

ALMUT HINTZE

# Avestan

Introduction – Part 1: Historical, geographical and cultural background



**MUYA** —  
**The Multimedia Yasna Project**

## Roadmap

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

## What is Avestan?

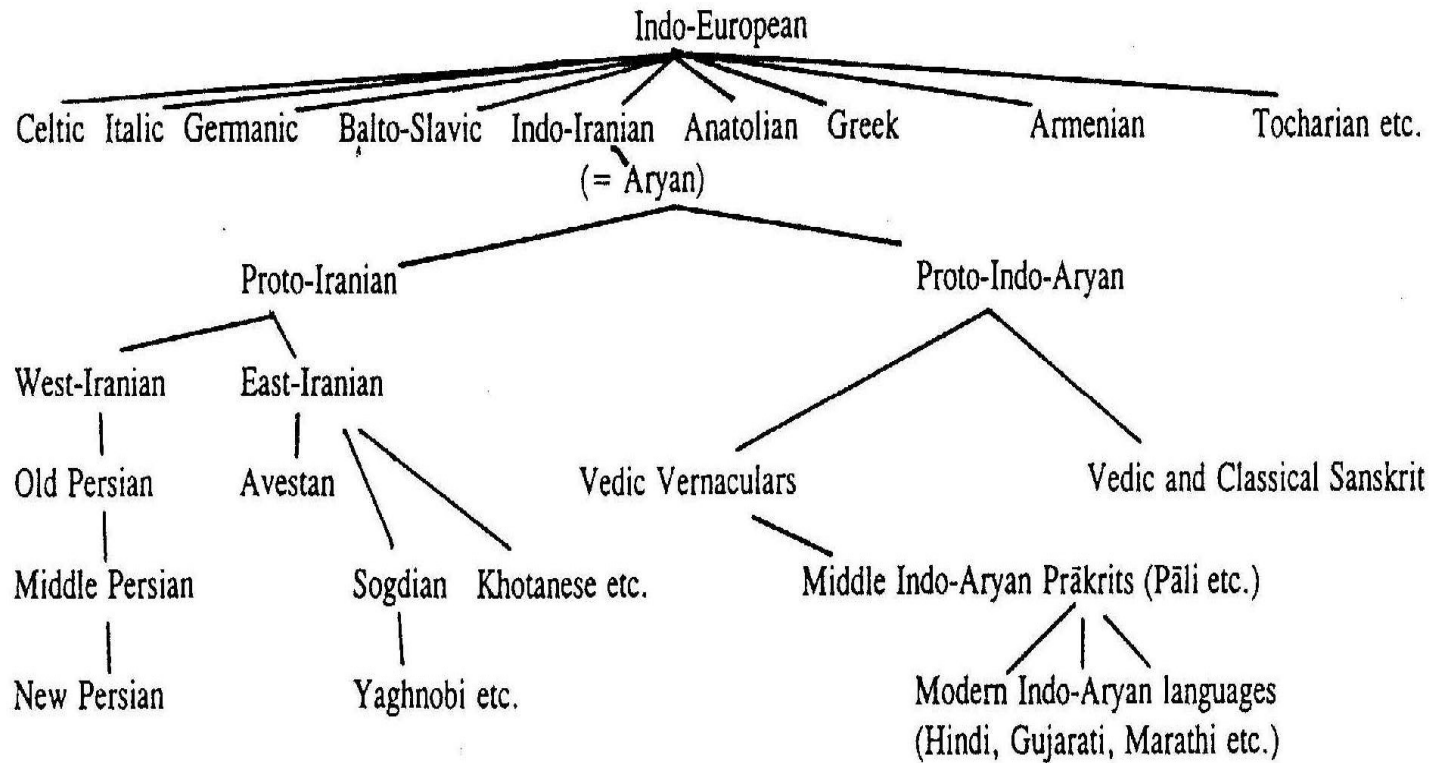
- Language of the Avesta
- Avesta: a body of texts to be recited in Zoroastrian rituals
- Gathas: ca. 1500 BCE

## Old Iranian

- Avestan
- Old Persian. Earliest attestation: 520 BCE
- Shared innovations, e.g. Ilr. \*s to PrIr. \*h:

Av. *haōma-*, OP *hauma-* < Proto-Iranian \**ha<sub>u</sub>ma-* < Indo-Iranian \**sa<sub>u</sub>ma-*

# Simplified stemma of Indo-European Languages



## Proto-Indo-Iranian (= Proto-Aryan)

- Reconstruction of ritual terms and concepts:
  - Proto-Iranian *\*hauma-*, Vedic *sóma-* < Ilr. *\*sauma-*, from the root Ilr. *\*su* 'to press'
  - Av. *ārmaiti-* 'right-mindedness', Ved. *arámati-* < Ilr. *\*ara-mati-*

# Distribution of Indo-European Languages



Map from J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* 1989, p.23 , © Thames and Hudson

