respect to the official religion is clear from the very fact that they are female deities.

Some answers to the problem of the afterlife were also put forward. We cannot, for example, exclude the possibility of the existence as early as the IE stage of some form of faith in metempsychosis, which is widespread among the Celts and of which there would also appear to be traces in the oldest Indian culture.

There also existed a hope of a happy eternal life, a passing over to fertile and pleasant places, which in Greece were termed ‘Elysian Fields’ or ‘Islands of the Blessed’ and which the Irish called ‘Land of the Living’ and conceived of as distant islands in the west, where a hero could come by ship after overcoming infinite difficulties.

But this vision is only apparently optimistic, since both in Greece and in Ireland this happy destiny did not await all men, but only a small, select number of the privileged. On the contrary, it appears that a very unhappy fate awaited most men after death. They would survive, certainly, but in a horrible dark world where they were deprived of physical concreteness, degraded and devoid of hope. This is the world that Homer portrays in the Nékyia, where the most courageous Greek hero, Achilles, comes to declare that he should prefer to labour for a miserable peasant on earth rather than be king of all the dead in the afterlife.

There is certainly a close connection between this uncertain and pessimistic view of the afterlife and the yearning for ‘immortal glory’, the only
form of survival that was really possible and desirable, which was typical of
the methods of the IE warrior and which we shall go on to discuss further (see
pp. 18–19).

The Family
As was demonstrated by Delbrück, the IE family had a structure similar to the
‘extended family’ which survives to this day among the southern Slavs and
which consisted of all the descendants of a common progenitor. Its stable
members were basically only the males, since the women, by marrying, would
move across into their husband’s family: links of friendship and alliance
would thus be created between the two families.

From an examination of kinship terms, attempts have been made to
determine what the internal structure of the family was, since we know
from anthropology that the individualization of levels of kinship is not
in fact universal or unequivocal: to us, for example, the distinction between
‘father’ and ‘mother’ appears obvious and necessary, but in Hawaiian
society there is no such distinction; the two stand on an equal footing
and are referred to by one term expressing only the fact that they are
direct ancestors of the first degree. Attempts have thus been made to relate
the internal structure of the IE family to models already noted by
anthropology, ranging from the ancient Chinese model to that of the modern
Omaha tribe (a Native American tribe situated along the Ohio river). The
method used for this identification was in fact the analysis of the meanings
of kinship terms both in the individual languages and at the level of
reconstructed Indo-European.

The data certainly merit at least some consideration. Lat. nepos, for
example, indicates two forms of kinship which are objectively different, in
that it denotes both ‘grandson’ and ‘nephew’ (this double meaning is retained
in modern Italian nipote). On the other hand, OIr. niae, which corresponds
etymologically to Lat. nepos, has a much more restricted meaning, since it
indicates only the sister’s son. In addition, Lat. avus is the grandfather, but its
diminutive form (avunculus) denotes the paternal uncle. Facts of this sort
might allow us to draw general conclusions in the reconstruction of the
internal structure of the IE family, if we were not faced with two major
obstacles, as is often the case with lexical methods. The first is that it is
difficult to establish a precise, unequivocal meaning at the IE level for certain
terms which have different meanings in the historically attested languages:
the second is that kinship terms are also subject to semantic and formal
innovations. While Latin cognatus ‘blood relative’ does survive in the
Romance languages, it has acquired a new meaning ‘brother-in-law’ (a case
of semantic innovation); in various modern Celtic languages relationships
established as a result of marriage are expressed according to French or
English models, for example, Bret. tad-kaer ‘father-in-law’, a calque on Fr.
beau-père, and Welsh tad-yng-nghyfraith, a calque on Eng. father-in-law
(which in turn are innovations in relation to Lat. *socer and OEng. *swéor which continue IE *swekuros).

These difficulties at the semantic level led one of the great Indo-Europeanists, O. Szemerényi (1978), to abandon the analysis of the internal structure of the IE family and to try instead to recover, by means of the etymological analysis of individual lexemes, the practical function and the social and affective position of its members. This attempt was not totally new, since for some time there had been scholars who, for example, would analyse *pH-tër ‘father’ as the *nomen agentis of the same root which appears in Lat. *pasco: the father, that is, was functionally identified as the provider of food. This theory is attractive but almost certainly unfounded, since it starts from the identification of the segment -tër with the *nominum agentis suffix -tër, whereas nouns such as *dajwër ‘brother-in-law’ and *swesör ‘sister’ would seem to suggest, rather, the segmentation *pHt-ër.

