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The Aristocratic Warlike Ethos of Indo-Europeans and the Primordial Origins of Western Civilization—Part Two

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Western civilization has been the single most war-ridden, war-dominated, and militaristic civilization in all human history.

Robert Nisbet

[Mycenaean] society was not the society of a sacred city, but that of a military aristocracy. It is the heroic society of the Homeric epic, and in Homer’s world there is no room for citizen or priest or merchant, but only for the knight and his retainers, for the nobles and the Zeus born kings, ‘the sackers of cities.’

Christopher Dawson

[T]he Greek knows the artist only in personal struggle... What, for example, is of particular importance in Plato’s dialogues is mostly the result of a contest with the art of orators, the Sophists, the dramatists of his time, invented for the purpose of his finally being able to say: ‘Look: I, too, can do what my great rivals can do; yes, I can do it better than them. No Protagoras has written myths as beautiful as mine. No dramatist has written such a lively and fascinating whole as the Symposium, no orator has composed such speeches as I present in the Gorgias—and now I reject all of that and condemn all imitative art! Only competition made me a poet, sophist and orator!’

Friedrich Nietzsche

1 See Comparative Civilizations Review, Spring, 2009 for Part One.
IV. Chariots, Mycenaeans, and Aristocratic Berserkers

Scholars—as I argued in Part One—have tended to underestimate the legacy of the origin and diffusion of Indo-European (IE) speakers. Mallory says that, as far as "concrete legacies" of the Indo-Europeans go, "the best claim is that of horse domestication." He thinks that the horse-drawn chariot cannot be regarded exclusively as an IE invention, because it was possibly invented independently in the Near East at about the same time. By the seventeenth century, in any case, chariot warfare was widespread from northern Anatolia down to the Nubian lands below Egypt. Mallory minimizes even the significance of horse domestication in his observation that horses were visible in the Near East from the second millennium BC onwards.

Drews, for his part, does not think that the domestication of the horse *per se* was the most distinctive feature of Proto-Indo-European society. While he notes that "by the end of the third millennium the riding of horses was apparently a common phenomenon on the open steppes," in contrast to the fact that horses were "rare...in the Near East...in the third millennia," he nevertheless insists that the distinctive legacy of PIE speakers was "the development of chariot warfare." He says that the chariot was most likely pioneered and perfected in Armenia (or eastern Anatolia) soon after 2000 BC, adding that this region was "far more likely" the Indo-European homeland rather than the Pontic steppes. It was "mastery of chariot warfare" that led to successful takeovers in the Near East by IE speakers in the middle of the second millennium.

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3 *ibid*. 41.
5 *ibid*. 153.
Duchesne

It is unclear why Drews needs to insist that Armenia was the IE homeland simply because this may have been the location where chariots for warfare were first created. Drews’s preoccupation with linking the coming of the Mycenaeeans into Greece (in the 1600s BC) with charioteering peoples leads him to dismiss as “historically insignificant” the pastoral movements of IE speakers before the second millennium. He rejects the claim that horse-riding was a peculiar IE ethnic marker on the grounds that, by the end of the third millennium, the domesticated horse was quite common from central Europe to central Asia.  

He does not consider the possibility that the horse might have been common in central Europe (they were in fact not common in the Near East until after 1800 BC) due to the diffusion of PIE speakers into this region. Be that as it may, non-IE speakers, as Drews tells us, were soon using chariots in such military undertakings as the Hyksos, who established command over northern Egypt in the seventeenth century, and the Kassite-speakers who took over much of southern Mesopotamia soon after 1600 BC. The cultural importance Drews attributes to the chariot thus turns out to be a mere short-term IE advantage.

I am persuaded that horse-riding was a key element in the spread of Indo-Europeans, well before the invention of the chariot. One lauded criticism against Gimbutas’s hypothesis that the spread of IE speakers was occasioned by waves of warlike horsemen was Renfrew’s archeological observation that horses were not mounted for military purposes before 1500 BC. This is true; horses were first used directly in battle (beyond mere raiding) only when they were attached to wheeled chariots. Horses were mounted and made effective for

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6 *ibid.* 132, 198.

7 *ibid.* 153-54.
cavalry warfare only during the course of the first millennium after a series of successive inventions: the saddle, the horseshoe, and the stirrup.

Nevertheless, the attempt to make light of Gimbutas’s image of Indo-Europeans as horse-riding warriors who stormed into Europe no longer squares well with the newly acquired findings of David Anthony. In his book, *The Horse, The Wheel, and Language*, together with a recent co-authored article, Anthony puts forth a set of highly persuasive observations showing that horse riding and tribal raiding were indeed key elements in the migratory movements of Indo-Europeans. The significance of horse riding was that it “greatly increased the effectiveness and the scale of herding,” which led to the accumulation of larger herds, which necessitated larger pastures, which in turn intensified tribal alliances and conflicts. It has been estimated that horse-riding would have allowed for the use of territories up to five times larger than otherwise.

Anthony also challenges the notion that, before the onset of cavalry warfare, horses were used much as donkey-like pack animals. He observes that the domesticated horses of the Pontic steppes (4200-3700 BC) were “big enough to ride into battle.” They were about the same size as the horses ridden into battle by the legendary Roman cavalrymen and the fierce American Indians. “History and experiment both show that horses the same size as Eneolithic steppe horses can be ridden effectively at a gallop, even in warfare, with a rope bit.”

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Horse riding increased the efficiency of surprise attacks and retreats in raiding. Cunliffe notes that horse-riding probably increased the overall speed of movement by about ten times. Gimbutas estimates that a horse could carry a rider 20-30 miles in one day—that is, about 4 to 5 times the distance traveled on foot.

In light of these facts, including the points presented in Part One on the pastoral way of life of the IE migrants, one could safely say that, starting in the fifth millennium and through the fourth millennium, the Indo-Europeans initiated a most dynamic way of life driven by the invention of wheeled vehicles, the secondary products revolution, horseback riding, large-scale herding, and aggressive raiding.

Moreover, the IE peoples may have held a longer term advantage in the use of chariots than Drews has estimated. Anthony believes that the “earliest” chariots probably emerged in the steppes before 2000, and that they were employed in the Near East about 1800, that is, about 200+ years after they had been invented in the steppes, rather than immediately, as Drews argues. Anthony draws a clear distinction between i) “true” chariots with two-spoked wheels pulled by horses controlled with bits, guided by a “standing warrior,” and ii) heavy solid-wheeled battle-carts or battle-wagons pulled by asses or onagers, controlled with lip-or nose rings, guided by a

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seated driver. The heavy battle-wagons were a Near Eastern invention, but not the chariots, which most likely arrived into the Near East from the steppes through Central Asia.  

There is no denying, however, that Drews puts together a superb case envisioning the arrival of the Mycenaeans as a conquest by a class of chariot-warriors ("big men, taller and broader" than the typical native inhabitants) rather than a migration of impoverished pastoralists who had been evicted from their original homeland and were seeking new lands "in which to make an honest living."

