

Arch of Titus, reminds of independence and the call for its renewal—and in our days, the days of the arising, of the assembling of the exiles, and of the unifying of the nation in its diaspora around the nation of Israel." On the shape of the emblem: "The square form, that ends with the point of a hero's shield, unifies the symbol of the past, the present, and the vision of a future of total perfection."

Of fleeting reflections of starlight there was not a trace.

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Aryan Invasions over Four Millennia

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Problems of "culture through time," as I perceive them,¹ are posed by Marshall Sahlins's study of the historical circumstances surrounding the death of Captain Cook. For Cook and his companions the events were one-off, nonrecurrent; they took place in the world of here and now. For the Hawaiians they were ritual events, justified by mythology, potentially recurrent; they took place in the ambiguous zone between this world and the other, where gods and people may come face to face. To bring these two viewpoints together, the symbolism that is inherent in any description of past events has to be brought into the open. Some of us had hoped to discuss the problems which this entails. But we never got that far, so I must construct my own vocabulary.

Time, as we experience it, is continuous; it contains no discrete "events." The events are put there by reflection on the past. As the past becomes more remote the remembered events become fewer in number and more limited in kind. It is for psychologists to say just why we remember this and forget that, but at the end of the day, the remembered past reflects our interests. It makes us what we are *now*.

The same is equally true of the publicly shared experience that we describe as history. Eventually time past is reduced to a sequence of named happenings punctuated by major discontinuities: The Reformation, the French Revolution, World War I—each was, in its original occurrence, a blurred ambiguity without beginning and without end. Such history is based on records, residues from the past. But records do not become a part of history simply by happening to survive.

¹Some features of this essay are influenced by its origination as a contribution to a conference funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and held in Fez, Morocco, during the third week of January 1986. The reader should bear that in mind.

Records are preserved because they provide a charter for what historians believe about the present. Different historians may believe different things, and the records are interpreted (and modified) accordingly.

In January 1986, on the way from Fez to Rabat, a party of people paid a hurried visit to the ruins of the Roman city of Volubilis. All members of the group must have noticed the prominent triumphal arch dedicated to the Emperor Caracalla and his mother, Julia Domna, though they may not have understood what they were seeing.

At the beginning of our era Volubilis was the capital of a local Hellenistic monarch, Juba II. Juba's son Ptolemy was murdered by Caligula, and in A.D. 44 Volubilis became the capital of a Roman province. The masonry was later plundered for the construction of nearby Moulay Idriss, and what then survived was mostly destroyed by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. In 1911 the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* reported only that "four gates are still recognisable, and a triumphal arch erected in A.D. 216 in honour of Caracalla." The corresponding entry in the 1985 edition says: "Roman ruins are extensive. . . . Noteworthy are a forum, a 2nd-century-AD basilica, and the Arch of Caracalla." The reconstructions thus implied were carried out as an expression of Marshall Lyautey's highly personal view of the role of France in colonial North Africa. At the same time, the considerable artistic treasures surviving from Juba's city were removed to Rabat. With the withdrawal of the French, Volubilis reverted to its earlier status of an overgrown ruin. A modern English guidebook remarks that "[the arch] held no particular purpose beyond creating a ceremonial function for the principal street. . . . Its inscription records that it was originally surmounted by a great bronze chariot. This and the nymphs which once shot water into basins below are gone, though with its tall Corinthian columns [of imported marble] and unashamed pointlessness it is still an impressive monument." But is it really so pointless even in decay?

Colonial glory, whether Roman or French, may be a thing of the past, but the empty landscape on the horizon is still what it was 1,900 years ago. I was reminded of a surrealist vista by Magritte. Each of us creates out of the residues of time past whatever it is that we may wish to see.

The only serious historian of Volubilis, Carpocino (1943), con-

centrates on King Juba and the death of Ptolemy and never mentions the arch at all.

For my present purpose, the word *myth* has this iconic Malinowskian sense. A myth is a story about the past pegged to an identifiable relic and a place on the map. It serves as a charter for beliefs or actions in the present. The chronology of myth is at best ambiguous. Myth may be transmitted by oral tradition or in writing. By contrast, I use *history* to mean written history, a fixed text that explicitly claims to record what happened in the past in potentially datable sequence. For me the concept of "oral history" is misnamed. If an oral tradition happens to be concerned with events that we know (on other grounds) to be historical, this concern does not convert the tradition into history.

