



## ARYANS

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**ARYANS.** *Definition of the term “Aryan.”* The name “Aryan” (OInd. *ā́rya-*, Ir. \**arya-* [with short *a-*], in Old Pers. *ariya-*, Av. *airiia-*, etc.) is the self designation of the peoples of Ancient India and Ancient Iran who spoke Aryan languages, in contrast to the “non-Aryan” peoples of those “Aryan” countries (cf. OInd. *an-ā́rya-*, Av. *an-airiia-*, etc.), and lives on in ethnic names like *Alan* (Lat. *Alani*, NPers. *Īrān*, Oss. *Ir* and *Iron*. “Aryan” is thus basically a linguistic concept, denoting the closely related Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages (including Nūrestānī), which together form the Indo-Iranian or Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, sharing a linguistic and cultural development separate from the other IE. tribes. The use of the name “Aryan,” in vogue especially in the 19th century, as a designation of the entire Indo-European language family was based on the erroneous assumption that Sanskrit was the oldest IE. language, and the untenable view (primarily propagated by Adolphe Pictet) that the names of Ireland and the Irishmen were etymologically related to “Aryan.” (For the Iranian attestations of the word, see H. W. Bailey on *Arya* above. For the etymological problems see also H. Siegert, “Zur Geschichte der Begriffe “Arier” und “arisch,” *Wörter und Sachen* 22, N.F. 4, 1941/42, pp. 73-99. M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* I, Heidelberg, 1956, pp. 49, 52, 79; III, Heidelberg, 1976, pp. 623, 633f.)

*The Aryan parent language.* The common ancestor of the historical Aryan or Indo-Iranian languages, called the Aryan parent language or Proto-Aryan, can be reconstructed by the methods of historical comparative linguistics. The Indian group or Indo-Aryan (especially Vedic, the language of the Vedas),



Avestan, and Old Persian show some remarkable correspondences, especially in the religious language (one could translate whole Av. sentences word by word according to the phonetic laws into correct Vedic). By comparison of the (Old) Indo-Aryan with the (Old) Iranian languages a Proto-Aryan language can be reconstructed, which must be counted as the most archaic of all IE. languages.

A number of exclusive innovations separate Indo-Aryan and Iranian from the other IE. language, e.g., (1) the merger of IE. \*a, e, o and \*ā, ē, ō into Indo-Ir. \*a and \*ā respectively (also in the diphthongs), (2) the development of IE. \*ə into Indo-Ir. \*i, (3) the change of IE. \*s after \*i, u, r, k into Indo-Ir. \*š (Ir. \*š, OInd. ś), (4) the gen. plur. ending \*-nām in the vocalic stem classes, etc. In addition there are important correspondences in the vocabulary, especially in the field of religion and mythology, including morphological elements, such as suffixes and stem-formations, and phraseology. (See Chr. Bartholomae, "Vorgeschichte der iranischen Sprachen," in Geiger and Kuhn, *Grundr. Ir. Phil.* I/1, 1895-1901, pp. 1-151. A. Erhart, *Struktura indoíránských jazyků*<sup>w</sup> [The structure of the Indo-Ir. languages], Brno, 1980.)

*The Aryans in prehistoric times: their coming to India and Iran.* The linguistic history and the history of their religion and culture indicate that the Aryans (Indo-Iranians) must originally have formed one single people. Only about the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. did their unity split up, when Indo-Aryans and Iranians went separate ways.

The first appearance of Aryans in history is about the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. in the Hurrian empire of Mittani (in northern Mesopotamia), where Indo-Aryans at that time at least formed the aristocratic dynasty. It seems that individual groups of Indo-Aryans instead of going eastward to India came via Iran to the Fertile Crescent together with the Hurrians, to whom they soon became assimilated as to language and culture. Thus traces of their language have survived only in a few male personal names (royal names like *Artatama*, *Tušratta*, *Šattiwaza*), names of gods, and appellatives containing technical terms of horse-training. These are attested in cuneiform records of the 15th/14th, and perhaps even 13th centuries B.C. from the empire of Mittani and from later Syro-Palestinian states influenced by it politically and/or culturally. (See most recently M. Mayrhofer, "Welches Material aus dem Indo-Arischen von Mitanni verbleibt für eine selektive Darstellung?" *Investigationes philologicae et comparativae. Gedenkschrift für Heinz Kronasser*, Wiesbaden, 1982, pp. 72-90; idem, "The Earliest Linguistic Traces of Aryans outside India



and Iran,” *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 50, 1983, pp. 87-95).

