

Essay on a Flapjack: Philology and the *Urvolk*

ABSTRACT: After surveying some familiar territory regarding the field's formulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this essay probes far deeper into the past to conjecture on a prehistoric, metaphorical extension of a word for unleavened bread batter to a word for people. Such an etymology, with origins in the ancient hearth of Indo-European nationalities, may provide insight into the variable implications of "folk," disparaging or complimentary, when it is deployed as a term of rhetoric. Seeking to understand the fringe status of folklore in contemporary research universities, this essay draws a contrast with philology, which successfully recast itself as historical linguistics in the twentieth century, sloughing off burdensome connotations taken up during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century reaction of Romanticism.

AS I SETTLE DOWN TO MY TOPIC I have just finished a breakfast of buckwheat pancakes. Partaking in the direct, grounded experience of such comfort food inspires me to come to terms with issues regarding my chosen occupation, and I trust the meal of flapjacks to nourish my thought. My college degree is in folklore, a discipline that has walked hand-in-hand with language studies on the one side and anthropology on the other. If, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson summarize in their afterword to the 2003 edition of *Metaphors We Live By*, "metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious" (p. 272), then I have lived by the concept of "folk" in the sense that I have, in part, earned my keep as a public folklorist throughout my adult life. Yet if there is a metaphor inherent in "folk,"

it has been forgotten. My goal here is to recover the derivation from proto-Indo-European root **pel-* (flour) and its metathesized stem **plāgo-* (people) to Greek *poltos* (porridge) and *polis* (settlement) to Late Latin *fladō* (pancake or flapjack) and *vulgus* (common people) to Gothic *folkam*, Old English *folc*, and High German *Volk*.

I also take the occasion to ponder the sense that folklore as a discipline is being forgotten, in academia if not in the public sector. Although both linguistics and anthropology are thriving, in the United States only Indiana University offers a doctorate in a department of folklore, down from three such programs only a few years ago and down from five in the 1980s. In his 1999 book *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, while describing the new academic discipline of cultural studies, social anthropologist Adam Kuper writes:

“Culture” in cultural studies includes the fine arts, literature, and scholarship, the stuff of the curriculum in the humanities, but it also takes in the black arts of the media, and the vaguely demarcated sphere of popular culture (a mix of what used to be called folklore and proletarian art, plus sports). These forms of culture are valued very differently. Roughly speaking, official high culture is suspect, and mass-produced culture condemned as ersatz, if not irremediably corrupt . . . but popular culture is treated sympathetically. (p. 229)

In this formulation it is not the subject matter that is passé and devalued, but only the label “folklore” that is to be (or by 1999 had already been) discarded. Ironically, the preferred term “popular” in Romance languages is related to “folk” in Germanic languages, and so presumably shares the same hidden metaphorical entailments. It is understandable that folklore as an aspect of popular culture should be likewise vaguely demarcated, for “folk” has such a long history that it may connote both itself and its contrary. Dictionary definitions of “folk” stress that it may mean, first, any and all people in a society, or it may mean, secondly, only the lowest class of people in contrast to an elite. It may mean one’s friends and neighbors, or, contrarily, it may mean only one’s family. (To use other words from Old English, “folk” may mean kith, or kin, or both kith and kin.) If “folk” means kin, according to the circumstances it may entail only one’s immediate family or more extended relations including widening segments of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. If it means extended family, it may according to the situation

imply persons related by marriage, or only include persons related by blood. Thus, much of the meaning of “folk” is carried by pragmatic implications of use from instance to instance.

The definition is complicated by the fact that, in English, the singular form “folk” began to be supplanted by the plural form “folks” in the fourteenth century. The plural became the prevalent form by the seventeenth century, especially in the American colonies, as if the concept shifted from a collective mass noun to a count noun during the early modern period, even as the adjective retained the singular form. Although “folk” is still in use as a noun (especially by lower-class folks!), it is held by lexicographers to be archaic or dialectical. This is the judgment, for example, of C. T. Onions, editor of *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (p. 367). Nevertheless, the proverbial English expression “queer as folk” has a current use as title for a popular cable television series, both in Britain and the United States, carried forward by the renewed use of “queer” if not of “folk.” All these considerations help to explicate the variable connotations of such colloquial phrases as home folks, local folks, town folks, country folks, fancy folks, plain folks, rich folks, poor folks, strange folks, familiar folks, old folks, young folks, my folks, your folks, and just folks. This last instance of slang is confined to the United States.

Although the English term “folklore” was not coined until 1846, the scholarly specialty had been developing since the seventeenth century. During the inception of modernity, from Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Enquiries into Vulgar and Common Errors* (1646) through Henry Bourne’s *Antiquitates Vulgares; or, the Antiquities of the Common People* (1725) to John Brand’s *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777) and Henry Ellis’s revision of Brand, subtitled *Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of Our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies and Superstitions* (1813), antiquarians took a disparaging attitude toward the “vulgar.” This word, like its cognate “folk,” was treated as a mass noun as well as an adjective. As Richard Dorson documents in *The British Folklorists: A History* (1968), the incentives shared by these English Protestants were not only to promote Enlightenment rationality but also to excoriate the paganism they saw persisting in Roman Catholicism. Regrettably, as judged by these authors, pagan delusions likewise persisted among the illiterate, irrational stratum of peasants who supplied their information (p. 1–43).

