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The Actual Achievements of Early Indo-Europeans, in Accurate Historical Context

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Ricardo Duchesne's reply to Martin Hewson's review of his book, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* (2011), focuses on a number of important points concerning the impact of peoples speaking Indo-European languages in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. However, several of Duchesne's key assertions need to be modified to accord with the data.

Duchesne begins by claiming that 'Indo-Europeans' were 'nomads' of the steppes. He explains that "By 'Indo-Europeans' I understand a pastoral people from the Pontic-Caspian steppes" and mentions some of their putative achievements, including "initiating the most mobile way of life in prehistoric times, starting with the riding of horses and the invention of wheeled vehicles in the fourth millennium BC." According to his explanation, by 'Indo-Europeans' he means here 'Proto-Indo-Europeans' (henceforth, 'PIEs').

However, the earliest actual hard evidence for the existence of early Indo-European (henceforth 'IE') speakers anywhere is the early Anatolian (Hittite) onomastic material in Assyrian documents from the 19th century BCE, and (indirectly) the probable Proto-Tokharian-speaking people whose remains dating to the same period have been found in the area of ancient Kroraina (near Lop Nor in Chinese-occupied East Turkistan, now Xinjiang [literally, 'New Territory'] of the People's Republic of China). The next evidence for IE speakers comes from around the middle of the second millennium BCE, with early Greek and Western Old Indic material attested in the area of Greece and throughout the Levant respectively.

Why is this important? The old 'demic' or 'gradual' model of change over millennia, according to which Proto-Indo-European ("PIE") evolved very slowly into the attested IE branch-languages, has been resoundingly rejected in recent scholarship on language contact and change (Garrett 1999, 2006; Beckwith 2007; Beckwith 2009, Appendix A). The gradual theory is unsupported by data on any natural language. It also hardly accords with Duchesne's view of IEs as dynamic, mobile people. We have no evidence that anyone spoke PIE in 4,000 BCE, though of course it is likely that someone

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somewhere spoke an ancestor of the language at that time. However, even when people *did* speak PIE, they were *not* nomadic horseriders. When the PIE speakers began migrating around 2000 BCE (they are first attested shortly after that time), and until some time late in the second millennium BCE, when the late-PIE or post-PIE ancestors of the third group of IE daughter languages began migrating, they did not ride horses. No one rode horses yet.

The PIE speakers were farmers and husbandmen, and they did not live out on the open steppe, which is marginal land unsuited to farming. The very solid evidence for their farming definitively rules out nomadism. The PIE speakers did raise horses, but they raised them for food. The bit-wear evidence argued by Anthony (2007)¹ to attest to such early horse-riding is ambiguous and contested by other scholars in the field; it does not in fact tell us that anyone was riding horses in the fourth millennium BCE. Moreover, Drews (2004) shows that there is absolutely no *historical* evidence for the riding of horses, let alone for anyone fighting from horseback, before the early first millennium BCE. Other scholars, e.g., Di Cosmo (1999), have shown that actual full-blown pastoral nomadism did not appear on the open steppes until the development of horse-riding; these interrelated innovations are very clearly achievements of the Iranian peoples specifically, among whom the Scythians and their relatives are the first historical nomads (attested in Assyrian and Greek sources), followed by the Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu)—who, though ethnolinguistically unidentified, were culturally almost identical to the Scythians.

As for ‘wheeled vehicles’, PIE does have a solidly reconstructed word for ‘wheel; vehicle’ (**kweklo*; one word, cognate to English *wheel*), but the PIEs did *not* invent the wheel or the wagon, they borrowed them from the Ancient Near East. However, the PIEs almost certainly did invent the chariot, and they certainly were the first people to become proficient at using it for war. Nevertheless, because the chariot was an extremely complex, delicate machine not usable for anything but war and hunting (this is explained in great detail in Beckwith 2009, Chapter 1), it did not give the early IEs greater mobility in general. Even the fully nomadic Scythians’ wagons, which they used for transporting goods and on which they lived in tents, were pulled by slow-moving oxen, not horses; this continued to be the case even under the Mongols. (The horse-collar, which made it possible for horses to pull heavy loads, was only invented in the Middle Ages.) So, in short, all of the great Indo-European migrations—to the extent that they were ‘migrations’ to begin with—were carried out on foot.