The presence of Indo-Aryans in the Near East by no means proves the theory that the later Indo-Aryans of India migrated through those extremely western countries. Even less probable is the theory held previously by P. Kretschmer and recently by O. N. Trubachov that Indo-Aryan tribes once settled on the Black Sea shore, since their arguments are based upon the unreliable and speculative etymologies of a variety of names.

Also about the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C., the first Indo-Aryans seem to have penetrated into northwest India (the Panjab and adjacent regions) across the passes of the Hindu Kush mountains, from where they spread further after defeating hostile groups of peoples named Dāsa or Dasyu in Vedic texts. There is no evidence, documentary or archeological, of their routes to the Indian subcontinent and their earlier habitat, but we may assume that they came in several waves of immigrants, who spoke slightly different dialects. Thus the earliest groups may still have distinguished between *r* and *l* (from IE. \**r* and \**l*, whereas the dialects of the later groups of Indo-Aryans share with (most of) the Iranians the coalescence of *r* and *l* into *r*).

Most scholars consider Central Asia, i.e., roughly the Eastern Iranian steppes of ancient Sogdiana, Chorasmia, and Bactria and the adjacent area to the north of them (between the lower Volga and Kazakhstan) as the original habitat of the nomadic Proto-Aryans. Two important facts speak for this theory: (1) In contrast to other Iranian territories, there seem to be no reliable traces of a non-Aryan, i.e., a pre-Aryan population in that region, (2) several East-Ir. geographical names attested both in Avestan and Old Persian texts are also found in Old Indo-Aryan sources, e.g., Av. *Harōiuua-*, Old Pers. *Haraiva-* “Areia,” cf. OInd. *Sarāyu-*, name of a river; Av. *Haraxvaitī-*, Old Pers. *Haraுவati-* “Arachosia,” cf. OInd. *Sārasvatī-*, name of a river, etc. Theories concerning still earlier times are based on too scanty evidence and need not detain us here.

The Indo-Aryans seem to have left the Proto-Aryan homeland about 2000 B.C.; according to R. Ghirshman they went in two groups: the first reached Northern Mesopotamia, the other passed between the Karakum Desert and the great Central Desert, the Dašt-e Kavīr, over Koppa Dāg into Northern Afghanistan, and over the Hindu Kush into India.

The immigration of the Iranian tribes into the Iranian plateau and the adjacent areas must be dated considerably later than that of the Indo-Aryans,



according to the common opinion. The scanty historical evidence and archeological remains suggest that it took place through a succession of numerous (groups of) tribes, each tribe speaking its own variety of the Iranian language. The earliest groups contained the “Western” Iranians (Medes and Persians), whose migration is generally placed at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. (11th or even 10th cent.). However, their exact routes are very hard to establish. There are two possibilities: (1) They went north of the Caspian Sea, crossed the Caucasus and the Armenian Highlands and then went southeast; (2) they came directly from the steppes in the north or northeast, crossed the Dašt-e Kavīr, to be brought to a halt only by the Zagros mountains. Last apparently came the “Eastern” Iranians, who in historical times were settled in the region extending from Margiana and Bactria to Arachosia and Balūčestān.

The Medes are for the first time attested in 836 B.C. in an Assyrian inscription of King Salmanasar III (who fought against the *Mataī*). They must have settled in Central Iran, especially in the region around Hamadān, where several archeological sites like Godīn Tepe, Bābā Jān Tepe, Tepe Nūš-e Jān and Tepe Sialk preserve evidence about them. The Persians are first attested some years earlier (843 B.C., which is the date of the first definite evidence for Iranian settlement in Iran proper), under the name *Parsuaš* (Iranian \**Pārsva-*). They apparently have to be located to the south and west of Lake Urmia. For the following two centuries one then finds a succession of reflexes of the name-forms \**Pārsva-* and *Pārsa-*, which is stepped chronologically as well as locally: Under the Assyrian King Tiglathpileser III the *Parsuaš* region is probably to be sought more to the southeast, in the central Zagros, and under Sanherib (691 B.C.) they are allies of the Elamites and to be located near the Baḳtīārī mountains. In 639 B.C. Assurbanipal destroyed the Elamite kingdom and marched against Cyrus I, who, we are told, ruled over both *Parsumaš* and *Anšan* (i.e., Tall-e Malīān, which means that by then the Persians had almost reached their historical home in Fārs.)

