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The Noble Ones

Our study of the Asian Axial Age begins neither in the axial centers nor even in the Axial Age. We start, rather, with a collection of peoples who lived in Central Asia several millennia before the Axial Age got under way. Known today as the Indo-Europeans, these individuals were the ancestors of the axial communities of West and South Asia. Understanding the Indo-Europeans enables us better to grasp the developments that enfolded among their descendants.

The Indo-Europeans

Six thousand years ago, the Indo-Europeans occupied the area of the south Russian steppes, just north of the Black and Caspian Seas. Today, this region roughly corresponds to the land stretching from Ukraine, across a portion of southern Russia, to west Kazakhstan. When the Indo-Europeans occupied this area, it was mostly a barren desert that suffered bitterly cold winters and harsh summers. It was not an easy place in which to live.

Scholars do not know a great deal about the inhabitants of this region during this period, but on one matter, most of them agree: many of the original occupants and their descendants gradually migrated to other parts of the world, including the northern Mediterranean area, northern Europe as far west as Ireland, and southward into Iran and the Indian subcontinent. This hypothesis suggests that many of the past and current residents of these sundry regions derive from a common ancestral stock. The basis of this theory is principally linguistic. The careful analysis of languages as diverse as Icelandic, German, Gaelic, Latin, Greek, Russian, Persian, Sanskrit, Sinhalese, and English has determined that they all evolved from what was once a single language known today as Proto-Indo-European (PIE). Because it fell into disuse before writing was invented, there is no direct evidence attesting to the existence of this original language. But by analyzing the dozens of extant languages that are

believed to have developed from it, linguists have been able to reconstruct much of Proto-Indo-European. This reconstruction, along with some archaeological and archaeogenetic (the study of ancient DNA) evidence, has provided the means to hypothesize the migratory patterns of these Central Asians. While some of the specific details of these patterns continue to be the subject of debate, there is general (but not universal) agreement among scholars about the main features of the migrations.

The Indo-Iranians

Of the many groups that migrated out of Central Asia to other locations, the most important for our study are those who journeyed southward into the areas now occupied by the countries of Iran, Pakistan, and India. To differentiate these migrants from other Indo-European peoples, scholars often refer to them as the Indo-Iranians, but they called themselves the Aryans, a name that derives from *ariya*, which translates into English as "noble." Thus, they knew themselves as the "Noble Ones."

This group remained unified until about four thousand years ago, when it slowly split and moved in separate directions. Some of the Aryans settled in present-day Iran, and others traveled farther into Afghanistan and then the Indus Valley, gradually spreading across the northern Indian subcontinent. As the Aryans divided, their languages evolved away from one another, but they were still similar enough that communication was possible for some time. The Iranian tribes spoke a dialect we call Avestan, because it now exists only in a collection of sacred writings known as the Avesta. The group who migrated to India spoke a form of the language now known as Sanskrit.

When each group arrived at its final destination, each called its new territory the "Land of the Noble." The Indo-Aryans knew their new home not as "India" but as *Āryāvarta*, and the Irano-Aryans called theirs *airyana waējah*, an expression that later evolved into "Iran."

Society and Economy

Almost all we know of the Aryans comes from two sources: the Rig Veda, the oldest extant Indo-European text, taken to India in oral tradition, and the Avesta, a slightly later text from Iran, also preserved orally for much of its history. Because they were composed before the final division of the Aryans, the Rig Veda and the Avesta tell us a good bit about Indo-Iranian life. These texts make clear that the Noble Ones were nomadic and seminomadic shepherds and cattle herders who wandered in relatively small areas, seeking pastureland for

their animals. Since the Central Asian steppes were arid and barren, the Indo-Iranians were not great agriculturalists. The principal source of their food was the domesticated animals they kept and the wild game they hunted.

Their society was divided into two classes: the priests and the laity. Members of the lay class were called the "producers" because their occupations involved meeting the community's material needs. The Aryans arranged themselves loosely into tribes, with little to no formal governing structures. Early Indo-Iranian society appears to have been relatively peaceful and probably quite static, as it seems to have existed for centuries with few significant cultural changes.

