

Identity of Aryan Culture

Texts for Traits of Aryan Culture

The principal traits of Aryan culture are set out by Vedic, Iranian, and Greek literary texts and cognate terms found in the proto-Indo-European languages. The texts that help us to reconstruct the material and other aspects of Aryan culture comprise the *Rig Veda*, the *Zend-Avesta*, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Specialists may differ on the criteria for dating these texts, but we may go by the generally accepted dates. The *Rig Veda* is assigned to roughly 1500 BC, although the later additions might be as late as 1000 BC. The earliest parts of the *Zend-Avesta* are roughly attributed to 1400 BC, and Homer's works are assigned to 900–800 BC. Though these texts belong to different areas, they suggest the period when copper and bronze were in use. The later portions of Homer also mention iron. Generally, the texts represent agriculture and pastoralism as the principal sources of livelihood. The people lived in temperate climate. They domesticated horses which were used for riding and for driving carts. They used spoked wheels, and fought with bows and arrows which were placed in quivers. They lived in a male-dominated society. They buried the dead body, but also practised cremation. The cults of fire and soma prevailed among the speakers of the Indo-European languages in Iran and the Indian subcontinent. However, animal sacrifice, including horse sacrifice, seems to have been practised by all the Indo-European communities.

The cultural contents of the texts date roughly to the late Neolithic and early Bronze ages. The contents seem to cover Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which are geographically linked to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, and Greece. Since ancient times various communities in a major

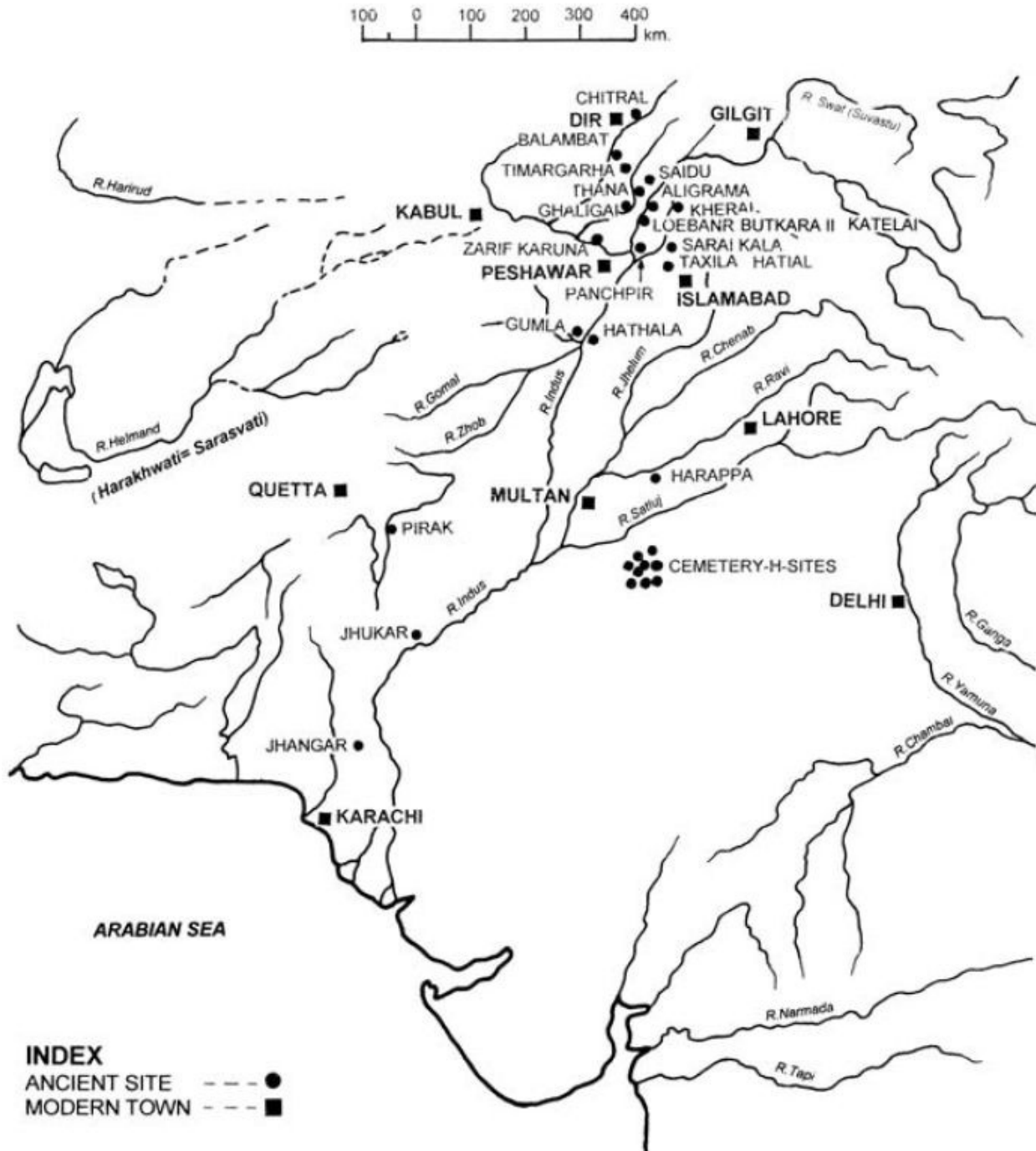
portion of this vast territory spoke Indo-European languages. The climatic conditions, birds, animals, and trees revealed by the cognate words suggest that the Aryans did not live in warmer areas. We, therefore, have to seek the speakers of the early Indo-European languages in the temperate zone covering Eastern Europe and Central Asia. We may recall that genetic signals that pass from generation to generation in human beings link together speakers of Indo-European languages. A genetic marker called M 17, which prevails in 40 per cent people of Central Asian steppes, is also found frequently in the Indo-Aryan speakers. In the Hindi-speaking area of Delhi, it is found in 35 per cent people. This suggests migration of the Indo-Aryans from Central Asia.

