

Clipboards in paradise: comparative philologists and Proto-Indo-European institutions



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CLIPBOARDS IN PARADISE: COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGISTS AND PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

ABSTRACT

The techniques used by comparative philologists to reconstruct proto-languages are not applicable to reconstructing culture, which may spread horizontally and involve convergence and coincidental parallel development. Examples discussed include the alleged ‘Proto-Indo-European’ royal horse-sacrifice ritual, coercive fasting, and institutionalised pederasty. Ignoring material from non-Indo-European-speaking areas has tended to skew the evidence in favour of ‘Indo-European’ and ‘Celtic’ continuity (‘Celtic head hunting’, for instance). It may also result in contrived syntheses of quite disparate material. The example given is an attempted association, as ‘Celtic’, of monosandalism in late medieval Irish royal inaugurations with the ‘Three Golden Shoemakers’ in Middle Welsh literature and the pair of golden shoes excavated at Hochdorf, near Stuttgart.

WHEN COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGISTS venture out of their own discipline into comparative mythology and sociology their conclusions become controversial. John Rhys, T. F. O’Rahilly, and Calvert Watkins are just a few such distinguished names within Celtic Studies. When practising comparative philology they were constrained by established phonological and other rules, and, if they observed them, there was a good chance that their conclusions would be accepted. Transferring their expertise to other disciplines, they were less shackled but also less likely to be able to convince other specialists. As the eminent Hellenist M. L. West admitted, ‘the mutations of divinities or of mythical motifs are subject to no rules’ – unlike phonemes – and ‘the validity of a comparison [...] has to be judged on its intrinsic appeal’ (West 2007: 24). In other words, conclusions are subjective.

Students of myth tend to be partial to their own brainwaves while ignoring those of others. West, for example, discussing the supposed Proto-Indo-European (and Celtic) horse-sacrifice ritual in his *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007: 415–19), ignored Wendy Doniger’s paper on the same topic, ‘Sacred cows and profane mares in Indian mythology’ (Doniger O’Flaherty 1979), presumably regarding it as far too speculative. In turn Doniger, reviewing West’s book under the heading ‘The land east of the asterisk’, claimed that he ‘rushes in, and stumbles, where pundits fear to tread’ (Doniger 2008: 27). ‘*Indo-Europe, the land east of the asterisk’ was her name for ‘the mythical land of the [Indo-European] family home’, chosen because hypothetical Indo-European forms are ‘usually designated by an apologetic or atropaic asterisk’.

She agreed with West that ‘linguistics is a science and the study of myth is not’ (ibid., 28).

The impasse of subjectivity is well illustrated by what a contemporary called ‘that powerful but erratic engine, – the mind of Professor Rhys’ (Holmes 1907: 291 n. 2). In Celtiberian *Uxama* (Osma) there is a Latin dedication to the Lugoves – two or more gods called *Lugus* – made on behalf of a guild of shoemakers (*sutores*).¹ Rhys linked it to the Welsh *Triads*, where *Lleu* (< *Lugus*), along with *Caswallon* and *Manawydan*, are the ‘Three Golden Shoemakers’, and to the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, where *Manawydan* and *Pryderi* ply that trade and *Lleu* and *Gwydion* disguise themselves as shoemakers. Rhys proceeded to identify *Lleu* and *Gwydion* with the Celtiberian *Lugoves*. For W. J. Gruffydd, followed by Eurys Rowlands, Jan de Vries, and others, this was one of ‘his numerous inspired guesses’.² Windisch, however, in ‘Die von John Rhys befolgte Methode mythologischer Deutung keltischer Götter und Sagenhelden’, called it a fantasy, as did Loth in ‘Le Mabinogi de Math vab Mathonwy d’après W. J. Gruffydd et la méthode en Celto-mythologie’.³ For what it is worth, my own (subjective) opinion is that the connection between the Welsh characters and shoemaking may be entirely due to the name *Manawydan uab Llyr* – an adaptation of Irish *Manannán mac Lir*, influenced by Welsh *Manaw* ‘Isle of Man’ – seeming to contain the word *manawyd* ‘awl’, the tool used by shoemakers (Sims-Williams 2011: 11–13). Another suggestion, by Bromwich (1961: 177), is that *Lugus*, like the Irish *Lug*, was a master of all arts and crafts (*samildánach*), and that it is just a coincidence that shoemaking happens to be the particular craft mentioned a millennium apart in Spain and Wales.⁴ But, if West is correct in admitting that there are ‘no rules’, it is difficult to see how this and others of Rhys’s ‘numerous inspired guesses’ can be *proved* to be wrong. By contrast, no philologist would now accept Windisch’s opinion that *Lleu*’s name is properly *Llew* ‘Lion’ (< Latin *leo*), a late variant, and does not derive from *Lugus* (Windisch 1912: 119; cf. Schrijver 1995: 340–3 and 384).