By the generation of William John Thoms’s *Anecdotes and Traditions, Illustrative of Early English History and Literature* (1839), science was seen as triumphant and the antiquarian motive was changing to embrace

an ideology of nationalism and Teutonic chauvinism. Thoms took a positive approach to fables and other oral genres, and in his preface he quoted approvingly the poet Robert Southey: “The fabulous history of every country is part of its history, and ought not to be omitted by later and more enlightened historians; because it has been believed at one time, and while it was believed it influenced the imagination, and thereby, in some degree, the opinions and character of the people” (quoted in Dorson 1968:79). It was Thoms who eschewed “popular antiquities,” with its aura of Catholic countries where Romance languages are spoken, in favor of “folklore,” which he heard as an expression of Anglo-Saxon nativism.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, folklore as an emerging area of textual studies aspired to be an objective science, and folklorists allied themselves with philologists. According to Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, the ancient term “philology” had been revived in 1777 by the German Friedrich Wolf, who meant to denote “attention to the grammar, criticism, geography, political history, customs, mythology, literature, art, and ideas of a people” (quoted in Graff 1987:69). If Wolf had written a few years later he might have added archaeology to the list. In practice, folklorists added expertise in folk traditions—myths and other oral narratives as well as beliefs and customs—to the etymologist’s preoccupation with word derivations in trying to restore the worldview of prehistoric Indo-Europeans. To the debates folklorists contributed the idea that oral tradition implied communal composition.

These developments are laid out by Giuseppe Cocchiara in *The History of Folklore in Europe*, first published in Italian in 1952 and translated into English by John McDaniel in 1980. Both folklore and philology as a whole were waylaid for a time, however, by theories of cultural evolution as espoused by the emerging discipline of anthropology. During the decades following the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, in Cocchiara’s estimation “The term *anthropology*, initially adopted from Aristotle in the literal sense of ‘study of man,’ now came to mean ‘the natural history of mankind.’ This ‘history’ contributed to a dangerous confusion between nation, race, and linguistic group” (p. 375).

Cocchiara does not identify who had adopted “anthropology” from Aristotle, but he may have had in mind Immanuel Kant’s lecture notes known in English as *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798),

which is certainly not a work in natural history. The scholarly record shows early German and English anthropologists, contemporaries of Darwin, ratcheting up the rhetoric regarding the evolution of civilization. A few representative examples might include *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* by Theodor Waitz and *Der Mensch in der Geschichte* by Adolf Bastian (both 1860), *Primitive Culture* by Edward Tylor (1871), *Wald- und Feldkulte* by Wilhelm Mannhardt (1877), *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer (1890), and *Mutter Erde* by Albrecht Dieterich (1905). These authors share the secondary definition of “folk,” that is to say the folk are rural peasants in industrializing nations, who at the village level retain survivals of primeval practices. Their works also share a fascination with fertility beliefs and ritual sacrifices related to vegetation, notably forest trees and agricultural crops (Cocchiara 1980:375–429). Although dated in their theories, these early attempts at cultural anthropology still repay the investment of readers intrigued by the content. Oddly enough, even a few French thinkers were not immune to extremes of Teutonic mystification, even before wrong-headed readings of *Origin of Species*. Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau published *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855), in which he invented the Aryan race (Taylor 1996:233–34). After reading Darwin, Felix–Archimède Pouchet revised his *On the Multiplicity of Human Races* (1858) to conclude that peoples of differing colors were separate species, distantly related through an ancestor ape (p. 234).

Scholars of folktales, literature, and language in Russia began to break away from comparative philology and ethnology in the 1890s, and in the early twentieth century new theories of morphological form were developed by such leaders of the field as Vladimir Propp, Petr Bogatyrev, and Roman Jakobson (Graff 1987:69–72). French linguists led by Ferdinand de Saussure were able to free themselves from evolutionary assumptions shortly after the turn of the century, to be followed by French cultural anthropologists, notably Claude Lévi-Strauss, who further adapted linguistic notions of semiosis and structuralism received from the Russians. Folklore studies and physical anthropology in Germany and England, however, remained stuck in progressive stages of culture and divergent social classes and races well into the twentieth century. As archaeologist Timothy Taylor reminds us in *The Prehistory of Sex*, Hans Günther’s *The Racial Elements of European History* (1927) gave Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler all the facts they needed in the 1930s to plot the neo-pagan folk purity of the Third Reich (1996:227–29).

American folklorists did not begin to reformulate the field until 1972, just as I was beginning my indoctrination, when Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman edited *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, an anthology gathered from a 1966 conference announcing the coming of age of a cohort embracing performance studies and the ethnography of communication. Nevertheless, class-based definitions of folk culture persisted in other social science disciplines. An outstanding example is *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* by the sociologist Herbert Gans (1974). Gans identified five “taste cultures” coexisting in the United States during the 1970s, which he named high, upper-middle, lower-middle, low, and quasi-folk low. Of quasi-folk low culture Gans wrote in part:

This taste culture is a blend of folk culture and of the commercial low culture of the pre-World War II era, which catered to audiences who were just emerging from ethnic or rural folk cultures at the time. This is the taste culture of many poor people, who work in unskilled blue collar and service jobs and whose education ended in grade school; many of them rural or of rural origin and nonwhite. Although this public is still numerous, its low status and low purchasing power mean that its cultural needs receive little attention; by and large it must get along with low culture content. (p. 93)

With such a characterization, it is little wonder that most individuals in contemporary American society might resist or resent being publicly labeled as “folk,” even if they use the term privately for their own purposes. Yet not only academic departments but also governmental agencies preserved survivals of nineteenth-century nationalistic discourse into the 1980s and 1990s. Guidelines for federal efforts such as the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts or the Office of Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Institution carried the unmistakable imprint of Victorian-era folklorists and allied anthropologists, even though they were intended as affirmative action initiatives to redress past wrongs in cultural policy.