The Religion of the Indo-Iranians

The religious life of the early Indo-Iranians, inasmuch as it can be reconstructed from our limited resources, suggests a rather commonsensical worldview for people living in the harsh environment of Central Asia. Like all ancient groups, the Indo-Iranians had their gods, their beliefs about the nature of the world, and their rituals that helped them understand and influence those gods and that world.

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The Gods

The gods were of various sorts, each related to a different aspect of everyday life. Especially important to the ordinary people were the deities who controlled the natural world. These gods included the Sky and the Earth (Asman and Zam), the Sun and the Moon (Hvar and Mah), and the Winds (Vata and Vayu). Although not considered gods as such, trees also were venerated, especially those growing beside rivers or streams, probably because the bark or fruit was thought to have healing properties. In India today, certain trees growing by rivers are seen as highly auspicious and often mark the sacred site of a temple or shrine.

At one time, the Indo-Iranians worshiped an overarching sky god. This king of the gods was known in the Iranian dialect as Dyaoš and in the Indian dialect he was called Dyaus-Pitr. These names are cognates of the Greek and

Roman terms for their chief god: Zeus (Dyaoš/ Dyaus) and Jupiter (Pitr). Over time, this Aryan sky god became so remote and distant from everyday life that he simply became irrelevant, and the Aryans effectively forgot about him.

In addition to the gods of nature, there were gods associated with ritual practices. Particularly important were the Fire, the Water, and Geush Urvan, or the "Soul of the Bull." Geush Urvan was the spiritual energy of a primordial bovine that had once lived on earth but had died and ascended to the heavens, where its powers continued to replenish the animal realm. The Aryans also deified a vision-inducing substance called Haoma in the Avestan dialect and Soma in the Sanskrit. Because of their importance in religious ceremonies, these divinities were especially significant to the priests.

Another category of divine beings were the *ahuras*, in Avestan, or *asuras*, in Sanskrit (names that simply mean "lords"). In this class, three gods were of greatest significance. The first two—Varuna and his assistant, Mitra—were associated with oaths and promise keeping. These gods were invoked to ensure that covenants among individuals and communities were fulfilled. The third and greatest was Mazda, the lord of wisdom.[1] As the Iranian tradition evolved, Ahura Mazda became the most important god of all, and perhaps for some, the *only* god; interestingly, he played no role at all in the development of the Indian traditions.

Finally, there were numerous lesser divinities known as *daevas* in Avestan and *devas* in Sanskrit. These words are ordinarily translated as "gods," but a more literal rendering would be "shiny ones." These Avestan and Sanskrit words have obvious cognates in other Indo-European languages. *Deus* in Latin, *divine* in English, and *diva* in Italian are just three examples. The shiny ones initially represented such qualities as courage, friendship, justice, obedience, and "glory," a charismatic characteristic that dwelled in gods and heroes. In the later Indo-Aryan tradition, *deva* and its feminine form *devi* became terms for the most important class of divinities, although, as we shall see, that was not the case in Irano-Aryan religion.

Morality and Order

In addition to this complex world of spirits and gods, the Indo-Iranians believed in an abstract, impersonal principle of order. The Sanskrit speakers called it

1. The name of the Iranian god is spelled just like the automobile Mazda. According to the manufacturer, the car was so named for three reasons: first, to honor the god Mazda; second, because Mazda means "wisdom" in Persian; and third, because the family name of the Japanese manufacturer is Matsuda, which sounds a lot like Mazda when anglicized.

rita, and those who spoke Avestan referred to it as *asha*. Both words designate a natural law that maintains cosmic order, keeping the astral bodies on their paths and the seasons turning in proper sequence. *Rita* or *asha* had moral as well cosmological dimensions, and in this sense, it was a principle for appropriate human and divine behavior; the deities, like humans, were also subject to it. Adherence to this moral law promoted harmony and well-being for the individual and for society.

The principle of order was opposed, however, by another power that promoted disharmony and chaos. The Iranians, for whom this element of disorder became very prominent in later theology, called it *druj*; the Sanskrit speakers called it *druh*. Because these two principles were diametrically opposed to one another in a constant struggle for dominance, the Indo-Iranians considered it necessary to help maintain and strengthen the orderly element. Proper observance of the religious rites, they believed, enhanced the power of order and promoted harmony in the world.

