

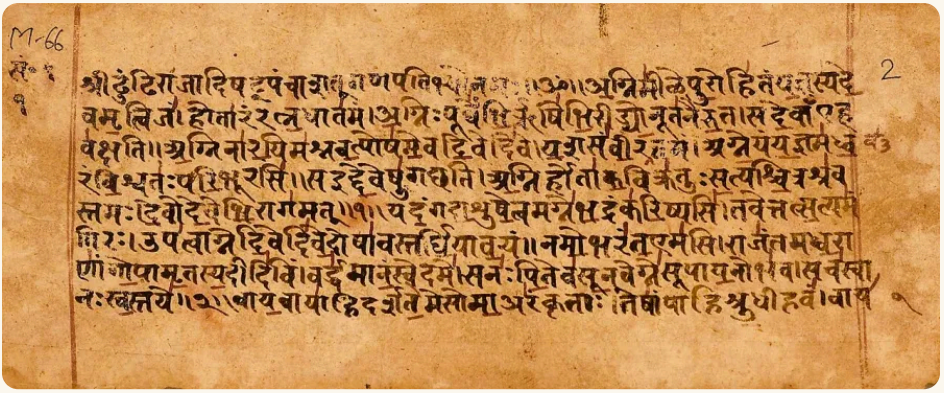
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Vedic Civilisation: Society, Polity and Religion

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Vedic Civilisation: Society, Polity and Religion

Practice: 8 MCQs



A Rigveda manuscript page, Mandala 1, Hymn 1, dedicated to Agni. Photo by Ms Sarah Welch, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Vedic age moved from tribes and cattle to kingdoms, iron and ritual. This article covers its society, polity, religion and the Rakhigarhi DNA debate.

- **Age:** c. 1500 to 600 BCE, split at about 1100 to 1000 BCE.
- **Early unit:** the jana, led by a rajan.
- **Councils:** sabha and samiti.
- **Iron:** first named in the Atharvaveda.
- **Parushni:** the Ravi.
- **Rakhigarhi:** little or no steppe ancestry in one sample.

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1. The Vedic people

The Vedic age is named after the Vedas, the oldest texts of the Sanskrit tradition. The Rigveda is the earliest of them.

1.1 When did the Vedic age run, and where?

Textbooks usually give c. 1500 to 600 BCE for the Vedic age. Historians split it into an Early (Rigvedic) phase and a Later Vedic phase. The break comes around 1100 to 1000 BCE. Early Vedic people were centred in the Punjab and lived in tribes, not kingdoms. The Rigveda names the land of seven rivers, the Sapta Sindhu. That is roughly today's Punjab and nearby areas.

Early and Later Vedic age

Early: unit	Jana (tribe), rajan
Early: wealth	Cattle
Early: place	Punjab
Later: unit	Kingdoms, towns
Later: wealth	Land, iron tools
Later: place	Western Ganga plain

Break at about 1100 to 1000 BCE.

Two phases side by side. Original explanatory diagram.

1.2 What is the Rigveda?

The Rigveda is the oldest of the four Vedas. It has 10 books with 1,028 hymns in about 10,600 verses. Most hymns praise gods. Scholars place the bulk of it between 1500 and 1000 BCE, in north-west South Asia.

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Vedic period
- Wikipedia, Rigveda

Early Vedic people lived mainly in settled farming kingdoms.

Think it through: why do books give different dates for the Vedic age?

Textbooks usually give c. 1500 to 600 BCE for the whole age. Historians split it into an Early and a Later phase, with the break around 1100 to 1000 BCE. Check which range the question uses.