Unless we have to reckon with several tribes of the same name, this evidence can be interpreted as reflecting the Persians’ movement from northwest Iran to their final home, thus providing the main argument for a northwestern invasion route. The arguments in favor of a northeastern (or easterly) invasion route, on the other hand, directly from the steppes, with the flat open country of northeast Iran as a natural gateway for nomadic invaders, are (1) similar migrations in later times, (2) the ceramic evidence (e.g., T. Cuyler Young, Jr.;



see bibliography), (3) the linguistic affinities between Old Persian (which is a Southwest-Iranian language in the traditional view) and the Northeast-Iranian Sogdian language. The main objection to this hypothesis is that the archeological evidence would then imply that the Eastern Iranians in Central Asia originally came from the Iranian plateau in the west!

Further theories about these various prehistoric migrations must remain guesswork. They may, e.g., have taken the shape of infiltrations of smaller groups or real mass movements. Several archeological cultures in the Central Asiatic steppes, which have been thoroughly investigated by Soviet archeologists in the last decades (especially the Andronovo culture), may be of Indo-European peoples. However, whether the Andronovo culture or any others are connected with the Proto-Aryans or the Proto-Iranians (or some specific Iranian tribe) can not yet be determined.

*Aryan culture and religion.* The linguistic similarities between the Old Iranian texts, particularly the Zarathushtrian *Gāthās* (the oldest part of the Avesta), and the Old Indian Veda (especially its oldest part, the Rigveda or Ṛgvedasaṃhitā, are quite striking and much closer than those between any other two Old Indo-European languages. These similarities concern not only phonology, morphology, and single words, but also compounds and entire phrases (cf. e.g., Vedic *uttānāhastamānasā* [Rigveda 6.16.46 etc.] = Gathic Av. *nəamṇhāustānazasta-* [Y. 28.1] “with hands outstretched in reverence;” Vedic *hrdā́ mānasā* [Rigveda 1.61.2 etc.] = Gathic Av. *zərədāčā manəṇhāčā* [Y. 31.12] “with heart and mind”). It has rightly been stressed that such correspondences in idiomatic phrases bear testimony to not only linguistic affinity, but also spiritual and cultural community. In particular B. Schlerath has demonstrated how Vedic and Avestan when compared are able to illuminate each other, thus e.g., in his studies on OInd. *kṣatrā-*, Av. *xšaθra-*, Old Pers. *xšaça-* “rule, reign, sovereignty” (*Das Königtum im Rig- und Atharvaveda*, Wiesbaden, 1960, pp. 128-31) and OInd. *ásu-* Av. *ahu-* “life” (“Altindisch *asu-*, awestisch *ahu-* und ähnlich klingende Wörter,” *Pratidānam. Indian, Iranian and Indo-European Studies Presented to F. B. J. Kuiper*. The Hague and Paris, 1968, pp. 142-53, especially pp. 152f.). The common elements of the Vedic and Avestan poetic phraseology inherited from Proto-Aryan are most systematically collected in B. Schlerath, *Awesta-Wörterbuch. Vorarbeiten II: Konkordanz*, Wiesbaden, 1968, pp. 148-64 (to be supplemented by J. Duchesne-Guillemin, “L’étude de l’iranien ancien au vingtième siècle,” *Kratylos* 7, 1962, pp. 1-44, especially pp. 33-36; É. Benveniste, “Phraséologie poétique de l’indo-iranien,” *Mélanges d’indianisme à*



*la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Paris, 1968, pp. 73-79).

Both the Indo-Aryans and the Iranians are rather conservative peoples, which means that a good number of their original common beliefs and customs lived on into historical times, perhaps more in Iran than in India, since the geographical and climatic conditions of the regions inhabited by the Iranians on the whole were more similar to those of the Proto-Aryan habitat. This homogeneity of the two Aryan peoples is seen most clearly in matters of religion, mythology, and cult, and is still reflected in their oldest and most archaic texts, though religious reforms, mainly that of Zarathushtra, have caused more or less important changes. This is the case of Indo-Ir. \**daiva-*, which has preserved its original meaning “god” in OInd. *devá-*, but has become “demon” in Iranian (Av. *daēuua-*, Old Pers. *daiva-*).