PASTORAL CEMETERIES AND OTHER RELATED SITES IN CENTRAL ASIA



MAP 4 Pastoral Cemeteries and Other Related Sites in Central Asia. *Courtesy ASI*

EARLY INDO-ARYAN SITES



MAP 5 Early Indo-Aryan Sites. *Courtesy ASI*

The Horse, its Domestication and Diffusion

The horse is regarded as an indispensable trait of the Aryan culture, for it plays a crucial role in the life of the early Indo-Europeans. The term *asva* (horse) in the *Rig Veda* and its cognates appears in Sanskrit, Avestan, Greek, Latin, and other Indo-European languages. In ancient texts, particularly Vedic and Avestan, many personal names are horse-centred. For the early Vedic period we have over fifty horse names and thirty chariot names. Similarly, the *aspa* or horse forms part of the name of several Iranian chiefs in the *Avesta*. Some Iranian tribes mentioned by Herodotus are also named after the horse. In its various forms, the term *asva* occurs 215 times in the *Rig Veda*; no other animal is mentioned so frequently. The term *go* (cow) occurs 176 times, and the term *vrsabha* (bull) 170 times. Both these terms taken together suggest the importance of cattle rearing. However, the cattle rearers were dominated by a horse-based aristocracy. The tiger and rhinoceros, characteristic of the tropical and moderately temperate climate of India, are absent in the cold conditions of Central Asia. They do not occur in the *Rig Veda*, and similar other tropical and moderately temperate zone animals such as the lion, deer, buffalo, and elephant have few references in this text in contrast to those made to the horse, cow, and bull. This difference can be attributed to the Central Asian influence on the *Rig Veda*.

The *Rig Veda* devotes two complete hymns in praise of the horse. Almost all the Vedic gods are associated with it, and this in particular applies to Indra and his companions, the Maruts. Though the Vedic people frequently pray for *praja* (children) and *pasu* (cattle), they also specifically ask for horses, sometimes as many as a thousand. In the *Avesta*, cattle wealth seems to be more significant, but the horse has its own importance. Both the horse and chariot repeatedly occur in prayers made to the Avestan Mithra who is the same as God Mitra in the *Rig Veda*. The adjective 'swift-horsed' is applied in the *Avesta* to several divinities. The text refers to the prayer to the god that the king be granted swift horses and strong sons. The horse and the horse-drawn chariot are equally important in Homer. Equerry, or the person in charge of the horses belonging to the chief, is a common term in the *Odyssey*. The Vedic, Iranian, and Greek texts, thus leave no doubt that the earliest speakers of the Indo-European languages were well acquainted with the horse.