The cultural values of Western scholars of the twentieth century lead us to believe that "good" history *really* records what happened in the past while "bad" history does not, but the basis on which we can make this kind of distinction is always very insecure. "Bad" history is seldom constructed out of fantasy; it is simply that we tend to accept as good history whatever is congenial to our contemporary way of thinking. The good history of one generation becomes the bad history of the next.

From this point of view all history is myth. But the converse is not the case. Although some texts can function either as history or as myth, history and myth are, in a fundamental sense, categories of quite different kinds. History is anchored in the past; it is time-bound; it cannot be repeated. Myth is timeless; it is constantly reenacted in ritual performance. In days gone by, there have been many respected forms of historiography in which this formula could equally have been applied to history. History was thought to repeat itself as transformation. The authors of the Christian Gospels believed that they were writing history, but they wrote it in such a way that the individual stories were consciously presented as antitypes to the types encountered in the Old Testament. Such views have not been confined to religious authors. I will not pursue this matter; I simply wish to insist that when any of us who are anthropologists are presented with stories that purport to be history, we should be skeptical. We always need to ask: In whose interest is it that the past should be presented to us in this way?

In this essay I am mainly concerned with one particular case in which an oral tradition has been treated as if it were a datable written record and myth has been confused with history as it actually happened.

Until very recently most European scholars adopted an entirely different view of the relationship between myth and history from the one I have just presented. They have taken it for granted that the great majority of religious myths and secular legends contain elements of garbled history; for example, the Trojan War of Homer's *Iliad* and the Biblical Exodus both really happened, even though they did not happen quite as described. Ancient historians have regularly used such presumptions as part of their evidence. They have pieced together their picture of the cultural background of prehistory by combining the evidence provided by archeology with the evidence contained in religious texts. The basic principle seems to be "Always believe what the text says unless it is palpably quite impossible." Almost everything that passes for the history of the Jews prior to 600 B.C. is such a reconstruction.

In history writing of this sort the assertions that are made about vernacular speech and the details of everyday life are especially suspect. In our own highly literate environment, however, the evidence is all around us that the conventions of literature are quite different from the conventions of colloquial speech; we do not ordinarily talk as we write or write as we talk. But philologists who specialize in the decipherment of ancient scripts and the reconstruction of long-dead languages seem to imagine that once they have deciphered a written text they know the language that was spoken by the people who wrote that text. By claiming that the text in question was originally a transcription of an earlier oral tradition, they may even claim that they know how people spoke at a date far earlier than the written text itself. And from there they go on to discuss how languages were spread across the map by "movements of peoples." All studies of Indo-European language, culture, and literature are permeated with thinking of this sort.

Although there are admittedly some cases where language distributions are the end-product of movements of peoples, there are many other possibilities. The present-day distribution of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English speakers in non-European territories

makes it very obvious that languages are sometimes dispersed across the map by military conquest and colonialism, but the process is never simple. No law of nature declares that the language of the conqueror will replace that of the conquered or that the invading conquerors need to be present in large numbers. Tupi rather than Portuguese could easily have become the national language of independent Brazil, for example; an English-based pidgin, not English or German, is the normal language of present-day Papua New Guinea. Within Europe itself the development of the Romance languages—Italian, Spanish, French—out of a merging of Latin with local dialects can be seen, in retrospect, as a consequence of political and social arrangements in the Roman Empire. But the development of Romance languages was not a response to any movement of peoples. Romans from Italy did not move in large numbers to the outer fringes of the empire. Trade and slavery and the administrative convenience of small numbers of bureaucrats had quite as much influence on who spoke what to whom as any form of migration. Modern English is not a simple lineal descendant of Celtic, or Latin, or Norse, or Anglo-Saxon, or Norman French, though it contains components from all these sources (and many others). The linguistic history of northern India is equally uncertain; it might contain all these confusing possibilities and many more.

Indeed, if the only evidence for a supposed population movement derives from the content and distribution of religious texts rather than from any real knowledge of who spoke what and when, then nothing can be inferred at all. We know that most documents originating in the British Isles between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. were written in Latin. Under the influence of Christian missionaries the use of these texts became widely dispersed. But the status of Latin as a colloquial lingua franca was declining rapidly throughout this period, and insofar as there was a movement of peoples (as represented by the Anglo-Saxon invasions), it went from east to west, whereas the dispersal of the Latin texts went from west to east. Skepticism of this sort will seldom be encountered within the ranks of Indo-European specialists, most of whom claim that they can show not only how a (hypothetical) long-extinct parent language, Proto-Indo-European, evolved into the diverse and widespread language family that we now have but also how these modern languages came to be distributed

across the map by historical movements of peoples. Religious texts provide a large part of the evidence on which these arguments are based.