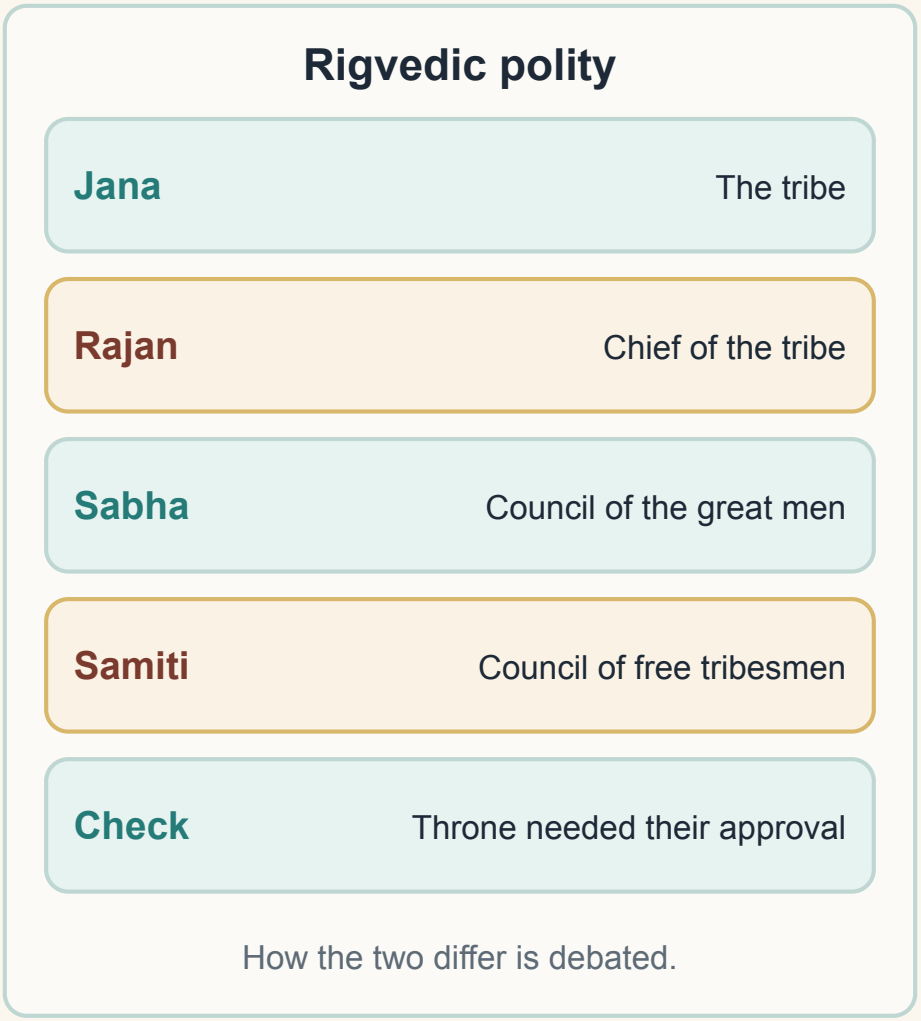
2. Rigvedic society and polity

2.1 What was the basic political unit?

The basic unit was the jana, or tribe. People owed loyalty to the tribe and its chief. Land was not yet fixed as a kingdom. The chief of a tribe was called the rajan.

2.2 What checked the rajan's power?

Two tribal councils limited the rajan: the sabha and the samiti. Together they helped govern the tribe. The rajan could not take the throne without their approval. Historians are not sure how the two differed. One view, from A. L. Basham, is that the sabha was a meeting of the great men and the samiti a meeting of all free tribesmen. Some tribes had no hereditary chief and were run by the councils alone.



Who governed the tribe. Original explanatory diagram.

2.3 Which women are linked to the Rigveda?

The Rigveda credits hymns to a few women. Ghosha and Lopamudra are among the women named. Formal caste lines had not yet hardened in this phase.

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Vedic period (section 2)
- Wikipedia, Rigveda (section 2)

The sabha and the samiti limited the power of the rajan.

Try it yourself: what were the sabha and the samiti?

They were the two tribal councils that checked the rajan. Historians are unsure how they differed. One view is that the sabha was a meeting of the great men and the samiti a meeting of all free tribesmen.