The earliest domesticated horse is found at a considerable distance from the Indian subcontinent. It is significant that the largest number of horses appear to have been in the area between the Dnieper river in the west and the Volga river in the east. The earliest evidence of the horse is found in the south Ural region and the Black Sea area in the sixth millennium BC. In the fourth millennium BC, the horse is found in Anatolia which lay close to the Black Sea. By the third millennium BC, horses are found in large numbers in south Siberia. Evidently, the use of the horse underwent a long gestation period. Although its existence was known around 6000 BC in the area between the Black Sea and south Ural, it came into general use in Eurasia only in around 2000 BC.

The earliest inscriptional evidence of the use of the horse in western Asia is in Anatolia in the second half of the nineteenth century BC. Its effective use in western Asia is ascribed to the Kassite invasion of Babylonia in 1595 BC. When the horse first figures in Babylonia, it was called the ass from the mountain.

The War Chariot

The Indo-Europeans widely used horse-drawn chariots which are well known to the Vedic, Avestan, and Homeric texts. The chariot race prescribed in the *vajapeya* sacrifice of the later Vedic texts was also a Greek practice, and is fully described by Homer. It is held that the wheeled chariot originated in western Asia in the fourth millennium BC and reached the steppes of south Russia at about the same time. Sufficient evidence of the existence of the chariot from 3000 BC onwards appears in the excavations in south Russia. Chariots with two or three wheels of the third millennium BC have been found. The existence of horse-drawn chariots is also indicated by the names of the Mitanni rulers around 1400 BC and later. These are 'having the running chariots', 'facing the chariots', and 'having the big horses'. We also hear of the Indo-Iranian title 'horse-driver'. Dasaratha, the name of a Mitanni king, means a person possessing ten chariots. Wooden wheels are known outside India, but until 2000 BC they were generally solidly built. Clay wheels are reported in the Harappan context, though they cannot be dated earlier than 2500 BC.

Spoked Wheels

Spoked wheels appear in Hissar in Iran and in the north Caucasus around 2300 BC. A six-spoked wheeled chariot depicted on a cylindrical seal is attributed to

Hissar around 1800 BC. It is said that in the nineteenth century BC, the Hittites used light-wheeled chariots to conquer Anatolia. War chariots with spoked wheels appear in the Sintashta region in the south Ural area adjoining western Kazakhstan. By 1500 BC, spoked wheels are in existence at several places in eastern Europe and western Asia.

A spoked wheel is neither identified at Harappa nor Mohenjo-daro where all the toy carts found so far show solid wheels. Banawali in Hissar district in Haryana is associated with the use of spoked wheels in the Harappan period, but this seems to be a post-Harappan phase.

The remains of horses of the second millennium BC have been found in south Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan. By 1500 BC the horse and the chariot are represented in Kirgizia, the Altai zone, Mongolia, the Pamir mountain ranges and, above all, in south Tajikistan.

Horse Remains in the Subcontinent

Only a few horse remains of the third millennium BC are ascribed to the Indian subcontinent, and these are of a doubtful nature. Richard Meadow, who has thoroughly studied the remains, finds no clear osteological evidence of the presence of the horse in the Indian subcontinent until 2000 BC. In his view, the Pirak complex located near the Bolan pass in the Kachi plains of Baluchistan shows the earliest true horse in South Asia around 1700 BC. The remains of horse and horse furnishings dating to 1400 BC and later appear in the burials of the Gandhara grave culture in the Swat valley situated in the North-West Frontier in Pakistan. The existence of the horse in the north-west may have helped its spread in north India. Horse bones have been found in the overlapping layers of the Painted Grey Ware and the Harappan cultures at Bhagwanpura in Haryana attributed to 1600–1000 BC. The Surkotada horse from the Kutch area may have been contemporaneous with the Pirak horse. The horse also appears in the later or the post-urban Harappan phase at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Lothal, and Ropar. The existence of the horse has not been reported from most recent excavations at Harappa in 1986–95. Also, although numerous bones have been found in the excavation of the Harappan site at Dholavira in Kutch, there is no indication of any bones of the horse.

The existence of the horse in the late Harappan phase at various places is consistent with its arrival in Pirak and the Swat valley from the eighteenth century BC onwards, and it becomes important in the non-Harappan/post-

Harappan cultures of Pirak, Gandhara, and Painted Grey Ware sites.

