Avestan
Introduction – Part 1: Historical, geographical and cultural background
Roadmap

- Avestan within the Indo-Iranian languages
- Significance of the domesticated horse and spoked-wheel chariot technology
- Sredny Stog culture (Proto-Indo-European)
- The expansive Yamna culture (Late Proto-Indo-European)
- Andronovo culture (Indo-Iranian)
- Sintashta
- The Bactria-Mariana Archaeological Complex and its the expansion
- Yaz culture of Transoxiana
What is Avestan?

- Language of the Avesta
- Avesta: a body of texts to be recited in Zoroastrian rituals
- Gathas: ca. 1500 BCE
Old Iranian

- Avestan
- Old Persian. Earliest attestation: 520 BCE

- Shared innovations, e.g. Ilr. *s to Prl. *h:

  Av. haōma-, OP hauma- < Proto-Iranian *haṷma- < Indo-Iranian *saṷma-
Simplified stemma of Indo-European Languages

Indo-European

Celtic  Italic  Germanic  Balto-Slavic  Indo-Iranian  Anatolian  Greek  Armenian  Tocharian etc.

(= Aryan)

Proto-Iranian

West-Iranian  East-Iranian

Old Persian  Avestan  Vedic Vernaculars

Middle Persian  Sogdian  Khotanese etc.

New Persian  Yaghnobi etc.

Proto-Indo-Aryan

Vedic and Classical Sanskrit

Middle Indo-Aryan Prākrits (Pāli etc.)

Modern Indo-Aryan languages (Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi etc.)
Proto-Indo-Iranian (= Proto-Aryan)

- Reconstruction of ritual terms and concepts:
  - Av. ārmaiti- ‘right-mindedness’, Ved. arámati- < Ilr. *ara-mati-
Distribution of Indo-European Languages

Map from J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* 1989, p.23, © Thames and Hudson
Indo-European Homeland in the Sredny Stog culture

ca. 4500 – 3500 BCE

Map prepared by Louis Henwood
Wild horses in the Pontic-Caspian Steppes
The Dereivka site

dereivka site

EURASIAN STEPPE

Dereivka site

Botai site

Black Sea

Caspian Sea

c. 3800 – 3500 BCE

Avestan – Introduction, Part 1
Horse-drawn chariots

Geographical distribution of the Indo-European wheel and wagon terminology
Horse-drawn chariots

Gold model of a four-horse chariot from the Oxus Treasure, 5-4th cent. BCE, British Museum

© British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
Horse-drawn chariots

Cylinder seal showing Darius hunting a lion Achaemenid, British Museum

© British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
Pontic-Caspian cultures associated with Proto-Indo-Europeans and Indo-Iranians
Indo-Iranians and the Sintashta culture
The Sintashta culture

Burial from Sintashta with cart and horses
The Sintashta culture

Sintashta Mogila Grave 30: Burial of a charioteer with two horses, two ten-spoke chariot wheels, weapons (after Anthony 2009: 56, fig 4.4)
The Sintashta culture

Sintashta Grave 28: Imprint of the spoked wheel of a chariot
Approximate historical map of the spread of the chariot, 2000 –500 BCE.
Horse-drawn chariots

- A spoked wheel on display at The National Museum of Iran, Tehran

- Late 2nd millennium BCE, found at the Elamite site of Choqa Zanbil near Susa, Khuzestan (Iran)
Burial pits constructed like houses

- Creep upon this mother earth, the broad earth of wide expanse, who is very kindly. The young girl, soft as wool for the one who gives priestly gifts — let her protect you from the lap of Dissolution.
- Arch up, Earth; do not press down. Become easy to approach for him, easy to curl up in. Like a mother her son with her hem, cover him, Earth.
- Let the earth stay arching up. For let a thousand (house)posts be fixed in (her). Let the house be dripping with ghee. Let it always be sheltering to him there.
- I prop up the earth from you. Setting down this earth clod here, let me not be harmed. Let the forefathers uphold this pillar for you. There let Yama fix your seats.

Rigveda 10.18.10—13, translation by Jamison & Brereton 2014
The Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex
Ancient contacts

Andronovo tribes overlapping with the BMAC culture and interacting with the Indus civilisation
Substrate words in Ilr. languages

- ‘Brick’: Vedic īṣṭakā, Av. iṣṭiia-, OP išṭi, from a Central Asian word *išt
- ‘Camel’: Ved. úṣṭra- Av. uṣtra-
BMAC expansion

Expansion of BMAC material southwards

Picture credit: Fredrik T. Hiebert
Middle Bronze Age migrations

c. 2100–1600 BCE
Hydronomy in the Ilr. borderlands

- Av. haraxʰaitī- Ved. sárasvatī-
- Av. harōiuua- OP haraiva-, Ved. sarayú- < *saraɪu-a-
Cultures associated with Indo-Iranian migrations
Late Bronze Age migrations

Yaz culture and Iranian Migrations, ca. 1600–1200 BCE
Burial practices

Copper seal with excarnation scenes. Bronze Age, Bactria (Sarianidi 2006, p. 65 Fig.11).