Cosmogony: How the World Came to Be

To understand ritual in any preaxial culture, one must have a grasp of its beliefs about the origins of the world. Creation stories, or cosmogonies, provided prototypes or templates for ritual practices. The performers of religious rites often understood themselves as reenacting the original divine work of creation and thereby renewing creation and giving it a fresh beginning.[2]

This point can be well illustrated by considering an account of the world's creation from the Avesta and then studying its relationship to ritual practices. The Avestan version says the earth was created in seven stages, not unlike the seven-day scheme of the book of Genesis, which was written centuries later. The driving force behind creation in the Avestan story is not always clear, although sometimes it appears to be the Ahura Mazda, the Iranian lord of wisdom.

In the first stage, the sky came into being. The sky was conceived as something like a gigantic inverted bowl made of beautiful stone. Rather than believing that the sky was our perception of infinite space, as we moderns might think, it seemed obvious to the ancients that the firmament was a finite, solid structure.[3] During the second stage, water was created, covering the bottom

2. For an analysis of the connection between cosmogony and ritual, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987).

3. I remember thinking as a child the same thing as I pondered the nature of the sky. When the first manned rockets were sent into space, I recall being deeply worried about the possibility of spacecraft literally shattering the sky and breaking it into pieces.

of the sky shell. Imagine an upside down bowl floating on the surface of the water in a sink. Next, in the third stage, solid earth came into being, floating on the surface of the water like a flat plate beneath the inverted bowl. Life was added to the physical world during the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages, with the successive emergence of one plant, then one animal (a bull), and finally, a man, named Yima. The seventh stage brought fire, an element that came to pervade the entire world, residing in seen and unseen places.

In the final act of creation, the gods assembled to perform the first ritual, a sacrifice. By crushing and dismembering the primordial plant, the bull, and the man, the gods created new lives, and the vegetable, animal, and human realms were populated and the world set in motion, following the course of *asha*. Death soon appeared, as did reproduction and new life, and the world was on its way.

Ritual

In their own ceremonies, the Indo-Iranians reenacted the primordial sacrifices of the gods to maintain the cosmic and moral order and to ensure that new life properly replaced the old.

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Among the simplest of their rituals were offerings of libations to the gods of Water and Fire, performed in the home by ordinary folk. In the arid and cold steppes, the importance of—indeed, the very sacredness of—these two elements is readily evident. To the Water was given an offering of milk and two plant leaves to represent the animal and vegetable realms. These libations returned to the divine powers the vital elements they required to continue productivity and harmony. Fire was of great importance not only for winter warmth but also for cooking meat, the staple of the Indo-Iranian diet. Because starting a new fire was difficult, fires were kept continually burning in fireplaces and terra-cotta pots. Like the libations to Water, the offerings to Fire were from the two kingdoms: incense and wood from plants and animal fat from cooked meat. The melting fat caused the flames to blaze, visibly fortifying the fire.

For more complex rituals, a sacred space had to be created, and professional priests were required to conduct them. Because of their nomadic life, the ritual precinct was temporary, and portable implements were used. Sacred space was marked by lines drawn on the ground as prayers were uttered to keep out evil spirits. Fires burned in sacred vessels and pits dug in the earth.

The most sacred of all ceremonies were the fire rituals, and they often involved blood sacrifice, usually goats, sheep, or cattle. The Avestan word for sacrifice was *yasna*, almost identical to the Sanskrit *yajna*. The Indo-Iranians were awed by the act of taking life and did so reverentially. Animal sacrifices had to be performed with special prayers to enable the animal's spirit or life force to continue on. This ritual practice suggests a strong affinity between humans and animals. One of the Avestan texts says, "We reverence our [own] souls, and those of the domestic animals which nourish us . . . and the souls of useful wild animals."[4] The spirits of sacrificed animals were believed to become part of Geush Urvan, the "Soul of the Bull," the life energy of the animal world. Since blood sustained this deity, the Indo-Iranians understood themselves as helping the god to care for the animals on earth and thus guarantee their abundance. Consecrated meat was also offered to the other gods and then eaten by the participants of the sacrifice. Because of their respect for animal life, the Indo-Iranians ate only sanctified meat from their domesticated animals. Even before killing a wild animal for food, hunters said prayers to ensure the animal spirit's safe return to the Soul of the Bull.