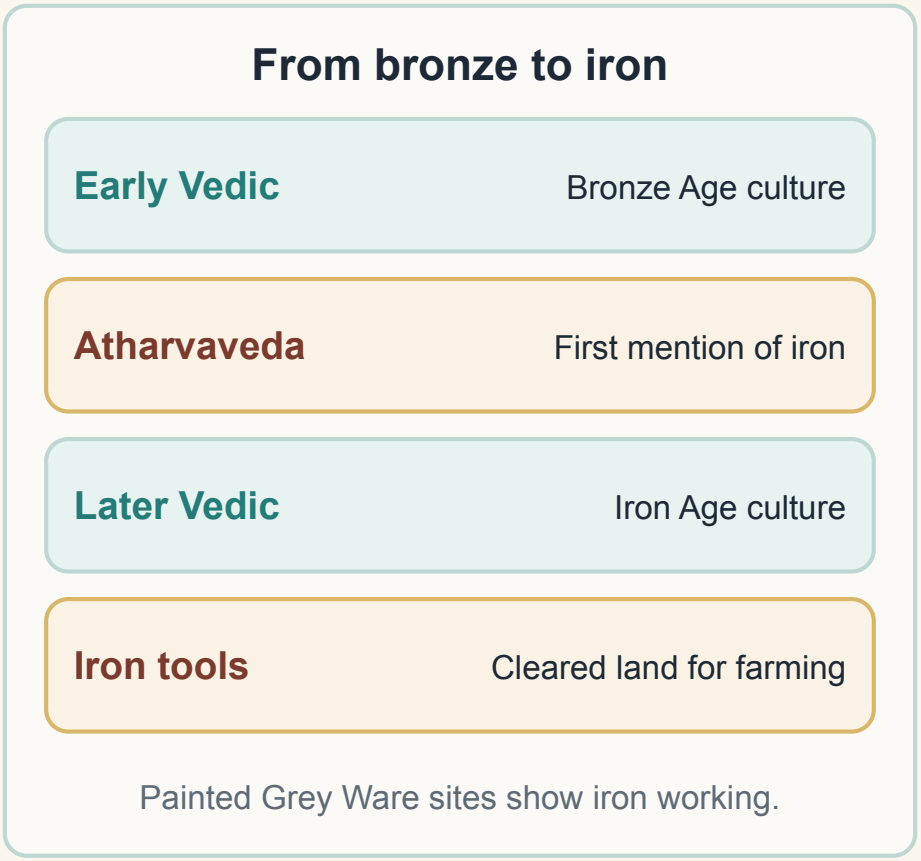
3. The Later Vedic shift

3.1 Which new texts appeared?

The Later Vedic age added the Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. It also added the prose Brahmanas and the early Upanishads. These texts were completed in the second half of the Vedic period.

3.2 What did iron change?

The Early Vedic period was a Bronze Age culture. Iron, called “black metal”, is first mentioned in the Atharvaveda. So the Later Vedic period was an Iron Age culture. Painted Grey Ware sites in the Ganga plain show extensive iron metallurgy. Iron tools helped clear land for farming.



Four steps in toolmaking. Original explanatory diagram.

3.3 How did tribes become kingdoms?

Around 1200 to 1000 BCE the culture spread east to the fertile western Ganga plain. Tribes settled and farmed. The second half of the Vedic period saw towns, kingdoms and a complex social order. The Kuru kingdom codified the orthodox sacrificial ritual. As monarchy grew, the rajan moved away from the people.

3.4 What happened to the varna system?

A hierarchy of four varnas emerged: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The later Vedic texts fixed the roles, status and ritual purity of each group.

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Vedic period (section 3)
- Wikipedia, Painted Grey Ware culture

Iron is first mentioned in the Rigveda.

4. Religion: nature to ritual

4.1 Which gods did Rigvedic religion centre on?

Rigvedic hymns praise gods such as Indra, Agni and Varuna. Indra is tied to war and the storm. Agni is fire. Varuna is the personified sky. A Hittite-Mitanni treaty of the mid-14th century BCE names Varuna, Mitra and Indra. This gives an outside date for these gods.

4.2 Why did ritual and priests gain power later?

Later Vedic religion grew more ritual. The Kuru state codified the orthodox sacrifice. The effects of the Rajasuya sacrifice depended on the varna of the sacrificer. Brahmana priests who knew the rites gained status. The early Upanishads, finished late in the period, turned toward philosophy.

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Rigveda (section 4)
- Oxford History of India, ch. on the Vedic age (Univ. of Chicago copy)
- Wikipedia, Vedic period (section 4)

Remember this: three Rigvedic gods.

Indra: war and storm. Agni: fire. Varuna: the sky. An outside treaty from the mid-14th century BCE names Varuna, Mitra and Indra too.