Drews thinks that the Mycenaeans came to control an indigenous population that was "perhaps ten times as large as their own" but which was less civilized than the far larger majorities the Indo-Europeans encountered in the Near East. While the Mycenaean minority "did not ethnically transform the land," it superimposed its language and culture, and thus it "Indo-Europeanized Greece."

The consensus is that the Mycenaeans were a "highly warlike people." M.I. Finley says that when they came into Greece around 1600 BC "something happened on the Greek mainland which gave a radically new turn to developments there...Mycenae suddenly became a centre of wealth and power, and of a warrior civilization, without an equal in this region."

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13 Robert Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks*, 158, 181; though we should not presume that chariots were effectively used directly in warfare across the mountainous Greek landscape.
14 *ibid.* 195-99.
15 M. I. Finley, *Early Greece: The Bronze and the Archaic Ages* (London: Chatto & Windus 1970: 47). Some time ago, Christopher Dawson observed that "the Mycenaean Culture was, to an even greater extent than the Hittite Empire, or the New Kingdom in Egypt,
Louise Schofield also observes that before 1600 BC "the mainland of Greece was a cultural backwater [...] The men were about 5-ft 2-in to 5-ft 6-in tall." But after 1600 the archeological records suddenly portray a "military aristocracy" made up of men who "had an average height of 5 ft 7 in...were robustly built, strong and muscular, with large hands and feet." The archeological remains of this Mycenaean culture "give the impression of a fierce and warlike people who gloried in battle and in the hunt."  

Most scholars agree that the Mycenaeans came by conquest and created communities that consisted of heavily fortified palaces. Their palaces were centers of food collection, storage and distribution, ruled by kings who relied on "aristocratic warriors." Archeologists are always impressed by their well-prepared shaft graves, in which the top men were buried together with their swords, daggers, spearheads, arrowheads, and blades, and which show that the aristocracy enjoyed remarkable wealth, and that they venerated military prowess. These types of shaft graves were without precedent at Mycenae or anywhere else in Greece. They are seen as in line with the kurgan graves original to the Pontic Steppes.

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that of a thoroughly warlike society." He believed, too, that this was the society of a "military aristocracy." See "The Origins of Classical Civilization," in Dynamics of World History (ISI Books 2002: 157-58). He also noted, before Gimbutas, that pastoral societies were more patriarchal and "masculine" than farming societies. See "The Warrior Peoples and the Decline of the Archaic Civilization," in Dynamics in World History.


Indo-Europeanists, including Anthony, have invariably preferred “scientific” explanations in their insistence that PIE speakers were compelled to migrate by “external factors” such as ecological or demographic pressures, which can be measured. Diakonoff, for example, thinks that PIE peoples migrated in response to “overpopulation” pressures in their original homeland (which in his view consisted of “isolated, poorly connected mountainous valleys” located in the Armenian plateau and Transcaucasia).

This scarcity pushed the IE peoples out in search of new lands. Drews, for his part, highlights the technology associated with chariots as the “essential” factor behind the IE conquests. In one sentence he adds: “the takeovers were motivated... by the desire for power and wealth.”¹⁸ But this is a point that “need hardly be said” insomuch as all imperial takeovers are ipso facto about power and riches.

Anthony is more careful in the way he distinguishes “push” from “pull” factors. “Push” factors are generally those which compel a people to leave their homes, such as demographic pressures, war, disease, crop failure, or high bride-prices. Anthony agrees that most current explanations of migrations tend to stress “push” factors. He thinks that “pushes alone” are not enough and that “pull” factors also play a role, by which he means essentially the pulling attractions of the destination.¹⁹

But all in all, Anthony follows a common line of “objective” analysis according to which IE migrations were practical solutions to questions of survival and economic ambition.


I think we miss much if we forget the aristocratic context of these migrations, the constant competition for prestige and honor among the noble elites, and the fact that the excess of young men who were pushed or pulled to migrate were finely built characters eager for adventure and joy within a culture that afforded them with the opportunity to express themselves as individuals and expected them to be jealous of their tribe’s dignity, as well as their own.

I would thus make a distinction between the biological/economic desire for security and gain, obtained by means of rational calculation, and the irrational desire for prestige irrespective of privation and biological safety. This is not to say that one should lose sight of the exceptionally mobile economic life of IE pastoralists. IE migrations were driven literally by horses and wheeled vehicles; but they were also driven by an ethos wherein fighting and voluntarily risking one’s life was the essential ground of being a man of virtue.

Let me start addressing this restless ethos by drawing attention to the fact that the major themes of IE poetry revolved around the heroic deeds, immortality, and fame of individual men. Poets were highly respected in IE societies; they were not only the repositories and transmitters of the overall cultural knowledge but were also entrusted with singing the praises of heroes. The preoccupation with going into battle in order to seek personal recognition found expression in such poetic phrases as “imperishable fame” and “to overcome death.” Fortson writes that a warrior valued battle above all else because it afforded the opportunity to attain fame, which brought immortality, and in this sense fame was a way of overcoming death. According to Watkins, the poet had a patron who bestowed largesse on him in return for conferring “on the patron what he and his culture valued more highly than

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life itself: precisely what is expressed by the ‘imperishable fame’ formula.”

In a culture where individual renown was so important, bestowing a name upon a newborn, especially among the ruling or warrior classes, was the subject of a ritual. Fortson refers to several IE traditions in which the words for “name” and “fame” are collocated such as “famous in name” and “name-fame.” He notes that a large number of ancient IE names (“many of which furnish information about naming practices in PIE times”) were in the form of “a bipartite compound X-Y where one or both compound members are concepts, virtues, or animals” such as “having greater fame/glory,” “born of god, born of Zeus,” “brave among the people,” “having a hero’s strength.”

Combined with this heroic poetry was a highly individuated mode of reckless but “glorious” fighting. Michael Speidel, in a captivating paper, argues that “an outstanding feature of Indo-European culture” was a style of “berserk-like” fighting in which individual warriors would throw off armor or garments in sight of the enemy, “showing off their utter fearlessness,” rushing ahead yelling and “raging uncontrollably in a trance of

21 Calvert Watkins, How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics, 70; see also Chapter 15, “An Indo-European theme and formula: Imperishable fame;” Anthony, The Horse, The Wheel, and Language, 260; Fortson, Indo-European Language and Culture, 29-30. Aaron Gurevich finds “a latent conception of the human personality” through the representation of the hero in the Germanic-Scandinavian-Icelandic Sagas of the medieval era; see his The Origins of European Individualism (Blackwell, 1995), 19-88. I agree; however, in these heroic poems individuals are still prototypical representations of the ideals of their own class, rather than individuals with their own sense of what virtue is (as in classical Greece) and with their own individual rights (as in modern times).
Speidel observes that IE berserks fought in this manner “for over more than two and a half thousand years, from 1300 B.C to A.D. 1300.” While he documents instances of such fighting by the Assyrian army, in the thirteenth century BC, he thinks that these “mad-warriors” were either IE mercenaries or Assyrians who had adapted this style of warfare from their Hittite neighbors. “By 1500 B.C.,” he writes, “Indo-European speakers held sway from Northern India to Western Europe.”