Philologists are accustomed to working with Indo-European family trees, created as an aid to reconstructing Proto-Indo-European. These aim to include as much inherited core data as possible while stripping out noise from innovations and interdialectal borrowings (e.g. Canby et al. 2024). Though entirely valid in their own terms, such trees are dubious models for the transmission of culture, precisely because there is a strong affinity between the transmission of

¹*Lugovibus / sacrum / L(ucius?) L(icius?) Urci/co(m) colle/gio sutoru/m d(onum) d(edit): Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, ii, 2818; cf. Tovar (1982: 595–6).

²Rhys (1898: 424–5); Gruffydd (1928: 238); de Vries (1963: 59–60); Rowlands (1961: 235).

³Windisch (1912: 115–21): ‘Als ein letztes Beispiel phantastischer Kombination’ [‘As a final example of a fantastic combination’] (Kap. XXXIV, p. 121); Loth (1929: 297–8): ‘Tout justement Windisch cite la trouvaille de Rhys sur les Lugoves comme un dernier exemple, caractéristique, après plusieurs autres, des fantastiques combinaisons à l’aide desquelles Rhys arrive, à force d’imagination, à construire des *sagas* pan-celtiques et une nouvelle mythologie’ [‘Windisch rightly cites Rhys’s discovery about the *Lugoves* as a final, typical example, following many others, of the fantastic combinations by which Rhys, by dint of imagination, manages to construct pan-Celtic sagas and a new mythology’].

⁴In Bromwich (2014: 186), ‘corroborated’ is a misprint for ‘combated’ in the first edition.

culture and the transmission of the noise which philologists strip out from their linguistic trees. Archaeologists have therefore been scathing about attempts to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European society, culture, religion, and literature by working back, from data attested in the daughter languages, towards an ‘asterisk reality’.⁵ In the 1980s, for example, Colin Renfrew dismissed ‘the work of Dumézil and his followers’ as a ‘dream world’ in ‘Dream Time’.⁶

In 2007 M. L. West admitted that

the heroic traditions of both India and Ireland portray warriors using horse-drawn chariots [and] we might be tempted to infer that this was an Indo-European style of warfare. Similarly [...] the myth of the Sun’s horse-drawn chariot is widely diffused among Indo-European peoples, and we might well conclude that this is an Indo-European myth. But it cannot be so, for archaeology tells us that the war-chariot with spoked wheels [...] first appeared [...] long after the Indo-European cultural continuum had been broken up.⁷

West (2007: 24) noted that ‘this is a devastating result for us seekers of Indo-European mythology’. Even so, it did not stop him writing *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, an enthralling book of 525 pages.

Turning specifically to Celtic, let us examine three examples of Proto-Indo-European ‘asterisk reality’ that are said to impinge on Ireland.