Pit-dwelling

The pit-dwelling can also be associated with the Aryan culture, and may have originated in cold conditions. Around 4500 BC, the horse-users of Ukraine lived in semi-subterranean houses in addition to surface ones. With their eastward advance, pit-dwelling began in the Ural–Volga region in the fourth and third millennia BC, and in the Andronovo culture of Central Asia in the second millennium BC. Burial seems to have developed in imitation of pit-dwelling. In the Swat valley some villages show large pit-dwellings dating to around 1500 BC. These may be linked to the migrations because of which post-cremation burials are also in evidence. The practice of pit-dwelling prevailed in Burzahom near Srinagar in Kashmir and also in Haryana. This may be due to the Central Asian influence on the borders of Kashmir.

Birch

The use of birch-wood seems to be an Aryan feature along with underground houses. The birch is called *bhurja* in Sanskrit, and it has cognates in six Indo-European languages. Although this tree is found in a substantial part of Eurasia including the Ukraine, its earliest remains appear in the Andronovan settlements, where it was used to construct structures together with pine and cedar. The subterranean dwellings in particular were covered with birch. In medieval India, many manuscripts were written on the leaves of the birch tree.

Cremation

Like the use of the horse, cremation developed as an Aryan trait. Its practice is supported by the Vedic, Avestan, and Homeric texts, but does not seem to be a feature of the mature Harappan culture. The Harappans practised earth burial, and this underwent a distinct change in their later phase. This is shown by pot burial in Cemetery-H; in some cases, such burial also shows evidence of burnt bones deposited in urns.

Post-cremation burial is in evidence at several sites in the extension area of the Harappan culture in Gujarat, but it is difficult to date it in this area. Thus, the

evidence at Surkotada is doubtful. In any case, even if we take a liberal view of the chronological position, the practice cannot date to earlier than 2000 BC, which marks the beginning of the post-urban phase. Its introduction may be attributed to the contact with the outside areas where the practice began much earlier. It is difficult to argue for human cremation on the basis of the burnt bones of birds and animals. Cremation is as old as the fifth millennium BC. Archaeologically, its instances are found in Holland, Germany, Eastern Europe, Iraq, and Kazakhstan in Central Asia in 5000–4000 BC. However, it is not clear when and where this practice was adopted by the horse users, but, around 1500 BC, they practised it in both Europe and Asia including the Chinese part of eastern Central Asia. In the Indian subcontinent, the earliest evidence of this practice by the horse users occurs in the Swat valley in the second half of the second millennium BC. At a distance of about 500 km from the Swat area it appears in Tajikistan around 1400 BC. Wheeler rules out the prevalence of cremation at both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, though some late Harappans may have followed the practice under the influence of outside contacts.

The Fire Cult

The fire cult is considered to be a special trait of both the Indo-Aryans and Indo-Iranians. The fire altar or *vedi* is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, and fire worship is very important in the *Avesta*. Some scholars consider the fire cult to be Harappan, but the veracity of the ‘fire altars’ found in Lothal in Gujarat and Kalibangan in Rajasthan is doubted by the excavators themselves. It is significant that the fire altars discovered in the Harappan context match neither the textual prescriptions nor the age-old traditional practices. However, as fire is so indispensable to human existence, it may have been worshipped in many regions including the Indus Valley, but whether it took the form of the Vedic altar is extremely doubtful. We may note that some structures, not exactly similar to Vedic fire altars but indicative of fire worship, dating to 4000–3500 BC have been found in Ukraine.

Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice was an important Aryan ritual. However, given its almost universal practice among pastoral tribal people, it is difficult to make much of it. The earliest stock raisers did not raise cattle for the sake of milk and dairy

products. A segment of the Gond tribe still believes that milk is really meant for the calf. Therefore, the early pastoralists were great meat eaters. The ritual of animal sacrifice may have been evolved because of the need for non-vegetarian food. Graves in Ukraine and south Russia dating to the fourth and third millennia BC provide numerous examples of animal sacrifice in funeral ceremonies. That is also true of south Central Asia in the second millennium BC and later. Apparently, the ritual was generally prevalent and symbolized the provision of the requirements of this world in the next world.