One of the few reflexive exercises in the arena of public programming occurred in 1987, when the Folklore Institute at Indiana University sent a fieldwork team to interview demonstrators at the Festival of American Folklife, an annual event produced by the folklorists of the Smithsonian Institution on the grounds of the National Mall. The 1987 festival featured residents of Michigan and North Carolina and the final report makes clear their apprehensions regarding the folk-

lorists' ideology. Michigan fishing guides Will Davis and Steve Jayton gave a typical statement, as summarized by the fieldwork team: "both Davis and Jayton rejected what Davis labeled the 'folksy' subtext of 'folklife.' Before coming to the festival, Davis had worried about being treated as a backwoods hick by the audiences in D.C., but at the end of the two weeks he remarked, 'If anyone treated me that way, it was someone from the Smithsonian, it wasn't the people'" (Bauman, Sawin, and Carpenter 1992:42). The report goes on:

Most festival participants pride themselves on being "traditional," either by continuing a family occupation, talent, or practice, or by learning one that is personally significant. They do, then, use the term "folk" self-referentially. Among the FAF participants, however, were those who seemed particularly sensitive to and offended by being perceived or treated as "folksy," in the sense of unsophisticated, untravelled, uneducated people without political views and agendas. . . . At the 1987 festival, it was clear that FAF staff and their field consultants seek to include participants who stretch popular conceptions of what "folk" and "folklore" encompass. Yet perceptions by participants of an undifferentiated treatment not only undermine such impulses, but perhaps also suggest that models seem currently to have outpaced practices. (p. 46)

In the interest of collegial fairness, the Indiana University folklorists also turned the critique on themselves: "In addition to relations with staff and audiences at a 'folklife festival,' the situation of being studied by 'folklorists' (at that moment, the IU team) also involves an implicit ascription of the 'folk' label as well as issues of hierarchy and permission to interrogate, so it is not surprising that participants played with the researchers in resistance-based ways" (p. 46). In these passages from *Reflections on the Folklife Festival*, Latinate terms like "people" and "popular" are again used unselfconsciously in preference to the cognate Germanic term "folk," which seems increasingly to be loaded with negative connotations in the realm of cultural politics. ("Politics" is also an uncontroversial cognate of "folk.")

In light of such reports, folklorists engaged in tortuous self-examination during the early 1990s, just after post-modernism went sweeping through the humanities. In these years new revelations regarding the appropriation of the concept *das Volk* by National Socialists in Germany were being made public, particularly in an anthology edited by James Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld in 1994, *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*. These self-doubts came to a crisis at

the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in 1996, when participants in a plenary session entitled "What's in a Name?" advocated that the discipline should rename itself altogether or perhaps merge with cultural studies.

Typical of this point of view was the presentation "Of Names, Professional Identities, and Disciplinary Futures" by Regina Bendix, who described how university departments in Germany had changed their names in the 1980s and who then asserted, "Although less problematic as a name for a field than *folklore*, *Volkskunde* will forever be associated with the *völkisch* ideology of the Nazis: no matter how much rehabilitation the discipline undergoes, the name will always carry this connotation" (1998:240). And regarding the field in America, while alluding to Frazer's *Golden Bough* she suggested, "We might keep in mind . . . that the ideology inscribed in the field of folklore has during the past century and a half latently or even overtly assisted in horrifying numbers of deaths; perhaps this warrants a Frazerian ritual slaying of the name *folklore* to make room for the installation of one or more new names" (1998:237–38). This motion was strongly seconded in "Folklore's Crisis," by panelist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who made a case that the disdain of early antiquarians toward the vulgar folk had come to dominate common usage during the past 350 years and that negative reverberations associated with "folklore" could not be overcome.

To the surprise of many members of the professional society, Jane Beck, director of the Vermont Folklife Center, endorsed the proposal to abandon the name in her 1996 presidential address later in the conference (Beck 1997). Nothing came of this initiative, although some practitioners revived an impulse from the 1980s that the field should be called folkloristics so it would appear more like semiotics and linguistics. Nevertheless, in the following few years two of the three remaining doctoral programs in the United States, at University of California Los Angeles and University of Pennsylvania, were suspended or collapsed into another program.

It is worth a brief digression to review how philology escaped the teeth and claws of Social Darwinism to reestablish itself as an acceptable branch of twentieth-century linguistics. In the three generations of scholarship between the 1780s (when imperial officials such as William Jones suggested that several ancient European and Asian languages shared an ancestral origin) through the 1820s (when comparative grammarians like Jacob Grimm identified sets of correspondences regarding changes

in pronunciation over time) and into the 1870s (when Karl Verner and other Young Grammarians elaborated and codified such patterns of change into scientific “sound laws”), philologists seeking to reconstruct a proto-Indo-European grammar and lexicon prepared the ground for linguistics. The accomplishments of that century of scholarship include a shift in focus from the written to the spoken word, an emphasis on phonology and phonetics, an acknowledgment that languages undergo continual change and are equivalent in complexity, and that distinctions drawn in the past between standard languages and regional dialects are a result of bias on the part of centralized elites toward peripheral populations (Lyons 1968:21–38).