Further on in the first paragraph, Duchesne argues that “these nomads had ‘Indo-Europeanized’ the Occident, but the IEs who came into Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia were eventually absorbed into the more advanced and populated

¹ This work is not cited in Duchesne’s reply, but it is cited in his book.

civilizations of this region.” This is not correct. Firstly, much of Mesopotamia was ruled off and on by Hittites, Old-Indic-speaking Mitanni or their relatives, and others. Most notably, from about the 8th century BCE the region was ruled by the Iranic-speaking Medes and Persians, whose descendants in large part still are Iranic-speaking, including the Kurds (the dominant people of eastern Anatolia and northern Iraq today), Persians, and various other Iranic-speaking peoples. (Just to make it clear: Iranic is a branch of IE, and thus directly related to English, French, German, etc.) Anatolia as a whole was Indo-Europeanized by the end of the second millennium BCE, and continued to be heavily IE speaking (mainly Greek, Armenian, and Iranic) down into the 20th century, when Turkish finally began to replace the other languages in most of the region.

Secondly, Duchesne says, “In Neolithic Europe, the Indo-Europeans imposed themselves as the dominant cultural group, displacing the native languages.” These and other ideas about ethnolinguistic change in the first paragraph are not supportable on the basis of the evidence or current theory, all of which indicates that largely undifferentiated IE-speaking people moved out of Central Eurasia (in many cases in more than one stage) into neighboring regions, which were already populated by people speaking other languages. The newcomers, who were usually *not* conquerors (they were in some cases mercenaries), mixed with the local people and produced distinctive creole languages and cultures in each area. The outcome of such mixing is not predictable. The pre-Hittite Anatolians mixed with the Hatti and produced the Hittites, who *retained* their IE language—though as usual heavily influenced by the native speakers’ original language and culture. (This is given incorrectly in Duchesne’s fifth paragraph.) By contrast, although the pre-Mitanni speakers of Western Old Indic retained their language long enough that fragments of it survived, they shifted to the local non-IE Hurrian language of their kingdom, while retaining some names and technical terms from Western Old Indic. In both cases, the merger produced a new people containing cultural and linguistic elements from the contributing peoples.

It is widely known that Greek and Germanic, for example, contain a very high percentage of non-IE lexical forms, and the phonology of each branch is highly distinctive within IE. The Greeks and their language were and are creoles, and the same is true of the Germans and other Germanic peoples and their languages. Duchesne’s contrast of the Hittites with the Mycenaean Greeks (in paragraph 5) is problematic. He quotes me on the end of the Hittite kingdom at the hands of the Sea Peoples and says, “This outcome should be contrasted to the linguistic situation in the Greek mainland after the Mycenaean order ended around the same time, which remained Indo-European and would go on to produce the Homeric epics ...” But I do *not* say that the Hittite kingdom was replaced by non-IE peoples. Anatolia remained in

part Anatolian (IE) in language down to the Hellenization of the region later in Antiquity, and remained largely IE speaking down into the 20th century, as noted above. His argument on these points is evidently intended to ‘prove’ the superiority of his ‘Indo-Europeans’—which he makes clear means above all people from Western Europe, or whose ancestors were Western Europeans—over the other people in the world.

Duchesne’s summary of the *comitatus* and its key role in early Central Eurasian culture (in paragraph 4), including that of the early Indo-Europeans, agrees fairly well with my presentation, but it does not clarify that the Central Eurasian Culture Complex was *not* specifically IE at all. It was, rather, specifically Central Eurasian, part of the shared cultural foundation of one Central Eurasian nation after another for millennia, as I have discussed at length (Beckwith 2009, Prologue). In addition to the socio-political-economic factors, there was a religious factor behind the *comitatus*: the oasttakers believed there was a God of Heaven, and that they would go on to another life with their feudal lord after this life.

The wonderful oral epic literature of the ancient Greeks and the medieval Western Europeans Duchesne glowingly remarks on is paralleled by the equally wonderful oral epic literature of the ancient, medieval, and modern Central Eurasians, including the *Kalevala* (Finnish), the *Nart Sagas* (the Iranian Ossetians and non-IE Caucasian peoples), many Turkic epics (*Dede Korkut*, *Alpamış*, *Kör Oğlu*, *Manas*, etc.) from Turkey to China (some of which are still performed today), many Mongolic epics (*Janghar*, *Geser*, etc.), *Gesar* (the main Tibetan epic), and others. This is significant. There is no break in the oral epic tradition in Central Eurasia down to the 20th century, or even the present day, but the ancient epic tradition died out among the Greeks, as it eventually did among other IE peoples who left Central Eurasia, regardless of which direction they went. This is because heroic oral epic poetry was a function of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, which was in turn a function of life in Central Eurasia.