Szemerényi’s investigation, although conducted with great scholarship, comes up against the fact that most of the kinship terms are obscure from the point of view of etymology because of the very fact that they belong to the oldest stage of the language; this can lead Szemerényi to propose untenable etymologies. This may be shown by recalling the fact that, for example, *bhr-äter ‘brother’ is analysed as a compound *bhr-áter ‘bearer of fire’ (in family life, that is, his task would have been to keep the fire alight during moves). However, such a compound does not seem convincing from the point of view of the formal rules of IE nominal composition: what we should expect for ‘bearer of fire’ is something more like *ātr-bhr (or *ātr-bhros). The identification of the name for ‘sister-in-law’ (husband’s sister), Gk gálös, with the name for ‘marten’ (Skt giri-) is no more than an extremely vague theory, suggesting that the young, nimble little sister-in-law may have been denoted metaphorically in this way.

Otherwise, the serious limitation of this method consists in the fact that it does not take account of the fact that kinship terms are relative (the ‘father’ is such relative to the sons, the ‘uncle’ is such relative to the nephews, etc.), while Szemerényi’s etymological analysis centres around absolute rather than relative meanings. Even if we accept, as a hypothesis, that a young member of the family was called ‘bearer of fire’, the development to ‘brother’ requires, as a necessary condition, that this term was used only relative to the other brothers; if it had been used, for example, relative to the father, then it would have developed into ‘son’ according to the same process.

It is thus better to give up this illusory reconstructional examination and to analyse, by means of the textual method, the real relationships which existed within the IE family.

The undisputed master (*potis) of the IE family was the father (clearly to be understood not in the sense of physical father but in the sense of the Roman *paterfamiliiās). His authority was so unlimited that the title of ‘father’ was also conferred on the gods, with reference not to creation, a concept which did...
not yet exist, but to their absolute power over men. The feminine *potniH, which in historical times comes to mean ‘mistress (of a household)’, should not lead us to assume an equal authority on the part of the wife, since the term originally had purely a possessive value, ‘she who specifically belongs to the *potis’. In fact, it is the emancipation of the members of the family from the despotic authority of the father which constitutes one of the essential, non-IE, features of modern Western civilisation, although its origins lie as far back as Greek and Roman times.

The house – not in an architectural sense, but as a social unit, the ‘household’ (Benveniste 1969: 296) – was termed *dom-, and the ‘master of the house’ was therefore the *doms-potisl*dems-potis (Ved. dampati-, Avest. dāng paiti-, Gk. despōtes).

Marriage
The Indo-Europeans certainly practised forms of marriage, which we can reconstruct easily thanks to the surprising correspondences in the rules laid down in the old Indian, Irish and Welsh legal texts: these correspondences are confirmed, moreover, by some of the legendary elements of the oldest Roman history (such as the rape of the Sabine women or the story of Dido and Aeneas).

The most basic form of marriage simply consisted of two young people living together in amorous pursuits. But alongside this form of marriage, which we may also interpret as a judicious concession to youthful excess, there existed a more brutal form, marriage by rape. The memory of this survived in Rome in the myth of the rape of the Sabine women, but it also represented a fully recognized form of marriage, one which was particularly recommended for warriors. Finally, there also existed a form of marriage by purchase: the father of the young man would acquire a wife for him by giving specified goods to her father or her tribe. This was the only type of marriage which was sanctified by special religious ceremonies; Indian ethics justified the payment itself by adducing the great expenses which the father of the bride had to face for the matrimonial rites.

However, the economic situation was much less simple than it might appear, since although the girl’s father received her price on the one hand, on the other he had to provide her with dowry and presents. In actual fact, it is probable that the situation was resolved by means of an exchange of goods between the two families, partly because the alliance between them resulting from the marriage essentially prevented the impoverishment of one in favour of the other.

