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# roots

family histories  
of familiar words

by Peter Davies

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# preface

This book is an amateur's effort at popularizing a subject that has been regarded as difficult: the Indo-European fact, and its relevance and interest for everyone who speaks English. It brings together some of the findings of two separate and demanding specialties — historical linguistics and Old World archaeology. I am an untrained aficionado of both, with professional qualifications in neither. I may well have made errors of detail that will give pain or amusement to specialists, and if so I am sorry. But this book has not been written for specialists.

The Indo-European fact dominates the prehistoric background of our entire culture. It has often been distorted by politicians and racists, and partly for this reason many academics have soft-pedaled it for a generation or so. Also, both the linguistics and the archaeology of the subject have become so complex that each requires a formidable training; it is now all but impossible to acquire real proficiency in both in one reasonable lifetime, and the two groups of scholars often find it hard to even communicate with each other. These are not good reasons for the rest of us to ignore this fascinating subject.

The real Indo-Europeans still loom there in our past, and some appreciation of them ought to be a commonplace part of modern education. In some still obscure sense, they were prime movers in some of the major cultural surges of the human race, in India, in the Middle East, and in Europe. Their influence remains formative, for good or evil, in the present and future world-culture.

This book is intended to provide a simple but realistic way of looking at the Indo-Europeans and the continuities that connect them to us. Using well-established word-histories, with archeological and historical comments, it offers a series of glimpses of the ever-ramifying traditions by which Indo-European roots are present in the familiar words of our everyday speech.

*Crescent, Georgia*

PETER DAVIES

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# introduction

*We are still speaking Indo-European.*  
—Calvert Watkins

Some of our words are “native,” inherited words, but most have been acquired by borrowing from other languages. The English word BOURGEOIS\* = “middle-class person” is a borrowing of the French word *bourgeois* = “townsperson.” The word MATERNAL is a borrowing from Latin *māternus* = “motherly.” CYCLE is borrowed (via several intermediaries) from Greek *kuklos* = “wheel.” More than ninety percent of our huge modern vocabulary has been built up over the years from such borrowings. The more recently the borrowing occurred, the easier (usually) it is to recognize as a borrowing. Some are also easily identifiable as borrowings by their shapes; CONSTELLATION is obviously from Latin, and DIAGNOSIS could only be from Greek. But many others, especially those that were acquired several centuries ago, such as BIRTH, CATCH, JOIN, FOREST, GRAIN, SEASON, SQUARE, have been so thoroughly assimilated into the fabric of the language that they are to all appearances entirely English words.

Alongside the hordes of naturalized aliens are the true natives. While they are relatively few in number (less than ten percent of the entries given in the big modern dictionaries), among them are most of our commonest and most basic words, including nearly all the common prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and other function words, and all of the cardinal numbers from ONE to HUNDRED. Also among the natives are such basic nouns as MOON, STAR, and THUNDER; COW, FISH, and HOUND; MOTHER and FATHER; SWEAT, WORK, and WORD; such basic verbs as KNOW, RIDE, ROW, SEW, SOW, WEAVE; and such basic adjectives as NAKED, NEW, SWEET, TAME, and WISE. These words have come down to us in unbroken inheritance, owing nothing to other languages, from the Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) spoken a thousand years ago in England, from the Germanic language spoken a thousand years before that by the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons in northwestern Europe, and long before that from the prehistoric language ancestral to Germanic.

These two components of our word stock, the native and the borrowed, exist compatibly side by side, and few people but experts are or need to be conscious of any great difference between them. Details of their individual stories are readily available in the etymologies given in any good dictionary. The languages of Europe, and their neighbors to the east, have been so thoroughly studied by the science of historical and comparative linguistics that the origins of most of our words, both native and borrowed, can be reliably traced back not only throughout the centuries of recorded history but also several thousand years into the undocumented past of prehistory.

\*The histories of the English words cited in the introduction in small capitals are given under their individual roots. See index of English words on page 210.