1. THE PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN HORSE-SACRIFICE RITUAL IN IRELAND

An example of what worries archaeologists is the above-mentioned Proto-Indo-European horse-sacrifice ritual, reconstructed by comparative mythologists from material ranging from the ancient Indian *śvamedha* (‘horse-sacrifice’) ritual, where the queen of an established king cohabits with a dead stallion, via the Roman *October Equus* festival, to Gerald of Wales’s darkest Donegal, where a king is allegedly paired with a live mare at his inauguration and then sits in the broth in which she has been stewed – a unique allegation rejected by all later Irish writers until it became grist to the Indo-European mill in 1927 (Schröder 1927, followed by, among others, Binchy 1970: 11 and 48 n. 21).⁸

⁵This useful term was borrowed by Wooding (2009: 69) from Shippey (2005: 22 and 24 (‘asterisk-reality’)).

⁶Renfrew (1987: 286; and 1990: 18). The archaeologist Brunaux (2022: 308–19) is even more dismissive of francophone syntheses of Indo-European, Gaulish, and Irish material. Some Celtic philologists have adopted a comparable position; for example: ‘There is no such thing as a Common – or Proto-Indo-European mythology’ (Zimmer 1990: 336; cf. Demoule 2025: 406).

⁷West (2007: 23). West had earlier argued that the idea of the sun god’s chariot, perhaps ‘an ox-cart with block wheels’, spread from the Near East in various directions in the post-Proto-Indo-European period (West 1997: 112, n. 34, and 507). Cf. Sims-Williams (2011: 132); Demoule (2025: 408–9).

⁸See Bartlett (2013: 12–15). The accuracy of Gerald’s ‘uncorroborated’ account is still debated; see Fitzpatrick (2004: 9, 25, and 182–93).

J. P. Mallory objected in 1989 that the comparative method

suggests that the horse is selected from a paired chariot team. But archaeological evidence indicates that the horse was not likely to have been employed in paired draught until the invention of the spoked wheel and chariot, which is normally dated after about 2500 BC and, consequently, some time after we would have assumed the disintegration of the Proto-Indo-European community. [...] Although cultural borrowing or parallel development may be suggested, this is a problem yet to be resolved.⁹

One might hypothesise that the chariot was added later in India, but the problem is that the right-hand horse of a chariot-pair, supposedly a crucial correspondence, is also selected in the Roman 'October Horse' sacrifice,¹⁰ and once one starts deleting awkward elements little will be left of the Proto-Indo-European ritual.

As well as the archaeological problem, there are philological ones. In 1955 Jaan Puhvel suggested that the Sanskrit *āśvamedha* 'horse-sacrifice' was 'almost homophonous' with the name of the Gaulish king *Epomeduos*, commemorated on coins from the Auvergne (Puhvel 1955; cf. 1970: 167). It is 'almost homophonous' – philologically a worrying phrase – because only the first elements correspond, *āśva-* and *epo-*, both from PIE **h₁ékʷo-* 'horse'.¹¹ For Puhvel (1970: 167) the second element of *Epomeduos* was Celtic **medu-* 'mead', as widely supposed to occur in the name of the legendary Irish queen *Medb* of Crúachain, supposedly an 'intoxicating' or 'intoxicated' sovereignty goddess. In 2007, however, any connection between the second elements of Gaulish *Epomeduos* and Sanskrit *āśvamedha* was convincingly rejected by Georges-Jean Pinault, who explained *Epomeduos* as 'horse governor' from Celtic **med-* 'gouverner, diriger, etc.' (< IE **med-*). Then in 2017 Britta Irslinger published a strong case for seeing the same stem **med-wo-* in the name of *Medb*, who was therefore a mundane 'ruler' or 'queen', not an 'intoxicating one' or the like.¹² Apart from *Medb*, queen of Crúachain, the name was borne by ordinary women in early Ireland, and its masculine equivalent, *Medb* < **medwos*, occurs as the name of a priest in the Book of Armagh (Carney 1966: 15; Muhr 2013: 52; Bieler 1979: 170, cf. 262). The genitive of this masculine

⁹Mallory (1989: 136–7), referring to Puhvel (1970). See also Doniger O'Flaherty (1979) and Watkins (1995: 265–76). Mallory's 'after about 2500 BC' date is still accepted: see Chechushkov and Epimakhov (2023: 254). Mallory (2025: 194 and 207) and Demoule (2025: 310–11 and 409) agree that horses were harnessed to chariots c. 2000 BC. If radically earlier evidence is found, the issue may need rethinking.

