

# Ghosts and grave robbers

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## Prehistory in fiction

Fictional narratives about prehistory began to be written almost as soon as archaeologists adopted the term prehistory (Angenot and Khouri 1981; Rowley-Conwy 2006). Some of the first practitioners of **prehistoric fiction** were themselves archaeologists, or writers of science fiction (Ruddick 2010, 23, 48-51).

Many such works are set in the Palaeolithic, the evidential base for which consists almost entirely of material archaeological remains (Ruddick 2010, 2; James 2010, 455). The predominant mode of prehistoric fiction has tended to be naturalism, with a strong emphasis on **authenticity to archaeological detail** (for critiques of such an approach to depicting the past, see Lukács 1981, 186, 195, 198; Sainte-Beuve 1862).

Later periods of prehistory, however, provide a richer epistemic base, including **cultural evidence** via the fields of linguistics and comparative poetics. The present work is the latest in a series of experiments in which interdisciplinary research forms the basis for creative practice that explores new ways of depicting prehistory in fiction. In this instance, the creative work also constitutes a reflection on the discipline of archaeology itself.

## Indo-European linguistics

Since the **Indo-European** language family was first recognised, its provenance has been debated in the field of comparative linguistics. Consensus has not been reached on where or when 'Proto-Indo-European' (the hypothesised proto-language from which the language family derives) was spoken (Mallory 1989; Renfrew 1990).

But the picture becomes increasingly clear in the **later stages** of Indo-European, based on linguistic evidence (proximity and divergence in sound, lexicon and syntax) correlated with the point at which languages are first attested

in the historical record (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1995, 325-26). For instance, the emergence of the Indo-Iranian branch must have been earlier than the mid second millennium BCE Mesopotamian kingdom of **Mitanni**; contemporary cuneiform texts contain Indic vocabulary and mention the worship of Vedic gods (Thieme 1960).

An early third millennium Yamnaya burial in the Volga region of Russia contained a '**massive copper object**' (pictured above), resembling a cudgel or sceptre, that bears a striking similarity in design to clubs found in Indian archaeological sites—clubs which in turn resemble the descriptions in the *Rig-Veda* of Indra's *vajra* or thunderbolt weapon (Kuznetsov 2005). The Indo-European dialect likely spoken at that time and in that area would have been ancestral to both the Indo-Iranian and Hellenic branches of the language tree.

## The Yamnaya horizon

The Yamnaya (Pit-Grave) horizon, named after its unusual burial pits, comprises a number of archaeological cultures dating from the **Copper Age**, spreading from the area between the Volga and Dnieper rivers to a vast territory spanning the whole **Pontic steppe**, and further west up to the Carpathians and the Middle Danube (Der-gachev 1989, 796).

The people of the Yamnaya were horse-riding **nomads** who kept livestock, used wheeled vehicles and advanced weaponry, and had a highly stratified society (Anthony 2007, 300; Gimbutas 1965).

This skeleton (pictured left) occupied a tumulus near Samara in the Volga region, dated to early in the **third mil-**



features of poetic traditions to identify common inheritances. Certain tropes, deities, formal elements and even formulaic phrases have been ascribed to the poetic tradition common to the Indo-European language family as a whole (Watkins 1995; West 2007; Puhvel 1987; Lincoln 1975, 1976).

But other aspects of Indo-European poetics are specific to certain branches. In particular, Ancient Greek lyric poetry and the Vedas comprise a rich field for comparison. Many of the metrical conventions in each tradition are similar, and in some cases identical (Nagy 1974).

For example, the Vedic metres *gayatri* and *anustubh*, respectively three- and four-line variants of an octosyllabic stanza found abun-



**lenium BCE** (Kuznetsov 2005, 1, 9).

Debates over the role of the Yamnaya in the later prehistory of Europe and Asia have pitted theories of migratory waves and armed conquest against more complex and differentiated models (Gimbutas 1997; Renfrew 1990; Anthony 2007).

However, few would deny a significant role for the Yamnaya in the **social and technological changes** that occurred across Europe and Asia in the subsequent millennia (Mallory 1989). Characteristics of the Yamnaya cultures—weaponry and equestrian transport as well as their distinctive burials—spread not just west, across Europe, but also to the east.

## Comparative poetics

Just as comparative linguistics reconstructs hypothesised ancestors of attested languages, comparative poetics compares

dantly in the Vedas, follow this metre in their earliest forms:

× × × ×    ◡ — ◡ —

In Aeolic verse, the glyconic line is a slightly more regular form of the same basic metre:

× × ◡ —    ◡ — ◡ —

## Writing the poem

My poem 'The Grave Robber' stages an encounter between an archaeologist and the ghost of the Yamnaya man whose remains are pictured above; stanzas alternate between the voices of the two characters. The archaeologist's stanzas are blank verse. The ghost's are made up of a form that might plausibly, if speculatively, be assigned to an Indo-European metre ancestral to Greek and Indic: essentially, *anustubh* with final-verse catalexis (albeit with stress replacing length, to suit the English language).