One of my purposes in this paper is to take an anthropological look at the motivations that have led such scholars to think about these matters in the way that they do. In discussing this theme I shall use as my central example the Indo-Europeanists' doctrines concerning the Rig Veda. I am well aware that for an outsider to attempt to bring about a shift in this entrenched paradigm is like trying to cut down a 300-year-old oak tree with a penknife. But the job will have to be done one day.

It is now well over 100 years since European scholars first asserted that 3,500 years ago people in northern India spoke in the language of the Rig Veda. The idea is odd in itself, since the language of the Rig Veda is obviously religious, dramatic, and poetic rather than vernacular. We would not expect to be able to learn much about the colloquial speech and everyday customs of fourth-century Britain if the only available evidence was a copy of the King James version of the Bible. But it is the regular practice of Sanskritists and Indian prehistorians to use the text of the Rig Veda as a basis for their description of the culture of northern India around 1700 B.C. This is at least 1,200 years earlier than any written version of the text could possibly have existed.

Why has this curious scholarly tradition lasted so long? History is only true for the time being; each new generation of scholars rewrites the work of its predecessors. But such revisers rarely go back to the beginning and start from scratch. Instead they build uncritically on "generally accepted" foundations laid down by their predecessors. These traditional, established truths of history have a large symbolic component of which their exponents are usually unaware.

My case study is summarized in the following quotation from an authoritative work published in 1982:

In India the earliest written records so far available [apart from the still unread inscriptions of the Indus civilization] are the inscriptions of Asoka [third century B.C.], but there exists a body of earlier literature of very considerable size and variety which was composed and passed on for many centuries in oral form. This literature goes back to the oldest surviving text, the Samhita, or "compilation" of the hymns of the Rigveda. A reasonable estimate of the

date of the compilation of the Rigveda is c. 1500-1300 B.C., and the composition of many of the individual hymns may be expected to have extended over several previous centuries. (Allchin and Allchin 1982: 288)

The title of the chapter in which this passage occurs is "The Arrival of the Indo-Aryan-speaking People and the Spread of the Indo-Aryan Languages." From this we must infer that prior to about 1700 B.C. the population of northern India spoke some quite different kind of language. It may well be so; but we cannot know. Even if the Indus-civilization inscriptions turned out to be written in some form of Dravidian or other non-Indo-Aryan language, we still would not know.

The beginning of the formulation of this story can be dated fairly precisely to 1786, when Sir William Jones announced his discovery of a close relationship between Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, German, and Celtic languages. The date is interesting. The English, having just lost most of their American colonies, were embarking on a vast, worldwide, colonial expansion. The details of the linguistic association among the various Indo-European languages had been fully worked out by 1833, when Franz Bopp published his *Vergleichende Grammatik* (Comparative Grammar). By the time Max Müller began to work on his translation of the Rig Veda around 1846, it was already being claimed that the text was extremely ancient. Max Müller himself spelled out the argument at full length in a lecture given in 1878 (1878: 145-67). As early as 1865 he had already proposed a dating that is very close to that given in my quotation from the Allchins: "We cannot well assign a date more recent than 1200 to 1500 before our era, for the original composition" (Max Müller 1880, 1: 13). With only slight variation, the general argument has been repeated over and over again, almost without criticism, so that it has now become a dogma.

I would have supposed that almost anyone looking closely at what Max Müller says would see that his reasoning is specious. There is no genuine evidence that the text of the Rig Veda existed in its present form before about 400 B.C., but no contemporary Indo-European scholar will admit as much. If you ask such a scholar for his or her evidence (as I have done on several occasions), you will find that the answer is simply a slightly tidied-up version of what Max Müller said in 1878.

But this is *not* the point at issue in my present paper. I am fully aware of all the arguments that have been put forward in favor of the belief that the text of the Rig Veda is substantially the same as an oral text that existed in remote antiquity. I do not myself believe that this is in the least likely to be the case, but that is irrelevant. The crux of my argument is that whatever the date of the Rig Veda text may be, absolutely no grounds exist for supposing that it refers to events that actually happened in "real" historical time. Equally, I consider it futile to suppose that the cultural environment that seems to be postulated by the Rig Veda texts might be identified with any "real" cultural environment that might be reflected in the excavations of archeologists working in northern India.