¹⁰Puhvel (1970: 163); West (2007: 418). A chariot also appears in the alleged Irish parallels adduced by Fickett-Wilbar (2012). Polomé (1994) regarded the similarity between the Indian and Roman rituals as coincidental, and plausibly denied any common Indo-European origin with what Gerald of Wales describes.

¹¹See Pinault (2007: 296), on the meaning and etymology of the Sanskrit second element *médha* 'sacrifice' (also 'broth', favoured by McCone (1990: 118), noting that broth appears in Gerald of Wales – though not in the Indian rite).

¹²Pinault (2007: 301–4); Irslinger (2017). See Schumacher (2004: 478–83, s.v. **med-e/o-* 'ermessen, (be)urteilen, (be)herrschen'). On the personal-name element *med-*, see Williams (1930).

name is attested in ogam in the Owey-na-gat cave at Crúachain: VRAICCI MAQI MEDVVI ‘of Fráech son of Medb’. This location has puzzled scholars, because Crúachain is where Medb is queen in the Ulster cycle, and where the inauguration mound, Carnfree (Carn Fraoich), five miles to the south, seems to take its name from Fráech (or vice versa).¹³ Was MEDVVI mistaken as a female name (genitive *MEDVVI[AS])? Did the inscription inspire the story of Queen Medb and the character Fráech, whom she desires and then destroys? Was Fráech’s parentage suppressed to avoid the implication of mother-son incest? Such questions are easier to ask than to answer. However, if *Epomeduos* and Medb have nothing to do with mead and intoxication, and chariots with paired draught did not exist in Proto-Indo-European times, does not the proposed Proto-Indo-European horse-sacrifice ritual start to look like a house of cards? Horse-sacrifice was widespread across Eurasia (e.g. Anderson 1999, Sadykov et al. 2024) and ‘the symbolical mating of the king with the local Earth-Goddess’ – for Binchy (1970: 11) ‘the essential feature of all’ in Gerald of Wales – is also paralleled outside the Indo-European world, as Binchy himself noted (1970: 48 n. 22), citing the study of ancient Egypt by Henri Frankfort (1948: 295–309; cf. Egeler 2012). The ceremony described by Gerald, if it really occurred, was not necessarily of Indo-European origin.

2. THE PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN CREDITOR’S FAST IN IRELAND

Another alleged Proto-Indo-European institution surviving in Ireland is the practice of fasting against a powerful adversary: ‘the creditor’s fast’. This was discussed by Daniel Binchy in three papers (1973: 26 and 34–5; 1975: 23–7; 1982), culminating in ‘A pre-Christian survival in mediaeval Irish hagiography’ in the Kathleen Hughes memorial volume, where he concluded that it ‘can only have been mediated [...] through the native druids’ (1982: 178). Here it may be added that it also occurs in Welsh hagiography (Wade-Evans 1944: 136). In the second and third of these papers Binchy refers back to a note entitled ‘Sitting Dharna’, published by Whitley Stokes in *The Academy* in 1885, where Stokes said that this ‘curious’ Hindu practice ‘still followed in Native states by a Brahman creditor [...] has long been identified with the practice of “fasting upon” ’ in the Irish laws (Stokes 1885). Stokes was evidently alluding to the first volume (1865) of *The Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland*, where the parallel was mentioned but not explained (*AL* i, xlviii). Despite Binchy (1975: 24), Stokes himself does not seem to assert any *connection* between Ireland and India in *The Academy*, or anywhere else, so far as I know; Victorian jurists were accustomed to collect random parallels between unconnected legal systems. It was Henry Sumner Maine, who learnt about the Irish material from Stokes, who had supposed, in 1875, that there was a common ‘basis of Aryan usage’.¹⁴ Myles

¹³Carney (1966:15); Byrne (1973: 19–20); Meek (1984: 17 n. 54); Fitzpatrick (2004: 29, 60–8 and 227); Muhr (2013: 51–2); Irlinger (2017: 43). For maps, see Wailes (1982: 27) and Meek (1984: 11). It seems unlikely that the inscription ever read *MEDVVIAS, as matronymics are unknown in ogam.