5. Cattle, land and rivers

5.1 What did wealth mean in Rigvedic times?

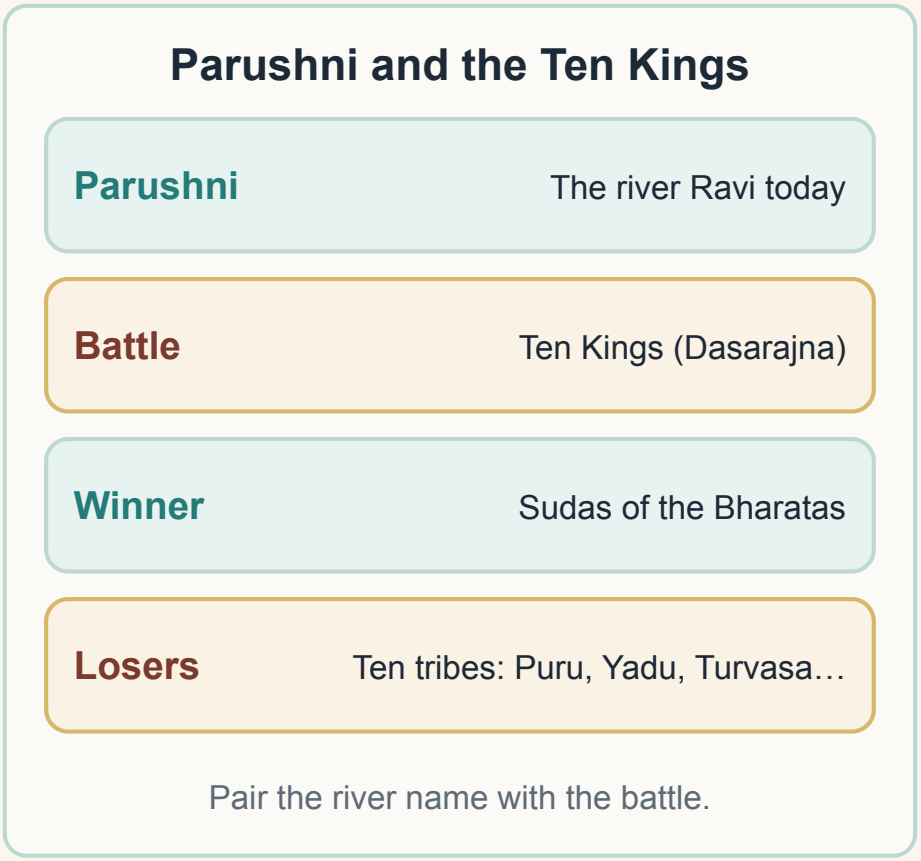
Cattle counted as wealth for the Early Vedic tribes, who lived mainly by herding. The Rigveda uses gomat, “rich in cattle”, for a wealthy person. Later, settled farming and land became more important.

5.2 What does the Rigveda say about wells?

Rigveda 10.101.7 speaks of a well. In Griffith’s translation the line is “Pour forth the well with stone wheel, wooden buckets”. So the verse points to well-water equipment.

5.3 Which river is the Parushni?

The Parushni is the Rigvedic name of the river now called the Ravi. The Battle of the Ten Kings was fought on its bank. It is first mentioned in the Rigveda’s 7th book. King Sudas of the Bharata tribe won against a confederation of ten tribes, including the Puru, Yadu and Turvasa.



River and battle in one view. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Vedic period (section 5)
- Wisdomlib, Rigveda translation
- Griffith translation, Rigveda 10.101
- Wikipedia, Battle of the Ten Kings
- Haryana State Gazetteer, Vol. I
- Macdonell, A History of Sanskrit Literature, p.166

Parushni is the Rigvedic name of the river Ravi.