Ferdinand de Saussure may be regarded as the pivotal figure in the transition from philology to linguistics. In 1879, very early in his career, he postulated that inexplicable vowel alternations in Greek and Sanskrit could be explained if the protolanguage had contained certain root syllables with initial consonants that had been lost in all descendent languages. In this regard, Philip Baldi observes that “Saussure, in fact, was the first abstract phonologist, since he was working strictly with indirect evidence” (1983:157). Later in his career Saussure turned away from diachronic speculations regarding dead languages to emphasize synchronic, structural descriptions of living languages. By 1916, when his *Cours de linguistique générale* was published, Saussure deserved to be recognized, in the words of Lyons, as “the founder of modern linguistics” (p. 38), and Lyons avers that “contemporary linguistics is no longer committed to a positivist conception of science; and . . . it is no longer predominantly concerned with the ‘evolution’ of languages” (p. 33). Just the same, comparative philology, with its quest for proto-Indo-European sources, continued under the rubric of “historical linguistics” into the 1960s when Lyons was writing. The name quietly changed, and so did the underlying ideology, but the enterprise went ahead unimpeded.

To return to the example introduced in the paragraph above, the power of the comparative approach was affirmed when Bedřich Hrozný determined in 1915 that Hittite was an Indo-European language. Then in 1927 Jerzy Kuryłowicz demonstrated that the lost sounds proposed by Saussure in 1879, which had come to be known as laryngeals, occurred in Hittite in the appropriate positions. Although Saussure had not made detailed predictions about the lost sounds, he suggested they might be resonants (either nasal /*m*/ or /*n*/ or liquid /*l*/ or /*r*/).

Kuryłowicz's analysis showed that the missing sounds were usually the glottal fricative /h/ (Baldi 1983:151–59). Nevertheless, “Hittite was now given prominence as a most archaic Indo-European stock, and, more importantly, the methods of reconstruction linguists had been using for decades were given solid verification. This was truly a momentous event” (p. 157).

According to Baldi's account, the implications of Saussure's insights were systematized by 1935 by Emile Benveniste, who theorized that all proto-Indo-European roots had the form *CeC*, where *C* is a consonant. Roots in descendent languages that begin with a vowel (always other than /e/) betray a lost laryngeal (p. 158). Through the 1970s such advances propelled work on proto-Indo-European morphology and syntax by a new generation of researchers, including Joseph Greenberg, Winfred Lehmann, and Paul Friedrich (p. 20–21). Calvert Watkins, editor of the most recent revision of *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (2000), celebrates:

The last decades of the 20th century have happily witnessed a resurgence of Indo-European studies, catalyzed by advances in linguistic theory and an increase in available data that have resulted in a picture of the reconstructed protolanguage that is, in a word, tighter. The grammar of Indo-European today is more thoroughly organized and more sharply focused, at all levels. There are fewer loose ends, fewer hazy areas, and those that remain are more clearly identified as such. New etymologies continue to be made, new roots are recognized, and older etymologies undergo revision to incorporate new evidence or better analyses. . . . Indo-European studies are alive with excitement, growth, and change. (p. ix–x)

With such encouragement in mind I will attempt a reconstruction of “folk” as a prehistoric metaphor in an effort to understand how the presuppositions of conventional folklorists came to seem condescending and came to be received contentiously, in recent decades. Lakoff and Johnson propose that the origins of primary metaphors and other figures of speech must be sought in direct bodily experience, or grounded interaction with the natural environment (2003:56–58). But surely “ground” is itself a metaphorical expression, and one that leads, conjecturally, right back to the mouth and larynx and to the vocalization *grrr*. “Ground” is the past participle of “grind” showing the ablaut, or vowel gradation, characteristic of Indo-European languages and Germanic tongues most of all. To chew one's food is to grind one's teeth and mix with saliva to masticate the mouthfuls into smaller particles

so they may be swallowed. “Grind” is related to “grit” (to clench one’s teeth) and “grin” or “grimace” (to display one’s teeth), and also related to such voiced sounds as “growl,” “grunt,” and “groan.” By extension, rocks are reduced by wind and waves into dust and sand, or, in other words, into “grains” of grit. Mixing with moisture produces “grout” or mud, and when enough sediment is accumulated in low-lying places, there is formed “ground” in the sense of soil—small particles of earth that have been through a grinding process. Such fertile ground may support “growth” of vegetation such as cereal “grasses.”

Between the grinding of the teeth and the grinding of the weather is another sort of grinding following the acceptance of agriculture: the pulverizing of kernels of cereal grain into “grist.” Before there were power mills there were hand mills, and before hand mills there were saddle querns, early mortar-and-pestle devices in which a grinding stone was manually “gripped” and bodily weight or “gravity” applied back and forth on a base until eventually a saddle-shaped “groove” was formed. From the earliest phase of cereal cultivation there is evidence of a coarse, or “gross” “grade” of grinding, as in “groats,” and then a fine grade of grinding as in flour. Groats and flour may be soaked to make “gruel,” or boiled to make “grits,” or heated to make “griddle cakes” or flatbread. These staple foods lead back to the mouth and grinding of the teeth.