Every four stanzas, the stanza length is halved, so while the first stanzas belonging to the ghost are made up of four *anustubh*, towards the end of the poem the *anustubh* are truncated to two lines and then a single line, with the catalexis retained throughout.

## The Grave Robber

She looks for me beneath the grass,  
between splinters of barrow-stone.  
Spades cut the heavy knoll and lift  
the earth's weight from my old bones.  
A dozen youths to help her dig,  
as pale and thin as she is plump  
and brown, of ample arse and breast;  
a handsome crone, and well-fed.  
Wise in her craft, and quick to rage  
when clumsy boots crack pottery,  
she rules over the trembling boys  
with the fear of her tongue-lash.  
Her eyes wear gems that make them sharp  
as a girl's, missing nothing, but  
she'll be like me—a pile of bones—  
before those eyes can find me.

Preliminary findings indicate  
a Chalcolithic pit-grave tumulus.  
Analysis by radiocarbon has  
begun already: we await results.  
A wagon, disassembled, has its wheels  
Distributed at corners of the pit;  
and in the central section of the grave,  
a male, mature, abundant ochre paint  
upon the facial section of the skull,  
the arms and legs unusually long,  
of sturdy build, accompanied by goods  
suggesting power, social status, wealth.  
beside this figure, cradled by the bones  
of his left arm, a striking artefact:  
a solid copper mace, with tapered hilt,  
still glinting through the furring green of age.

Around my bones, the young men flit  
and cluster, chirp from slender throats.  
Then silence at her heavy tread:  
she's the most man among them.  
But a light touch to brush the loam  
away—tickle these ribs, my girl!  
You found my bones, but won't find me.  
This barrow does not hold me.  
I linger in the hearts of men,  
by camp-fires, in the deathless song  
of my imperishable fame.  
On singers' lips, I live on.  
Who drained a hundred soma-cups  
then bathed in blood of cattle-thieves?  
Whose armies tore a city down?  
My bones moulder, my deeds live.

This artefact appears to be unique:  
the largest metal object as yet found  
among inventories of pit-grave goods.  
The item bears resemblance to a sword  
but blunt, and weighs about a kilogram.  
Effective use in combat would require  
dexterity and skill as well as strength.  
(A measure of such qualities would make  
a vast improvement to these undergrads  
assigned for fieldwork, foisted on my dig.  
A dozen seal-pups flapping aimlessly  
would do less damage than these gormless boys!)  
Beyond such practical utility,  
a cultic function, or a symbol of  
juridical authority, perhaps;  
what kind of man is priest, and judge, and king?

Out of his cloak, one of the lads  
takes something smooth and flat as slate.  
Tiny faces slide from his thumb's rub.  
At the crone's glance, he stows it.

Can these odd folk get stranger yet?  
What kind of thieves dig up the dead  
and take plunder by light of day?  
These grave robbers have no shame.

Beneath the human bones are larger ones:  
two horses, side by side and buried whole.  
Nomadic pastoral societies  
depend on equine transport, and, as such,  
to sacrifice a pair, apparently  
in health, of working age, would indicate  
conceptions of the afterlife include  
continued use of transferred worldly goods.

Uncounted were my enemies,  
countless battles I fought and won.  
At last, it was a careless cook  
who killed me with some bad meat.  
The women wept as the men dug.  
Strong arms: it only took a day.  
Now feeble fellows dig me up  
again, their slow limbs take weeks.

Some distance from the central area,  
a female, also tall, and similar in age  
and ochre application to the male  
(although, no horse or copper mace for her).  
A secondary burial, she may have been  
interred some years after him—or was  
her widowhood a brief one, lasting just  
as long as it took them to dig the pit?

The crone sits a way off and paints  
small pictures with a tiny brush:  
cramped, shapeless, ugly drawings of  
stitches, or rows of squashed bugs.

Her huddled bones, a paltry string of shells;  
his horses, chariots and copper mace.  
I can't maintain my analytic cool  
before this grave-site's silent testament.

A wispy-bearded boy picks up  
my lightning-cudgel. Curse his hands!  
Scatter my bones, I do not care—  
You must not take my kingship.

You are no king. You never were. You're just  
a thug, a dime-store Ozymandias,  
a baby crying for his rattle. What's  
the size of cudgel compensating for?

If I were still alive, I'd cut  
your filthy tongue out, foul hag.

I'll pound your grinning skull to powder, snort  
a line, then flush the rest straight down the loo.

Which of these youngsters shares your tent?  
Do they take turns, you great whore?

No songs are sung about you. No one knows  
your name. You're dead, forgotten and unmourned.

Not one? Not even a short song?

I might get something in *Antiquity*.

Then make it a good one, crone!

I think I'll make it all about your wife.

## Indo-European language family with approximate branching periods

