

UK linguist reconstructs sounds of prehistoric language

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What did our ancestors sound like in the 50th century B.C.? University of Kentucky linguistics lecturer Andrew M. Byrd examines ancient Indo-European languages (such as Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Old English) and the language from which they derive, Proto-Indo-European, or PIE.

PIE is the prehistoric ancestor of hundreds of languages, including English, Spanish, Greek, Farsi, Armenian, and more. The language is typically thought to have been in use around 7,000 years ago, though some suspect it was spoken at an even earlier time.

According to some archaeologists and the majority of linguists like Byrd, the people who spoke PIE were located just to the north of the Black Sea and were likely the first to tame horses, and perhaps even to invent the wheel.

The primary focus of Byrd's work is to understand what this language would have sounded when it was spoken millennia ago. Byrd says this all begins by looking at similarities in other languages.

"We start by gathering words, such as 'king,' from languages that we think are related and then find the common threads among them," he said. "When you bring these words together, you'll see that all of the words meaning 'king' or 'ruler' begin with something like an 'r' followed by a long vowel. Through examining trends in each [language](#), you can tell which parts of the word have changed over time, and working backward from that ... you can peer into the past and get an idea of what

PIE might have sounded like."

Byrd's work was recently featured on the website of [Archaeology Magazine](#), published by the Archaeological Institute of America. The online piece includes recordings of Byrd reading two fables constructed in PIE.

Since the recordings were published online, Byrd has been featured in several major news outlets, including the BBC, The Huffington Post, io9.com, Le Figaro, USA Today and Smithsonian magazine.

A full Q&A with Byrd is available at www.as.uky.edu/fables-reconstruction-andrew-byrd , including links to the recordings of Byrd reading fables in PIE.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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