Speidel cites numerous documentary sources, Roman writers, mythological stories, and sagas showing that this style of fighting—“naked, shouting, barefoot, flowing-haired, and often in single combat”—was “for love of fame and out of daring.”

The less protected the body and the greater the capacity to sustain pain and maintain one’s courage and “willfulness” unbroken, the more heroic and human the fighter was in the eyes of his peers.

The single and singular warrior in combat was idolized. Having the opportunity to fight in this way, the “freedom...to outdo other warriors” was the “highest happiness.” A life that lacked deeds was the “greatest grief.” The “manhood” of warriors

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24 ibid. 256, 272.
25 I would gather that Hegel came up with the notion of a “first battle to the death for pure prestige” from reading many of the sources Speidel cites from Greeks and Romans who observed the berserk-style of warfare, including Xenophon, Livy, Tacitus, Polybius, Strabo, and Caesar. J. N. Findlay writes that “of all great modern philosophers Hegel is the most thoroughly soaked and steeped in things Greek.” See Hegel: A Re-examination (Oxford University Press, 1958: 28).
26 ibid. 266-69, 284.
depended on deeds of berserk daring. This psychological state of fighting—the wild, beast-like howling and “stormy unruliness”—carried to an extreme the individuality and singularity of the warrior. The etymology of “gone berserk” stresses the “trance-like state madness” of fighters, their animalized transfiguration into wild creatures, a bear or a wolf, separated from social controls of any kind, in an utter state of fury (furor, menos, or wut). For Speidel “the mind of the berserker in the second millennium BC was much the same... as that of medieval warriors two thousand years later.” The history of IE berserk warriors “offers rich religious, cultural, and military detail from about 1300 BC to AD 1300 and links the bronze, iron, and middle ages, three thousand years of history seldom understood as belonging together.”

When the Franks were converted to Christianity, they continued to fight in the berserker style; some Frankish warriors even gave Christ the qualities of the Germanic war god “Woden” (from which we take the day “Wednesday) which meant “fury.” Some centuries later, in Nordic sagas, Christ was imagined as the Lord’s bravest fighter, “God’s berserk!” While Christianity “forbade” berserks, their “spirit lived on” late into medieval times among IE speakers in Norway, Scotland, Ireland and other tribal cultures in the northern forests of Europe.

Speidel is right that the development of Greek and Roman city cultures, and the creation of disciplined armies manned by well protected soldiers who fought in unison, brought an end to the berserker style of fighting of early Romans and Greeks. Classical Greeks and Romans thought of themselves as

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28 Speidel, 272, 278.
civilized and of Celts and Germans as barbarians. They contrasted their self-control and reasonableness (as well as their courage in staying in rank in the face of the enemy without giving way to fear and panic) with the “recklessness” and “mindless bragging” of berserkers.

I would add, however, that Greek hoplite soldiers, Roman legions, and Christian knights did not eradicate the state of mind of the berserker as much as sublimate its excessive, disorganized, and “barbaric” impulses into a far more effective, disciplined style of warfare that would make Westerners “the most deadly soldiers in the history of civilization.”

IV. Aristocratic and Martial Traits Combined

But we need to realize that the berserker style of fighting was one of many traits that testified to the aristocratic-individualistic nature of Indo-Europeans. While experts commonly tell us that IE society—including the Celts and Germanics peoples of the Iron Age—were ruled by an “aristocratic elite” that was “highly warlike,” no serious efforts have been made to study the combined significance of these traits. Indo-Europeans are viewed as “aristocratic” in a light-headed way, much like countless other privileged classes across the world. The common line of reasoning is that, notwithstanding variations specific to time and locality, all stratified societies are dominated politically and economically by “aristocratic” elites who live off the surplus produced by the majority.

29 Hanson, Carnage and Culture, 5. In tracing the origins of the West to the polis period, Hanson misses the cultural continuities between the berserker warrior and the hoplite fighter.

30 This is evident in Bruce Trigger’s study of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Shang China, the Aztecs, the Classic Maya, and the Inca in his Understanding Early Civilizations (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147-154.
Likewise, IE scholars take it for granted that similar elites dedicated to warfare existed in other cultures. At no point do Mallory, Drews, or Anthony stop to reflect (from a comparative perspective) whether IE speakers were aristocratic and warlike in a unique way. Gimbutas did insist that IE speakers were militaristic males who “superimposed” their culture on the peaceful female-oriented cultures of Old Europe. But her emphasis was on the “patriarchal” character of IE culture. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Azar Gat, in his recent book, *War in Human Civilization*, admits that pastoral peoples exhibited a higher disposition for warfare than non-pastoral cultures. But Gat downplays this difference in degree, for it does not fit well with his Darwinian claim that warfare was a common feature of the human calculus for survival, reproduction, and dominance across history.

In the realm of culture and history, where all differences are relative rather than absolute, differences of quantity, scale, or intensity may be substantially important. John Keegan, in his encyclopedic study, *A History of Warfare*, is quite definitive in his assessment that the pastoral peoples of the steppes, Scythians, Huns, Mongols, were a “new sort of people” in being “warriors for war’s sake, for the loot it brought, the risks, the thrill, the animal satisfactions of triumph.”

But Keegan is another historian who remains silent on the Indo-Europeans, and believes that the Scythians were the “first

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31 Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization*, 189-230. Mallory correctly questions Gimbutas “stark contrast” between an essentially peaceful Old Europe and an “intrinsically aggressive population” from the steppes, with the claim that “warfare of some sort would appear to be a universal in human societies.” Yet he too recognizes that the “frequency of its occurrence might vary considerably over region, people or time.” See his entry “Warfare” in *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*. Eds. J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, 630.
steppe people.” Still, if we agree that the IE were a people of the steppes, the first horseback riders and inventors of chariots, we can make the inference that they were the first peoples from the steppes to engage in warfare for the sake of the joys, the risks, and the prestige it brought.

Yet, at the same time, we should avoid the converse error of delinking the martial temperament of the IE peoples from their pastoral way of life. Keegan is aware of this, and in response to the question: “why should ...pastoralists...have been more warlike than their hunting ancestors or agricultural neighbors,” he answers that young pastoralists had to “learn to kill, and to select for killing” their domesticated animals. “It was flock management, as much as slaughter and butchery, which made the pastoralists so cold-bloodedly adept at confronting the sedentary agriculturalists.” This answer, however, is limited. In the first instance, Keegan is viewing warfare for its own sake in downbeat terms, and, secondly, he is abstracting one datum—killing young, nimble animals—from a whole way of life.

