Ling 51: Proto-Indo-European Language and Society

Final Essay

The final essay and the final linguistics problem will constitute the remaining work for the course. You may turn them in any time before December 23rd (or after that if you must, but please arrange this with me ahead of time). If you are going to submit your answer electronically make sure that your answer is in .pdf format since a .doc or other word-processing file will usually become illegible owing to font changes and changes in operating systems. Again: I will accept electronically submitted answers only in .pdf format.

Essay Directions
We’ve covered a lot of ground in this seminar — a long period of history, a large geographic area, a range of cultural topics, and a not inconsiderable amount of linguistic information and theoretical tools and concepts. The range of topics for a final essay is therefore really quite open. To give you some guidelines I will suggest two possibilities.

1. Many issues in Proto-Indo-European linguistics and cultural reconstruction are debated, and even if a scholarly consensus has emerged, it may have emerged only very recently; in other cases the actual data we have available to us — archaeological, linguistic or literary — is consistent with more than one interpretation. Given this, you may wish to write an essay discussing a controversial or open-ended issue of this sort, considering various interpretations of the past and the pros and cons or a particular conclusion. You can refer to the readings (textbooks and other readings) and, if necessary, to other sources you may find relevant. Nevertheless this is not intended as a research paper per se, so you are not expected to bring in a lot of new material into your essay.

However, your essay should not be based primarily on the same reading which you did for your class presentation. If you are addressing a topic related to one you did for your presentation, you need to make substantial use of some of the ‘extra’ readings; if your essay is on a topic that overlaps very little with what you presented in class, you may make less use of ‘extra’ readings.
Some of the more obvious possible questions we’ve seen are:

a. Who were the Tarim mummies? Where did the Tocharians come from?

b. Where was the Proto-Indo-European homeland?

c. How did Anatolian languages end up being spoken in Anatolia?

d. How extensive were the contacts between the Anatolian and Aegean (Mycenean) civilizations?

e. What aspects of the PIE pantheon and religion can really be constructed from comparing historically attested traditions?

f. In what ways does Hittite society or law reflect PIE society and in what ways is it the product of the pre-Indo-European culture of the region?

g. Who tamed the horse first and where?

h. To what extent does phenomenon X (fill in the blank) really reflect a tripartite structuring of PIE society and cosmos, as Dumézil proposed? Are there other ways to construe the facts?

i. What were the hypothetical PIE ‘laryngeal’ segments? How confident can we be that there was a language which contained such sounds?

j. Was Zoroastrianism the first ‘monotheistic’ religion that departs radically from a proto-Indo-Iranian polytheism as later reflected in the Vedas? Or is Zoroastrian ‘monotheism’ really the result of Judeo-Christian European historians imposing (perhaps unknowingly) their perspective on another culture?

You can probably think of many others. The above are not even necessarily the most original topics.

2. This option is a bit more open-ended but provides you an opportunity to consider the overall impact of this course. You may choose to write an essay about something you learned (or concluded) which was, to you, rather surprising, that is, something which prior to taking the class you would not have suspected was the case and which you might expect someone with no acquaintance with the topic (such as, say, a roommate or friend) to initially reject as quite implausible. Then, using evidence of whatever kind is suitable, present an argument that the ‘surprising’ or ‘implausible’ conclusion is correct. This option could, if you wish, even take the form of a simulated dialogue between you and the other person — in the manner of the dialogues which in non-literate societies were used as tools for arriving at complex conclusions.

Your essay should be about 6-8 printed pages in length; spacing is up to you! Don’t write anything just to make your essay longer; brevity can be beautiful (as the informationally ultra-compact Indian sutras strangely illustrate), and we all know that word-processing programs make it very easy to write before you think; so think first, then write. I am much more concerned about: quality of the content, originality of the ideas, skill in synthesizing concepts and information from various sources, pertinence of the data, logical thinking and a sensibly organized presentation.