Religious texts, whether oral or written, are almost invariably composed either in a language alien to the current vernacular (for example, Latin and Greek in medieval Christianity; Pali, a form of Sanskrit, by Theravada Buddhists in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka) or in an "archaic" version of the current vernacular (for example, Old Church Slavonic in the Russian Orthodox Church). In the latter case we cannot assume that the religious language is necessarily a conservative survival of what had once been vernacular. The archaism is part of the code; it is a way of asserting that the content of the text is ancient and authoritative.

As Indo-European studies developed during the nineteenth century there was at first no fixed dogma about how the linguistic dispersion of the Indo-European language family had come about. Around 1850 Max Müller was still fairly vague. He wrote of the "Aryan" language, "spoken in Asia by a small tribe, nay, originally by a small family living under one and the same roof," as if it were the mother tongue of the human race, but prior to 1872 (and occasionally after that date) he was careful to distinguish the study of language from "ethnology," the study of the movements of peoples: "There are Aryan and Semitic languages, [but] it is against all rules of logic to speak, without an expressed or implied qualification, of an Aryan race, of Aryan blood, or Aryan skulls" (1880, 4: 223). But the last quotation comes from a lecture given at the Imperial University of Strassburg in May 1872, just after the annexation by Germany of Alsace (against the express wishes of the local German-speaking inhabitants). In the earlier part of the lecture Max Müller expressed his

Germanic pride in this reunification of the German nation. His distinction between language and race is clearly under strain. By 1878 he writes without equivocation about "the Aryans" as if they were a racial group moving outward from some central Asian homeland by a process of conquest. By the 1890's, the linguist Sir George Grierson was explaining all Indo-Aryan dialect distributions in northern India as due to past military conquest, a view that was repeated without criticism in the 1969 printing of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The history of European colonialism covers many centuries and takes diverse forms, but whereas the European explorers and conquerors of the Americas, Africa, and Oceania usually took it for granted that the local inhabitants could be enslaved or butchered or driven into the hinterland at the whim of the invaders, the literate nations of Asia were initially treated as peoples toward whom the courtesies of European diplomacy should be applied.

At the end of the day these Asian civilizations were likewise mostly subdued by force of arms, but such conquest needed some kind of moral justification, a mythical charter. The Rig Veda as interpreted by Max Müller and his contemporaries provided just such a myth. It had the following form: Away back, long before the dawn of true history, Aryan invaders (who spoke a proto-European language and were therefore close kin to the Greeks, Romans, and Persians, who were the acknowledged founders of European civilization) had brought the first civilization to India, establishing themselves as an elitist military aristocracy among a population of barbarian serfs. They followed the precepts of a morally pure religious system, "The Vedic Religion," which was very different from "the modern Brahmanic religion, as founded in the Puranas and Tantras, [which] consists in a belief in Vishnu, Siva and Brahma, and manifests itself in the worship of the most hideous idols" (Max Müller 1878: 154). After many centuries, during which the high culture of these original Aryans gradually decayed into gross immorality and superstition, a new wave of Indo-Europeans was now repeating the process. Once again the conquerors were establishing themselves as an elitist military aristocracy under the banner of a morally pure religion (Christianity).

Three elements in the argument are crucial. First, the hymns of the Rig Veda, which were committed to writing around 400 B.C. at the very earliest, had previously survived in the form of a word-perfect

oral tradition for well over 1,000 years. Second, although these hymns are religious documents, they are also records of history. It was repeatedly and categorically asserted that we can infer the nature of Aryan society around 1700 B.C. from a close study of the Rig Veda. Third, the history thus recorded was the history of the beginning of civilization in India.

Essentially similar claims have frequently been made for the possibility of reconstructing the world of Odysseus from the pages of Homer or the world of the ancient Israelites from the pages of the Pentateuch. Only very recently have the radical skeptics in these matters begun to gain the upper hand, and it is still an open question as to whether skepticism or blind faith will end up victorious.