There is no doubt that polygamy was widely practised, at least at the level of the richest and most powerful families (as a general practice it would be objectively impossible if only because of the fact that in any human grouping the number of women is more or less equal to the number of men). Polygamy is well attested not only in the eastern area of the IE world, but also in the
western area. We know from a valuable comment by Caesar (De bello Gallico 6,19) that it was practised by the Gaulish nobility: indeed, whenever a nobleman died in suspicious circumstances, his wives (note the plural) would be subjected to torture. Moreover, we know from legal texts that it also existed in ancient Ireland, where the different wives were not placed on an equal footing but according to a hierarchical scale at the apex of which was the *primben* ‘wife of the first rank’.

In Greek culture there is a sure reference to polygamy in the Iliad, where Priam has two wives, old Hecuba, by whom he has had nineteen sons, and young Laothoe, who has provided him with another two. Laothoe is the daughter of the king of the Leleges and has brought him a large dowry; we may therefore exclude the possibility that she was simply a concubine.

The recognition of the new-born son was conducted formally and solemnly: the father would place him on his knees and the child would thus assume the status of legitimate son. This IE custom is preserved in the Sogdian phrase *z’nwk z’tk* ‘legitimate heir’ (lit. ‘son of the knees’), to which the OIr. compound *gl’án-daltae* ‘adoptive son’ (lit. ‘child of the knee’) corresponds; the Latin adjective *genuinus* ‘authentic, true’ presupposes the same usage (Benveniste 1926). In Homer (Odyssey 19.400ff.), finally, there is a detailed portrayal of this custom: the nurse Eurykleia places the young Odysseus on the knees of his grandfather Autolycus and invites the latter to give the child a name. In other words, Autolycus legitimizes him and, as the first fruit of this legitimization, gives him his name; incidentally, we note that this act is carried out not by the father, Laertes, but by the figure who has most authority in the family, which leads us to assume that originally the legitimization was carried out by the *dems-potis*, the head of the household.

**Tribal Organization**

The *dom-*, as we have seen, is the smallest social unit, since within IE society the individual has no reality outside the group to which he belongs, to the extent that being expelled from this group is the punishment for the most serious crimes.

A group of *dom-* (i.e. of households, ‘extended families’) made up a *wik-*, which we may translate as ‘clan’; and just as the *dom-* had as its master the *dems-potis*, the *wik-* had the *wik-potis* (Ved. *vispati-*, Lith. *višpats*). In its meaning of ‘tribal division’, the element *wik-* appears in Greek in the adjective *trikhaikes* ‘(the Dorians) divided into three tribes’ and, perhaps, if Szemerényi is right, in Homeric *hippóta*, an epithet used of illustrious warriors, which was traditionally interpreted as ‘horseman, knight’, but which may be better interpreted as reflecting an older *wik-potēs* ‘clan chief’.

Less certain is the reconstruction of the unit or units larger than the *wik-*. It is probable that the only unit larger than the *wik-* was the tribe in its entirety and that it was termed *toutā* (OIr. *túath* ‘tribe’, OHG *diot* ‘people’,
Osc. *toutō* 'state, community of citizens, *civitas*', Lith. *tautā* 'people, country', Pers. *tōda* 'heap, pile, crowd'). At the head of the *tōutā* there is a figure of fundamental importance in IE, the *rēg-s* ‘king’, a term which survives in only a few, but important, areas (Ved. *rāj-,* Lat. *rex*, Gaul. *-rix*) and which elsewhere is formed either by a derivative of *teutā* (Goth. *piudans*, Ill. Teutana 'queen') or by a variety of different innovations (Gk *basileus*, for example, is almost certainly borrowed from a non-IE language); but it would be gratuitous (not because the question is of no interest, but because we lack the material to resolve it on an objective basis) to speculate about the reasons for such substitutions.

In this section we have basically listed terms; but it would be methodologically wrong to deduce cultural information from mere lists of words. The aim of the investigation and reconstruction must therefore be to elucidate the actual content of these lexemes, and this can only be done by means of textual comparison. In fact, given the current state of research, this appears to be possible only in the case of the ‘king’, i.e. the tribal chief. As far as the rest is concerned, only a brief comment is possible: the clan and the ‘family unit’ should not be taken absolutely in the sense of administrative subdivisions of the tribe, nor their chiefs as functionaries; this is true, to some extent, only in the historical period and only in some areas. But the IE tribe is certainly not to be conceived of as a unitary, centralized state.