These sacred rites also utilized *soma*, as it was called in Sanskrit, or *haoma* to use the Avestan term. This substance, like fire and water, was regarded as a god and resided in a special species of plant whose identity is unknown to us today. According to the ancient texts, the liquid essence of this plant was pressed out and mixed as a golden drink resembling honey. *Soma* had properties that allowed those who imbibed it to feel ecstatic, literally out of their ordinary world, and transported to the realm of the gods. This passage from the Rig Veda captures a sense of the experience of consuming this sacred libation:

I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it . . . [ambrosia].

When you penetrate inside, you will know no limits, and you will avert the wrath of the gods.

. . . . . .

We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. What can hatred and the malice of a mortal do to us now, O immortal one?

4. Yasna 39.1-2 quoted in Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 5.

. . . . . .

The glorious drops that I have drunk set me free in wide space . . . . Let the drops protect me from the foot that stumbles and keep lameness away from me.

Inflame me like a fire kindled by friction; make us see far; make us richer, better. I am intoxicated with you, Soma, I think myself rich. Draw near and make us thrive.

. . . . . .

> Weakness and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness have fled in terror. Soma has climbed in us, expanding. We have come to the place where they stretch out life-spans.[5]

By ingesting *soma*, the Indo-Iranians achieved what they considered the apex of existence: a sense of immortality, freedom from suffering and fear, communion with gods and the spirit world, and intense pleasure. Little wonder that *soma* was so highly prized and zealously protected. Its chief downside, however, was that it provided only temporary ecstasy. Eventually, the effects would wear off, and ordinary life would reassert itself. But the experience of divine communion was important in confirming the existence of the gods and expanding the mind to consider the deepest possibilities of human life. *Soma* allowed the Indo-Iranians to imagine a life free from suffering and fear. In the centuries to come, the heirs of these traditions would seek similar experiences through the techniques of introspection and ascetic practice, rather than botanical substances.

The religious practices reveal the fundamental elements of Indo-Iranians, features that pervade the worldview of preaxial Aryans. The central purpose of religion was to collaborate in the processes and functions of life. These forces were often personified as gods and goddesses or as abstract, impersonal principles. Human beings had to do their part to keep both the natural world and the social world in good working order, and it was clear they felt a close kinship with other aspects of the natural and divine worlds. Aryan religion at this time supported a culture that was generally static and relatively peaceful. Innovation was often viewed with suspicion and frequently regarded as sacrilegious because it represented a departure from the primordial acts of the gods.

5. *The Rig Veda,* 8.48, trans. Wendy Doniger (New York: Penguin, 2005), 134–35.

The Raiders

Despite the conservative forces in Indo-Iranian society, the way of life for these people eventually changed. As they drifted southward from the Central Asian steppes, the Indo-Iranians acquired the knowledge to domesticate the horse and to build and use war chariots. They also learned how to make bronze and availed themselves of the rich ore deposits of the area to fashion weapons. The coming of the chariot and the implements of war completely disrupted the once-stable culture. A new form of livelihood now emerged to supplement the passive tending of sheep and cows, and that was *stealing* sheep and cows. Many of the later Indo-Iranians became cattle rustlers. Raiding and pillaging became a new way of life, initiating a restless, heroic age, not unlike the cultures of the old Norsemen and pre-Islamic Arabia. A career in raiding brought a fundamental new purpose to those who partook of this way of life: gaining wealth and glory. Cattle and sheep had long been the measure of prosperity among the Indo-Iranians. Besides providing meat and milk, these animals were the sources of leather for clothing and tents, bones for tools, dung for fire, and even urine for the consecration of sacred utensils.

But raiding not only altered the economy of the Indo-Iranians, it also disrupted moral concerns and respect for the rule of law. These pillaging cattle rustlers showed little regard for the weak and defenseless; whole villages might be wiped out in an afternoon just to enhance another clan's livestock holdings. Might rather than right ruled the day. A third class of individuals arose alongside the priests and producers: the warlords and professional warriors. This new class soon became identified with their love for rough living, hard drinking, and gambling, in many ways similar to the Hollywood versions of the old American West, with its outlaws, gunslingers, and saloons. There was excitement and a thrill to living on the edge and outside the restraints of conventional society.