If we accept all this, then the Aryan invaders appear as a race of chariot-riding heroes who conquer a population of servile peasant barbarians, the Dasa (Dasyu). This is a familiar story. Crossland, writing as a skeptic about traditions concerning the origin of Greco-Roman civilization, remarks: "The role of the Indo-European peoples in the ancient world has been portrayed too often as the incarnation of northern virility sweeping down in massed chariots to bring new vigour to a decadent south" (1971: 826). Where India is concerned, the construction of this mytho-history was complete by 1920 and it was being written about as if it were fully authenticated history. It still is, though it deserves note that as early as 1914 a South Indian Brahmin scholar published in the pages of *Anthropos* a thoroughgoing criticism of the whole Max Müller enterprise (Iyengar 1914). So far as I can discover, this excellent article has been completely ignored in all subsequent Indo-Europeanist writings.

In 1922 archeologists started to turn up evidence of the Indus civilization. Mohenjo-daro and Harappa have had most of the publicity, but new discoveries are still being made all the time. Major engineering constructions similar to those recently discovered at Mohenjo-daro and dating back to around 2500 B.C. have now been discovered as far north as the Helmand and Oxus river basins in Afghanistan. The claim now is that the Indus civilization at one time "occupied an area larger than the cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia combined" (Norman Hammond, in the *London Times*, July 13, 1985, p. 10).

Common sense might suggest that here was a striking example of a refutable hypothesis that had in fact been refuted. Indo-European

scholars should have scrapped all their historical reconstructions and started again from scratch. But that is not what happened. Vested interests and academic posts were involved. Almost without exception the scholars in question managed to persuade themselves that despite appearances, the theories of the philologists and the hard evidence of archeology could be made to fit together. The trick was to think of the horse-riding Aryans as conquerors of the cities of the Indus civilization in the same way that the Spanish conquistadores were conquerors of the cities of Mexico and Peru or the Israelites of the Exodus were conquerors of Jericho. The lowly Dasa of the Rig Veda, who had previously been thought of as primitive savages, were now reconstructed as members of a high civilization who were destined to subordination because of their dark skins. The Aryan invaders could still be considered the originators of Indian civilization because they wiped out by fire and slaughter whatever was there before.

In 1963 Thomas Burrow, a Sanskritist of great distinction, put the full weight of his authority behind this revamping of the Dasa. He claimed that the ruins of Harappan settlements are repeatedly mentioned in the Rig Veda and were viewed with religious awe by the Rig Veda authors. He cites the following hymn to Agni as explicit evidence that the Rig Veda is in places a record of Aryan victories over non-Aryan Harappans: "Through fear of thee the dark coloured inhabitants fled, not waiting for battle abandoning their possessions, when O Vaisnavara, burning brightly for Puru and destroying the cities, thou didst shine, O Agni" (Rig Veda VII. 5.3, cited in Burrow 1963).

Burrow's interpretation has been widely applauded by specialists in Indo-European studies, but their approval was to be expected, since his matter-of-fact translation fits in with the proposition that myth is thinly disguised history. This can hardly be said of the version offered by Max Müller and Wilson a hundred years previously. In the Müller/Wilson sun-worship interpretation, the "dark coloured inhabitants" are seen as personified powers of darkness, while Agni is present not as the destroyer of enemy cities by conflagration but as the light of the sun triumphing over night. As an anthropologist I have no preference. Texts of this sort cannot possibly be interpreted (as distinct from translated) unless we have independent knowledge of the cultural background, which, in this case, is lacking. Even if bits and pieces of the text refer to "real" happenings, no modern scholar could possibly know what they are.

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Moreover, if the Rig Veda is really a residue of a very early oral mythology, it is just as likely to derive from Harappa as from wandering bands of entirely imaginary chariot-riding conquerors. But it could also have been introduced into India at some quite indeterminate date by a few enterprising Persian missionaries. And there are many other possibilities. We know that the Indus cities traded northward to Central Asia and westward to Persia, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Sea. They would have been as polyglot as imperial Rome, contemporary Jerusalem, or fifteenth-century Baghdad. All manner of religious cults would have been found there. Yet modern scholars have repeatedly asserted that the Rig Veda is only a slightly disguised account of an actual sequence of events, the Aryan invasions.

In 1950 Piggott, an archeologist of high repute, claimed without qualification that the god Indra "is the apotheosis of the Aryan battle leader . . . the victorious leader of the Aryans in their conquest of the hated ancient empire of the Punjab" (Piggott 1950: 260). He followed this up by saying that the identification of Vedic Dasa with Harappan is "something near to a certainty." A central feature of this thesis, in which Piggott was following Mortimer Wheeler, was that the Aryan invaders had completely obliterated the civilization of their Harappan predecessors. Since then whole books have been written on this theme (such as Shendge 1977).