Thus, the sound symbol and adaptive morpheme {gr-} in proto-Germanic allows, in Lakoff and Johnson’s terms, the coherent mutual structuring of three conceptual domains—chewing and vocalizing, weathering and erosion, and growing and grinding grain (p. 7–13, 77–105). As they refine their ideas in the 2003 afterword, Lakoff and Johnson would see such systematic polysemy as an example of dynamic enactment inferences resulting in neural mapping within the human brain so that such interrelated metaphors become second nature (p. 247–61). These sorts of semantic associations using old but written languages may be recovered using any extensive reference work such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

This exercise demonstrates why etymology will not die: it is intrinsically interesting and enjoyable. Nevertheless such an exercise, even in this latter day, is still not complete without recourse to myth and epic poetry. In *Hamlet’s Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission through Myth* (1969 [1977]), Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend develop an insight that poetic narratives involving grist mills are foundational not only in European culture but indeed in

prehistoric civilizations around the globe. Their example from Scandinavian nations begins with the tale of Amlethus in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (13th century), and they follow this Danish story to an analogue in the character Amlodhi from the Icelandic *Skaldskaparmal* of Snorri Sturluson (13th century). (As has been recognized since the 1890s, Saxo's Amlethus is the prototype of Shakespeare's Hamlet in the 17th century.) The melancholy Amlethus in Old Norse stories is the builder of a mill, of which the central axle, or "mill tree," becomes disjointed and the whole broken mechanism lost in the sea, grinding salt and forming a whirlpool. Back on land, a new mill must then be built and set with a fresh pole, dedicated by the sacrifice of a living deity between the grinding stones, marking the start of a new age.

De Santillana and von Dechend trace this tale type not only through several Indo-European epics but also Finno-Ugric, Semitic, indigenous Polynesian, and Central American mythologies. Their interpretation is that the rotary millstone is the earth turning on its axis, as seen against the stars—the grist of the night sky or grains of salt in the celestial ocean. The story is inspired by the way the celestial equator is out of phase with the ecliptic plane, so that the pole star for the northern hemisphere moves out of alignment and another star must be designated by astrologers as indicating north from time to time. Isaac Newton explained this phenomenon scientifically in 1687, as due to a twenty-four-degree tilt of the earth's axis in relation to its orbit around the sun, and a slow rotation of the pole around a line perpendicular to the ecliptic, as the sun and moon exert gravitational attraction on the out-of-kilter planet. But according to de Santillana and von Dechend, astrologers have understood and timed the pattern for thousands of years as the precession of the equinoxes moves westward through the twelve signs of the zodiac. The whole process takes about 25,800 years to complete, so each age is 2,150 years long. Whereas in our time the pole star is in the constellation Ursa Minor, in ancient times it was in Draco and in 10,000 years it will be in Lyra.

Although (as far as we can say) precession was first described in writing by the Greek Hipparchus in the second century BCE, the first depictions of the zodiac date from ancient Mesopotamia with its number system based on twelve and sixty. Sumerian cities at the dawn of history were the scene of the earliest documented pottery wheels, cartwheels, and rotary drills or fire sticks. Around 2,300 BCE the vernal equinox was in transition from what we know as Taurus into Aries. In

the meantime that marker has moved through Aries and Pisces and is now approaching Aquarius. (Contrary to popular belief we did not enter the Age of Aquarius in 1969; the musical *Hair* was slightly premature.) The arguments offered by de Santillana and von Dechend throughout *Hamlet's Mill* in support of their thesis are learned and persuasive, far too rich to summarize here. For the present purpose I need only mention that in Germanic languages the mythic mill is known as “Grotte,” and the authors point out correspondences that confirm the semantic consistency of the morpheme {gr-}, as well as other implications. For example:

[Grotte] is still used today in Norwegian for the “axle-block,” the round block of wood which fills the hole in the millstone, and in which the end of the mill axle is fixed. In the Färöer as well as in the Shetland dialect, it stands for the “nave in the millstone.” The original Sanskrit *nabhi* covers both “nave” and “navel,” and this point should be kept in mind. In the story, it is obviously the nave that counts, for it created a hole when the mill tree sprang out of it, and the whirlpool formed in the hole. But “navel of the sea” was an ancient name for great whirlpools. (p. 91)

And so on for hundreds of pages. *Hamlet's Mill* shows why the explication of Indo-European origin myths, like the tracing of Indo-European verbal roots, will not go away; it is too intellectually stimulating and too enlightening. This particular explication also suggests that the grinding metaphor was originally used to map to a fourth conceptual domain, the beginnings of astronomy. From their own analysis de Santillana and von Dechend estimate that both the mythology and the cosmology were in place no later than 4,000–4,500 BCE, but it would seem that if the narrative is distributed as distantly as Oceania and pre-contact Mexico (and the evidence is substantial), then the genesis was earlier than that timeframe, and even prior to rotary mills. The authors do speculate that the original grinding metaphor entailed waves crashing on the seashore recalling back-and-forth motion on a saddle quern. They further speculate on the basis of image as well as text that a metaphorical extension from an earlier spinning hand-tool to a rotary mill may have involved the fire-stick. Be that as it may, for agricultural societies emanating from Asia Minor the recurrent motif has been the gristmill.