## Indo-European Homeland in the Sredny Stog culture



ca. 4500 –  
3500 BCE



## Wild horses in the Pontic-Caspian Steppes



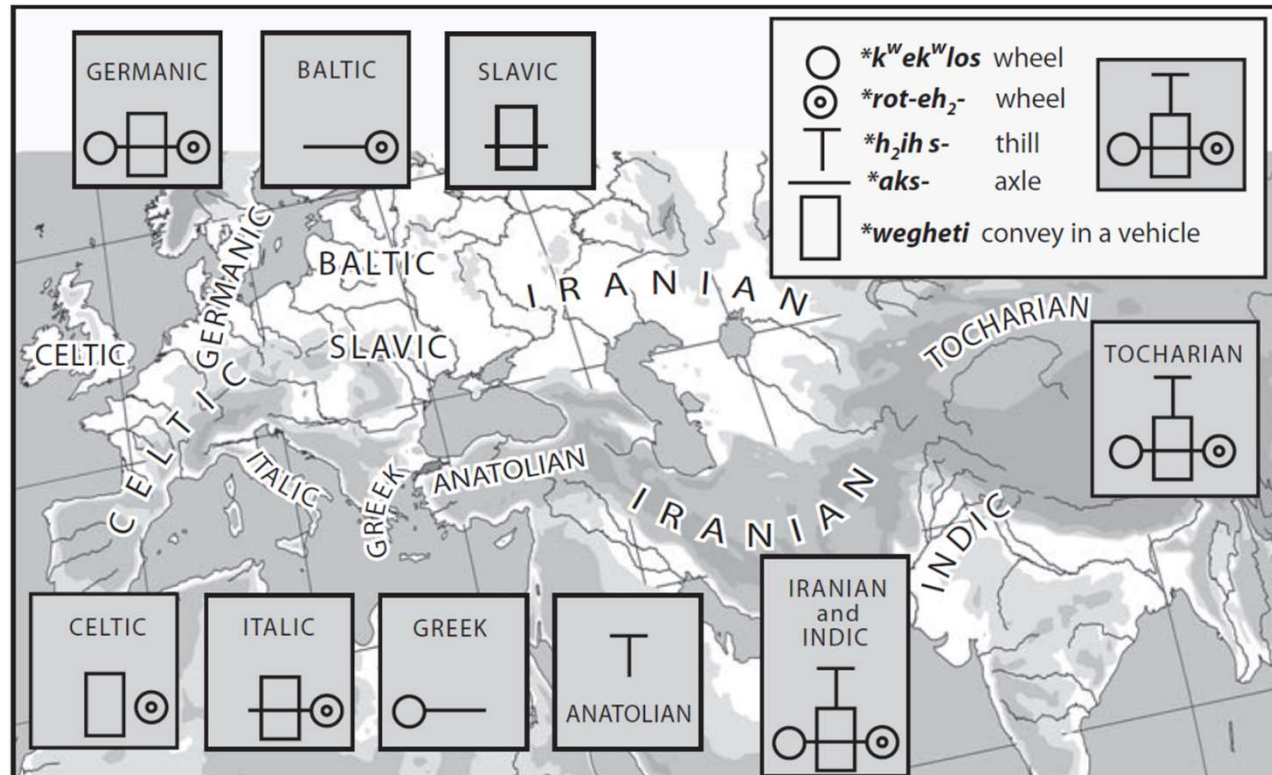
## The Dereivka site



ca. 3800 –  
3500 BCE

# Horse-drawn chariots

Geographical distribution of the Indo-European wheel and wagon terminology





## Horse-drawn chariots

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

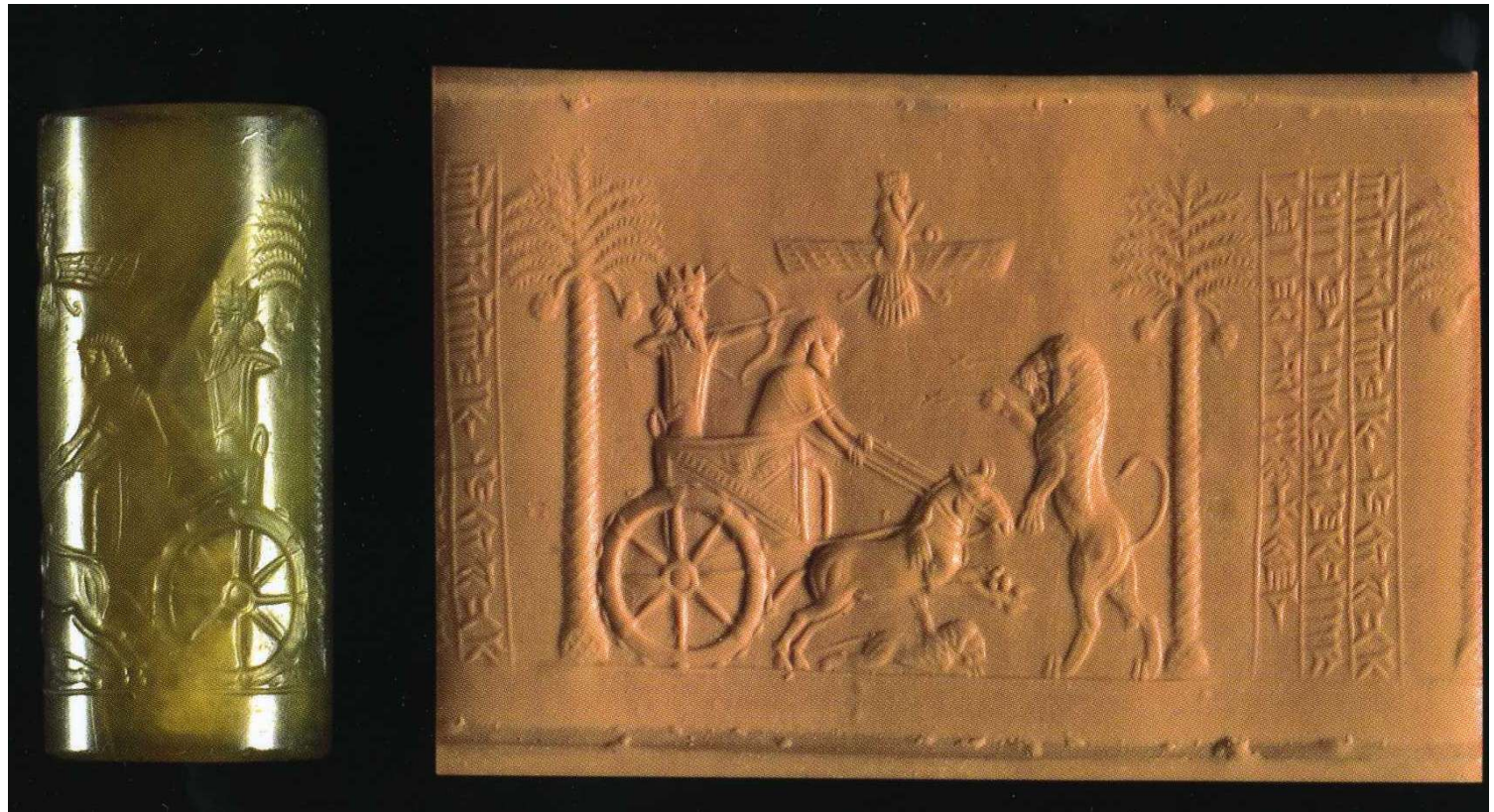
© British Museum  
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



## Horse-drawn chariots

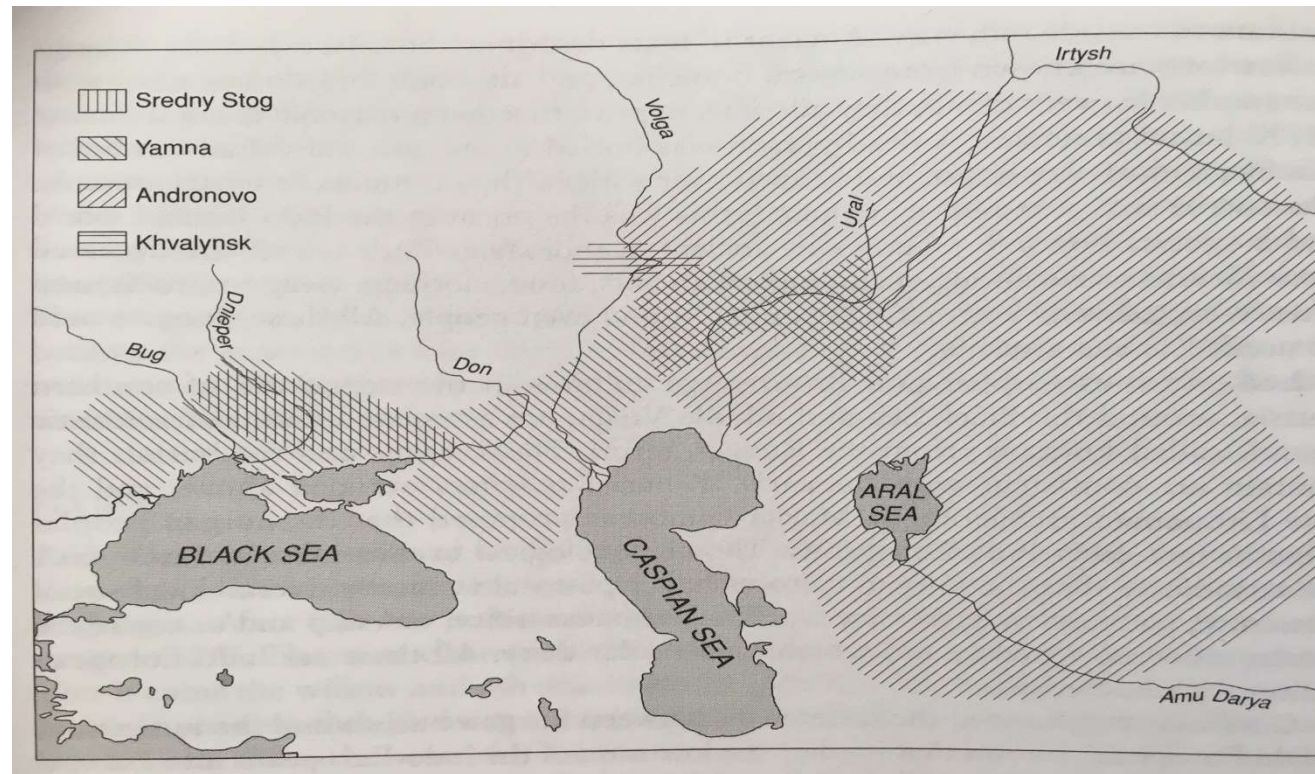
Cylinder seal  
showing Darius  
hunting a lion  
Achaemenid,  
British Museum