The IE economic lifestyle included fierce competition for grazing rights for specific areas, constant alertness in the defense of one’s portable wealth, and an expansionist disposition in a world in which competing herdsmen were motivated to seek new pastures as well as tempted to take the movable wealth (cattle) of their neighbors. This life required not just the skills of a butcher but a life span of horsemanship and arms which brought to the fore certain mental dispositions including aggressiveness and individualism, in the sense that each individual, in this male-oriented atmosphere, needed to become as much a warrior as a herdsman.

33 ibid. 160-61.
Indo-Europeans were also uniquely ruled by a class of free aristocrats. In very broad terms, I define as “aristocratic” a state in which the ruler, the king, or the commander-in-chief is not an autocrat who treats the upper classes as unequal servants but is a “peer,” who exists in a spirit of equality as one more warrior of noble birth. This is not to say that leaders did not enjoy extra powers and advantages, or that leaders were not tempted to act in tyrannical ways. It is to say that in aristocratic cultures, for all the intense rivalries between families and individuals seeking their own renown, there was a strong ethos of aristocratic egalitarianism against despotic rule.

Let me pull together a number of traits I have found in the literature which, in their combination, point to a life of aristocratic equality and, in Nietzsche’s words, of “vigorous, free, joyful activity.” First, all IE cultures from the “earliest” times in the fifth millennium—when ranking was just emerging—have seen the presence of warriors who sought to demonstrate their standing and wealth, by dressing in “ostentatious” ways; for example, with long or multiple belts and necklaces of copper beads, copper rings, copper spiral bracelets, gold fittings in their spears and javelins—with variations of styles depending on place and time but all demonstrative of an “individualizing ideology.”

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34 David Anthony, *The Horse, The Wheel, and Language*, 160, 237, 251, 259-263. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian of the first century BC, had this to say of the Celts: “The clothing they wear is striking: tunics and breeches dyed and embroidered in various colours.... They wear bracelets on their wrists and arms, and heavy necklaces of solid gold, rings of great value and even corselets.” Cited in Stephen Allen, *Lords of Battle. The World of the Celtic Warrior*, 111-12. The Celts, I might add, were on average of the same height as the Mycenaean at 5 ft 7 in tall (some Celtic princes have been measured at just over 6ft).
Second, the IE warriors “were interred as personalities showing off the equipment of life and their personal position in a final coup de theatre, rather than joining a more anonymous community of ancestors.”\textsuperscript{35} Kurgan burials commemorated the deaths of special males; the stone circles and mounds, and the emphasis on “prestige weapons and insignia,” were intended to isolate and self-aggrandize the achievements of warriors.\textsuperscript{36}

Third, IE aristocrats developed a distinctive tradition of feasting and drinking, in which “individual hospitality rather than great communal ceremonies” dominated the occasions. These feasts—backed by a “prestige goods economy”—were “cheerful” events of gift-giving and gift-taking, performance of praise poetry, and animal sacrifices.\textsuperscript{37}

These feats were a great opportunity for warriors with higher status and wealth, in this world of constant small-scale raids and persistent inter-tribal conflicts, to acquire the greatest

\textsuperscript{35} Andrew Sherratt, “The Transformation of Early Agrarian Europe: The Later Neolithic and Copper Ages, 4500-2500 BC,” 192.

\textsuperscript{36} David Anthony, \textit{The Horse, The Wheel, and Language}, 245. Gimbutas sees the kurgan mounds as the “most distinctive” archeological remain of the Indo-Europeans. She contrasts IE ceramics, art, and architecture to the “refined” and “advanced” culture of the Old Europeans. She observes as well that kurgans “singled out” male warriors, “in contrast to Old Europe, where both sexes were buried together,” and where burials were “collective”. See “The Fall and Transformation of Old Europe,” in Eds. Miriam Dexter and K. Jones-Bley, \textit{The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe} (Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph 18, 1997), 351-54. Anthony agrees that kurgans were intended to highlight male prowess, but he brings up new research (329) showing that about 20% and sometimes 50% of the central graves contained adult females.

number of clients. They were also an opportunity for the less powerful or younger warriors to attach themselves to patrons who offered opportunities for loot and glory. The more followers the patron could recruit, the greater the expectation of success and loot to be gained by all.

Fourth, as Gimbutas has clearly articulated, and as Anthony has further noted, this was a culture in which “all [the] most important deities lived in the sky.” While Gimbutas described these sky gods in negative terms as the gods of a belligerent people, one may see them as the gods of an energetic, life-affirming people whose gods were personified as celestial heroes and chieftains.

The sky-gods of the Indo-Europeans reflected—to use the words of Christopher Dawson—their “intensely masculine and warlike ethics, their mobility.” If the gods of Egypt and Mesopotamia demanded unquestioned submission to their will, passive acceptance; and if the female deities of Old Europe—to borrow the language of Camille Paglia—represented the “earth’s bowels,” and embodied the “chthonian drama of an endless round, cycle upon cycle,” the sky-gods of Indo-Europeans furnished a vital, action-oriented, and linear picture of the world.  


39 Christopher Dawson, “The Warrior Peoples and the Decline of the Archaic Civilization,” in *Dynamics in World History*. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (Vintage Books, 1991). The Celtic gods, writes John Corcoran, existed “in the climate engendered by the warrior-aristocratic society of their period…” “The strongly marked aristocratic nature of Celtic society in the days of independence [before Roman subjugation] suggests that the mythology relates to the gods of the aristocracy…” E. Tonnelat writes of the Germanic gods that they “were never thought of as more than men of superior essence…” They “were conceived by a warlike people… the
Teutonic gods were nearly all distinguished for their warlike virtues."

He continues: "The basic structure of the Teutonic pantheon is a concept shared by all the Indo-European peoples, who are to be distinguished from all other cultural groups..." He carefully adds that not all IE gods were "sky-gods" and male gods. There were important goddesses, such as Frigga, the wife of Odin (said to be the principal god of the Germanic people) who "shared his wisdom and foresight." See Felix Guirand, The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology. Trans. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames. (Hamlyn Publishing, [1959] 1984), 244, 252, 273.

For Gimbutas, the process of Indo-Europeanization of Old Europe resulted in the hybridization of two mythological structures within which the Indo-European prevailed but the Old mythology survived as an undercurrent; see The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 147-150, 196-200.

Corcoran also speaks of the Celtic-Irish goddess Macha as perhaps "a survival of a mother-goddess worshipped in parts of Ireland prior to the arrival of the Celts" (229). He notes that in some stories Macha "appears as a warrior-queen in her own right." The notion that the patriarchal mythology of the IE peoples brought about a degradation of women is not consistent with the presence of goddesses who, "though few in number," as Tonnelat also observes in the case of Germanic mythology, "reveal themselves on the occasion to be fearful in battle" (252).