When a people migrated out of that world region into another one (Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, the Arctic), their cultures changed as they adapted to a new physical and human cultural environment. That is what we must conclude based on the data. What then about the medieval oral epic literature in Western Europe? The Romans had ‘Mediterraneanized’ or ‘Hellenized’ much of Western Europe by the time the Western Roman Empire collapsed, but as we know, the peoples on the other side of the frontier had already begun migrating in. With them they brought oral epic poetry and their other retained Central Eurasian traditions, including a feudal hierarchical socio-political structure, of which the *comitatus* was a part. The *Völkerwanderung* period represents the re-Central Eurasianization of ‘Romanized’ Western Europe, but it did not effect a complete conversion of

Western Europe to the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, but rather a partial merger, as we know because it produced the mixed, complex, ‘Roman’–‘Central Eurasian’ culture of the Early Middle Ages.

I pass over Duchesne’s third paragraph, except to mention that any attempt to evaluate “human accomplishments across cultures, by calculating the amount of space allocated to these individuals in reference works, encyclopedias, and dictionaries” (Murray 2003, cited by Duchesne) is doomed from the outset to reflect the cultural biases and linguistic abilities of the people who have written these works and the people who have read and interpreted them. Did Murray read through the many massive literatures of non-European languages, including encyclopedias and other reference works in Chinese, in Japanese, in Tibetan, in Thai, in Burmese, in Pali, in Arabic, etc., from Antiquity to the present, and understand all of it well enough that he could “calculate the amount of space” devoted to individuals mentioned in them and compare them to ‘the space’ devoted to individuals in English, etc. works? I like the idea that Murray has attempted to do a comparison of this sort, but it seems highly unlikely that it would be possible to even attempt it without choosing the same number of sources written by native peoples from all cultures of the world that were literate by 1950 (or whatever cutoff date were chosen), and translated into the same language (known to the author) so that they would cover about the same amount of paper, etc. Without such a study, works such as Murray’s cannot really be taken seriously.

As for the roots of the scientific creativity that Western Europeans did finally get around to doing, it has nothing to do with Duchesne’s supposed “aristocratic warlike culture of the Indo-Europeans.” Western Europeans borrowed science as *a completely developed tradition* from Classical Arabic civilization during the Crusades, though Europeans fully incorporated the originally Central Asian ingredients and thus ended up making science an intrinsic part of their culture (Beckwith 2012). None of this, though, has anything to do with a superior race of conquering steppe-warriors swooping down on Europe from Central Eurasia. There are no examples of *nomadic* IE-speaking *steppe-warriors* ever having conquered any part of Western Europe at any time in the archaeological or historical record. The Scythians and their relatives are the only nomadic IE-speaking steppe-warriors to ever have conquered any part of Europe, and it was the furthest southeasternmost corner of it, far from Western Europe. By contrast, the Huns, the Hungarians, the Mongols, and the Turks, among others, did establish political domination over one or another part of Central or Eastern Europe, and for brief periods even over parts of Western Europe, but none of those peoples were IE-speaking.

In Duchesne’s fourth paragraph, he claims that I say, “if indirectly and without cognizant elaboration, that the Ural-Altai steppe peoples evolved in a direction heavily influenced by the bordering Asian civilizations.” He criticizes

my interpretation of the Islamicized comitatus system, and says “the fact is that the steppe warriors who were transformed into mamluks can no longer be categorized as ‘aristocratic’ ... inasmuch as they were not free men but slaves ... they were not true peers but servants of the Sultan.” I pass over the obsolete idea of ‘Ural-Altai’ peoples, and note that my studies of the Islamic adoption and adaptation of the Central Eurasian comitatus (Beckwith 1984 and 2009) show exactly the opposite of all this. The warriors in fact had to be aristocrats to join a comitatus; they were not ‘slaves’ (in anything remotely like the sense of the modern English word *slave*; this is an overlooked but fundamental problem, as I pointed out in 1984). In feudal hierarchical societies like Frankish Western Europe, the medieval Arab Empire, and premodern Central Eurasia, *no one* was ‘free’ (a Modernist fantasy), and *no one* was the peer of the paramount ruler. Even emperors (e.g., the Islamic caliph, the Türk *qaghan*, the Tibetan *btsanpo*, the Chinese *huang-ti*, etc.) were not the peers of other emperors, as I explained already in 1987 (Beckwith 1987/1993).