© British Museum  
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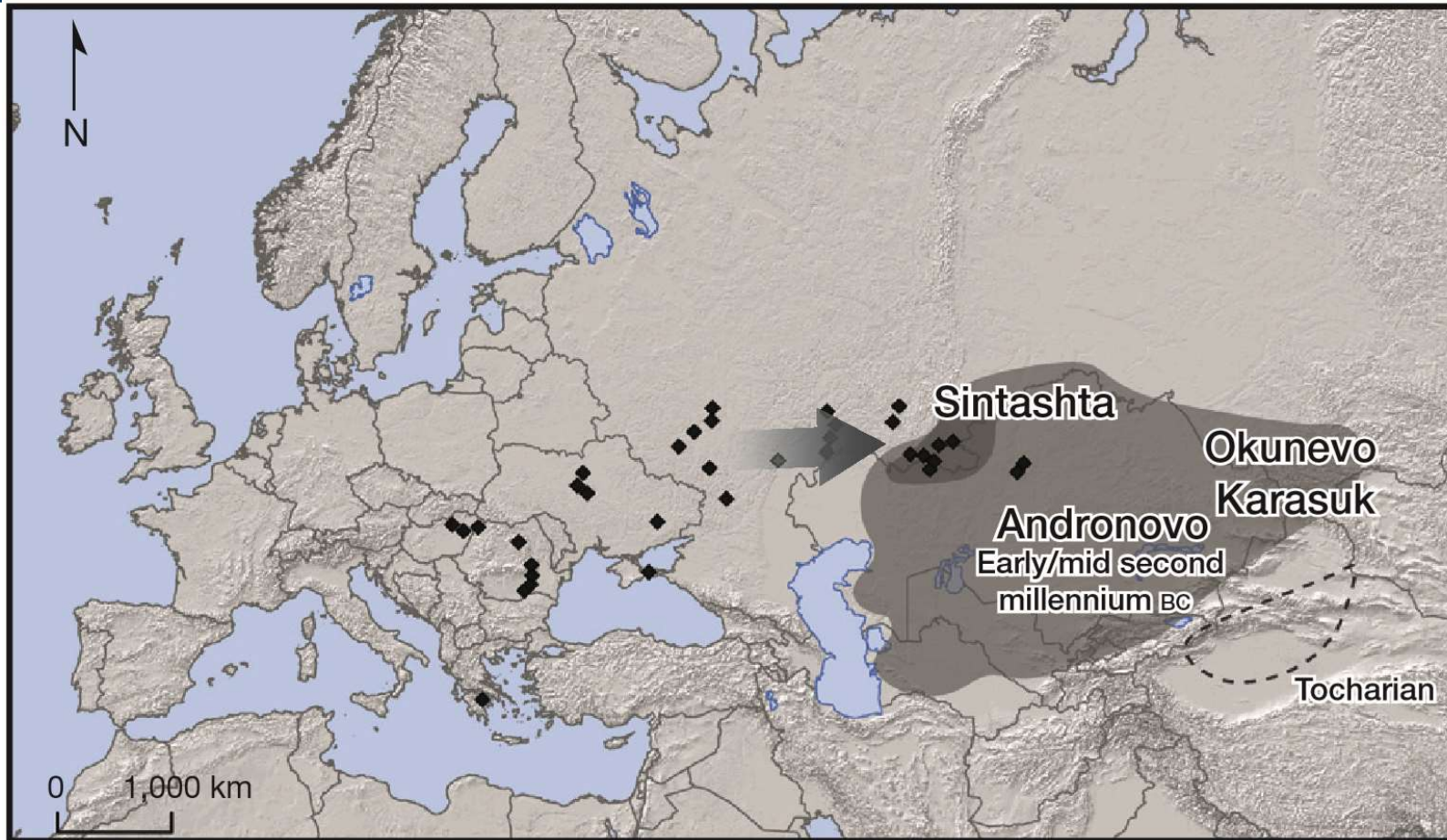




Pontic-Caspian  
cultures associated  
with Proto-Indo-  
Europeans and  
Indo-Iranians