Snell says that the Homeric gods reflect "the graceful stamp of an aristocratic society..." Throughout his poems Homer has his gods appear in such a manner that they do not force man down into the dust; on the contrary, when a god associates with a man, he elevates him, and makes him free, strong, courageous, certain of himself." He also notes that an essential feature of Homeric religion is "the suppression of all chthonian elements including the worship of Mother Earth..."

Yet, at the same time, he writes that the "ladies of Mount Olympus, Hera, Athena, Artemis and Aphrodite [...] in spite of their one-sidedness, are faultless and attractive creatures. With no effort at all
Finally, I would highlight the purely aristocratic manner by which Indo-Europeans organized themselves into war-bands (koiros, brotherhood). The nature of this association might be better understood if we were to start by describing IE society in terms of different levels of social organization. The lowest level, and the smallest unit of society, consisted of families residing in farmsteads and small hamlets, practicing mixed farming with livestock representing the predominant form of wealth.

The next tier consisted of a clan of about five families with a common ancestor. Several clans sharing the same territory constituted a tribe, and this was the third level. Those members of the tribe who owned livestock were considered to be free in the eyes of the tribe, with the right to bear arms and participate in the tribal assembly.

Although the scale of complexity of IE societies changed considerably with the passage of time, and the Celtic tribal confederations that were in close contact with Caesar’s Rome, for example, were characterized by a high concentration of both economic and political power, these confederations were still ruled by a class of free aristocrats. In classic Celtic society, real power within and outside the tribal assembly was wielded by the most powerful members of the nobility, as measured by the size of their clientage and their ability to bestow patronage. Patronage could be extended to members of other tribes as well.

they possess the noble simplicity and quiet grandeur which Winckelmann regarded as the essence of the classical spirit. But the original Greek temper surpasses this classicistic ideal. The Olympians have their full share of the passions...vitality, beauty, and lucidity.” See Snell, The Discovery of the Mind, 23-42.

40 For a detailed linguistic assessment of the “four divisions of [IE] society,” see Emile Benveniste’s Indo-European Language and Society (University of Miami, 1973), 239-261. I only refer to three divisions, but, below, I conceive another social group, the war-bands.
as to free individuals who were lower in status and were thus tempted to surrender some of their independence in favor of protection and patronage.

Now, in addition to these relations of clientage, IE nobles were grouped into war-bands. These bands were freely constituted associations of men operating independently from tribal or kinship ties. They could be initiated by any powerful individual on the merits of his martial abilities.

The relationship between the chief and his followers was personal and contractual: the followers would volunteer to be bound to the leader by oaths of loyalty wherein they would promise to assist him while the leader would promise to reward them from successful raids. The sovereignty of each member was thus recognized even though there was a recognized leader, “the first among equals.” These “groups of comrades,” to use IE vocabulary, were singularly dedicated to predatory behavior and to “wolf-like” living by hunting and raiding, and to the performance of superior, even superhuman deeds.\(^{41}\)

The members were generally young, unmarried men, thirsting for adventure. The followers were sworn not to survive a war-leader who was slain in battle, just as the leader was expected to show in all circumstances a personal example of courage and war-skills.\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) See the entries “Army” and “Warriors” in *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*. Eds. J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, 30-31; 631-635.

\(^{42}\) Tacitus observed about the chiefs and his followers in the region the Romans called “Germania”: “Both prestige and power depend on being continually attended by a large train of picked young warriors, which is a distinction in peace and a protection in war... On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of their chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong
It is worth adding in this context Heiko Steuer’s recent observation that the so-called “folk [mass] movements” of Celts, Germans, and Scandinavians (during the first millennium AD) were actually initiated by war-bands—which could number up to 2000 to 3000 men—in search of loot and adventure. These movements, he writes, were “not the migrations of tribes with the whole family…but rather campaigns of warrior bands whose wars only much later led to the occupation of land.” This is the way he describes, for example, the movements of Alamans, Franks and Saxons into the Roman Empire.

However, in contrast to Steuer, who emphasizes the need on the part of warlords to ensure a steady supply of resources for their entourage, I would accentuate the search for prestige and immortality. Young men born into noble families were not only driven by economic needs and the spirit of adventure, but also by a deep-seated psychological need for honor and recognition—a need nurtured not by human nature as such but by a cultural setting in which one’s noble status was maintained in-and-through the risking of one’s life (berserker style) in a battle to the death for pure prestige.

This competition for fame amongst war-band members (partially outside the ties of kinship) could not but have had an individualizing effect upon the warriors. Hence, although band members (“friend-companions,” or “partners”[^44]) belonged to a


cohesive and loyal group of like-minded individuals, they were not swallowed up anonymously within the group.45

V. The Impact of Indo-Europeans on the Civilizations of the East

There is a crucial difference in the historical effects of those Indo-Europeans who migrated to the Near East and those who migrated into Greece and Old Europe. This difference has been

45 All the aristocratic traits I have outlined in this paper were to be found, in varying degrees and through the influx of new cultural movements, from the early Bronze Age through the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. See Anthony Harding, “Reformation in Barbarian Europe, 1300-600BC;” Barry Cunliffe, “Iron Age Societies in Western Europe and Beyond, 800-140BC”; Barry Cunliffe, “The Impact of Rome on Barbarian Society, 140BC-AD 1300,” Malcolm Todd, “Barbarian Europe, AD 300-700,” in Barry Cunliffe, The Oxford Illustrated History of Prehistoric Europe. See also Stephen Allen, Lords of Battle, 60-83; 109-141; and Malcolm Todd, The Early Germans (Blackwell, 1992), 29-46.

But other than Speidel’s observation that the mind of the berserker “was much the same... as that of medieval warriors two thousand years later,” no one has put the dots together showing that these traits persisted across millennia from the early IE speakers who came from the steppes to the feudal warriors of Christian Europe.

Cunliffe, in his Europe Between the Oceans, accentuates the heroic aristocratic character of the peoples of the steppes, the Corded Ware peoples, the Bell Beakers, the Macedonians, the Nordics of the Bronze Age, the peoples from the Carpathian Basin region, the Hallstatt zone, the Celts, the Romans, the Germans, the Vikings, and other cultures of “footloose warrior lords”—yet he does not tie these observations together and does not speak of Europe’s uniqueness in these terms but instead argues that what made Europeans peculiarly “restless” was the geographically mobile nature of the European peninsula. He also thinks that the Indo-European language came into Europe with the Near Eastern farmers who brought agriculture after 7000 BC.
strangely neglected by Indo-Europeanists. In contrast to the radical transformations we saw in Europe, the IE invaders who came into Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia were eventually assimilated to the far more advanced civilizations of this region. Although the Hittites were masters of the central Anatolian region, and their language was the imperial language of their empire created about 1650 BC, it is clear from the clay tablets covering the period from about 1650 to 1200 BC, that they had undergone considerable assimilation.