The comitatus warriors were in a special relationship to their lord, but they were still part of the feudal socio-political structure of their nation. There has been quite a lot of scholarship on the comitatus of late, but most of it argues against or in favor of Arabocentric/anti-Arab or Islamocentric/anti-Islamic ideas that are contradicted by the data. It is absolutely certain that Central Eurasians, including people speaking Iranian, Turkic, and other languages, most of whom were certainly not ‘steppe warriors’, influenced the Arabs when they (the Arabs) invaded Central Asia, such that the Arabs adopted the comitatus system, at first unchanged, but eventually modified into what is now known as the ‘ghulam’ or ‘mamluk’ system. In any event, this is an example of peripheral (non-Central Eurasian) people invading Central Eurasia and being influenced culturally by the Central Eurasians; the same thing happened when the Arabs conquered Visigothic Spain and adopted the Visigothic version of the comitatus.

In paragraph 6, Duchesne again bestows effusive praise upon the Indo-European “aristocratic culture” and their “barbarian energies,” to which he credits the success of the ancient Greeks and Romans and the medieval Germanic peoples. He says that “Beckwith is aware that it was the Proto-Indo-Europeans, not the Turks or the Mongols, who originated and developed the steppe toolkit, horse riding, wheel vehicles, chariots and, I would add, the ‘secondary-products revolution.’” However, as noted above, the PIEs did not do any of these things, with the probable exception of the invention or perfection of the chariot. Duchesne needs to read my book (Beckwith 2009, especially the Epilogue on the Western construct or fantasy of ‘the barbarian’), much more carefully.

In paragraph 7, Duchesne says I “erroneously [assume] that the development of organized warfare in Greece and Rome, and the rise of the

polis and the Roman senate, signalled the end of the aristocratic mind set.” I nowhere say anything of the kind, and never even thought it, as far as I can recall. This is an example of Duchesne’s failure to read my book carefully and in full. If anything I support Aristotle’s idea of the superiority—in some respects—of an aristocratic (or anyway, hierarchical or ‘feudal’) system over the deception known as ‘democracy’, and thus agree with Duchesne, in part, on this issue. His conclusion to this paragraph—“My view, rather, is that the Indo-Europeans were a highly influential people”—is one that I actually agree with too, as is obvious in my book, and I think many others agree with it as well. The question is just *how* were the Indo-Europeans influential, and when, where, why, and *how much*? It is not helpful to claim that IEs were the smartest and most powerful, therefore they were the smartest and most powerful. One must deal dispassionately with everyone else, too, and Duchesne does not do that.

In paragraph 9, Duchesne claims, “While the arrival of the Indo-Europeans involved symbiosis as well, a far stronger case can be made that they thoroughly colonized Europe as ‘pure nomads’ with their new pastoral package of wheel vehicles, horse-riding, and chariots, combined with their aristocratic-libertarian ethos, which was superimposed on the natives.” This repeats Duchesne’s problematic or erroneous ideas about nomadism, chariots, Indo-Europeans, conquest, and so on discussed above.

In paragraph 10, Duchesne cites Standen (2004), who ‘observes in her study of the Liao peoples bordering north China in the 10th century that they were not interested in permanent administrative control over a piece of territory but looked to China as a raiding opportunity when trade was denied.’ This ‘needy, greedy barbarian’ idea needs to be corrected by reading Beckwith (2009, Epilogue). The rest of Duchesne’s comments in paragraph 10, focusing on the Turks, are misinformed. There is no reason to think that Turks were ever all ‘nomads’, and that the expansion of their influence should therefore reflect the expansion of ‘nomadism’ if they were as powerful a people as the IEs supposedly were. One wonders, in this regard: if the IEs were so powerful and dominant, why did the Turks supplant them linguistically in virtually every location where they migrated?

From paragraph 11 on, Duchesne depends on the 1990 *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, edited by my late teacher, Denis Sinor. There are many good things in that volume, but much of it was written decades before 1990 and represents the old ‘bad barbarians vs. good peripheral peoples’ construct, as repeated by Duchesne in, for example, paragraph 14: “The most significant legacy of the *Pax Mongolica* was the creation of a continuous order across a vast territory ... in addition to the mayhem and terror they brought to China, Persia, Russia, all of which suffered mass exterminations and famine.” Mass exterminations! Famine! Citing such out of date views hardly represents the

state of the art in the field. It is true that this ahistorical, unexamined construct has dominated non-Central Eurasian writers' interpretations of Central Eurasian relations with the periphery for far too long, but it is thoroughly criticized in Beckwith (2009), which proposes a new model based on the actual data.