¹⁴Lectures II and X in Maine (1875: 29 and 165).

Dillon would do the same, exactly a century later, discussing ‘the creditor’s fast’ in his *Celts and Aryans* (Dillon 1975: 118–20). So the ‘Aryan’ or ‘Proto-Indo-European’ theory ended up with two weighty supporters, Dillon and Binchy, later followed by Calvert Watkins (1995: 395). On the way, however, there were sceptics. To Laurence Ginnell in 1894, such fasting is ‘strange to us because so long obsolete’, but the India-Ireland resemblance is no more than a coincidence (Ginnell 1894: 162–3; 1917: 96). D’Arbois de Jubainville (1895: 220–2) and F. N. Robinson (1909) were of that same opinion. In 1900 the orientalist Washburn Hopkins (1900: 158) mentioned a ‘lurking doubt as to whether a custom which is found among several related peoples be not self-developed in each rather than inherited by all’. And Louis Gernet (1982: 80) regarded ‘une tradition commune’ as only a possibility. But for Dillon the similarity between early Ireland and ancient India was ‘unmistakable and most impressive’ (Dillon 1975: 118). That impression may be because he and Binchy only looked at material from those two Indo-European-speaking countries. In fact, as we shall see, coercive fasting is found more widely. That this might prove problematic for the ‘Aryan’ or ‘Proto-Indo-European’ theory was already anticipated by Dillon in 1947:

[...] it may be that some features common to India and Ireland recur in other primitive systems of law, and these would not be cogent evidence for my purpose. Only a specialist in comparative law can decide. There is one remarkable practice which was observed long ago by Stokes, and which is not recorded elsewhere so far as I know, namely, fasting as a means of enforcing legal claims. (Dillon 1947: 247, citing Stokes, Robinson, Maine, and Thurneysen)

In 1886 the ethnographer Friedrich Krauss (1859–1938), in his edition of an epic poem of the Bosnian Muslims, *Smailagić Meho*, recorded that in Bosnia, if a debtor would not pay, his creditor went and sat in his doorway *without eating or drinking* until he paid up. This practice was obsolete in Bosnia, but in Krauss’s native Croatian region, Slavonia, it was still customary for the creditor to move in with the debtor, and to stay there gratis, until the debt was paid off.¹⁵ Then in 1888 the Breton scholar François-Marie Luzel (1821–95) recalled that in his youth, when a Breton had a grudge against someone, he would say ‘I vow that I will fast on him’ (*‘me a westlo anezhan! me iuno warnhan! “Je vous vouerai! Je jeûnerai sur lui”*’) – note the same preposition as in early Irish, but a different verb (from Latin *ieiunium*) versus Irish *troiscid*.¹⁶ Luzel does not say where the threatened fasting would take place, but quite likely he meant the fasting undertaken when on pilgrimage to St Yves to seek redress.¹⁷

¹⁵Krauss (1886: 120), cited by Gaidoz (1888b: col. 406).

¹⁶Apud Gaidoz (1888b: col. 41). Gaidoz’s material is repeated by Jobbé-Duval (1920: 421–2).