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How this seemingly impossible feat has been done will not be described here; some references are given at the end of this Introduction. The picture revealed by the linguistic evidence is one of a parent language referred to as Indo-European, from which most of the languages of Europe, and various others of the Middle East and India, are descended. Judging from the earliest recorded forms of these languages, the common parent must have existed two or three thousand years before them. But this does not imply that it was a “primitive” language. Human speech and language is thought to be several hundred thousand years old, and all individual languages that have been observed in the present and recent world are of virtually equal sophistication. Nor, from the great spread and success of its descendants, can we infer that Indo-European was an especially superior language. Languages expand their domains and prosper not by any internal dynamic but by the efforts and fortunes of the people who speak them. Indo-European was merely one of the world’s already numerous languages spoken some five or six thousand years ago. It had its own intricate grammatical structure, and a vocabulary of (at least) several thousand words; from these the structure of our modern speech, and the “native” component of our vocabulary, are directly inherited.

Of our more numerous *borrowed* words, on the other hand, the great majority are taken from languages neighboring to the English-speaking people, chiefly Norse, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Italian, and from the two “dead” cultural languages Latin and Greek. All of these are cousins of English, equally descended from the Indo-European parent language; each of their inherited vocabularies is selectively derived from the same original set of words. Thus it has come about that English has, in thousands of cases, both inherited an Indo-European word and later (unwittingly) borrowed a cognate word, one that is separately descended from the same original term.

This book sets out one hundred of the most interesting and impressive Indo-European roots represented in English. Each entry tells the story of one word or root and how it has come into modern English both by inheritance and by borrowing. Each entry has a diagram on the facing page, showing the story in a concise visual form. Continuity within a language tradition is shown by solid lines. Borrowing from one language into another is shown by broken lines with arrows. Modern English words are given in capitals at the bottom of the diagram. No other special conventions are used, and there are no abbreviations.

It will be seen that in many cases the inherited “native” word remains the basic one, while the borrowings have been built onto the vocabulary as subordinate terms of one kind or another. The Indo-European words *māter*\*

\*All the Indo-European words or roots cited here are treated, in alphabetical order, in the body of this book.



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= “mother” and *pater* = “father” have been inherited as Modern English MOTHER and FATHER, and although they possess regular English derivative adjectives (*motherly* and *fatherly*), still our language tradition has found it necessary or convenient to borrow the more formal adjectives MATERNAL and PATERNAL from Latin.

This situation is repeated in case after case: BROTHER and FRATERNAL, NOSE and NASAL, NIGHT and NOCTURNAL, NAME and NOMINAL, MIND and MENTAL, TOOTH and DENTAL.

Similarly, the cardinal numbers from ONE to TEN are the native and basic words, but each has been supplemented with cognate borrowings from Latin and Greek. With native ONE there is Latin UNITY, with native TWO there are Latin DUAL and Greek DI-(prefix), with native THREE there are Latin TRIPLE and Greek TRI-(prefix); and so for the whole set.

Likewise, we have often inherited the name of a plant or animal, which we continue to use as the everyday name, and then subsequently borrowed its Latin or Greek cognate to serve as its scientific name, sometimes also providing a formal adjective. We inherit the everyday name of the BEECH tree, but as its formal botanical name we use the Latin cognate *Fagus*, yielding the (rare) botanical adjective *fagaceous* = “belonging to the family of the beech.”

There are many other examples of this relationship, where the inherited word has remained the everyday word and its Latin or Greek cousins supply some important but less basic term or terms. This situation was not consciously striven for by those who coined the terms; nor on the other hand was it wholly an accident. It results, almost inevitably, from the cultural history of the European languages, in which the two “learned” languages Latin and Greek have been used together as an inexhaustible quarry for the making of elegant, scholarly, and scientific terms, so that by mere probability the often unrecognizable cognates have often come to be regrouped in modern speech. The word HEMP is our inherited name for the plant, and when the pioneer taxonomist Linnaeus came to give it its formal botanical name he naturally adopted the Greco-Latin word *Cannabis*. He could not, of course, have known that the German word *hanf* and the English word HEMP were the exact cognates of Greek *kannabis*. But the upshot is that we now employ the inherited word HEMP for the plant in some contexts and its borrowed cognate CANNABIS in others.

