

Book review of Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global by Laura Spinney.

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Laura Spinney builds on two recent books: David Anthony's [The Horse the Wheel and Language](#), and David Reich [Who We Are and How We Got Here](#). Those two authors, Anthony and Reich, are leaders in their field. Spinney is a qualified scientist, but more of an author. However, her retelling of the story is more recent, uplifting, and provides more detailed information about the evolution of the individual Indo-European languages.

Spinney has nothing but the highest praise for both the scholarship and the humanity of both men. David Anthony was worked with on physical anthropology – the remains of ancient tribes, and made himself an expert in the evolution of languages. David Reich pursues the history of humanity from another vector – DNA. They were both working on the same question.

The genetic approach had been on under investigation for perhaps 30 years. It was started by Luigi Cavalli supports the, whose name does not appear in Spinney's book. However, he was a mentor to David Reich and is generously thanked in Reich's book.

Anthony did not address the question of genetics in his 2007 book. However, he was quick to help when David Reich needed him. It turns out that on much of the evolution of the Indo-European languages took place in the former Soviet Union, and access to which became difficult in 2014 and extremely difficult after Russia started the war in Ukraine in 2022.

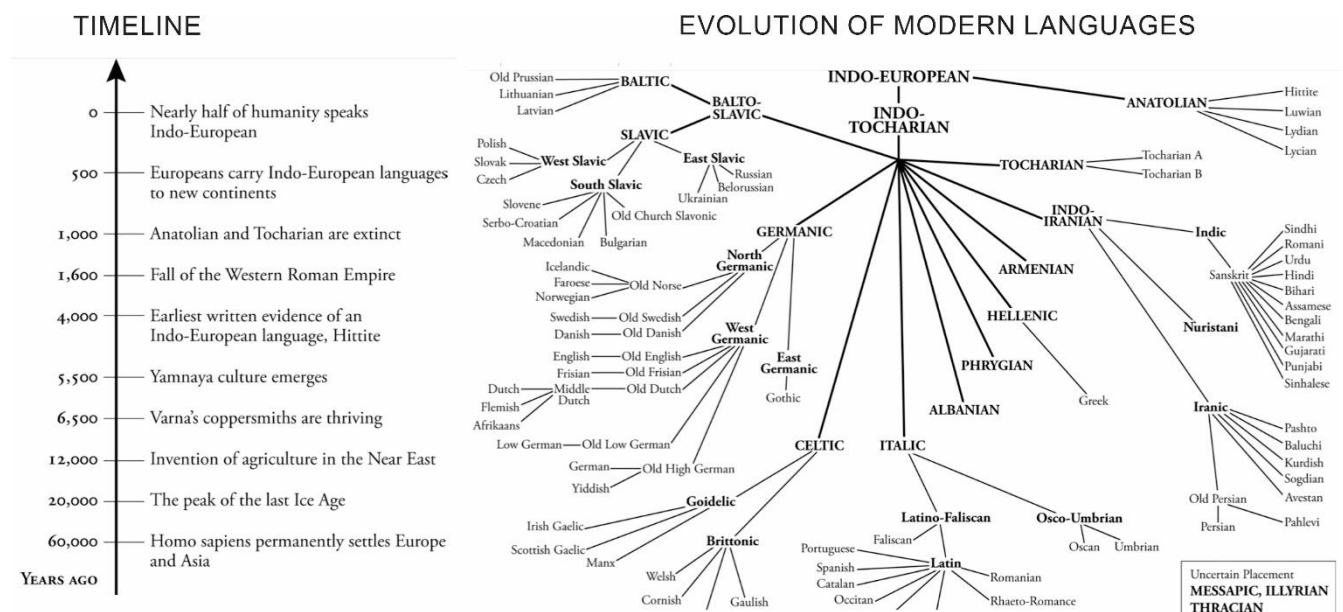
Reich needed some ancient DNA for analysis and knew that Anthony had collected physical remains of ancient people years before. He was more than willing to send his samples to Reich for analysis. Given

the current inaccessibility of the sites and the destruction of Mariupol in the 2022 war, it was a godsend.