Many words in their language, including the very name "Hittite," were borrowed from a language called "Hattic," which was spoken by the predominant aborigines of central Anatolia. Their religion and their culture at large were also heavily infused with indigenous elements. Mallory notes that Hittite culture has always been difficult to distinguish from its non-Indo-European neighbors; the Hittites appeared to have "embraced thoroughly the local cultures," displaying "no obvious cultural traits that mark them off as distinctive."\(^{46}\) Mallory, however, makes this observation without contrasting it to the experience of IE speakers in the rest of Europe.

Anthony adds that the early speakers of Hittite constituted not just a minority (as all Indo-Europeans did even in the less advanced cultures of Europe) but a minority living in a cultural landscape dominated by non-IE speakers "who had already founded cities, acquired literate bureaucracies, and established Kingdoms and palace cults."

It is noteworthy that they borrowed Hattic words for "throne," "king," "heir apparent," and for a wide variety of bureaucratic positions or functions—which are indicative of IE acculturation to non-aristocratic forms of government. Moreover, while Luwian (another IE language which arrived

into Anatolia around the same period) was spoken over a wider area than Hittite, it too borrowed from other non-IE languages. In any case, Hittite and Luwian are now extinct, with no new IE dialects emerging out of them.

The Indo-Iranians who came into the lands of Iran and India did have a considerable cultural influence. Pre-Indo-Iranian was an eastern steppe dialect of Proto-Indo-Europeans, which must have existed at the latest about 2500-2300 BC. Common Indo-Iranian was probably the tongue of the Sintashta culture located at the eastern border of the Pontic Caspian steppe, southeast of the Urals, during the period 2100-1800 BC. The Sintashta era saw a significant increase in the intensity of warfare. Contacts between the peoples of the eastern steppes and Central Asia became much more visible during the period 2000-1800. Around 1900 BC there was an actual migration of chariot-driving Indo-Iranian tribes from the steppes into Central Asia.

By 1600 all the old trading towns and cities of eastern Iran had been abandoned as Indo-Iranian speakers with their pastoral economies spread across this region. Archaic old Indic probably emerged as a separate language from archaic Iranian about 1800-1600. Old Indic speakers pushed eastward into the Punjab around 1500, where the Rig-Veda was compiled about 1500-1300.47 The Vedas pictured a people of enormous pride with a fondness for feasting, dancing, and for making war.

But while the Rig-Veda was “decidedly pastoral” in its values and practices, the number of non-Indo-European words contained in the 1,028 hymns of this classic text suggest “a close cultural relationship” between Indo-Iranian speakers and the old native folk.48 The Indic speakers who moved into the Indus valley came into an area already inhabited by a civilized

48 Ibid. 455-56.
culture known as “Harappan,” and as the Indo-Europeans penetrated deeper through the Ganges south to Banaras, in the course of centuries, “they gradually gave up their pastoral habits and settled into agricultural life.”

This settled agriculture involved the cultivation of semi-arid areas by means of river irrigation. As the Rig-Veda reported, “They made fair fertile fields, they brought the rivers. Plants spread everywhere over the desert, waters filled the hollows.”

Now, the importance of this point, which I can only outline here, is that this river-based agriculture took on an “agrobureaucratic” character; centralized patterns of irrigation and social control became the order of the day in the effective handling of water supplies (canals, aqueducts, reservoirs and dikes).

This economy led to the rise of what Karl Wittfogel has called a “hydraulic state” in which “the early Vedic tradition of aristocratic tribal republics was eclipsed in the Late Vedic period” after 1000 BC. As a result, the aristocracy lost its independence to a king who came to derive its legitimacy not from an aristocratic tribal council but from the ritual investiture of Brahmin priests.

Similarly, the pastoralists who moved into the land of Iran came to fall within the orbit of a hydraulic system of

51 ibid, 43. See also Karl Wittfogel’s now infamous book, Oriental Despotism (Yale University Press, [1957] 1963), 265. His “hydraulic hypothesis” needs revision, but its concomitant argument that there was a lack of an independent property owning class in the East, and, I would add, a rather dependent aristocratic elite, needs to be taken seriously.
agriculture and a form of “despotic” rule lacking an independent, private-property-based aristocracy. Thus, by the time of the Achaemenid dynasty, we hear Darius (522-486 BC) sounding like a Mesopotamian or Egyptian ruler who appears to be the only character with any individuality and heroic achievement: “I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King of Persia”—to be buried in a royal tomb intended as a colossal glorification of the king.

While I appreciate Pierre Briant’s effort to revise the ancient Greek perception of the Persian monarchy as “despotic,” I have to disagree with the way he uses the term “aristocracy” to designate the elite members of the satrapal system of the Persian state. Briant calls “aristocratic” any leading member of the administration and army who happened to enjoy economic luxury, high status, and legal privileges.  

It is rather revealing, nevertheless, that in the same sentence in which he writes that the “Achaemenid satrap was not merely a civil servant, in the dismissive sense this term has in our contemporary society,” he adds that the satrap “depended personally on the King, and he had to behave as a faithful bandaka; moreover, he was closely watched by the central authority.”

The Persian ruling class of Darius’ time may have lost the aristocratic IE ethos I outlined above, which the ancient classical Greeks, as I will briefly suggest below, came to cultivate in their ideal of arête. Moreover, while it is true that Persia, like India, produced an epic literature (Shahname) that reflected the aristocratic influence of the “Aryan” warriors, we should not underestimate the oppressive character of the

53 ibid. 340.
Achaemenid monarchy as symbolized in the uniquely Eastern practice of prostration. The ancient Greeks saw this custom of worshipping rulers as gods to be an act of subservience in contrast to the freedom of the Greeks.

54 Thanks to Laina Farhat-Holzman for alerting me to this Persian heroic literature and encouraging me to reevaluate the influence of Indo-European culture on Persian civilization.

55 Karl Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism, 153, 205, 265. There is a tyrannical-turned-despotic tendency in the aristocratic pursuit of superior greatness. This is how I interpret Alexander the Great’s assimilation of Persian kingship customs. But there is also a powerful tendency among aristocrats to oppose this despotic tendency and to uphold “republican” values. A stand against prostration and Alexander’s “Orientalism” is a recurrent theme in Arrian’s, or Lucius Flavius Arrianus’s biography, The Campaigns of Alexander (Penguin Books 1971).

Arrian writes critically of how Alexander “came to allow himself to emulate eastern extravagance and splendor, and the fashion of barbaric kings of treating their subjects as inferiors” (213). He reports a speech made by Callisthenes, a pupil of Aristotle, to Alexander and his elite companions, in which he derided the homage of prostration as a “humiliating custom,” asking Alexander “do you really propose to force the Greeks, who love their liberty more than anyone else in the world, to prostrate themselves before you?... [The] Greeks and Macedonians honour you honourably as a man” (221, see also pp. 356-57).