We now know that Piggott's thesis is quite untrue. The Indus civilization did not come to an end suddenly but over a period of centuries. The primary cause of its decline was probably a geological catastrophe that led to a change in the course of the Indus, a failure of the irrigation system, and the collapse of waterborne trade. In the centuries that followed, the political and economic center of gravity moved eastward into the Ganges plain.

It is certainly possible that this is the period when Indo-Aryan languages first became dominant in this region, but we do not know. Moreover, even if it was the case, we cannot know why it would have happened. A rough survey of well-authenticated examples would suggest that, of the many possible reasons for a change in language distribution, political domination by a small minority is the most likely factor, while a mass movement of population is the most improbable.

Despite the enthusiastic fantasies that have been developed by Georges Dumézil and his followers, who claim that the post-

Harappan Vedic society of northern India had a form of social organization that was prototypical of the organization of all the Indo-European peoples (see, for example, Littleton 1982: 7-18), nothing in the archeological record suggests that the Ganges plain society was radically discontinuous from its Indus predecessor. Nor is there any independent *archeological* evidence for a massive intrusion of foreigners from the northwest. The suggestion in parts of the recent archeological literature (e.g. Allchin and Allchin 1982: 358) that such evidence does exist is quite misleading. The "Painted Grey Ware Culture" of these writers would never have been interpreted as such if they had not started out by treating the Rig Veda as a history book.

On my reading of the evidence, the firmly established parallels between north Indian society in the first millennium B.C. and societies in other parts of the Indo-European-speaking world are no closer than the parallels that existed in such non-Indo-European societies as China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Here is an example.

As part and parcel of the dogma that the Rig Veda was introduced into India by the Aryan invaders, we have the further dogma that the life-style of the divine beings of the Rig Veda was the life-style of the Aryan invaders themselves. In particular, the war chariots of Indra and his associates show that the Aryan invaders were lavishly equipped with war chariots, while the complex rituals of the Vedic horse sacrifice stem from the fact that the horse was "the supreme symbol of the victorious Indo-Europeans . . . whose domestication enabled the Indo-Aryans to conquer the Indo-European world" (O'Flaherty 1981: 85). This too is a fantasy, though it has been around a long time.

It is true that the two-wheeled chariot, in a crude form, is likely to have been invented in Central Asia. But the appearance of chariots as grave goods and the pictorial representation of chariots in other contexts suggest that it was a rare object, a ceremonial carriage rather than a piece of normal military equipment. The characters in the Rig Veda ride in chariots because they are divine beings.

And then there is the question of dates. Chariots were in use in Mesopotamia in the early third millennium B.C. They were known in Egypt by the middle of the second millennium and probably reached Minoan Crete and mainland Greece from the southeast rather than from the north. They were in use in Shang-dynasty China at about the same period. But in each of these archeologically verifiable cases,

the context is that of a city-focused state with a well-organized army, and only the war leaders ride in chariots. Holocaust sacrifices of chariots and their horses and charioteers were a feature of royal funerals in both Mesopotamia and China at a very early date. Rig Veda horse sacrifices seem tame by comparison. Admittedly, war chariots appear in the *Iliad*, but here again the author seems to regard them as prestigious rather than military objects. Chariots are used for racing and for transporting the heroes to the scene of battle, but that is about all. Hector's corpse is dragged in shame behind the wheels of Achilles' chariot, but the actual combat between the two heroes is on foot.

On the other hand, wild horses were common in all the more northerly parts of Eurasia from remote antiquity. They were probably hunted for meat long before they were domesticated for riding. Horse bones, carbon-dated to about 4400 B.C., have been identified in a "Kurgan culture" site in the Lower Dnieper region, but there is no evidence that they were from domesticated horses or that, if they were, the "Kurgan" people were the first to domesticate horses. And despite the current fashion among Indo-European scholars, there is no genuine evidence that the Kurgan people spoke any form of Indo-European language. Dates are uncertain, but all the ancient urban civilizations made extensive and quite early use of domesticated horses.

In other words, the prominent place given to horses and chariots in the Rig Veda can tell us virtually nothing that might distinguish any real society for which the Rig Veda might provide a partial cosmology. If anything, it suggests that in the real society (as opposed to its mythological counterpart), horses and chariots were a rarity, ownership of which was a mark of aristocratic or kingly distinction.