The introduction of Sumer into the discussion bears a reminder of the Biblical city of Ur. As Colin Renfrew explains, the goal of classical German philology was to ascertain the *Ursprache* and *Urheimat* of

the *Urvolk*, or in other words the language and geographical home of the speakers of proto-Indo-European (1987:77). This does not mean that nineteenth-century grammar sleuths proposed that the ultimate fatherland was Ur, but they adopted the name of that Mesopotamian city, once the home of Abram, progenitor of the Israelites, as a metaphorical trope. As evidence accumulated in the first half of the twentieth century, archaeologists and linguists realized that the historical Ur could be a reasonable candidate for the symbolic Ur. As Glyn Daniel tells the story in *The First Civilizations: The Archaeology of Their Origins* (1968), researchers came to consensus by the 1850s that Sumer was settled, before the invention of cuneiform script, by a non-Semitic-speaking people who established populous cities such as Ur by 3,000 BCE (p. 36–68). Subsequent digs through the 1940s revealed that the pre-urban grain-harvesting culture complex had come into southern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) before 5,000 BCE from the northwest, the direction of ancient Anatolia (present-day Turkey), arriving from sites such as Mari on the Euphrates River and Nineveh on the Tigris River. The fertility and crop surpluses of the lower river flood plains provided conditions for a long peaceable Eden and then a Golden Age of the first large cities, but also, given enough time, for the problems of salinization of the soil, overcrowding, scarcities, and organized warfare (p. 69–82).

This degradation occurred in the northwest region (present-day Syria) before the southeast region of the Persian Gulf. Sumer was conquered by Sargon and the Semitic-speaking Akkadians about 2,400 BCE, and then the area changed hands repeatedly over the next 2,000 years, being fought over by Sumerians, Assyrians, Ammorites, Chaldeans, Babylonians, and Persians. Today the dominant language is Arabic, but it is easy to see why Abram, who left Ur about 1,400 BCE, would have remembered the ziggurat at Ur as the Tower of Babel, with various hungry, mutually unintelligible Semitic and Indo-Iranian societies fighting over the fertile fields. Yet the *Book of Genesis* makes plain that such edifices were not intended to provide a fable about language diversity; rather, they had a religious purpose: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens” (*Genesis* 11:3). In archaeologist Glyn Daniel’s words:

It was on the ziggurat, the staged tower or artificial mountain, that each year the Sumerians celebrated their most sacred ritual: at the new year a young priest and a young priestess were led to the ziggurat where in the presence of an officiating priest they consummated the symbolical union which according to the Sumerian religion assured the success of the new season's crops. This done, they were killed and buried. (1968:73)

The Sumerians made many more inventions than we have space to enumerate, but there is one aspect of their inventive genius that must be mentioned briefly, namely their mathematics. They had a system of calendars and a well-thought-out system of mathematics, and had made many and accurate astronomical observations. The debt of Western Civilization to the Sumerians is large, and in our list we should not omit positional numeration and the sexagesimal system by which we still divide our clocks and the circle. (p. 74)

De Santillana and von Dechend interpret the seven-storied Mesopotamian ziggurats (with their stairways to heaven) not merely as surrogate mountains in the collective memory of farmers from northwestern highlands, but also as embodiments of the "world pillar" or axletree of the celestial gristmill rising through the poles of the earth and the seven planetary spheres. They find the human sacrifice at the summit consistent not only with an urge toward annual fecundity, staged for the common people, but also with an enactment by astrologers for themselves of the periodic displacement and replacement of the pole star (1977:123).

Bringing the resources of twentieth-century archaeology to bear on the subject has led to hypotheses regarding the *Urheimat* or homeland of the proto-Indo-Europeans. Renfrew, in *Archaeology and Language*, reviews assumptions of linguists like Lehmann and Friedrich, based on lexicon, that the speakers of proto-Indo-European were pastoral nomads originating in the steppes north of the Black Sea. He further reviews and discredits a hypothesis first suggested in 1970 by archaeologist Marija Gimbutas that these folks were the Kurgans, who mastered the horse by 3,000 BCE and, as mounted warriors, swept out of what is now southern Russia to subjugate horticultural peoples westward throughout Europe, southward to Sumer, and eastward as far as India. In the formulation of Gimbutas, the earlier Neolithic settlements were peaceful and egalitarian, worshipping an earth goddess, but the conquering Indo-Europeans were violent and hierarchical, worshipping a sky god. Thus, she controversially suggests, a widely dispersed matriarchal society came to be dominated by a patriarchal elite. Renfrew finds

proof for this broad scenario to be wanting, and he gathers additional evidence accumulating through the middle 1980s to propose that Neolithic agriculturalists were themselves the Indo-Europeans, following a way of life that had originated in Anatolia before 6,000 BCE with the domestication of cereal crops and the herding of goats (1987:75–86, 120–37, 145–59). Rather than appearing in sudden surges of heroic conquest, the Indo-Europeans had dispersed by a gradual spreading of settlements in all directions, primarily in river valleys, that displaced pre-existing bands of hunters and gatherers:

The critic may well say that we have done little more than resuscitate an *Urvolk*, an original group of proto-Indo-European speakers, in an *Urheimat*, a homeland, in a rather unexpected place. To some extent such an observation is not unreasonable: I have indeed argued that before about 6000 BC there were, in the eastern part of Anatolia, and perhaps in some adjacent lands to the east and south-east, and probably nowhere else, people speaking languages ancestral to all the Indo-European languages of today. So that is indeed a kind of ‘homeland’ model, but it is certainly not a migrationist model of the old-fashioned and traditional kind. It does not assume a sudden and unexplained eruption from some rather ill-defined nuclear area, linked perhaps in some way to warlike nomad pastoralists. On the contrary, it links the spread of early Indo-European languages to a well-defined demographic process itself closely correlated with the adoption of a farming economy. (p. 266)