The results have not always been so neat. We have inherited the Indo-European word *kwon* = “dog” in the modern English word HOUND, but this is no longer the basic word for the animal. HOUND and its cognate adjective CANINE are a pair, but the word DOG, which is now the basic word for the animal, is not related. The Indo-European word *ekwos* = “horse” has not been retained in Modern English at all, though we have as usual adopted the Latin adjective EQUINE.

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In thousands of other cases, the sets of cognates that have emerged in Modern English are of a more random and miscellaneous nature. It may be only a curiosity that we measure farmland by the ACRE, and that our formal word for farming, AGRICULTURE, contains the same ancestral word for “field”; that the words NAKED and NUDE are a cognate pair; and that LIBIDO is a fancy or “clinical” word for LOVE. Individually such situations look like mere oddments or coincidences. Collectively, as this book is intended to show, they are a significant and little-noticed theme running through the whole of our vast vocabulary.

It will have been noticed that the forms of the words change in a remarkable way within each language tradition. This is one of the fundamental discoveries of the linguistic scholars to whom we owe the entire body of Indo-European reconstruction. These sound-changes result ultimately from the inevitable small changes of pronunciation that occur in the language-learning of children from generation to generation. The sound-system of a language is an extremely coherent and self-regulating system, and the permanent changes that result are not random but regular. Thus, the Indo-European sound /p/ was reinterpreted in Germanic as /f/, and this happened not sporadically but in every word in which the sound was present. The Indo-European word *piskos* = “fish” became Germanic *fiskaz*, and Indo-European *pāter* = “father” became Germanic *fadar*; whence Modern English FISH and FATHER. But these particular sound-changes applied only to Germanic. In Latin, the Indo-European /p/ was retained as /p/: thus *piskos* and *pāter* emerge in Latin as *piscis* and *pater*. When such Latin derivatives were later borrowed into English they retained the /p/ sound, which in corresponding *inherited* words had become /f/. Thus to our native words FISH and FATHER correspond the borrowed cognates PISCATORIAL and PATERNAL. This regularity of sound-changes is a large subject and will not be further explored here. A selective table of the more important ones is given on page 208. Some of the more clear-cut changes are also explicitly described in the word histories in the body of the book.

This book is intended as a browsable collection of some of the more fascinating of these deeply buried correspondences in our stock of words. Although the great majority of them result from borrowings that English has taken from its fellow-Germanic languages, from the Romance languages, and from Latin and Greek, as mentioned above, they are yet further extended by scattered borrowings from the Celtic languages (Welsh, and the Gaelic of Ireland and Scotland), the Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, etc.), and the Indo-Iranian languages (Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, etc.). These, too, are members of the great Indo-European language family, and their inherited vocabularies, too, are selectively descended from the same original vocabulary in the parent language. It is therefore again not entirely coincidental that when English borrows a Celtic word such as WHISKY, a

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Slavic word such as VODKA, or an Indic word such as NIRVANA, these, too, turn out to contain Indo-European roots that are already present in other English words, both inherited and borrowed. A representative scattering of these somewhat remoter cognates has also been included.

(It is perhaps worth pointing out that English has not confined its borrowings to its Indo-European cousins, but has taken words from every language with which English-speakers have come into contact, including Hebrew and Arabic, Bantu and Amharic, Chinese and Japanese, Algonquian and Eskimo. Such languages being of families other than Indo-European, borrowings from them obviously could not give rise to any of the correspondences here examined, and they therefore do not appear in this book. And the same of course applies to the considerable number of English words whose origins are still unknown.)