Likewise, the repeated assertion that Indra's victories over the Dasa can be confidently interpreted as a folk memory of real victories by real Indo-Aryan conquerors over their indigenous predecessors seems to me devoid of any plausibility. Of course nothing is impossible, but the likelihood is certainly slim. That the enemies of God should come to be identified with personal enemies is a phenomenon that is regularly encountered even in present-day warfare; but the converse proposition—that the mythical enemies of God always derive from badly remembered history—is fallacious, as should be obvious to anyone who has ever read Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

So I come back to my earlier question. Why do serious scholars persist in believing in the Aryan invasions?

At one time social anthropologists used to complain that their archeologist colleagues had no sense of the overall coherence of human societies. Now, under the influence of Dumézil, who was himself influenced by Durkheim and Granet, most of the prehistorians who have specialized in India and Pakistan and most of their Indo-Europeanist philological colleagues have become committed to a functionalism of a wholly naive sort. They seem to assume that cultural systems and language systems are bonded together and intrinsically stable over long periods of time. If societies are left alone, they stay put; otherwise, they roll across the landscape like impermeable billiard balls. If the archeological record shows that in fact changes have occurred, their occurrence is always explained as the consequence of a movement of population that carries with it the products (both material and immaterial) of a preexisting, alien, self-contained culture. As a rule, the alleged movement of people takes the form of a military conquest. The mythology of the Dorian invaders of ancient Greece who reduced their Ionian predecessors to serfdom matches point for point the mythology of the Aryan invasion of northern India.

I am not exaggerating the persistence of the "movement of peoples" doctrine. I quote again from the Allchins:

There seems to be general agreement that the Indo-Iranian languages . . . were originally spoken in the steppes of Eurasia, and that over a period of time they spread, undoubtedly largely through the medium of movements of groups of speakers, into the regions where they are later traceable through written records or where they are still spoken. . . . We would like to insist that the arrival and spread of the Indo-Aryan languages must have been associated with the movement of Indo-Aryan-speaking people, and that their relations with the populations they encountered must be conceived as a dynamic process of culture contact, producing a variety of cultural responses. This process must have continued over many centuries. Its result was to produce a cultural synthesis which we may refer to as culturally Indo-Aryan, that is, a synthesis of Indus or Indian, and Aryan elements. . . .

. . . Since 1871 there has been general acceptance that this early homeland [of the speakers of Indo-European languages] must have been somewhere on the steppes of Eurasia. (Allchin and Allchin 1982: 299–300)

The Allchins, in their archeological capacity, have consistently emphasized the continuity that links the residues of the Indus civilization with those of the later classical India in the Ganges basin and further south. Furthermore, they repeatedly emphasized that archeology provides no clear evidence of any mass movement of peoples from Cen-

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tral Asia into northern India. So why do they continue to pay deference to the "racist" notions of nineteenth-century philologists in this way? (Incidentally, there is no "general agreement that the Indo-Iranian languages . . . were originally spoken in the steppes of Eurasia.")

But we should note what is implicit in the Allchins' formulation. If the Indo-European languages were brought into India by a movement of population after the heyday of the Indus civilization, then the people of the Indus civilization did not speak an Indo-European language. The clear presumption is that they spoke a Dravidian language and were dark-skinned, like most of the present-day speakers of Dravidian languages. On the other hand, the speakers of Indo-European who arrived from "the steppes of Eurasia" are clearly presumed to be fair-skinned nomads. We have Max Müller plus Piggott and Mortimer Wheeler all over again.

Why is this sort of thing so attractive? Who finds it attractive? Why has the development of early Sanskrit come to be so dogmatically associated with an Aryan invasion? In some cases the association seems to be a matter of intellectual inertia. Thus Thapar (1969), who provides a valuable survey of the evidence then available, clearly finds the whole "movement of peoples" argument a nuisance, but at the end of the day she falls into line.

Where the Indo-European philologists are concerned, the invasion argument is tied in with their assumption that if a particular language is identified as having been used in a particular locality at a particular time, no attention need be paid to what was there before; the slate is wiped clean. Obviously, the easiest way to imagine this happening in real life is to have a military conquest that obliterates the previously existing population!

The details of the theory fit in with this racist framework. Just as each member of the total family of Indo-European languages is linearly descended from one or another of a number of extinct "protolanguages," so also are the speakers of these languages; hence the people who speak any particular language constitute an independent racial stock.