The “well-defined demographic process” relied on by Renfrew is the wave-of-advance model proposed by geneticist Luigi Cavalli-Sforza and archaeologist Albert Ammerman. In this scenario, the average European watershed in the Mesolithic period supported about one hunter/gatherer per ten square kilometers, but would support 50–100 farmers in the same amount of space. The density would double every eighteen years under initial conditions, but the growth curve would slow logarithmically as each settlement filled the carrying capacity of its hillside light loess topsoil, thinned by erosion and depletion. Then the younger generation would spill over into a nearby valley, spreading the farming strategy and supplanting the indigenous population in an incremental ripple effect. The widening edge of the agricultural way of life would expand about one kilometer per year, a rate that would allow the periphery to reach Britain and India from the cultural hearth in Turkey and Syria during the thirty centuries between 6,500 and 3,500 BCE (Renfrew 1987:126–31). This initial occupation took

place before the introduction of oxen-drawn plows, which allowed settlers to clear additional tracts of heavy clay soil in bottomlands. The human displacement aspect of the model is underscored not only by rigorous mathematical formulae, but also by the mapping of blood types of present peoples. Cavalli-Sforza and Ammerman conclude that Indo-Europeans pushed the prior inhabitants out of the way, except in cases of language isolates such as Basque, Lapp, Hungarian, and Estonian (Renfrew 1987:151).

In one factor Renfrew agrees with Gimbutas: during these 3,000 years the dispersing Indo-Europeans were peaceable among themselves. There is some evidence in the archaeological record of skirmishes between colonizers and natives, but no settlement sites in this long period indicate fortifications and systematic armed conflict. There were differentiated gender roles, but no extensive social stratification nor marked distinctions of wealth:

We are talking here of simple peasant farmers, with a restricted range of domestic plants and animals and a limited range of crafts. These may generally have included weaving and pottery-making and other farming skills, but theirs were egalitarian societies. To call them 'tribal,' at any rate at the outset, might be to overstate the case. . . . On the contrary, they can probably be more satisfactorily described as 'segmentary societies,' laying stress on the almost autonomous nature of individual village or neighborhood communities. Naturally there were links and marriage exchanges between these, but in the early days at least it may be wrong to think of much larger regional associations such as one might term 'tribes.' (p. 273)

The etymological evidence indicates that these egalitarian Neolithic farmers, diffusing toward Europe in one direction and India in another, referred to each other by various early versions of "folk," and, according to the situation, applied the term to embrace more or less inclusive and exclusive categories of kith and kin in their segmentary taxonomies. In Renfrew's solution to the puzzle of Indo-European origins, hierarchical royalties and militaries did not emerge until roughly the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the second millennium BCE, when there were no more temperate and easily tillable fields to claim. Soon warlords began to organize armies to assault one another in the context of rising populations, environmental exhaustion, and food shortages. This predicament, it seems, was the case when the Akkadians first attacked Ur in Sumeria.

Renfrew in *Archaeology and Language* does not address the gender issues raised by Gimbutas, but Taylor in *Prehistory of Sex* does challenge her conclusions regarding stone-age religion. Taylor lays out an argument, based on his understanding of the archeological evidence as unearthed by 1996, that early Eurasian agricultural communities were not matrifocal but familiarly patrilineal. Although he recognizes that prehistoric farming societies revered an earth mother, he concludes that this fertility goddess was not a supreme deity in comparison to the concomitant sky father, or god of sunlight and thunderstorms (1996:115–20, 148–59).

In Taylor's assessment horticulture was a mixed blessing for women. He cites a study of 162 buried skeletons from Abu Hureyra, a village from a portion of the proposed Indo-European hearth in present-day Syria, dating earlier than 5,500 BCE. The study was conducted by Theya Molleson of London's Natural History Museum. As Taylor summarizes, "She believes that women had ground the grain, on their knees, leaning over a 'saddle quern.' . . . Her conclusion is based on the marked repetitive strain injuries that damaged the vertebrae in female skeletons and caused severe osteoarthritis of the toes, curvature of the thigh, and 'housemaid's knee'—the growth of bony extensions on the kneecaps" (p. 151). For a combination of reasons the interval between pregnancies was shorter in settled Neolithic agricultural groups compared to Paleolithic hunting/gathering bands. Babies were weaned at a younger age, and this pattern contributed to the dramatic rise in farming populations. As Taylor continues his summary, "By 5500 B. C. there is clear evidence of deliberate weaning. It was for this purpose that fired pottery seems to have been invented. According to Theya Molleson's analyses of tooth wear in Neolithic infants, fired pottery allowed grain to be boiled into porridge gruel that could be used as a weaning food" (p. 153).