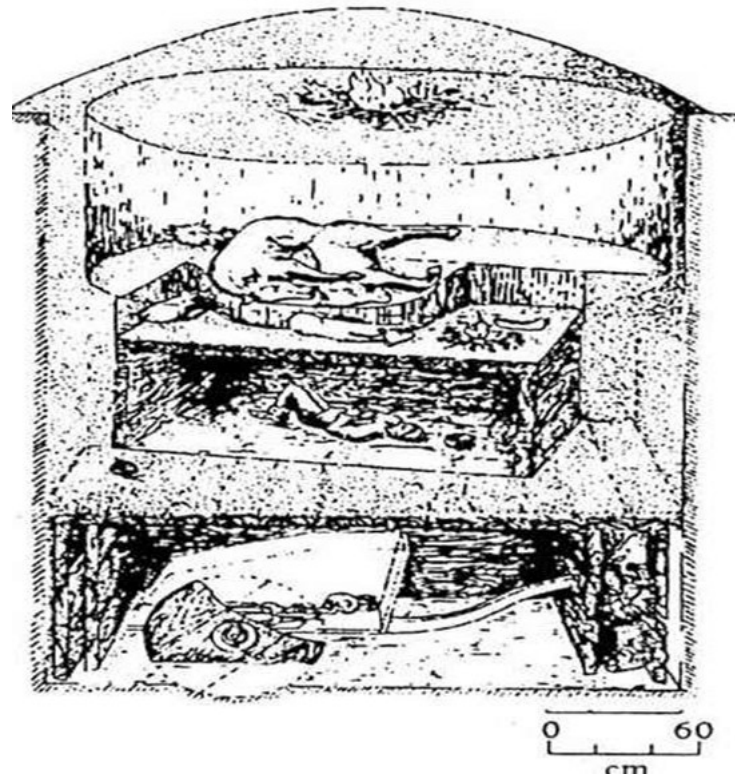


# Indo-Iranians and the Sintashta culture



## The Sintashta culture

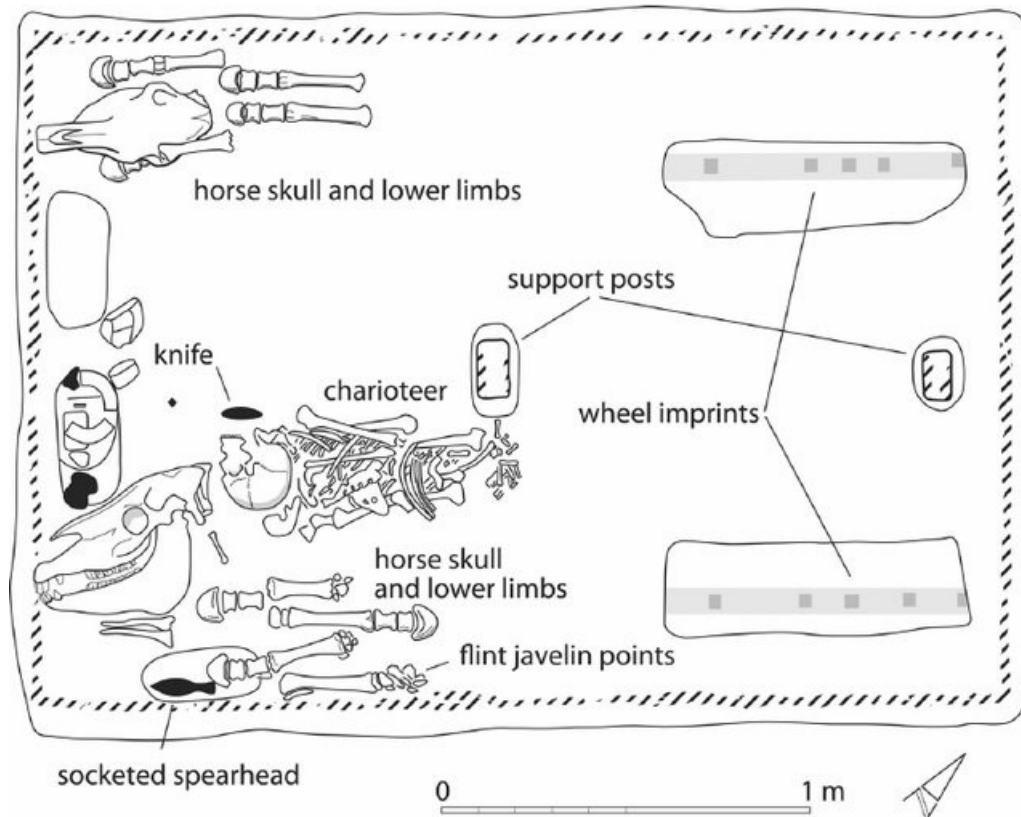
Burial from Sintashta  
with cart and horses