¹⁷See Le Braz (1893: 221–4): ‘Moyens d’appeler la mort sur quelqu’un: [...] Il est un moyen encore plus infaillible. C’est de aller *vouer* (gwestla) celui que l’on hait à saint Yves-de-la-Vérité. [...] Pour *vouer* quelqu’un à Saint-Yves-de-la Vérité, il faut [...] Faire à jeun trois pèlerinages

If the Welsh, Slavic and Breton parallels are explained away as an Indo-European inheritance, handed down for millennia, that would fit in with Binchy's hypothesis of 'an archaic custom which once obtained, not merely in the two extremes of the Indo-European area, but among all speakers of the parent language' (1975: 27). There is no trace of the custom in ancient Greece or Rome, however, although Gustave Glotz, Louis Gernet, and Émile Jobbé-Duval searched hard for it. All they could find were numerous examples of people committing suicide in a spirit of vengeance, something found all round the world.¹⁸ A possible Greek exception, noted by Glotz (1904: ix and 64–5), followed by Gernet (1982: 80–2), is a story in Plutarch, *Greek Questions*, 12:

Who was 'Charilla' among the Delphians? [...] The story of Charilla which they relate is somewhat as follows: A famine following a drought oppressed the Delphians, and they came to the palace of their king (πρὸς τὰς θύρας τοῦ βασιλέως) with their wives and children and made supplication. The king gave portions of barley and legumes to the more notable citizens, for there was not enough for all. But when an orphaned girl, who was still but a small child, approached him and importuned him, he struck her with his sandal and cast the sandal in her face.¹⁹ But, although the girl was poverty-stricken and without protectors, she was not ignoble in character; and when she had withdrawn, she took off her girdle and hanged herself. As the famine increased and diseases also were added thereto, the prophetic priestess gave an oracle to the king that he must appease Charilla, the maiden who had slain herself. Accordingly, when they had discovered with some difficulty that this was the name of the child who had been struck, they performed a certain sacrificial rite combined with purification, which even now they continue to perform every eight years. For the king sits in state and gives a portion of barley-meal and legumes to everyone, alien and citizen alike, and

consécutifs à la maison du saint [...] Empoigner le saint par l'épaule et le secouer rudement en disant: "Tu es le petit saint de la Vérité [...] Je te voue un tel [...] si le droit est pour moi, fais qu'il meure dans le délai rigoureusement prescrit" (*Te eo Santik ar Wirione. Me a westl dit heman [...] mar man ar gwir a du gan-in, gra d'ez-han merwel a-berz ann termenn rik*). ['Ways to call death upon someone. ... There is an even more infallible way. It is to go and *dedicate* (gwestla) the one you hate to Saint Yves-de-la-Vérité. ... To *dedicate* someone to Saint-Yves-de-la-Vérité, you must ... Make three consecutive pilgrimages to the saint's house while fasting ... Grab the [image of] the saint by the shoulder and shake him roughly, saying: "You are the little saint of Truth ... I *dedicate* so and so to you ... if right is on my side, make him die within the strictly prescribed time limit."'] For documentation see Hamon (2008 and 2013). On fasting to other saints see Gaidoz (1898). I am very grateful to Herve Le Bihan for his help here.

¹⁸Glotz (1904: ix and 64–76), followed by Gernet (1982: 80–4); Jobbé-Duval (1923: 585–6): 'Si nous ne trouvons pas dans les sources romaines trace de la "procédure du jeûne", elles conservent, au contraire, le souvenir du suicide, par esprit de vengeance' ['If we do not find any trace of the "fasting procedure" in the Roman sources, they do preserve, however, a recollection of suicide out of a spirit of revenge']. On the latter see Manning (2012).

¹⁹On the sandal throwing see below, n. 33.

a doll-like image of Charilla is brought thither. When, accordingly, all have received a portion, the king strikes the image with his sandal. The leader of the Thyads picks up the image and bears it to a certain place which is full of chasms; there they tie a rope round the neck of the image and bury it in the place where they buried Charilla after she had hanged herself. (Babbitt 1936: 184–9)

Here Charilla and the others are indeed ‘at the king’s gates’ (if translating very literally),²⁰ but they are not starving voluntarily, nor does Charilla *threaten* suicide.

