Abstract: There are no known linguistic facts that would be best explained by a catastrophic flood or other major event involving the Black Sea in Neolithic times. This lack of evidence, however, could be due as much to our limited knowledge, both theoretical and factual, of linguistic paleogeography in western Eurasia as to the absence of such an event in antiquity. This paper will review what is known about the ages, origins, means, and causes of spread for all the Eurasian and Near Eastern language groups west of India (including now-extinct ancient languages), in an attempt to find any possible signs that the Neolithic linguistic geography of the area might have been affected by a Black Sea exodus or culture crash. The null hypothesis is that nothing out of the ordinary happened to languages in the vicinity of the Black Sea anywhere between the origin of food production in Southwestern Asia about 10,000 years ago and the dawn of history in Mesopotamia about 5000 years ago.

Keywords: language family, language spread, Indo-European, Afroasiatic, linguistic diversity, Caucasus, language extinction

1. INTRODUCTION

As basic background information, two important facts about the historical and modern distribution of language families in western Eurasia should be noted. First, the recent and modern diversity of language families there is notably low (Austerlitz 1980; Nichols 1992:232ff., 1997a ). Second, the extent and frequency of large language family dispersals and language spreads there is notably high (Nichols 1992:123ff., 1997a, b, 1998).

Languages of the area in antiquity were not those of today but their
ancestors (together with other languages now extinct). Therefore, the present focus will be on language families rather than individual modern languages, and specifically, it will concern the kind of family that can be called a *stock*, which is the oldest clade that is both demonstrably a clade and reconstructable by standard linguistic comparative method (Nichols 1992:24–25, 1997a:363, 2003a). A stock is demonstrable if it exhibits (1) shared paradigms, especially shared irregular paradigms (Greenberg 1960; Nichols 1996; Campbell 2003), or similar shared closed sets of forms, (2) identical or near-identical three-phoneme sequences in its basic vocabulary with significantly greater than chance frequency (Bender 1969), and/or (3) evidently cognate vocabulary with recurrent sound correspondences having significantly greater than chance frequency (Oswalt 1991; Ringe 1992; Nichols 1996; Kessler 2001). A stock is reconstructable if its basic vocabulary displays regular sound correspondences and if cognates can generally be distinguished from non-cognates. Examples of stocks include Indo-European, Semitic, Kartvelian, and Uralic. Isolates such as Basque, Korean, and Zuni are one-language stocks. Three languages of the ancient Near East–Sumerian, Hurrian-Urartian, and Hattic–are often classified as isolates because they have no attested sister languages, though, of course, in their own time they may have had sister languages that happen not to have been written. Afroasiatic, the ancestor to Semitic and its sister stocks, is demonstrably a family (Greenberg 1960; Newman 1980) but has not so far been shown to exhibit regular correspondences. Daniels (2004) gives a summary table of the main evidence for this, while Appleyard (1999) and Hetzron (1990a) cite some lexical evidence. At present, Afroasiatic is the only clear example of a demonstrable but not reconstructable family.1

A stock can have many major branches (as Indo-European does), only a few (as Uralic does, with a primary bifurcation into Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic), or only one (as isolates like Basque do). Young families lacking external kin, like Chumashan or Japanese-Ryukyan, are also one-branch stocks with recent divergence. A stock can have many daughter languages (as Austronesian does), only a few (as Kartvelian and West Caucasian do), or only one (as isolates do).

Because language is transmitted by learning and can be adjusted to the social and cultural context, all languages change constantly. As a result, the evidence crucial to demonstrating relatedness eventually drops out of usage or changes beyond recognizability. Evidence sufficient to prove relatedness rarely survives more than several millennia. Most of the oldest firm stocks are around 6000 years old (good examples are Indo-European, Austronesian, Uto-Aztecan, and the Semitic and Chadic branches of Afroasiatic). Under the right circumstances–chiefly, when a family is well attested in a number of daughter languages and happens to have a durable and distinctive grammatical “signature”–somewhat older families can be detected. Two such families fall into the greater Black Sea area, as will be discussed below. As a rule of thumb, then,