By an exercise of faith rather than common sense the language of the Rig Veda was long ago claimed to be very close to "proto-Indo-Iranian." It is thus supposed to be ancestral not only to the Sanskrit of the later Vedas but also to Avestan (the language of the Zoroastrian

sacred books) and to Old Persian, bits of which are known from inscriptions of Darius the Great (sixth century B.C.). Written texts in Avestan date only from the fourth century A.D., but, as in the case of Rig Veda Sanskrit, the philologists claim that it is a very ancient language preserved in secret by the pre-Zoroastrian priesthood over many centuries.

Because of their commitment to a unilinear segmentary history of language development that needed to be mapped onto the ground, the philologists took it for granted that proto-Indo-Iranian was a language that had originated outside either India or Iran. Hence it followed that the text of the Rig Veda was in a language that was actually spoken by those who introduced this earliest form of Sanskrit into India. From this we derive the myth of the Aryan invasions. QED.

Several more or less coincidental origin myths are involved. The origin myth of the Indo-European philologists calls for a lineage of wholly imaginary ancestral "protolanguages."

The origin myth of British colonial imperialism helped the elite administrators in the Indian Civil Service to see themselves as bringing "pure" civilization to a country in which civilization of the most sophisticated (but "morally corrupt") kind was already nearly 6,000 years old. Here I will only remark that the hold of this myth on the British middle-class imagination is so strong that even today, 44 years after the death of Hitler and 43 years after the creation of an independent India and independent Pakistan, the Aryan invasions of the second millennium B.C. are still treated as if they were an established fact of history.

It is relevant that in the Rig Veda the divine heroes have no relations with the indigenous Dasa other than those of war and contempt. Hostility is not mediated by marriage (see Thapar 1978: 229 n. 15). This attitude fit well with the prejudices of nineteenth-century English and German scholars, whose colonialist compatriots were committed to maintaining a system of sexual apartheid to separate the rulers from the ruled. It is also appropriate in the origin myth of a society that later evolved into a hierarchy of endogamous castes.

Practicing Hindus are not greatly concerned with how it all began because their view of cosmological time is cyclical. There was no beginning. Nevertheless, the Vedic texts are considered peculiarly sacred, the Rig Veda most of all, and this state of affairs seems to have prevailed for at least 2,500 years. What, then, is the mythical

significance of the Rig Veda within India? This question has received surprisingly little attention. Yet here is precisely where anthropologists might make a useful contribution, if only their scholarly associates would stop thinking of the Rig Veda as a garbled history book.

When we look at the Rig Veda in context and try to understand just why it should have been regarded around 500 B.C. as a sacred text, several strange features become apparent. Received wisdom is that Vedic religion gradually evolved into Hinduism between the sixth and second centuries B.C. It should be noted, however, that Vedic religion is a fictional entity about which nothing whatever is genuinely known. The Vedas add up to a miscellany of undatable documents of unknown origin. Although the texts are preoccupied with the correct performance of sacrificial rituals of great complexity, especially the horse sacrifice, archeologists have so far failed to locate any site, apart from two horse burials in a non-Indian context in Swat, where such rituals, even on a reduced scale, might plausibly have been performed. A corpus of texts that is not associated with any clearly identifiable sequence of ritual performance does not constitute a religion.

At the present time, the spectrum of Indian religious doctrine and practice is very wide, but one important common component that is shared also by Buddhism and Jainism is the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, which is linked with the idea of *karma* (fate as determined by the merit or demerit of action during both present and past existences) and the goal of ultimate extinction (*mokṣa* for a Hindu; *nirvana* for a Buddhist). This doctrine was already held by the Jains and Buddhists as early as the sixth century B.C., but nothing analogous is apparent in the text of the Vedas. Furthermore, the ambisexual nature of deity in which the feminine is usually the active principle, which is such a striking feature of modern Hinduism, is sharply contrasted with the model of deity represented in the Vedas, where active characters are masculine and females are subordinate and passive.

I think the puzzles have sensible anthropological solutions, but this is not the place to put them forward. The essence of the matter is that we must recognize that the standard Max Müller-derived story is wholly implausible. Instead, we should pay special attention to the likely state of affairs around 500 B.C. We should then recognize that the versions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanical Hinduism that

were current at that time are best understood as contemporaneous structural transformations of a single system of ideas and ritual practices. Vedic texts may have a bearing on this system of ideas, but they are not primary in either a chronological sense or a theological sense. The Aryan invasions never happened at all.

Of course no one is going to believe that.