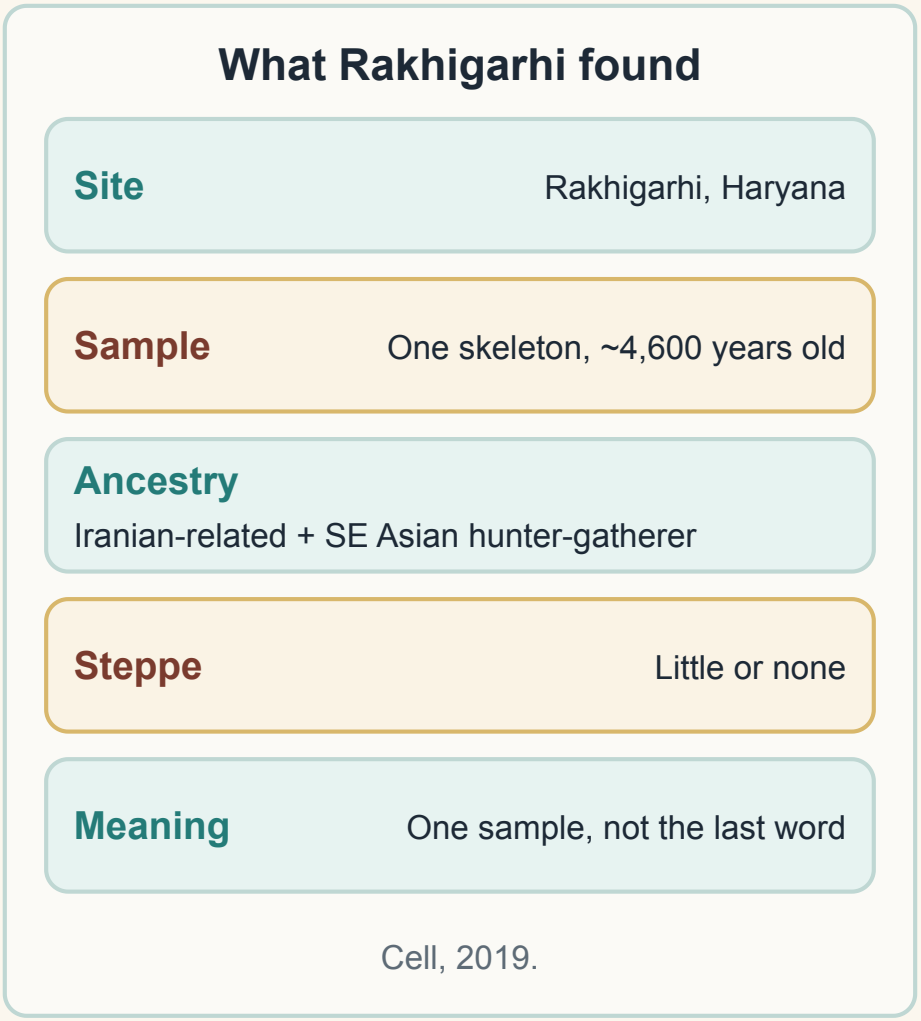
6. The Rakhigarhi DNA debate

6.1 What did the 2019 study find?

Rakhigarhi in Haryana is among the largest Indus Valley Civilisation sites. In 2019 the journal Cell published a genome from one skeleton from the site, of the mature Harappan phase, about 4,600 years ago. The person was a mix of ancestry related to ancient Iranians and ancestry related to Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers. The study found little or no steppe pastoralist ancestry.

6.2 Does it disprove the Aryan migration theory?

No. The result shows steppe ancestry was not widespread in this one Indus-period sample. That alone neither proves nor disproves migration. The study also argues against a large spread of Iranian farmers into South Asia. Treat it as one skeleton, not the last word.



From site to result. Original explanatory diagram.

6.3 What is the latest news on Indian digs?

At Rajghat in Varanasi, a team began documenting old finds in January 2026 and had recorded about 4,000 artefacts by September 2026. A box holding a skeleton from the 1960s dig was opened in August, and

BHU has begun a genetic study. Rajghat is a different site and period from Rakhigarhi. It is not Vedic evidence.

Sources:

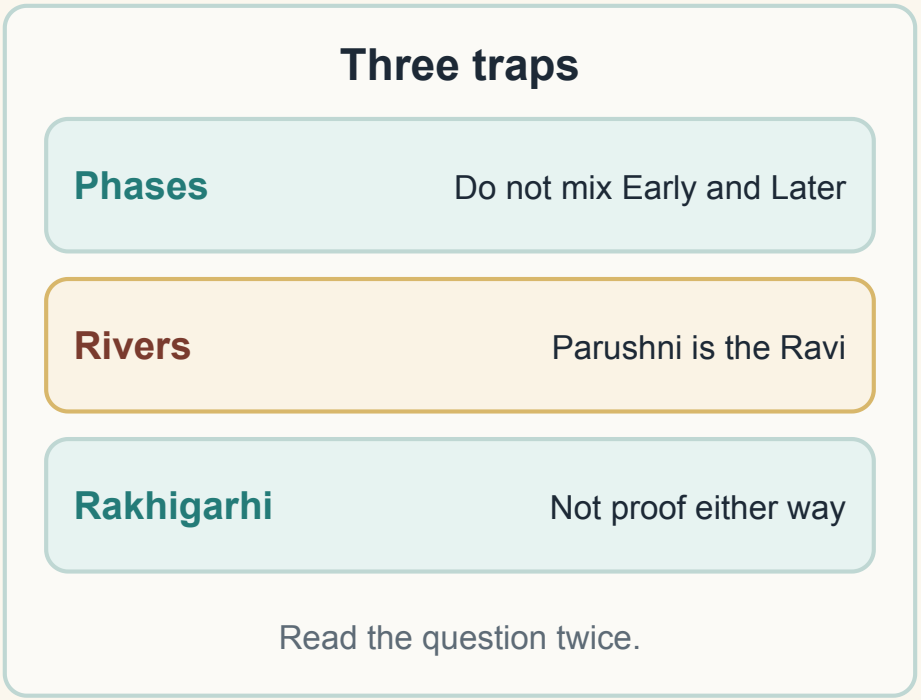
- Shinde et al., Cell 2019 (DOI)
- Wikipedia, Rakhigarhi
- The Indian Express, Rajghat excavation explained
- BHU, genetic study of the Rajghat skeleton