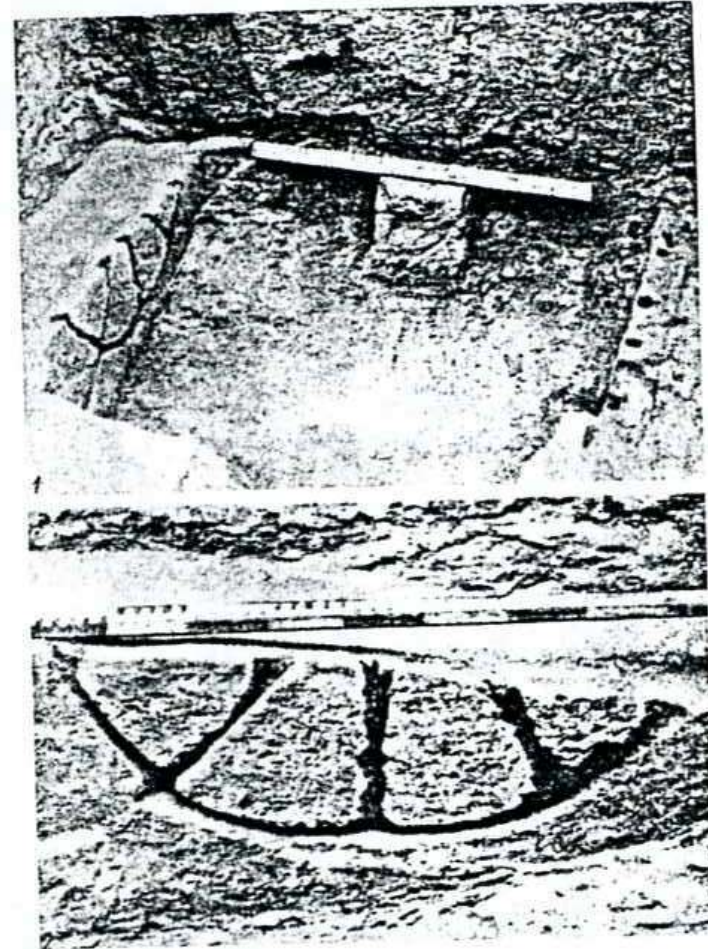
## The Sintashta culture

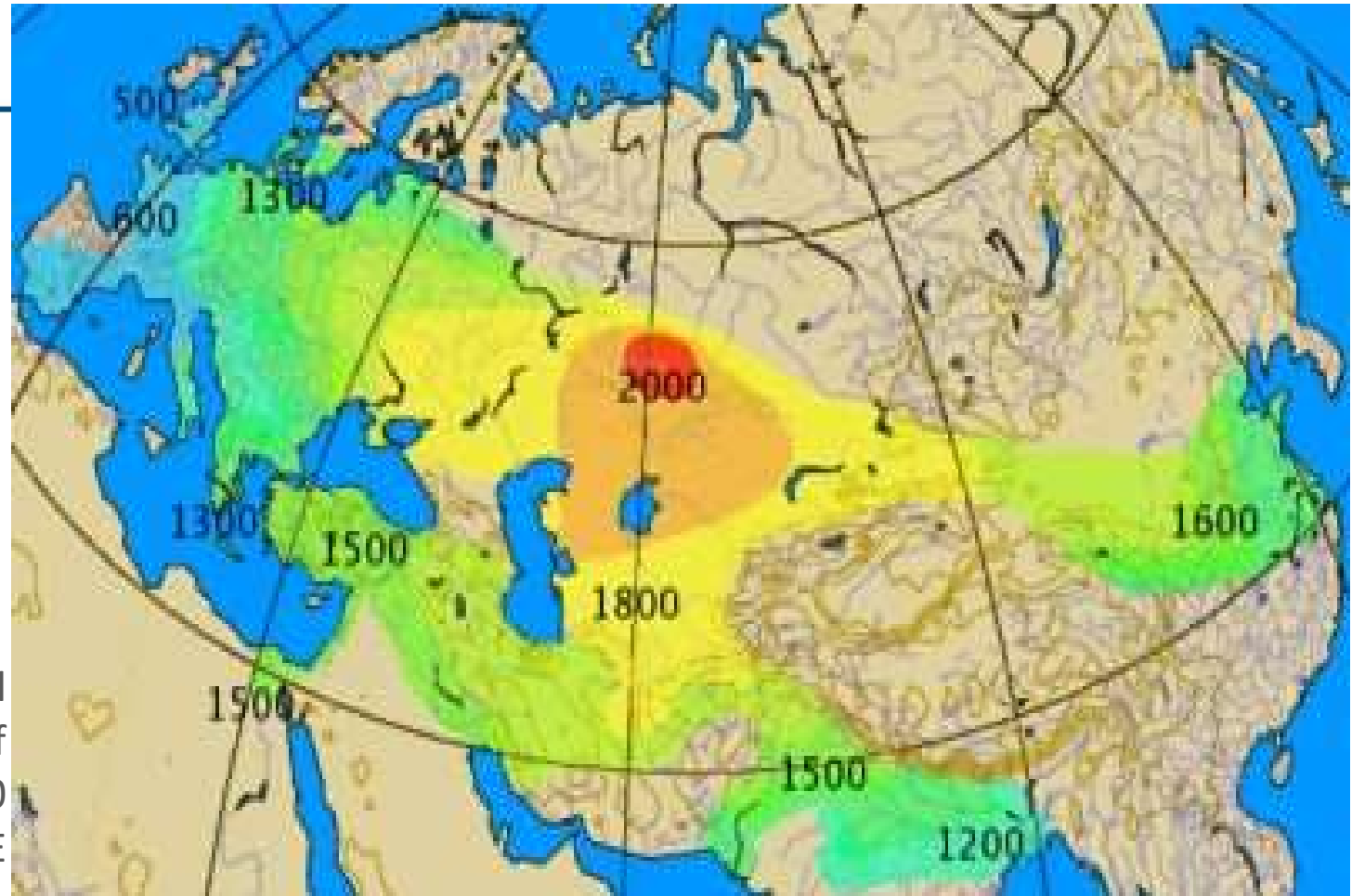
Sintashta Mogila Grave 30: Burial of a charioteer with two horses, two ten-spoke chariot wheels, weapons (after Anthony 2009: 56, fig 4.4)



## The Sintashta culture

Sintashta Grave 28: Imprint of the  
spoked wheel of a chariot





Approximate historical  
map of the spread of  
the chariot, 2000–500  
BCE

## Horse-drawn chariots

- A spoked wheel on display at The National Museum of Iran, Tehran
- Late 2nd millennium BCE, found at the Elamite site of Choqa Zanbil near Susa, Khuzestan (Iran)