Another bit of generosity of spirit is evidenced by Marija Gimbutas, a Lithuanian born UCLA anthropologist who had been forced out of Lithuania by the communist takeover. She originated or was an early and strong advocate of the steppe origin of Indo-European languages.

Nineteenth century archaeologists knew that there had been two major cultural transformations affecting both Europe and Asia since the last Ice Age. The first was the agricultural revolution, the beginning of agriculture and domestication of animals for meat. The second centered around the horse, triggered by those nomadic herders who roamed the Western Eurasian steppe about 5,000 years ago. A succession of peoples, starting with the Yamnaya, learned to live nomadic lives, carrying all they needed in ox-drawn carts as they herded their livestock from horseback. Their large herds made them rich. Defending those large herds made them fierce warriors.

In neither case had anthropologists been able to establish whether the spread of the changes had been peaceful, one culture mimicking what was successful for others, or due to migration, replacement and domination of the less-successful hunter-gatherer and less warlike farming cultures by the Indo-European steppe people whose languages came to dominate half the world, from Western China through Europe and then to the Americas.



The new ways of life could simply have been taken up by existing Europeans and Asians, without the need for any movement of people. But if new cultures could diffuse through populations, so in theory could new languages. There was a general agreement that a transformation as dramatic as the spread of Indo-European languages could not have happened in a vacuum. It had to have piggybacked on

some major social upheaval, and that all people must have left a trace in the art filled out archaeological record.

From Mesopotamia, farming had spread east to India and west through Greece up to the Danube by about 6,000 BCE. Gimbutas calls these farmers the Old Europeans. They worshiped female fertility gods and appear to have lived peacefully, without many weapons and not much evidence of warfare.

Over the same period hunter-gatherers, starting on the steppe grasslands north of the Black and Caspian seas, had tamed horses and learned by small degrees how to exploit the vast steppe stretching from the Danube to Mongolia. These people were taller and sturdier. Gimbutas describes the skeletal remains of the Old Europeans as “gracile” and those of the steppe people as “robust.”

They met in western Ukraine around 4500 BCE. The meeting appears to have been peaceful for the first few centuries, with an active trade of copper from the Balkan area, grains and pottery for hides, meat and horses.

For a couple of glorious centuries, about 3,500 to 3,200 BCE, the farmers lived in the largest towns on the planet. Ukrainians call them the Tripolye people for the name of the town on the right bank of the Dnipro River where their remains were discovered in 1899. Thereafter, however, their civilization died out rapidly. The question was, what happened?

As Spinney reports, DNA analysis has shed a lot of light on the question. While the DNA of modern populations shows a generous mix of genes from both populations, the male, Y-chromosome genes are mostly from the steppe horsemen. It may have been the result of peaceful intermarriage or conquest and rape, but one way or another the steppe nomads came out on top. Anthony and Reich’s books go deeper into how that may have happened.

The last two-thirds of Spinney’s book describe the evolution of the languages in the Indo-European family. As the upper right quadrant of Spinney’s diagram above of language evolution shows, there are no modern descendants of the earliest branches. Tocharian spread to Mongolia and western China, but died out. Two of the Anatolian languages survived until the advent of writing, from which linguists are able to analyze them, but died out long before Turkey was incorporated into the Roman and Ottoman empires.

Readers will recognize that the remaining offshoots of Proto-Indo-European, going clockwise from about 4:00 to 12:00 in the diagram, are living European languages. The major non-Indo-European languages today are Uralic – Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish, and Basque. Spinney writes that almost half of humanity now speaks Indo-European languages. The steppe legacy was powerful. Historians such as Hoffman, in [Why did Europe conquer the world](#), contend that as late as the 19th century Europeans ruled as much as 85% of the world.