It was in this context, I surmise, that metaphorical thinking applied porridge, or gruel, to people. Both words are related to the unattested root *pel-*. Julius Pokorny, in the standard reference work *Indogermanisches etymologische Wörterbuch* (1959), lists five senses of this root. As a noun it meant flour, or skin; as an adjective it meant a light shade of color; as a verb it meant to thrust or to fold. The semantic interrelations may be understood by imagining that pulverized grain is pale, that flour when wetted is kneaded with a pushing and pulling motion similar to the grinding motion, that moist unleavened bread (which is just baked gruel) may be manipulated and folded, and that such flatbread resembles a pelt or a membrane. Suffixed stems such as *peba*, *pləgo*, *plāk*, *plat*, *plek*,

and *pleu* carry connotations of abundance, multitude, surplus, to fill, to spread, to wander, to be flat or level, to float, and to flow. It was *plgo* that came to mean “folk,” and *plat* that retained the sense of “flatbread,” or pancakes. Hundreds of words have arrived in English, from Latinate and Germanic sources, derived from this semantic complex. Observing Grimm’s Law, which predicts in part that in the transition from proto-Indo-European to proto-Germanic, voiceless stops shift to voiceless fricatives and voiced stops shift to voiceless stops, we might suspect that whenever in English we notice a /p/ or a /v/ or an /f/ followed by an /l/ (with or without a vowel in between) and then perhaps a /g/ or a /k/, we have encountered an instance of this range of meanings. In certain settings the /l/ may shift to /r/, giving, as a few examples, “pour,” “poor,” and “*poori*” (flatbread in India).

For my own subjective, mythic origin of how the crucial metaphor came to be deployed, I imagine a Neolithic woman in Anatolia, kneeling over a griddle-stone and pouring a ladle of batter onto the hot surface. In keeping with the wave-of-advance model of agricultural diffusion, as a child she had moved from the vale of her birth to till new fields in an unsettled watershed, and as that place had filled and the population stabilized, her children had moved off to settle in level virgin places. As this woman watched the gruel flow on the griddle and then come to rest in a firm but flexible form as it cooked, she was reminded of the way the growing and grinding of grain were expanding across the landscape and of the way the baking and eating of bread had become synonymous with human survival. She made a creative association between the spreading batter—at first liquid and then solid—and people on the move into a fresh valley—at first mobile and then fixed in place. Thus she began to refer to settlement groups, departing to advance the agricultural way of life, with the word stem for flour and flatbread batter, and the expression caught on, morphing from *plgo* in proto-Indo-European into *folc* in Old English during the course of about 7,000 years.

Ten years before Lakoff and Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By* and thirty years before their students developed the neural theory of domain mapping, Wallace Chafe proposed the same ideas in *Meaning and the Structure of Language* (1970). He further proposed that such idiomatization propels language change, as metaphors have unintended consequences in phonetics as well as semantics. Neolithic farmers personalized the grain, an animistic mental move that had great implications for religion. But in comparing people to the bread

dough itself, they also created potential for laborers to be depersonalized, to be spoken of with a mass noun.

While reviewing metaphor theory Alessandro Duranti observes, “The cognitive theory of metaphors as cultural schemata . . . is closely associated with the idea that we understand the world, language included, in terms of prototypes, which are simplified, generalized views or folk theories of experience” (1997:38). In his conclusion Duranti unselfconsciously uses the old “folk theory” of the prototypical grinding trope, that humans may be, metaphorically, crushed from individual kernels into homogeneous flour:

The communal, public, shared properties of language define another sense in which language can be seen as the human condition. Language as a shared practice is one of the great dilemmas of social life. If, in order to express ourselves and communicate our thoughts to others, we need to have access to such a public resource as we know language to be, how can we ensure that we can still control it, bend it to our needs, that we as individuals are not crushed under the weight of the socially shared code? How can words born and used in other times, by other people, in different contexts, still be relevant, appropriate, and meaningful for us? To what extent are our words ever *really* ours? (p. 334–35)

Molleson’s report on the female skeletons at Abu Hureyra calls to mind a passage from the *Odyssey* of Homer, set perhaps 3,300 years later in Greece but not written down for another five hundred years. The scene takes place at Ithaca on the night before the climactic confrontation between Odysseus and the suitors of Penelope. The hero is praying for a favorable omen, and nearby a frail old woman is working at a quern, late and alone. She speaks:

Zeus, Father! King of gods and men, now *there*
 was a crack of thunder out of the starry sky—
 and not a cloud in sight!
 Sure it’s a sign you’re showing someone now.
 So, poor as I am, grant me *my* prayer as well:
 let this day be the last, the last these suitors
 bolt their groaning feasts in King Odysseus’ house!
 These brutes who break my knees—heart-wrenching labor,
 grinding their grain—now let them eat their last! (Homer 1997:414)

These verses suggest that the technology of milling by hand, stone on stone, did not change much in the Mediterranean area from the Stone Age through the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age. Yet society had

changed greatly, becoming stratified into social classes and preoccupied with battle and booty. Along the way, the children of *plago* had come to mean not only all the people in a society, but also and specifically the native laborers as regarded by an occupying elite. As a class, such workers, whom the suitors would have described as *poltos* or porridge, are given a voice by Homer. The misery, weariness, and bitterness are familiar, as is the yearning for justice against brutal usurpers.

In conventional grammar a metaphor whose referent has been forgotten is said to be dead. In England this process was exacerbated by the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century, after which the speech register of the French upper class would have used “people” and “popular” while the Anglo-Saxon lower class would have used “folk” and “vulgar.” By the nineteenth century, when “folklore” was introduced, it carried a dead metaphor from a dead language, yet carried also an inherent potential for depersonalization, referring to a static, undifferentiated mass, dumb as dough. At the time of the British Empire, not only nationalists and philologists but also reformers and poets, like Homer in ancient Greece, strained to hear the voice of the folk. Call that voice what we may, such folks are speaking still.

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