**The King**

The detailed reconstruction of this fundamental figure is one of the greatest successes of historical linguistics in the field of cultural reconstruction.

Contrary to what a simplistic use of the lexical method might lead us to assume, there is no military dimension to the IE king. He has a different, much more important function: positioned somewhere between men and gods, he is an instrument who presents the needs of his people to the gods and through whom the gods convey their gifts. In other words, the king is a sacramental figure, the priest *par excellence*. This was still quite clear at the beginning of the republican period in Rome: at the very moment when the kings were driven out, the new priest-figure of the *rex sacrificulus* was created, specifically to avoid a religious vacuum and in order not to leave unfulfilled those essential sacramental functions which could only be carried out by a *rex*.

Irish, Greek and Indian texts agree to a great extent in outlining the functions of the king. Basically, the well-being and the very life of the tribe depended on him, not because of any wise laws or provisions on his part, but rather thanks to his superhuman ability to obtain everything necessary from the gods. If the king is a true king, these texts say, the harvest will be good, animals prolific, the rivers full of fish, honey easy to find (remember that honey was used to make an alcoholic drink, *medhu*), fine healthy children will be born, and the enemy will remain outside the tribal boundaries. If this
does not happen, it means that the king is not a true king, and unfortunate measures then have to be taken.

To these textual agreements, themselves already more than sufficient, there may be added the concrete portrayal of the king in other IE cultures, a portrayal which fully conforms to this theoretical framework.

Consider again the legend of the origin of Rome. Writing about the encounter with the Sabines, Livy records that Romulus and Tatius were the kings of the two peoples; but, at the time of the battle, we see that these two kings are not commanding their armies, since the Roman commander is Hostius Hostilius, and the Sabine commander Mettius Curtius. So the kings do not have a military function; in other words, the legend is fully in keeping with the IE cultural information. But Romulus, though not fighting, is on the battlefield. His function is revealed when the Romans are put to flight: he raises his arms to the sky and calls for the aid of Jupiter Stator: a miracle ensues. The Romans stop fleeing, start fighting again and win easily. Obtaining miracles: this was the function of the king, even on the battlefield.

The king is a human and, at the same time, a divine figure. The way in which he could rise above the level of men and enter, at least partially, the level of the gods happened by means of a rite of enthronement which essentially consisted of his marriage to an indigenous goddess. The most archaic form of this rite is recorded for us by an English scholar of the Middle Ages, Giraldus Cambrensis, who observed it in an Irish tribe and relates it with some distaste, but with the honesty of a true historian: in the presence of his people, the man designated king would be united physically with a mare, an incarnation of the local goddess. After this rite had been performed, he was king.

The Irish (including noted scholars) have always maintained that this story is a scandalous English lie, invented to defame and ridicule them. However, fifty years ago it was shown that in India, too, there existed a similar rite of enthronement (which survived almost to the present day), so we may clearly conclude that Giraldus was not lying and also that the affinity between the two rites proves their common IE origin.

The fact that the accession to the throne took place, according to IE ideology, by means of a sacred marriage allows us to explain, among other things, the traditions and legends of peoples who, unlike the Indians and the Irish, had relinquished these practices in the historical period. Once again, we turn to the origins of Rome.

Numa Pompilius, the wise and pious man *par excellence*, had a strange relationship with the goddess Egeria; this relationship certainly took a matrimonial form (Livy uses the term *coniux*). All of this rather puzzled the historians of antiquity, partly because they knew that Numa was already conventionally married to Tatia (Plutarch avoids any difficulty by claiming that Numa's legitimate wife was already dead at the time of the relationship with Egeria). The reality is much simpler, even if the historians of antiquity...
could not recognize it: the matrimonial link between Numa and Egeria is a memory of the ‘sacred marriage’ which was necessary to become king (and which, obviously, had no relevance in connection with authentic human marriage).

This quasi-divine character of the king made him the religious centre of the tribe, but as a result left a considerable amount of free rein to the people, who in practical matters had to recognize as their true leaders the chiefs of the families and clans. It is therefore probable that as far back as the IE period there existed basic forms of democracy, represented by assemblies of ‘elders’ or ‘seniors’, which are variously attested in the ancient IE cultures (the senate at Rome, the gerousía in Greece, the darandoa among the Messapians, the Germanic pinge-, etc.). We thus have the impression of a society which is not yet differentiated into classes, even if imbalances from family to family have begun to become evident within it, presumably in connection with the acquisition of lands and wealth (and, therefore, also of men and arms) as a result of military expeditions.