Horse Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice may have prevailed among many tribal peoples, but the horse sacrifice was typical of the Indo-Europeans, particularly of the Vedic people. The French Vedic scholar Louis Renou considers it to be an Indo-European ritual. Much archaeological evidence about the prevalence of horse sacrifice is found in eastern, central, western, and northern Europe, and also in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In Ukraine and south Russia, many cemeteries testify to the sacrifice of more than one horse. The practice seems to have started in the second half of the fifth millennium BC. It became widespread in later millennia and continued in Rome, medieval Ireland, and Central Asia.

Though two hymns are devoted to the horse sacrifice in the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*, the later Vedic texts transform the sacrifice into *asvamedha*. Animals may have been sacrificed in pre-Vedic times in the subcontinent, but despite cut marks found on the bones, it cannot be said that the horses were killed for religious purposes. Archaeological evidence of horse sacrifice in Europe and Central Asia is wanting in India. Buffalo sacrifice became an important ritual in the worship of the various forms of goddess Shakti, but because of the rarity of this animal in East Europe and Central Asia, the practice did not prevail in those regions.

The Cult of Soma

The cult of soma, called haoma in the Avestan language, was confined to only the Iranian and Vedic peoples. The identification of the soma plant has been long debated, but now a plant called ephedra, small twigs of which have been found in vessels used for drinking rituals on the premises of the temple of Togolok-21 in Margiana in south-eastern Turkmenistan, is considered to be soma. Although

this identification has been accepted by many scholars, the search for conclusive evidence is continuing.

The Svastika

Sometimes the svastika, an ancient symbol formed by a cross with equal arms, is conceived of as a mark of Aryanism. It acquired a global cachet when the Nazis adopted it as a symbol of unadulterated Aryanism. Unknown to Vedic literature, the term appears in the texts of the early Christian centuries when it had an auspicious connotation in religious art. According to Mackay, the svastika symbol originated in Elam much earlier than 2000 BC when it figured in the Harappan culture. In south Tajikistan it figured around 1200 BC. It appears that by this time it had been adopted by the Aryans, and in the early centuries of the Christian era it came to be regarded a symbol of brahmanical culture.

Language and Inscriptional Evidence

Language is the most important attribute of the Aryan culture. Linguists have reconstructed the proto-Indo-European language, which started around the seventh or the sixth millennium BC. The Indo-European language is divided into eastern and western branches, and from c. 4500 BC marked phonetic development took place in the eastern branch, that is, proto-Indo-Iranian. However, inscriptional evidence of the proto-Indo-Iranian or Indo-Aryan language does not date to earlier than 2200 BC. The first linguistic traces of it figure on a tablet of the dynasty of Agade in Iraq. This inscription mentions two names reconstructed as Arisena and Somasena.

Hittite inscriptions from Anatolia indicate speakers of the western branch of the Indo-European language in this area from the nineteenth to the seventeenth century BC. Similarly, Mycenaean inscriptions from Greece indicate the arrival of speakers of this branch in the fourteenth century BC. The speakers of the eastern branch are represented in the inscriptions of the Kassites and the Mittanis in Mesopotamia from the sixteenth to the fourteenth century BC, but there are no such inscriptions in India. It is, therefore, absurd to argue that speakers of the Indo-European language spread from India to Mesopotamia. Many Munda words figure in the *Rig Veda*, and evidently they entered this text in the post-Harappan phase. Had the Vedic people moved to the north-west, the Munda words would have also surfaced in that area, but they did not. Some Russian

linguists consider the region south of the Caucasus to be the original home of the Indo-European language. This includes eastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia. Though eastern Anatolia is not far from the Black Sea area where the early horse was domesticated, neither the horse nor other characteristic traits of Indo-European culture are traceable to eastern Anatolia in the sixth–fifth millennia BC.

The finding of the Russian linguists supports an earlier hypothesis of Gordon Childe that Anatolia was the original home of the Aryans. This view has been recently reinforced by Renfrew. According to him, agriculture and the Indo-European language originated in eastern Anatolia around the seventh millennium BC. He argues that the expansion of agriculture from Anatolia led to the spread of the Indo-European language in various directions. However, much earlier, cereals were cultivated at a Mesolithic site near Jerusalem around 10,000 BC, and transition to full-fledged agriculture took place in the Palestine area around 7000 BC. However, agriculture was not confined to Palestine and Anatolia. In the sixth and seventh millennia BC, it was practised also in Iraq, Iran, and Baluchistan too. In any case, agriculture was not important in the life of the earliest speakers of the Indo-European language. This is shown by the lack of common agricultural terms used by the eastern and western groups of Indo-European language speakers from the outset. Also, if the Aryan language originated in Anatolia, why did it completely disappear from its place of origin?