The 2019 Rakhigarhi study proves that the Aryan migration never happened.

7. Traps exam setters use

7.1 Which traps come up again and again?

The first trap is mixing the phases. Early: jana, cattle, open-air hymns, loose caste. Later: kingdoms, land, ritual, rigid varna. The second trap is pairing rivers. Parushni is the Ravi. The third trap is reading Rakhigarhi as proof against migration. It is not.



Common exam mistakes. Original explanatory diagram.

7.2 Where have these topics appeared before?

UPSC CSP 2026, GS Paper I asked two linked questions. One asked which evidence supports well irrigation reaching the Punjab and Haryana plains in Rigvedic times. The other asked to match a Rigvedic river name with its modern name. Parushni is the Ravi.

- Source: UPSC CSP 2026, GS Paper I (fully answered)

Sources:

- Wikipedia, Vedic period (section 7)
- Wikipedia, Battle of the Ten Kings (section 7)
- Shinde et al., Cell 2019 (DOI) (section 7)

Explain it back: how do Early and Later Vedic life differ?

Early: jana, cattle, open-air hymns, loose caste lines. Later: kingdoms, land, iron tools, ritual and a rigid varna order. Say each in one sentence.

Your understanding checks

Your 5 quick checks Answered 0 of 5 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads.

Practice: 8 MCQs

Practice MCQs

1. What was the basic political unit of Rigvedic society?

A. Janapada

B. Jana

C. Mahajanapada

D. Gana-sangha

See answer ↓

2. Which two tribal councils limited the power of the Rigvedic rajan?

A. Gana and parishad

B. Sabha and sangha

C. Samiti and gana

D. Sabha and samiti

See answer ↓

3. In which Veda is iron first mentioned?

A. Rigveda

B. Yajurveda

C. Atharvaveda

D. Samaveda

See answer ↓

4. Parushni, a river of the Rigveda, is the modern:

A. Ravi

B. Sutlej

C. Jhelum

D. Beas

See answer ↓

5. Who won the Battle of the Ten Kings?

A. A chief of the Yadu tribe

B. Sudas of the Bharata tribe

C. A chief of the Turvasa tribe

D. A chief of the Puru tribe

See answer ↓

6. How many books does the Rigveda have?

A. Four

B. Ten

C. Twelve

D. Seven

See answer ↓

7. What did the 2019 Cell study of a Rakhigarhi skeleton find?

A. Little or no steppe ancestry

B. Only African ancestry

C. No Iranian-related ancestry

D. Mostly steppe ancestry

See answer ↓

8. Which kingdom codified the orthodox sacrificial ritual in the Later Vedic age?

A. Kuru

B. Panchala

C. Kosala

D. Magadha

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.**
   The jana, or tribe, was the basic unit. Its chief was the rajan.
   ↑ Q1
2. **D.**
   The sabha and the samiti helped govern the tribe. The rajan needed their approval for the throne.
   ↑ Q2
3. **C.**
   Iron, the 'black metal', is first mentioned in the Atharvaveda.
   ↑ Q3
4. **A.**
   The Parushni is the Ravi. The Battle of the Ten Kings was fought on its bank.
   ↑ Q4
5. **B.**
   King Sudas of the Bharata tribe won against a confederation of ten tribes.
   ↑ Q5
6. **B.**
   The Rigveda has 10 books with 1,028 hymns.
   ↑ Q6
7. **A.**
   It found ancestry related to ancient Iranians and to Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers, and little or no steppe ancestry. This one sample neither proves nor disproves migration.
   ↑ Q7
8. **A.**
   The Kuru kingdom codified the orthodox sacrificial ritual.
   ↑ Q8

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