Did slavery exist among the Indo-Europeans? The answer of scholars to this has always been an unqualified affirmative, clearly because slavery is attested among all the IE peoples in the historical period. However, a different view might be taken. First, we note, for what it is worth, that there is no trace of slavery in the reconstructed lexicon of Indo-European. The isogloss represented by Lat. servus, Gk eîreron ‘slavery’ and Avest. haurva- ‘ overseer’ is totally spurious (Benveniste 1969). At the textual level, which is much more relevant, there is complete silence even in areas where we should expect slaves to be mentioned. One example will suffice.

We have seen that the Vedic liturgical texts continued to view man as the supreme sacrificial victim. But this refers to the free man, the successor to Primordial Man. Moreover, the same texts give us the hierarchy of the victims, and after man (by this time a victim in theory only) they place the horse, the ox and the sheep. There is no mention of the slave. This is a significant absence because respect for human life could not have included that of the slave (who was not thought of as a man among men: Varro defined the slave as an instrumentum vocale ‘tool with the ability to speak’); if there had ever been a sacrifice of slaves, this would have been recorded in the liturgical list which preserves the very ancient tradition. This, it would seem, demonstrates that slavery did not exist in pre-Indian (i.e. Indo-European) culture.

This claim may appear to be at odds with what we shall say about the military and conquering activities of the Indo-Europeans, since victory for one side ought to imply slavery of the other side. But this is true only to a very minor degree. In fact, the transformation of men into slaves brought with it great dangers which only a strong, compact state could risk (as in Rome, for example, where even so the revolt of Spartacus took place); a very frequent practice was therefore to kill the males and reduce the women to slavery. The
claim that slavery was originally a typically female institution is proved by various facts. In Ireland the pre-monetary unit of currency was the *cumal* (female slave), not the *mug* (male slave); again in Ireland, and almost certainly in Homeric Greece, the hardest task, that of milling the grain, was carried out by the female slaves; when Troy was conquered by the Greeks, the women (Andromache, Cassandra, etc.) became slaves, but the men (even children such as Astyanax) were killed.

The women of the conquered, therefore, entered the family of the conquerors not just to work but also, inevitably, as concubines. Yet it is not stated that the son of a female slave also had the status of slave. In Homer we find numerous illegitimate children (Teucer, Isus, Cebriones, Megapentes, etc.) who have the position of freemen.

To sum up: rather than slavery in the classical sense of the word, the Indo-Europeans presumably practised systematic appropriation of the women of the conquered; the absence of any rights for these women captives was not so much a characteristic specific to them as the normal condition of all women.

The Common Man

It is not surprising that we know so little about this subject, since traditions, myths and legends deal at length with princes and heroes, but very rarely with the common man. However, some hypotheses can be formulated.

In the first reconstructions of IE culture it was already noted that the Indo-Europeans practised agriculture and the raising of livestock, a conclusion reached from the existence of IE lexemes pertaining to these areas of activity. In this case, however, the conclusion goes beyond the premise, since these lexemes can tell us at most that certain objects - plants and animals - were known, but not what importance they had in the IE economy.

Here, too, therefore, it is better to resort to the textual method, but taking care not to make deductions about the IE economy merely from correspondences in the economies of the historical periods as they are presented in our texts (since this could depend on similar lines of development), but rather on certain ancient locutions and metaphors which demonstrate the high incidence of agriculture and the raising of livestock in IE culture. Here we give only a couple of examples.

In the Irish, Greek and Vedic worlds there existed a coherent system of metaphor according to which the members of a family were referred to as the corresponding members of the bovine family: the man as the bull, the woman as the cow, the girl as the heifer and the boy as the bull-calf. In Pindar (Pyth. 4, 142) we read: ‘Cretheus and proud Salmoneus had the same cow as mother’; and the old classical philologists, who did not know the venerable antiquity of this metaphor, were shocked by it (see for example the commentary by Boeckh). But, in the same way, in Ireland a girl who chose to lie with an over-timid young man would justify her own behaviour thus:
'The heifers have to be bold when the bulls are not.' Facts of this sort – and we could recount many others – prove the importance of the rearing of livestock in the IE world.

