

David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

A traditional, but perhaps unfair, saying is that when archaeologists find a new shard or other object they rush to the nearest history book to find out what it means. Such history books tend to take their master narratives from written sources. For example, the master narrative for the ancient Roman republic is based mainly on the historical writings of Livy, Polybius, and Dionysius of Halycarnassus as well as, to a certain extent, Diodorus of Sicily and Plutarch. Likewise, the Hebrew Bible provides the basis for the master narrative of Israelite history. One problem with Eurasian steppe archaeology is there are no written source narratives, and, therefore, history books are often of little help in interpreting archaeological finds. What David Anthony has attempted to do is provide an interpretive framework of the steppe based on his understanding of the relationship between historical linguistics and archaeology in such a way that archaeologists can place the objects they have and find within that framework.

Anthony divides *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* into two parts and seventeen chapters. Part 1, “Language and Archaeology,” contains six chapters and presents the outlines of his interpretive framework. Part 2, “The Opening of the Eurasian Steppes,” contains the other eleven chapters and discusses existing archaeological evidence about the steppe for the neolithic and bronze ages within that framework. An appendix “Author’s Note on Radiocarbon Data” (467–470), a 36-page “Notes” (471–506), and 39 pages of “References” (507–545) round out the book.

In chapter 1, “The Promise and Politics of the Mother Tongue” (3–20), Anthony discusses the historical background to the development of the concepts of Indo-European and

Proto-Indo-European (PIE). He writes: “I believe with many others that the Proto-Indo-European homeland was located in the steppes north of the Black and Caspian Seas in what is today southern Ukraine and Russia” (5). From there, it then spread throughout much of the rest of Eurasia. In chapter 2 “How to Reconstruct a Dead Language” (21–38) he provides a primer in historical linguistics.

In chapter 4 “Language and Time 2: Wool, Wheels and Proto-Indo-European” (59–82), Anthony explains the issue of wagon and wheel terminology, how it is connected with the technology, and how we know there were no wheeled vehicles before 4000 B.C.:

a wheeled vehicle required not just wheels but also an axle to hold the vehicle. The wheel, axle, and vehicle together made a complicated combination of load-bearing moving parts. The earliest wagons were planed and chiseled entirely from wood, and the moving parts had to fit precisely. In a wagon with a fixed axle and revolving wheels (apparently the earliest type), the axle arms (the ends of the axle that passed through the centre of the wheel) had to fit snugly, but not too snugly, in the hole through the nave, or hub. If the fit was too loose, the wheels would wobble as they turned. If it was too tight, there would be excessive drag on the revolving wheel (65).

Such technology may help explain why the wheel played no role among the indigenous people of North and South America,¹ although we know some groups there at least had the concept of the wheel for transportation as represented by children’s toys. One is left wondering, however, what connection, if any, Anthony sees between the vehicle wheel, the grinding wheel, and the pottery wheel.

Anthony discusses Colin Renfrew’s proposal that Pre-Proto-Indo-European (or Indo-Hittite) developed by around 6500 B.C., diffused into Greece, then Europe with farming by 5000

¹ This point has been alluded to before. See, e.g., Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 101.

B.C.² Anthony finds Renfrew's theory to be unlikely in that it requires a very slow evolution of PIE between 6500 B.C. and 3500 B.C. when it adopts wagon and wheel terms. He reasons that "[b]y 3500 BCE, the earliest date for wagons in Europe, the Indo-European language family should have been bushy, multi-branched, and three thousand years old, well past the period of sharing a common vocabulary" (75). Thus, Anthony contends that PIE entered the western end of the Eurasian landmass from the steppe after wagon and wheel terminology had already been incorporated.

In part 2, Anthony discusses in some detail steppe archaeological evidence and how it can be interpreted within his historical-linguistic framework. In a review, Philip L. Kohl criticizes "the linguistic model that guides the archaeological interpretation rather than the reverse." Kohl goes on to argue: "Such a procedure almost necessarily means that the archaeological record is consistently manipulated to fit the linguistic model that it is meant to confirm; the reasoning is circular. What is initially stated as a hypothesis or tentative linguistic identification on one page becomes an established fact a few pages later, bending the archaeological record to fit the model."³ The problem with Kohl's formulation is the notion that the "archaeological interpretation" should guide the "linguistic model." It seems to me that Anthony is not intending the linguistic model to "confirm" the "archaeological record" but to interact with and help to explain it. To be sure, any model bends the evidence to a degree, and when it bends it too much it breaks down and another model replaces it. To what extent Anthony's model bends the evidence remains to be determined, but insofar as it works, it may

² Colin Renfrew, "The Anatolian Origins of Proto-Indo-European and the Autochthony of the Hittites," in *Greater Anatolia and the Indo-Hittite Language Family*, ed. Robert Drews (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Man, 2001), 36–63.

³ Philip L. Kohl, "Perils of Carts before Horses: Linguistic Models and the Undermined Archaeological Record," *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 1 (2009): 109.

help to provide a way of obtaining an interpretive framework for other archaeological areas of study for which there is no master historical narrative, such as the Etruscan, the Oxus, and the Indus Valley (Harappan) civilizations.