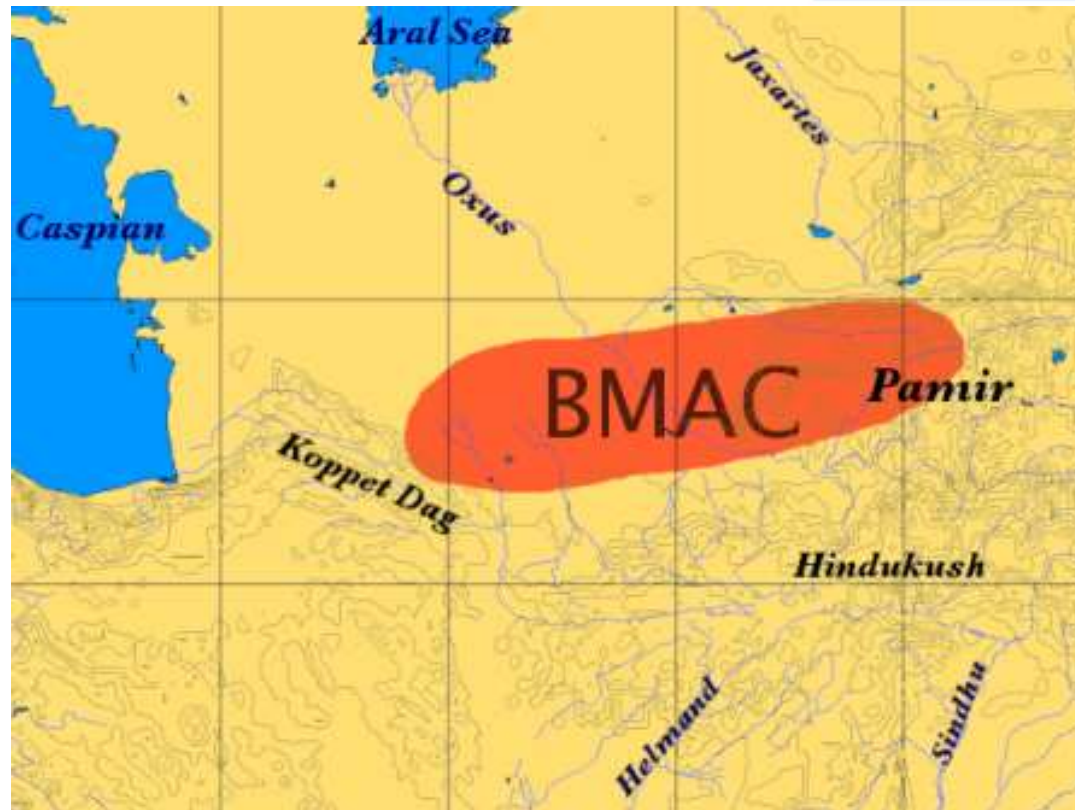


## Burial pits constructed like houses

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

Rigveda 10.18.10—13, translation by Jamison & Brereton 2014

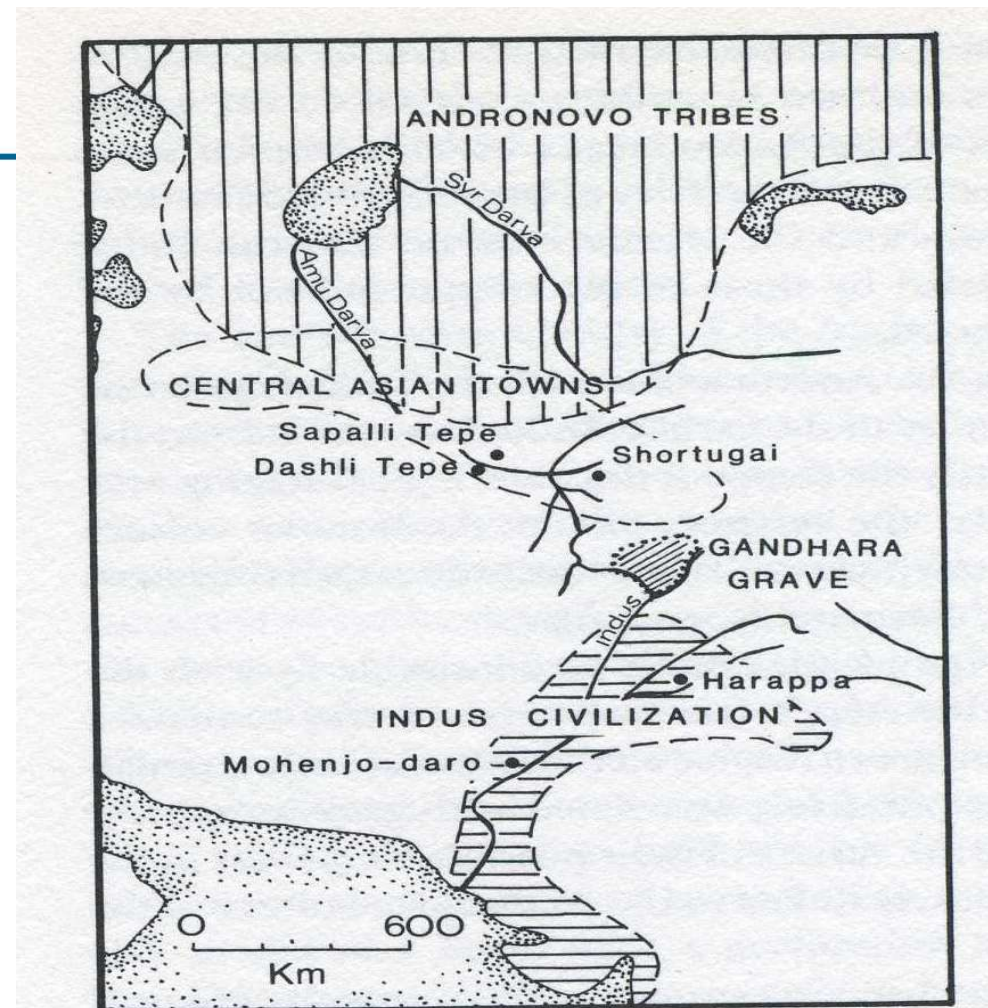
# The Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex





## Ancient contacts

Andronovo tribes overlapping with the  
BMAC culture and interacting with the  
Indus civilisation



## Substrate words in Ir. languages

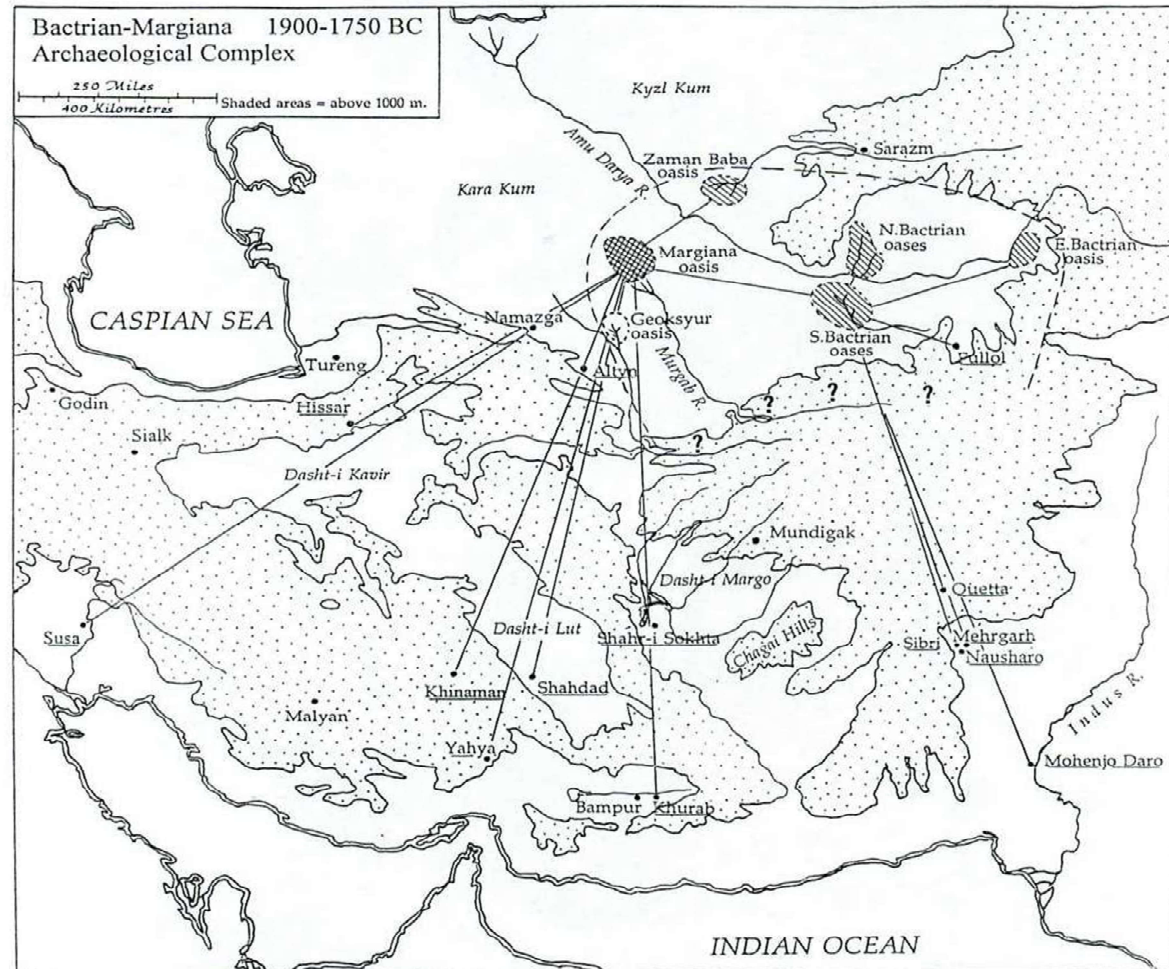
- ‘Brick’: Vedic *īṣṭakā*, Av. *ištiia-*, OP *išti*, from a Central Asian word *\*išt*
- ‘Camel’: Ved. *úṣṭra-* Av. *uštra-*