Certainly not all Indo-Iranians adopted the lifestyle of cattle rustling and village pillaging, just as not all denizens of the Old West were cowboys and outlaws. A new kind of nomenclature entered the Aryan lexicon to distinguish between the two kinds of people. The *ashavans* followed the way of order, the path of stability, but the wicked ones (at least so called by the *ashavans*) were the *drujvants*, the devotees of the principle of disorder. And like the guys with white and black hats, the *ashavans* and *drujvants* could be imaged differently. The followers of *asha* were believed to have been given a heavenly blessing (*khvarna*), which suggested divine approval. In images, the blessing was represented as golden flames surrounding the head. Similar motifs seen in later

images of the Buddha, Christian saints, and Muhammad may have derived from this Iranian influence.

The Religious Transformation

Although not all Indo-Iranians were cattle rustlers and outlaws, the raiding and looting life had ramifications for those who wanted nothing to do with it. These effects were even felt in Indo-Iranian religious life. New gods more acceptable to the emerging warrior caste began to appear and even dominate some forms of religion. Many turned to worship Indra, the brave new deity of the heroic age. In fact, by the time the Aryans reached India, Indra was the ascendant divine being. Over one-quarter of the thousand hymns of praise in the Rig Veda are addressed to him alone.

Indra was a macho god, to be sure. He was valiant in combat, reckless to the point of being foolhardy, nearly amoral, but loyal to those who revered him and made offerings to him. In return, he was a giver of many gifts to his followers. And he loved *haoma*, the intoxicating drink that fueled his passion and reckless spirit. Earlier, we observed how *soma* was imbibed to allow the Indo-Iranians to commune with the gods, to feel themselves immortal, to imagine a new life free of distress, and to inspire poetry. In the heroic age of raiding, *haoma* seems to have acquired another dimension. Perhaps it had been there all the along, but certainly in these latter days, its potential to produce a frenzy conducive to war and lawlessness was fully exploited:

> This, yes this is my thought: I will win [i.e., steal!] a cow and a horse. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> Like impetuous winds, the drinks have lifted me up. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> The drinks have lifted me up, like swift horses bolting with a chariot. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The five tribes are no more to me than a mote in the eye. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> In my vastness, I surpassed the sky and this vast earth. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> Yes! I will place the earth here, or perhaps there. Have I not drunk Soma?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I am huge, huge! flying to the cloud. Have I not drunk Soma?

I am going to a well-stocked house, carrying oblations to the gods. Have I not drunk Soma?[6]

Where *soma* enabled the priests to see visions of the gods and poets to utter great, beautiful words, the warriors now felt themselves invincible, powerful, beyond the confines of worldly limits.

In contrast to Indra, worship of many other gods began to decline. For many, Varuna, the venerable *ahura*, seemed a little too tame, sitting up in his palace in heaven, keeping order in the world. For a nomadic people equipped with the horse and chariot, the more adventurous life of the daring Indra was more appealing—or at least that is what the texts suggest by the sheer volume of songs written to the various gods. In time, Varuna and Indra would come to be seen as virtually diametrically opposite gods.

Division

Over time, the Indo-Iranian family began to divide and settle in different lands, where the once-shared religious practices and beliefs underwent significant transformations that ultimately produced the traditions that would much later be known as Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. The split was gradual, of course, and the religious developments were incremental. The actual divergence between the branches may have begun in the third millennium bce, but it was definitely under way by the mid-second millennium. Dates—especially for nomadic peoples—are notoriously difficult to establish with precision, because nomads leave very few archaeological artifacts.

We turn first to West Asia, particularly the land of Iran, and then later trace the movement of the Indo-Aryans into South Asia. We start with an Iranian prophet named Zoroaster, who is not exactly a full-blown axial sage but an individual whose life and thought seem to prefigure much of what is to come in the more prominent axial centers. Zoroaster, or Zarathustra,[7] is one of the least known founding figures in the history of the world's religions. Perhaps best regarded as a transitional figure, he represents an interesting mixture of preaxial and axial religious elements.

6. *The Rig Veda*, 10.119, trans. Doniger, 131–32.

7. The name Zoroaster is a Greek transliteration of Zarathustra.