As far as agriculture is concerned, let us consider the metaphor where the sexual act is seen in terms of ploughing and sowing. An old womanizer is described thus in Plautus (As. 873): 'He returns late at night, tired with working outside: he ploughs the farm of others, and leaves his own uncultivated'; in Aeschylus (Sept. 738) Oedipus 'sowed in the sacred field of his mother, where he himself had been nurtured'. Nor are these occasional metaphors: in an Attic nuptial formula it is said that the man takes the wife 'for the sowing of legitimate sons'. The same phrases are used in the Indian legal texts: 'Where seed has been scattered in a field (= woman) with the consent of the owner of the field (= the husband), the result is considered to belong to both the owner of the seed (= the natural father) and to the owner of the field' (cf. Pisani 1942–5).

It is therefore not the existence of IE lexemes pertaining to the rearing of livestock and agriculture that conveys the importance of these activities in IE society, but rather the vitality and the persistence of a metaphorical use of language that suggests an economy of the agricultural, pastoral type.

This basic character of IE society should not be seen as incompatible with the warfaring and conquering characteristics of these tribes, which succeeded in subduing a territory extending from Chinese Turkestan to Ireland. The victorious migratory movement of the Indo-Europeans, in fact, should not be conceived of in continuous form, but as a collection of successive desultory episodes, punctuated by long periods of stability, during which peaceful and normal economic activities went on and in which the inevitable disagreements with neighbouring peoples were not necessarily realized in terms of territorial conquest and new settlement. This framework, moreover, is fully confirmed by the so-called 'barbarian invasions', which represent, in the historical period, the final major movement of IE peoples westwards (this time to the disadvantage of other IE peoples). The Goths, for example, probably left southern Sweden and arrived in North Africa; but this journey took place over the space of about a millennium and was punctuated by extremely long stays in Moesia, Italy, France and Spain.

However, it seems right to emphasize the fact that the IE colonization was a military phenomenon; that is, we cannot accept the hypothesis of Renfrew (1987), according to which the colonization was carried out by small, peaceful groups of farmers progressively advancing further in search of new lands to exploit. Indeed, this vision is in total contrast to the 'heroic' values present in IE culture.

**The Warrior**

In a society which was not subdivided into castes or classes of activity, the common man and the warrior were one and the same person, but at different
times and in different situations. Just as the mild, pious Roman peasant of peacetime was transformed into a soldier of great skill in times of war, we can hypothesize that this was also the case in IE times.

However, in this area too the nature of our texts tells us much about the military ideology of the chiefs and very little about that of the common man. On the other hand, the extremely long, uninterrupted series of military successes which characterizes the history of the Indo-Europeans allows us to assume that the ideology of the elite was largely shared at all levels, especially since the fruits of victory, through the generosity of the chiefs, fell to all the people: new lands to exploit, women, plundered animals, valuables, reserves of food, and so on.

However, the ideal of the great warrior did not consist in this acquisition of material goods; on the contrary, it had a rigorously abstract and individualistic character and consisted in his achieving 'immortal glory' for himself. This is a fundamental concept which is an equally predominant force in the Vedic, Greek and Welsh texts. The basic alternative available to the warrior is that which Achilles (Iliad 9. 412ff.) puts to himself: 'If I remain here and fight the city of the Trojans, I shall never return home, but I shall have immortal glory; but if I go back to my homeland, there will never be immortal glory for me'; the warrior would always choose in favour of the latter. But what form did this 'immortal glory' take?

Essentially it consisted in the survival of a name, which in IE culture represented not a mere label, as it does today, but rather a basic constituent of every human being. However, a name could only survive if it was linked with glorious memories which were transmitted from generation to generation: hence the necessity for the warrior to commit a heroic, memorable deed through which, giving up his own life, he would enter into the eternal memory of his people.

It is completely natural to relate this heroic ideal very closely to what we have already noted in connection with IE religion. Faced with a religion which did not offer any hope of life after death and compared with vague suggestions of eternal unhappiness after death, 'immortal glory' offered the certainty of the indefinite survival of an essential part of oneself.