The discontent of his elite companions was testimony to their own sense of aristocratic pride as companions of Alexander’s army. The Roman historian, Quintus Curtius Rufus, in his biography, The History of Alexander, cites Hermolaus’ justification as to why he and others had plotted against Alexander: “We plotted to kill you because you have begun to act not as a king with his free-born subjects but as a master with his slaves” (Penguin Books 1984: 192).
VI. *Arête* and the “sublimation” of IE aristocratic barbaric values

I believe that there was an “internal” (or psychological-cultural) movement from the martial barbaric values of Indo-Europeans to the civilized values of the classical Greeks, which I hope to elucidate schematically through the employment of Nietzsche’s concept of “sublimated will to power.”

The concept of sublimation is familiar today in the psychological claim that the redirection of our sexual drives lies behind our cultural creativity. This concept was central to Freud who wrote: “sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.”

I will add to Freud the idea that the restless civilized life of ancient Greece did not come from the sublimation of ordinary human drives but the sublimation of the drives of individuals nurtured in a world of adventurous mobility, horsemanship, chariots, and aristocratic egalitarianism. Following Nietzsche, I suggest that what was civilized and harmonious among the Classical Greeks would have been unfeasible without the singularly agonal drives of the ruling aristocratic class. During

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Homeric and pre-Homeric times, these drives were "barbaric" in their "excess" in pleasure and warring.\textsuperscript{58}

The classical Greeks brought these primordial drives under "measure" and self-control, by re-channeling them into creative-cultural venues.

Apollo’s spirit of order and moderation always coexisted in conscious awareness of the Dionysian energies of aristocratic warriors. The emblematic meaning of Apollo was moderation—"nothing in excess"—in light of the aristocratic tendency for aggrandizement, tyrannical rule, and rapine. Apollo was a guardian against a complete descent into a state of chaos and wantonness—a redirector of the hubristic yearnings of men into higher levels of art and philosophy. Greek high culture was not produced by a naturally harmonious character.

The most significant original trait of ancient Greece was the aristocratic warlike culture which came in the second millennium and which formed the basis of Mycenaean civilization. The etymological origins of the word "aristocracy" are Greek. The upper classes of all agrarian civilizations can be said to have been well bred; but the distinguishing value of the Greek aristocracy was the idea of \textit{arête}. The root of the word \textit{arête} is the same as \textit{aristos}, which was used in the plural to refer to the aristocracy.

I follow the thesis of Werner Jaeger’s work, \textit{Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture}, which can be summed up in one sentence: \textit{arête} was the central ideal in the development of all Greek culture. Jaeger explains that this word was used in

ancient Greece to describe human merit and excellence as well as the abilities of non-humans, such as the spirit and speed of noble horses. Only men of aristocratic birth were thought to be capable of achieving excellence in life. The noblemen were distinguished from the common people not by their wealth as much as by their possession of talents and abilities.\textsuperscript{59}

The meaning of \textit{arête}, however, did not remain the same, but changed considerably from archaic to classical Greek times. While its meaning retained its basic association with superlative ability, it developed to include less warlike virtues. The \textit{earliest} literary meaning of \textit{arête} combined the notions of “proud and courtly morality with warlike valor.” This is the meaning expressed in Homer’s \textit{Iliad}. To strive always for the highest \textit{arête} and to excel all others in battle is the governing theme of this epic.

Although the aristocrats of Homer’s text were bound tightly to a common ethos, and individuals were rigorously subject to the norms of their class, this ethos assigned preeminent value to the pursuit of \textit{personal} glory. Competition with each other for the first prize of \textit{arête} was part of this ethos. Aristocrats in general had an insatiable urge for honor, the sources of which were praise and blame from one’s peers. This desire for social recognition was reflected in the way the meaning of the word \textit{arête} was sometimes altered to such words as “to esteem” and “to respect.”\textsuperscript{60}

This Homeric conception of \textit{arête} was to be found not only among the Mycenaean warriors immortalized in the \textit{Iliad}, but among the barbarian warriors who Indo-Europeanized the

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{ibid}. 3-34. The Greek gods themselves, Jaeger notes, were proud characters who would avenge any infringement to the honor due to them; he calls these gods “an immortal aristocracy” (10).
continent of Europe. It is true, however, as Nietzsche suspected, that in the “pre-Homeric world,” the expression of one’s arete would have involved far worse acts of cruelty and annihilation than in the time of Homer.  

By the eighth century, and perhaps by Mycenaen times, the Dionysian life force in general, and its militant cruelty in particular, would have assumed a more culturally productive Apollonian form, as aristocrats came to gain some degree of mastery over the “anarchy” of their instincts, by cultivating other, less bellicose, talents.

As the Mycenaenians prospered during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, and raised their standard of living, building great and sumptuous palaces decorated with brightly colored frescoes painted on walls and floors, they might have envisioned new ideals of aristocratic arete beyond mere physical prowess.

Jaeger notes that in Homer’s Iliad (this poem evokes Mycenaen times through an oral tradition which joins elements of the subsequent “dark age” and Homer’s time) the word arete was occasionally used in reference to spiritual-
moral traits. He believes, actually, that the earliest combination of nobility of action with nobility of mind was expressed by the old counselor of Achilles, Phoenix, when he reminded his pupil of the ideal on which he had been educated: “to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”

The *Odyssey*, according to Jaeger, sees a further sophistication of the notion of aristocratic excellence: “The *Odyssey* constantly exalts intellectual ability, especially in its hero, whose courage is usually ranked lower than his cleverness and cunning.” This epic, being an account of the heroes’ return and a description of his life in peace, portrays the aristocracy in a more contemplative manner within a milieu of polite speech and civil behavior.

But while Jaeger carefully traces the development of the idea of *arête*, from its “oldest” identification with courage, then prudence and justice, and finally wisdom, in the hands of Tyrtaeus, Solon, Archilochus, Sappho, Aeschylus, Xenophanes, Plato, and others, he never loses sight of “the vital significance of early aristocratic morality for the shaping of the Greek character...” In his view, “the Greek conception of man and his *arête* developed along an unbroken line throughout Greek history.” This ideal, which first found mythological expression in the *Iliad*, “was transformed and enriched in succeeding centuries,” and yet “it retained the shape which it had taken in the moral code of the [early] nobility.” “In many details, the ethical doctrines of Plato and Aristotle were founded on the aristocratic morality of early Greece.”