To the common, inherited traditions of the Indo-Aryans and Iranians belongs the common political, social, economic, and religious terminology, which is almost exclusive to these languages. Suffice it to mention OInd. *kṣatrá-*, Av. *xšaθra-*, Old Pers. *xšaça-* “rule, reign, sovereignty;” OInd. *sénā-*, Av. *haēnā-*, Old Pers. *hainā-* “(hostile) army;” OInd. *kṣétra-* “landed property, soil,” Av. *šōiθra-* “homestead,” and the characteristic tripartite classification of human society into three groups, as in OInd. *brāhmaṇá-* “priest,” *kṣatriya* “warrior,” and *vaísya-* “clansman;” Gathic Av. *zaotar* “priest,” *nar-* “man, warrior,” and *vāstar-* “pasturer,” but Young Av. *āθrauuān-/aθaurun-* “priest,” *raθaēštā* “warrior,” and *vāstriia-fšuiiant-* “fattening pasturer” (cf. especially Ē. Benveniste, “Traditions indo-iraniennes sur les classes sociales,” *JA* 230, 1938, pp. 529-49).

Since most of the sources available to us are religious texts, their common religious terminology (in the widest sense of the word) is what is best known of the Old Aryan languages. This common heritage is reflected, among other things, in the names of abstract concepts, such as the leading religio-philosophical concept of Indo-Ir. \**ṛta-*, Vedic *ṛtá-*, Av. *ašaÁ-*, Old Pers. *ṛta-* “truth, rightness, divine order based on truth;” or cult terms, such as Vedic *yajñá-*, Av. *yasna-* “sacrifice” (Indo-Ir. \**yažna-*, Vedic *mántra-*, Av. *mąθra-* “priestly utterance” (literally: instrument of thought, i.e., formulated meditation, Indo-Ir. \**mantra-*), or the priestly titles Vedic *hótar-*, Av. *zaotar-* (Indo-Ir. \**zhautar-*) and Vedic *átharvan-*, Av. *āθrauuān-/aθaurun-*. To the Proto-Aryan pantheon there belonged gods of various character, some who symbolized aspects of nature or natural forces (like sun, moon, water, fire, wind, etc.), and some who were personified or deified abstract ideas (like



Vedic *Mitrá-*, Av. *Miθra-*, Indo-Ir. \**Mitra-* “god Treaty,” derived from the Indo-Ir. appulative \**mitra* “pact, treaty”). Cultic gods are, e.g., the Fire (Vedic *Agní-*, but Av. *Ātar-*) and the Indo-Ir. \**Sauma-*, Vedic *Sóma-*, Av. *Haoma-*, originally a plant from which an intoxicating drink was pressed. Both Fire and Soma (etc.) play important parts in the sacrifice and symbolize aspects of the sacrifice itself. Also inherited from Proto-Aryan is the mythological First Man, Yama, son of Vivasvant (Vedic *Yamá-*, son of *Vivásvant-*; Av. *Yima-*, son of *Vīuuaṅ<sup>h</sup>ant-*), who reigns in the realm of the dead. The close relationship between the oldest Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages and literatures finally entails methodological consequences. In fact, Proto-Aryan religious terms and ideas can not be reconstructed by simply projecting only Vedic data into the Proto-Aryan period; they also have to be confronted with the Avestan evidence (cf. most importantly P. Thieme, “The “Aryan” Gods of the Mitanni Treaties,” *JAOS* 80, 1960, pp. 301-17; and T. Burrow, “The Proto-Indoaryans,” *JRAS*, 1973, pp. 123-40).

It can not be doubted that the Aryans possessed a poetic tradition (mainly religious poetry cultivated by the priests themselves) and a poetic language, of which fixed formulas and metrical patterns survived in Vedic and Iranian literature. As a matter of fact, both the Veda and the Avesta themselves contain allusions to earlier hymns and singers, such as references to the pride of a singer to have made a song “as never before,” Vedic *ápūrvyam*, Av. *apaourvīm* “without a previous one, i.e., without precedent.” The evidence indicates that there were songs of praise with shorter, basically octosyllabic verses, beside recitative gnomic poetry with basically hendecasyllabic verses already in Proto-Aryan times. However, to what extent mythological themes and motives (as, e.g., the Yama legend) originate from that period, remains an open question.

See also [Arya](#); [Indo-Iranian Languages](#).

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