At the same time as the vocabulary has been expanded by borrowings, the original native word stock of Old English has also been considerably eroded over the past thousand years. Numerous inherited words, such as Old English *eoh* = "horse," continuing the ancestral form *ekwos*, have for various reasons disappeared entirely. But the rate of loss has been slow, and a bedrock of native words is retained from generation to generation with astonishing persistence. Onto this slowly diminishing bedrock the language deposits ever newer strata of borrowings, most of which stem from the same ultimate source. A similar situation exists, in endlessly varying permutations, in the other modern Indo-European languages, which also borrow insatiably both from their influential neighbors and from ancient repositories of cultural prestige such as classical Sanskrit as well as Latin and Greek. The English vocabulary itself, owing to the current worldwide influence of the English-speaking peoples, is now being borrowed into every language in the world; thus a further already stratified layer is added.

The situation has so far been described and discussed as if it were a purely linguistic situation, but it actually of course results from and reflects several thousand years of human activities, and the endless interactions of the Indo-European-speaking peoples, and others. The full story, lying as it does at the intersection of history, linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology, and passing from the dimly seen world of prehistory into the overwhelmingly well-documented histories of many ancient nations, has never yet been coherently told. The subject itself is so vast and complex, and the implications so important and interesting, that the competing specialists have been unable to agree on even the main outlines. It has also been bedeviled by nationalism and racism.

Recently, however, the first convincing and well-grounded model of the fundamental and prehistoric part of the story has been set out. Acceptance of such a model can come only slowly, and controversy will doubtless

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continue beyond the present generation. But I for one am satisfied that this long-standing riddle has been essentially solved.

The Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas points to a people who lived on the plains of southern Russia and the Ukraine between 5000 and 4000 B.C. She has named them the Kurgan people (from *kurgan*, the modern local name for their burial mounds). Their way of life, in the fifth millennium B.C., was Neolithic. They planted grain and other crops and herded cattle, horses, sheep, and pigs. They lived in low-lying villages and also built hill forts for security and for political control. Their society, unlike those of the contemporary rather egalitarian peoples living in Europe, was rigidly stratified: an aristocratic caste of warriors ruled a larger class of farmers.

Gimbutas asserts that the Kurgan people were the original speakers of the Indo-European language. The assertion rests on two separate bodies of evidence. First, the culture and environment of the Kurgan people fit the culture and environment indicated by the Indo-European vocabulary. Second, and in the long run more conclusive, the Kurgan people in the period 4000–2000 B.C. embarked on a massive series of expansions, westward into Europe and southward into the Middle East, and continuities can be shown running on from their original Neolithic culture to those of the Bronze Age peoples who later emerge into the light of documented history as the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, the Germans, the Balts and Slavs, and the Aryans of Iran and India. Many of these peoples can be seen as originally Kurgan elites imposed on conquered peoples of non-Kurgan origin. To follow the archaeological identifications involved would fill a shelf of books, and not even an outline will be attempted here. But in many of the root histories given in this book, pertinent archaeological observations are briefly made, all tending to confirm the truth of Gimbutas's brilliant hypothesis.

If the Kurgan/Indo-European identification is correct, we can know more of this horse-loving people of the Eurasian grasslands than we can of any other people of their time, since we can scrutinize them with the binocular vision of linguistics combined with archaeology. Neither their language nor they themselves need be thought of as "primitive." We know something of their law, of their social structure, of their poetry, and of the metaphors by which they saw and described the world—many of which we are still using today. One of the most fascinating themes in the story of their endlessly successful aggressions is the part played by the trained horse harnessed to a wheeled vehicle, very possibly an original Kurgan/Indo-European development (*ekwos* = "horse," *wegh-* = "to travel, transport in a vehicle," and *kwekwlos* = "wheel"). There are also glimpses of their agriculture (*gr̥nom* = "seed," *s̥-* = "to sow seed," *ghordhos* = "garden"), of their animal husbandry (*gwōus* = "cow/bull," *owis* = "sheep," *sus* = "pig,"

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*agros* = “pasture”), of their mathematics (*dekm* = “ten,” *kmtom* = “hundred”), of their hospitality (*ghostis* = “guest”), strong drink (*medbu* = “mead”), and religion (*deiwos* = “god”).