The point is not that the aristocracy, as a social class, held dominion through the course of ancient Greece. To be sure, it

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63 Jaeger, 8, 26.
64 *ibid*. 6, 22.
65 *ibid*. 3-56.
is noteworthy that the poets, philosophers, scientists, and the democratic leaders themselves, were virtually all aristocratic in origin. The emergence of citizens did not negate the fact that it was the aristocratic elite that cultivated the "miracle" of ancient Greece.\footnote{Robin Lane Fox, 
*The Classical World. An Epic History of Greece and Rome* (Penguin Books 2006). I would be careful with Hanson's claim (1999: xviii) that classical Greece was "the only Mediterranean culture with a clearly anti-aristocratic tradition." I would say that it was due to its aristocratic individualism that classical Greece took an interest in the merits of non-aristocrats and thus the possibility of extending the opportunities for individual expression and achievement.}

But Jaeger’s point is quite different. He thinks that the "class limitations" of the old ideals of *arête* as a trait peculiar to the aristocracy "were removed when they were sublimated and universalized by philosophy."\footnote{Jaeger, 11.} In the ideal of warlike valor (as the highest standard of human character, for which the young should be trained) there was implied the humanistic principle that humans qua humans could be *ennobled* through the perfection of their entire personality. It is worth quoting Jaeger at some length on this critical point:

The democratic culture of Periclean Athens was the final product of a long and gradual transformation and extension of the early aristocratic tradition...The metamorphosis of the old aristocratic form of life into Periclean democracy cannot be understood merely in terms of the extension of political rights to the mass of the people. As Greek culture grew from its original and more exclusive form into something more universal and humane, it followed at the same time its own inherent tendency. For the very form of this culture implied, from the beginning, a powerful element of universality.
and rationality which enabled and predestined it to develop beyond class limitations into the culture of the entire Greek nation and finally into a world-civilization... The humanistic idea underlying this transformation was the assumption that, if culture be conceived as a ‘privilege’ due to ‘noble birth,’ there can be no higher claim to such a privilege than that inherent in the nature of man as a rational being. Thus instead of vulgarizing that which was noble, the cultural development of Greece ennobled the whole human race by offering it a programme for a higher form of life, the life of reason.

The underlying (yet to be “civilized”) basis of Greek civic and cultural life was the aristocratic ethos of individualism and competitive conflict that pervaded Indo-European culture. Ionian literature was far from the world of berserkers but it was nonetheless just as intensively competitive. New works of drama, philosophy, and music were expounded in the first-person form as an adversarial or athletic contest in the pursuit of truth.

While Thales, Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Leucippus, and Democritus each had a common interest in the hidden causes of things, each came up with their own radically new explanations. There were no Possessors of the Way in aristocratic Greece; no Chinese Sages decorously deferential to their superiors and expecting appropriate deference from their inferiors. The search for the truth was a free-for-all, each philosopher competing for intellectual prestige, in a polemical tone that sought to discredit the theories of others and to promote one’s own.

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68 ibid. 417.

69 Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word. Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (Yale University Press,
Homer may have remained the main schoolbook of the Greeks but there were always challengers. Early in the seventh century, Archilochus, for instance, broke with the dominance of the hexameter in Homer and Hesiod, and also with the stringent demands of heroic honor, admitting (in a still very warlike culture) that he had thrown away his shield in a flight—"I can get another just as good." Simonides soon followed with a new hedonistic poetry that vindicated the individual's right to sensual happiness, lamented the shortness of human life, and consequently challenged the ideal of a short heroic life.  

This desire to achieve individual renown was ingrained in the whole cultural and social outlook of classical Greece: in the Olympic Games, in the perpetual warring of the city-states, in

2002). Lloyd makes this argument in this co-authored book; his focus is on Greece, while Sivin's is on China. Lloyd does not connect this competitive spirit to the aristocratic character of ancient Greece but argues that it was somehow generated out of the argumentative atmosphere of the democratic assemblies.

ibid. 114-135. Walter Donlan questions Jaeger's thesis that "all later culture...still bears the imprint of its aristocratic origins," arguing that "the Parthenon was the product of Athenian democracy's proudest hour, and that Tragedy was born from the worship of Dionysus the farmers' god." But Donlan seems unsure, as he also acknowledges that "a premise of this study is that non-aristocrats did not so much...reject this set of [aristocratic] attitudes; rather, that as this ideal became more and more self-consciously the 'property' of aristocratic groups, non-aristocrats formulated other values, more compatible with their own social reality."

My argument, however, is that both refined aristocratic values and new democratic ideas carried the imprint of their past origins in "barbarian" aristocratic liberty. The aristocratic values of the early Greeks were central to the rise of democratic values themselves. See Donlan, The Aristocratic Ideal in Ancient Greece (Coronado Press, 1980: xi, 183).
the pursuit of a political career and in the competition among orators for the respect and admiration of the polis, in the Athenian theatre festivals where huge numbers of poets would take part in Dionysian competitions amid high civic splendor and religious ritual.  

G.E.R Lloyd describes this agonistic atmosphere well:

Far more that their counterparts in most other ancient civilizations, Greek doctors, philosophers, sophists, even mathematicians, were alike faced with an openly competitive situation of great intensity. While the modalities of their rivalries varied, in each the premium, to a greater or less degree, was on skills of self-justification and self-advertisement, and this had far-reaching consequences for the way they practiced their investigations as well as on how they presented their results.

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71 When Herodotus travelled around Egypt in the fifth century "he was astonished to find no organized games; [but] open competition in games is incompatible with such rigidly stratified societies as those of the ancient Near East, with their Pharaohs and other absolute monarchies at the apex, divinely sanctioned and sometimes gods themselves;" in Keegan, A History of Warfare, 247.

72 As cited in Barry Sandywell, "The Agonistic Ethic and the Spirit of Inquiry: On the Greek Origins of Theorizing," in Martin Kusch, Ed. The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge (Kluwer Publishers, 2000). Sandywell is on the right track in searching for the origins of dialogical theorizing in the agonal culture of Homeric and pre-Homeric "tribal" and "aristocratic" times. But he has no explanation for this agonal culture other than stating that it came out of a tribal past (which he does not distinguish from other tribal cultures) and a commercialized setting (which he does not distinguish from other commercial cultures). Sandy wishes to deconstruct (Derrida style) the origins of Greek "discourse" (Foucault style) by revealing its dark ground in a culture that celebrated war and maleness; but he
This agonistic temperament actually found a method-logical expression in the Sophistic-Socratic ethos of dialogic argument—in the pursuit of knowledge by comparing and criticizing individual speeches, evaluating contradictory claims, collecting out evidence, cross-questioning and arguing by means of open persuasion and refutation.

To conclude, this paper has argued that the primordial origins of the West should be sought in the irrational heroic spirit of prehistoric Indo-Europeans rather than in the rational spirit of historic Greeks. It is not, as Norman Davies has argued, that older-style textbooks on the West, by focusing on the great ideas have tended to present an "idealized, and hence essentially false," picture which airbrushes the crusades, the slaves, and the World Wars.\(^7\) It is not that we need, in the words of David Gress, a more realistic history in which the development of Western liberty is seen as "the tool and by-product" (or as the "unintended consequence") of rulers does not face up to the paradox this very agonal culture generated a dialogical way of pursuing the truth.

\(^7\) Davies, *A History of Europe*, 1-31. To his credit he appreciates the importance of European cultures for the understanding of the roots of America’s liberal traditions.
seeking power in the “geopolitical conditions” of a Europe divided into multiple competing polities.\footnote{David Gress, \textit{From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents.} (New York: Free Press, 1998).}

It is that the roots of the West are to be found in a profoundly different aristocratic character that first came into the light of history in the Pontic steppes.