Duchesne's idea that the non-IE-speaking steppe peoples were somehow weaker, less creative, or otherwise inferior to the IE-speaking steppe peoples is unsupported by any historical data. Perhaps IE-speaking Western Europeans were cleverer copycats than other people, so they were able to recognize useful things and ideas developed by Arabs, Turks, Chinese, and others, and turn them to their own purposes, but then what is the difference between the IE-speaking peoples and everyone else? Duchesne repeats throughout that the IEs maintained their nomadic steppe-warrior aristocratic culture despite their settlement in Europe, whereas the Hsiung-nu, Khitan, Mongols, etc., did not maintain that culture, but were changed by contact with the Chinese. I wonder, then, where can we find any nomadic IEs in Western Europe today, or in the Middle Ages, or in Antiquity? The answer seems to be that there aren't and weren't any. The only 'nomadic' IEs in Western Europe in modern times, as far as I know, are the Romani ('Gypsies'). This idea simply will not stand up to careful historical analysis. In my opinion, IE peoples were often unusually creative, energetic, and successful, but in other cases they seem to have been incredibly uncreative, lethargic, and prone to failure—like all other peoples. Praising selected perceived successes of one or another IE people, while ignoring or denigrating the successes of non-IE peoples, does not "meet scientific standards" (Duchesne's note 1) for the study of history. The basic rule of science is that theories must conform to the data. I know of no historical data that can be interpreted to show that IE-speaking peoples are more intelligent, creative, or dynamic than the many non-IE-speaking peoples who have had their day in the world and accomplished very much. Some of them, such as the Chinese, are charging ahead of the IE-speaking world at this moment.

Finally, I would like to stress that Duchesne makes numerous points that are surely correct and need to be studied further. For example, in his last paragraph, 18, he mentions "that 'the beginnings' of the West were not in the never-explained 'Greek Miracle.'" Yes, and not only. One must explain the centrality of the Persian Empire, the Scythians, and the Kushan Empire, all built and ruled by Iranic speakers. They remain largely ignored and misunderstood (including, I regret to say, in Beckwith 2009), but they were of fundamental importance for so much, including the 'Axial Age' of Karl Jaspers, which was a fully historical event like any other (Beckwith 2012). In other instances, Duchesne makes a worthy point, but it is vitiated by his failure to compare European cultural achievements with non-European cultural

achievements. In footnote 9, he remarks on ‘the ‘intense rivalry’ that characterized the art of the Renaissance, among patrons, collectors, artists, and that culminated in the persons of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian. It motivated Shakespeare to outdo Chaucer, creating more than 120 characters, “the most memorable personalities that have graced the theater—and the psyche—of the West.” No doubt, but what about Chinese classical painting, which boasts many Leonardos and Michaelangelos, and ditto for the art of Classical Chinese lyric poetry? We should not be blinded by European achievements. I do not think it is possible to argue that the masterpieces of the T’ang (Tang) poets and Sung (Song) painters are any less ‘great’ as art than those of the European Renaissance. I remember, when I was an architecture student long ago, being subjected to huge textbooks that contained almost nothing but European-American architecture, most of which consisted of repulsive imitations created in the 19th and early 20th centuries; a tiny number of pages were spent on a tiny number of Oriental masterpieces such as the Taj Mahal in Agra and the Potala in Lhasa, which were presented only in cheap black-and-white; even the Modern grotesqueries of Western ‘art’ were presented in expensive color. Textbooks on painting were equally unrepresentative of the world’s great art works. I already knew a little about Oriental art, and wondered where all the other great works were. They were buried, ultimately, by xenophobic Western writers. Let us not go back to those gloomy days.

Much more could be said on these and other topics touched on by Duchesne, but I have already said a lot of it in my earlier publications, which it would be good for anyone interested in Central Eurasian issues to read first. They are far from perfect—nothing is perfect in this imperfect world—but they contain corrections to some of the more problematic claims in Duchesne’s reply, and they might conceivably help produce a corrective to the empty pendulum swings of academic fashionism.

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