Dispersal of the Indo-Aryans

We may recall the genetic signals which show the migration of the Indo-Aryans from Central Asia to India. Genetic characteristics in the blood cells of humans are known as DNA. They are hereditary and pass from generation to generation. Some special genetic signals appear in the steppe people of Central Asia from one end to the other in c. 8000 BC. These genetic indications are called M 17. They are found in more than 40 per cent people of Central Asia. When scientists looked for them in Delhi they discovered these in more than 35 per cent of the Hindi speakers but only in 10 per cent of the Dravidian speakers. Biologists place the Indo-Aryan migration from Central Asia after 8000 BC, but linguists and archaeologists date it c. 2000 BC.

We also notice a striking similarity in the use of the past tense in Russian and many Indo-Aryan languages. In Russian one uses *Ya chital* ‘I read’ and *Ya pishal* ‘I wrote’. ‘L’-ending past tense is used in Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Maithili,

Bhojpuri, and Magahi. It is also used in Marathi and sometimes in Rajasthan. In Punjabi it is rare. Linguists can better explore Russian links with Indo-Aryan languages, but the genetic evidence about the Indo-Aryan migration is decisive.

Chronology

(BC)

10000	Cereals first cultivated at a Mesolithic site near Jerusalem.
8000	Indo-Aryan migration from Central Asia after this date.
7000	Developed agriculture in the Palestine area.
6 M	Existence of the horse in the south Ural region and the Black Sea area.
5000–4000	Cremation in Holland, Germany, eastern Europe, Iraq, and Kazakhstan in Central Asia.
4500	The horse-users of Ukraine lived in semi-subterranean houses in addition to surface houses. Introduction of the proto-Indo-Iranian language.
5 M	Horse sacrifice probably started among Indo-Europeans.
4–3 M	Pit-dwellings in the Ural–Volga region. Animal sacrifice in funeral ceremonies practised in Ukraine and south Russia.
4 M	Horse in Anatolia and wheeled chariot in western Asia and the steppes of south Russia.
3000 onwards	Sufficient evidence for the use of the chariot in excavations in south Russia.
3 M	Many horses in south Siberia. Chariots with two or three wheels in south Russia. Some horse remains ascribed to the Indian subcontinent.
2500	Clay wheels reported in the Harappan context.
2300	Spoked wheels in Hissar in Iran and in the north Caucasus.
2200	Indo-Iranian or Indo-Aryan language in an inscription of the Agade dynasty in Iraq.
2000	Wide use of the horse in Eurasia. Solidly built wooden

	wheels known outside India. Svastika symbol in the Harappa culture. Post-cremation burial in the late Harappan culture in Gujarat.
2 M	The horse, pit-dwellings, and post-cremation burial in the Swat valley. Pit-dwellings in the Andronovo culture of Central Asia. Horse remains in south Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan.
19 C	Hittites used light-wheeled chariots.
19–17 C	Western branch of Indo-European language in Anatolia in Hittite inscriptions.
1850 onwards	Earliest inscriptional evidence of the horse in Anatolia.
1800	Six-spoked wheeled chariot depicted on a Hissar seal.
1700	Pirak complex (Baluchistan) evidences the earliest true horse in South Asia.
1600–1000	Horse bones of the PGW and Harappan cultures at Bhagwanpura (Haryana) as evidenced by the overlapping layers there.
1595	Effective use of the horse during the Kassite invasion of Babylonia.
1500	Spoked wheels in eastern Europe and western Asia and representation of the horse and the chariot in Kirgizia, the Altai zone, Mongolia, the Pamir mountain ranges, and south Tajikistan.
1400	The date of the <i>Zend-Avesta</i> .
1400 and later	Existence of horse-drawn chariots indicated by the names of the Mitanni rulers. Remains of horses and horse furnishings in the burials of the Gandhara grave culture in the Swat valley. Evidence of cremation in Tajikistan.
14 C	Inscription of speakers of the western branch of the Indo-European language in Greece.
1200	Svastika in south Tajikistan.
1000	Later strata of the <i>Rig Veda</i> .
900–800	Homer's <i>Iliad</i> and <i>Odyssey</i> .