The Question of the Original Indo-European Homeland

Since we have mentioned the expansion of the Indo-Europeans, let us now outline in passing a long-debated question among linguists and archaeologists, that of the original homeland (Ger. Urheimat) of the Indo-Europeans.

In this area linguists have proceeded according to the lexicalist method, attempting to single out those IE lexemes which might be regarded as pointers to a particular geographical area. We have already mentioned the so-called 'beech-tree argument'; we might mention the analogous 'salmon argument', which also situates the Indo-Europeans on the shores of the Baltic. These
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Arguments are worthless, not only because they become ensnared in the vicious circle of establishing a meaning already implicit in the premise, but also, more specifically, because the problem is never viewed in the light of popular taxonomy. In other words, there is no justification for thinking that the only fish which the Indo-Europeans called 'salmon' was *Salmo salar*, which lives on the shores of the Baltic; on the contrary, we may assume that, as happens at the popular level, the same name was also applied to other varieties of salmon (which also live elsewhere) or used for different species (for example the trout family); clearly, the same reservation applies in the case of the beech tree. In other words, we should not presume that the Indo-Europeans worked as rigorously or as systematically as a modern specialist (Cardona 1988).

The argument of the 'war chariot' does not appear to be much more convincing. We know that the Indo-Europeans reared horses, but used them not as saddle animals (even Homer pretends to be unaware of the existence of cavalry), but rather to pull their war chariots. Now, it has been argued, these chariots could only function in flat, forest-free areas; reasoning by a process of elimination, it was concluded that southern Russia should be viewed as the place where the Indo-Europeans, still as one people, used war chariots.

Of course, we have no definite knowledge of this IE chariot; however, it is certain that the Greeks of the Mycenean period made frequent use of war chariots, and Greece is not exactly flat. Equally, in Roman times they were used by the Celts of Gaul and Britain, both of which were much more wooded than nowadays. In other words, we have the distinct impression that the conditions under which war chariots could operate have been set artificially high in order to come up with a precise geographical location.

The archaeologists, for their part, proceeded in an essentially similar manner and, using the lexicalist analysis at second hand, went in search of archaeological remains whose discovery would tally with the material culture of the Indo-Europeans as reconstructed by lexical methods. Using this method, a noted American archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas (1982), localized the original homelands of the Indo-Europeans in southern Russia because material remains were found there of a culture which, like the IE culture, practised war and worshipped gods. To this suggestion it was rightly objected that an infinite number of other cultures could also exhibit these same characteristics. Another archaeologist, Renfrew (1987), localizes the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans in present-day Turkey because it was there, in his opinion, that the cultivation of grain began, which was of such importance for the Indo-Europeans. This is rather like saying that the Germans must have originated in Peru because they eat a lot of potatoes (a plant which, as is known, comes from the Andes region).

In fact it would be more appropriate to consider the actual validity of such a problem. To talk of 'original homelands' is in fact tantamount to presuming that up to about 4000 or 5000 BC the Indo-Europeans were a sedentary people,
firmly fixed in a particular territory, and that at a certain moment they suddenly became nomadic conquerors. There is no documentary basis for such a hypothesis and it is unconsciously prompted only by a desire to provide the history of the Indo-Europeans with a beginning: from earliest times until 5000 BC the Indo-Europeans remained rooted in one place, like natural elements; after that date, they began to move, hence the beginning of their history.

This is an ingenuous assumption. History has no beginning other than an arbitrary point chosen by the historian as a place to begin, and the presence of documents, direct or indirect, on which it can be based. In the case of the Indo-Europeans there is no evidence of the existence of an ‘original homeland’: we could equally imagine them as nomadic peoples as far back as the oldest periods. Like all false problems, more than one solution is possible.

The Poet

Let us return, after this digression, to the problem of ‘immortal glory’.

The survival of the name is linked to the persistence of the memory of heroic deeds; here that character fundamental to IE culture whom we may conventionally call ‘the poet’ enters the scene. In reality the poet was a professional dealing with words and everything which is realized in words was part of his sphere of competence. He was thus a priest (in that he knew the precatory formulae with which to address the gods during sacrifices and prayer), a doctor (in that he knew the magic formulae to cure all illnesses), a lawyer (in that he knew the formulae of customary law), a historian (in that he knew and told the story, more or less legendary, of his tribe); and, finally, moved by divine inspiration, he celebrated in poetry the glorious exploits of princes and heroes present and past.