# BMAC expansion

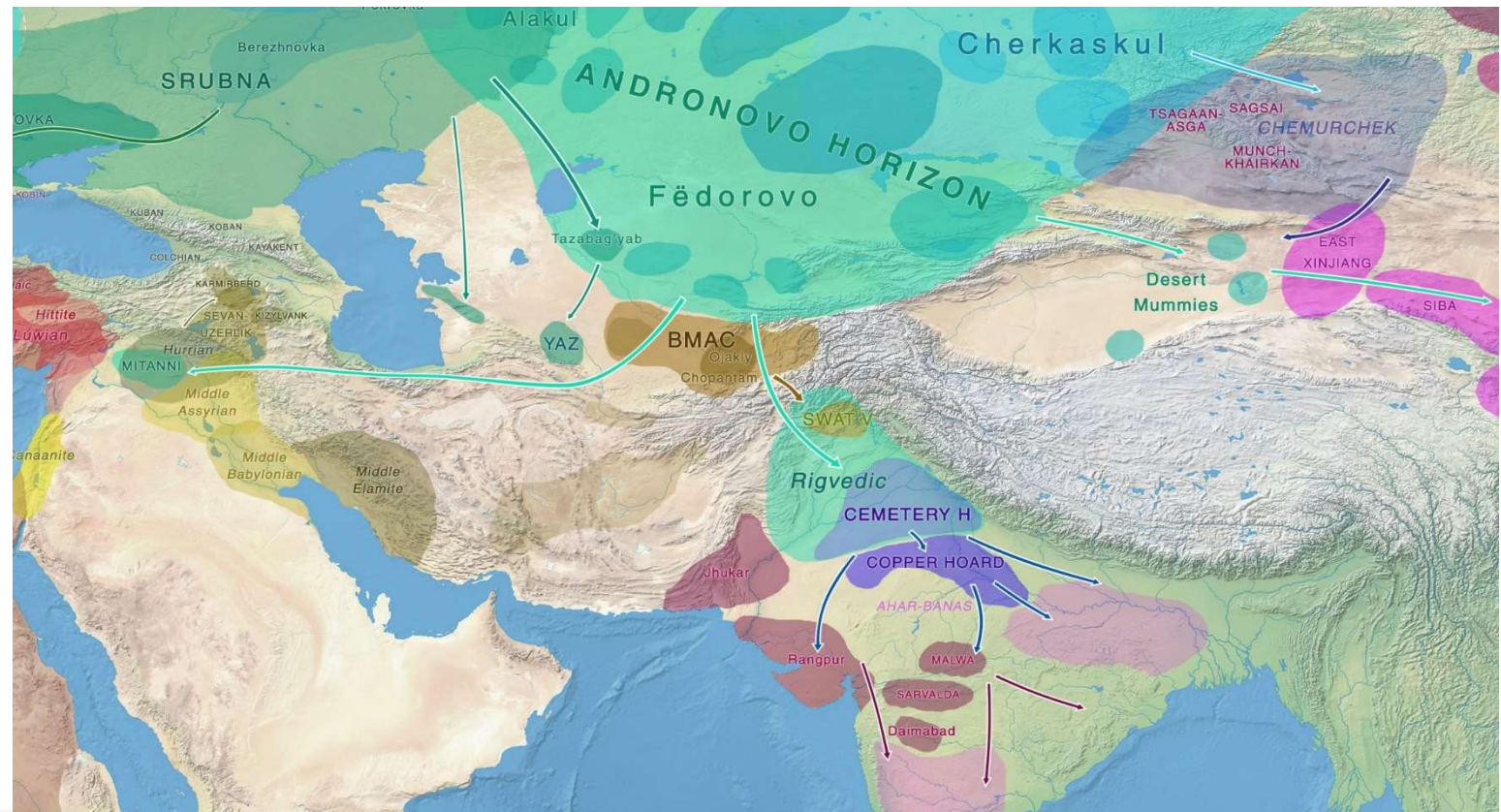
Expansion of BMAC material southwards

Picture credit: Fredrik T. Hiebert



# Middle Bronze Age migrations

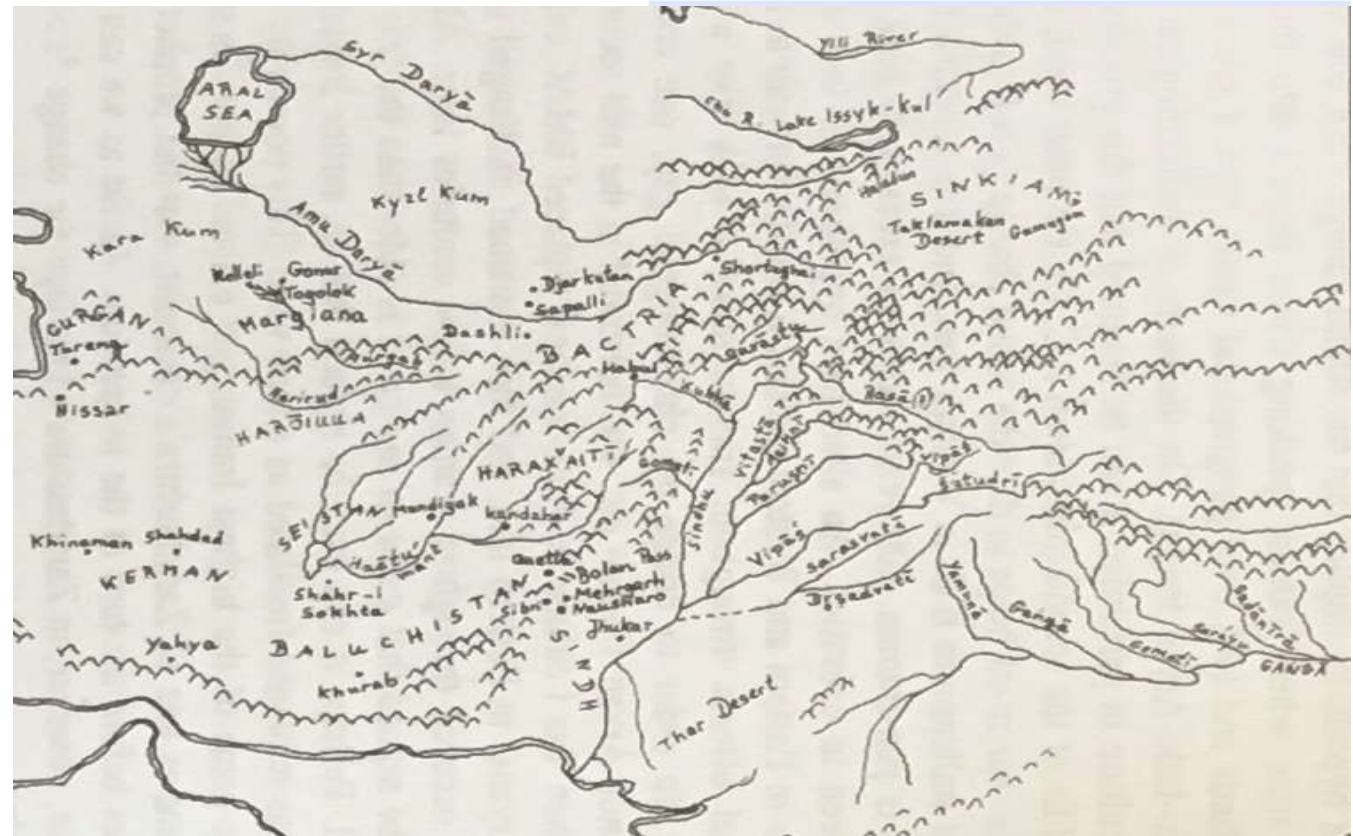
ca. 2100–  
1600 BCE





## Hydronomy in the Ir. borderlands

- Av. *harax<sup>v</sup>aitī-*  
Ved. *sárasvatī-*
- Av. *harōiuua-*  
OP *haraiva-*,  
Ved. *sarayú-*  
< \**sarajū-a-*