But the most compelling fact about this remote people is that they are our linguistic ancestors. We are a mixed race, and our modern culture is a revolutionary synthesis of ingredients from many sources, including Semitic, Mediterranean, African, and even Chinese elements as well as Indo-European ones, all many times transformed by the technological quantum jumps of the past two or three hundred years. But the long continuity of language, carrying with it unbroken threads of human consciousness, has a special place in the reckoning. Through all the world-moving and culture-shattering changes we have engendered and inflicted, these threads of language somehow mysteriously endure. Thanks to the scholars who have patiently and brilliantly unraveled the evidence and restored a fragmentary picture of the remote past, we can recognize that when we speak of the MOON and the STARS and the NIGHT we inherit the *mēn-* and *ster-* and *nekwt-* of our Neolithic forebears, that our homely terms SIT and SEW and WEAVE continue their *sed-* and *syū-* and *webb-*, and that our words SWEET and SWEAT and LOVE still faithfully echo their *swād-* and *sweid-* and *leubb-*. These ancient words, with the related borrowings that supplement them, are alive today in our everyday utterances. This book is a small sampling of these deep and wonderful continuities.

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# agros

1. The Indo-European word *agros* = “pasture, uncultivated land” appears in Germanic *akraz* = “cultivated field,” Latin *ager*, *agr-* = “land, field, farmland,” Greek *agros* = “open country,” later also “farmland,” and Sanskrit *ajras* = “open country, plain.”

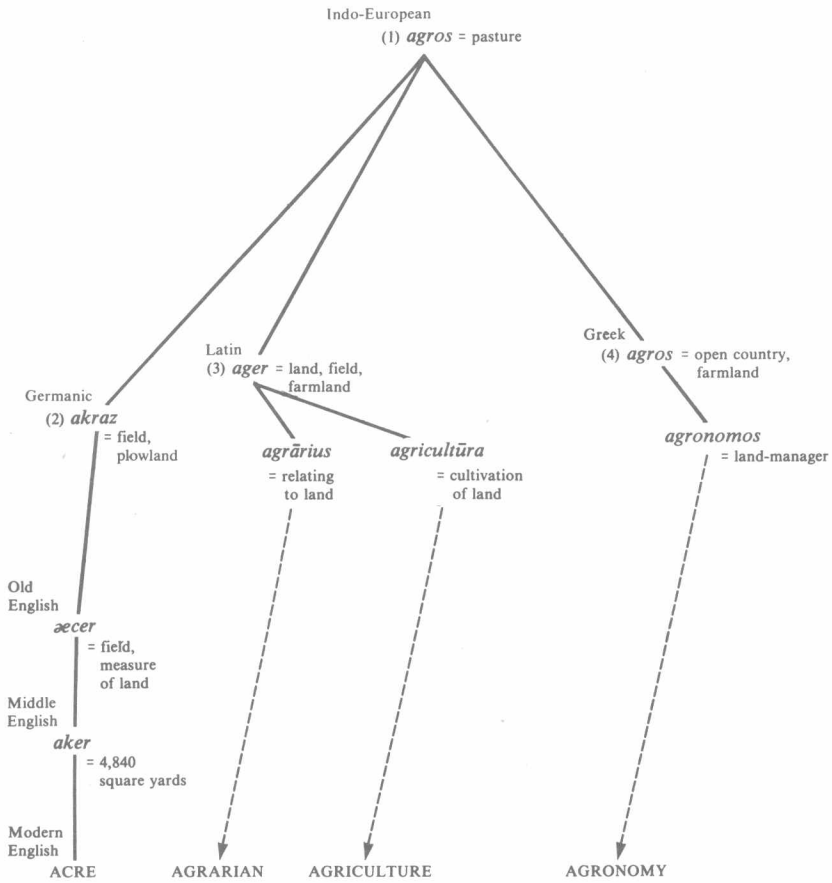
The Indo-Europeans, living on the grasslands north and northeast of the Black Sea between 5000 and 4000 B.C., had a Neolithic mixed-farming economy. They used the plow, and planted a little grain, but their cattle were more important to them than their crops; they computed wealth in head of cattle, not in land. As seminomadic cattle-herders they made far-reaching migrations into Europe and the Middle East.