This person, who seems so important to us because of his role in preserving and transmitting to future generations the whole intellectual culture of his people, did not in fact have a particularly elevated status among his own people: he was placed on the same level as highly specialized artisans, such as the smith or the chariot-maker. His last descendants survived into the modern period in the most conservative areas: the Yugoslavian guslars improvised lyrics in recent times in honour of Tito.

This great intellectual patrimony was acquired by means of a rigorously scholarly oral training at the side of an older poet. Caesar records that in Gaul this took as long as twenty years; in medieval Ireland it took at least twelve, and we still have the programmes and teaching methods. The same ‘poet’ figure survives and is known to us in other ancient IE cultures, albeit in less detail than is the case with Ireland. We have already mentioned the Slavic guslar, but the same figure was present in Greece, Rome, Iran and India.

This ‘poet’ would perform his various activities moving from place to place, in search of anyone who needed his services. His payment was often
poor: it is significant that an Irish itinerant poet had composed an ode in honour of a young noblewoman who had offered him a ‘good draught of beer’.

But the political chiefs soon realized the usefulness of the ‘poet’ as a propagator of the dominant ideology and celebrator of their own persons and their families. There thus arose the figure of the court poet, a poet who was permanently resident in the prince’s household and whose primary function was to entertain the prince with the countless stories he knew and to exalt in poetry his exploits and those of his great ancestors. Naturally, this presupposes a situation of economic prosperity which allowed the prince not only to maintain the poet and associated entourage (wives, children, servants, pupils), but also to present him with those outstanding gifts which were the concrete realization of the prince’s great generosity.

In Homer both of these types of poet are mentioned. Alcinous, preparing a banquet in honour of Odysseus, immediately sends for the minstrel Demodocus, an essential trapping of the feast: in other words, Demodocus was an itinerant poet who went wherever his work was required. On the other hand, when Agamemnon is leaving for Troy, he entrusts his wife to a poet; this is clearly the court poet, who was also used as a counsellor and man to be trusted; this frequently happens elsewhere as well.

What kind of verse did the IE poet use in his compositions? This is a question which linguists and philologists have asked since the middle of the nineteenth century, and which inspired a specific area of research going by the name of ‘Indo-European metrics’. Obviously the approach taken was the usual one of comparing verse in different languages in order to reconstruct the IE archetype.

However, it appears rather more probable that the IE poets never used either quantity- or syllable-based verse. We should rather consider that the defining characteristic of IE poetry was purely linguistic in nature: take, as a very approximate example, the language of the Homeric poems, a language which was never really spoken by anyone, but which is immediately characterized by the presence of archaisms, pseudo-archaisms, analogical innovations, forms from different dialects, set formulae, metaphors, fixed locutions, and so on. The language of IE poetry must have been typologically something like this.

It is certainly not possible to reconstruct an IE poetic text; but we do at least know how the king Labraid Longsech Moen, the illustrious ancestor of the sovereign who successfully ruled over Leinster, was celebrated in an extremely conservative culture, that of Ireland (and we can also imagine that the recitation took place at the end of a rich banquet, where much beer and expensive wine of French origin had been poured out):

The exceptional Moen, when still a boy – in the manner of the great princes – killed the king, a princely act, Labraid, the descendant of Lore.
The warriors of the Gailiain took up their spears (läigne); from this, the active troop took on the name of Laigin. They won battles as far as the shores of the Lands of Éremon; after the exile the flame of the troops held sway over the Irish. Higher than the shining sun the exceptional Moen, son of Aine, stood out over worlds of men and a god among gods is he, the exceptional king. (Campanile 1988b)

A rather obscure text, it might be said (although the original Irish is much more obscure); in reality, the text is intentionally obscure, because the poet did not intend to say anything new or definite, but rather to create a musical atmosphere evoking a great past. We know, moreover, that when the King of Oriel had listened to the ode composed in his honour by Dallán, he exclaimed enthusiastically: ‘Wonderful. What a pity I understood none of it.’

Note
1 However, the Kurdish form should be excluded from the comparison: cf. Henning 1963.

References
The bibliography on Indo-European origins and culture is very extensive. This list, prepared by M. P. Bologna, contains only those works explicitly or implicitly mentioned in the text.


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