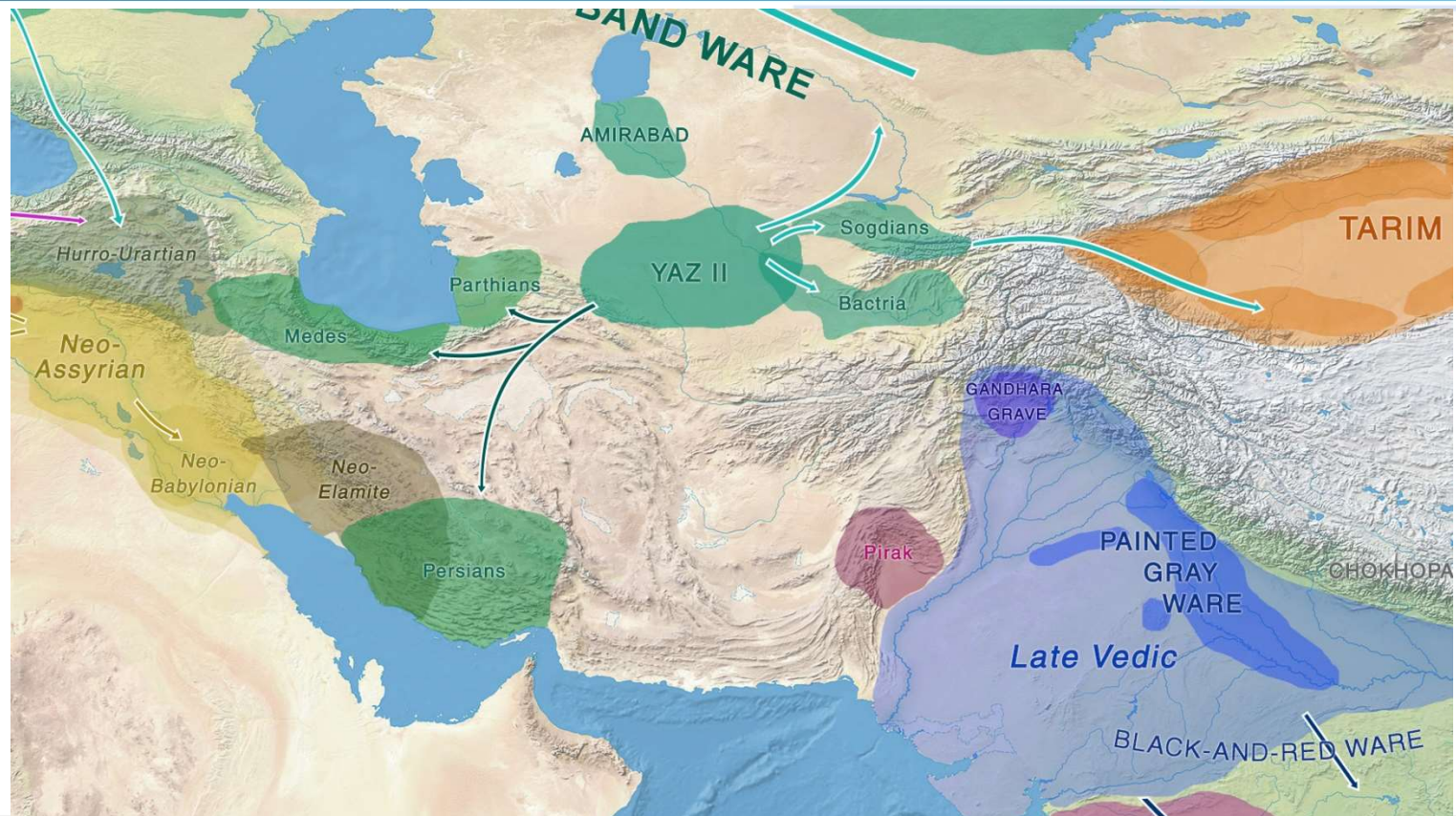


# Cultures associated with Indo-Iranian migrations



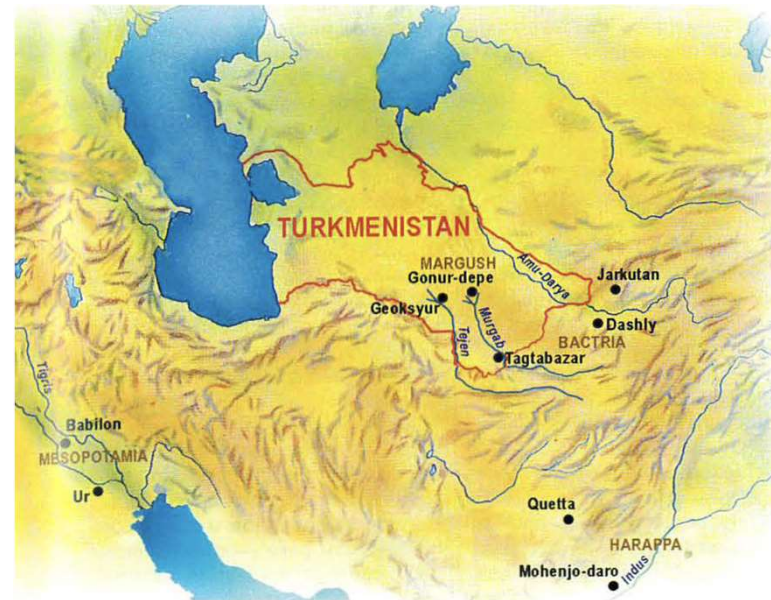
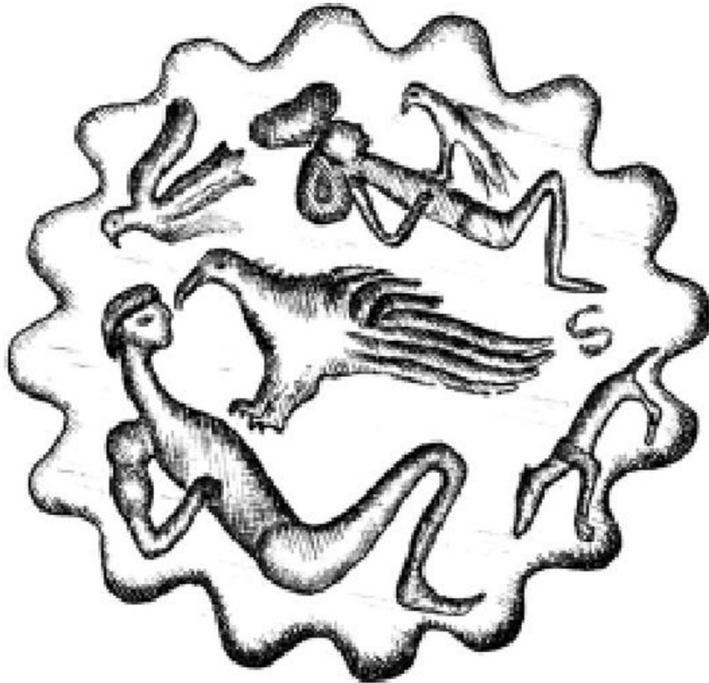
# Late Bronze Age migrations

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





## Burial practices



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