The word *agros* is a noun regularly formed from the verb root *ag-* = “to drive cattle.” It was originally a herdsman’s term meaning “the place where you drive the cattle,” i.e., “uncultivated grassland, pasture, the open range.” In Sanskrit and the earliest Greek and Latin, this remained the basic meaning of the word, still perhaps recalling periods of migration when the cattle-herders were always in search of good pasture. In later Greek and Latin, and exclusively in Germanic, the word *agros* was transferred to the farmlands of settled communities, whether used for grazing or for plowing.

2. *Agros* regularly became Germanic *akraz* = “field, piece of cultivated land.” This appears in Gothic *akrs*, Old Norse *akr*, Old High German *acker*, and Old English *æcer* was also used to mean a field of specific size, sometimes defined as the area that a team of oxen could plow in one day. In the thirteenth century it was officially defined as 4,840 square yards, so that 640 acres = 1 square mile. The word emerged as ACRE in Modern English, in the United States still the basic unit in which farmland is reckoned. In England, Australia, and elsewhere it has recently been abolished in the interests of worldwide conformity with the metric system.

3. Latin *ager*, originally “open country,” meant both plowland and farmland in general, especially the *ager publicus* = “public or common land, the land belonging to a village or community.” The adjective *agrārius* = “relating to farmland” was adopted into English (seventeenth century) as AGRARIAN. The noun *agricultūra* = “cultivation of land” (*cultūra* = “cultivation”) was adopted (also seventeenth century) as AGRICULTURE, a term that now includes animal-raising as well as crop-growing.

4. Greek *agros*, originally “open country,” likewise later meant “cultivated field, farmland.” There was a term *agronomos* = “land-manager” (*-nomos* = “practitioner, manager”). From this the modern word AGRONOMY = “the science and profession of land management” was coined.



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# apo

1. The Indo-European adverb/preposition *apo* = “off, away, from,” appears in Germanic *af* = “off,” Latin *ab* = “from, by agency of,” Greek *apo* = “off, from, away,” and Sanskrit *ápa* = “away from.”
2. Germanic *af* appears in Gothic *af*, Old Norse *af*, Old High German *aba*, and Old English *æf* = “from.” Old English *æf* had an unstressed form *of*, which became Modern English OF, with a vast spread of prepositional meanings and functions.  
Late Middle English *of* also had a stressed variant OFF, which in the sixteenth century became a separate adverb/preposition meaning “away, separating from,” etc.
3. A comparative form *apoter-* = “farther away” appears in Germanic *afstar-* = “coming after,” Greek *apotero* = “farther away,” and Sanskrit *apataram* = “farther away.” Germanic *afstar-* appears in Gothic *aftra* = “again, back,” Old Norse *aptr* = “back,” Old High German *afstar* = “behind, after,” and Old English *æfter* = “behind, after.” Old English *æfter* became Modern English AFTER.
4. The Latin preposition *ab* = “from, by” was freely used as a prefix in hundreds of words such as *abdūcere* = “to take away, abduct,” *abnormis* = “away from the norm, abnormal,” and *abstractus* = “removed from reality, abstract.” Many of these, including ABDUCT, ABNORMAL, ABSTRACT, have been adopted into English.
5. The Greek preposition *apo* = “off, away from,” was likewise used to form hundreds of compounds, such as *apostatēs* = “one who stands away, a rebel,” *apostolos* = “person who is sent away, envoy, apostle.” Many of these, including APOSTATE and APOSTLE, have been adopted into English. APO- itself is used as a productive English prefix, as in APOMORPHINE = “a chemical compound derived from morphine.”