A better example of coercion by threat of suicide is attested in 1877 among the Turkic-speaking Chuvashians along the river Volga, who were prepared to hang themselves *in an enemy’s gateway*. And in nineteenth-century China, to quote E. V. Huc in 1854, it is ‘often the weak who make the strong and powerful tremble, by holding suspended over their heads the threat of suicide, and forcing them by that means to do them justice, spare them, and help them’ (*en Chine c’est le faible qui fait trembler le fort et le puissant, en tenant toujours suspendue sur sa tête la menace d’un suicide, et le forçant souvent, par ce moyen, à lui rendre justice, à le menager, à le secourir*). In China, Washburn Hopkins noted, ‘starvation to compel one to grant a desire’ was practised and ‘suicide (by knife) on the doorstep’ was ‘not infrequent’.²¹

The Turkic and Chinese parallels undermine a Proto-Indo-European explanation for the Irish, Welsh, Breton, Slavic, and Indian examples. The practices in question could have spread across Eurasia at various times and in various ways, not respecting linguistic boundaries. Or perhaps they arose independently. De Jubainville argued that the fasting in the Irish Laws was a recent introduction under Church influence. This was a step too far for Robinson, who first made the good point (cf. Binchy 1975: 26 n. 38) that the Laws used the word *troscad* for coercive fasting, not *ain(e)*, the loanword from Latin *ieiunium*, which was used for Christian fasting (contrast the Welsh and Breton material). Nevertheless, mentioning that ‘usages similar to the Irish and Indian exist in other parts of the world’, Robinson (1909: 583) concluded cautiously:

There is no reason for assuming any direct connection between Irish and Hindu fasting, or any contact between the Druids and the Brahmins; and M. d’Arbois de Jubainville is *doubtless right in denying that the customs go back to a common Indo-European legal institution* [*Cours de Littérature celtique* VIII, 222]. But it remains probable, after all, that they are both very ancient and

²⁰Cf. Liddell and Scott (1882: 687), s.v. θύρα: ‘from the Eastern custom of receiving petitions at the gate αἱ τοῦ βασιλέως θύραι became a phrase’. They translate ‘court’.

²¹Rimbaud (1877: 1031); Huc (1855: 283; 1854: 281); Gaidoz (1888a: cols 10–11); Hopkins (1900: 159 n. 2; my italics). In China, according to Jamieson et al. (1888: 50), ‘as everyone knows, there are various other means by which creditors can enforce payment of debts without having recourse to the authorities at all. They may [...] threaten to go and hang themselves if not paid, or they may go and quarter themselves on the family of the debtor, who do not venture to turn them out. To get rid of these annoyances or for fear of worse troubles, the debtor or his friends will pay or compromise or make some arrangement as soon as possible’. Cf. Gaidoz (1888c).

had their origin in the same general conceptions. These may well have been Indo-European, though they were not confined to any single branch of the human family. (my italics)

Even more cautiously, Thurneysen (1925: 275) supposed that a similar custom could have developed in Ireland and India from similar conditions, and warned against jumping to the conclusion that the creditor's fast was an early Indo-European institution.

Corresponding to the reckless urge to find an ancient common origin for coercive fasting, transmitted along with the Indo-European dialects, are attempts to trace the alleged institution down to the twentieth century. In 1977 Kathleen Hughes stated that 'Hunger-striking in [modern] Ireland has its origins in an ancient ritual'.²² Then in 1995 Calvert Watkins, citing Louis Gernet – who was in fact quite agnostic (Gernet 1982: 80) – and quoting a banal passage in Euripides (*Iphigenia in Tauris*, 973–4), where Orestes fasts before Phoebus' shrine and swears to die if the god does not save him (cf. Delcourt 1939: 166), claimed that this 'legal institution' is 'of Indo-European provenience and, as well as in Greece, is attested in India from the Dharmasūtras to Mahātma Gandhi and in Ireland from the *Senchas Mār* to Bobbie [*sic*] Sands' (Watkins 1995: 395). This ancient lineage may look plausible at first glance, but it is contradicted by persuasive documentation that the initial models for Gandhi's fasts and for Irish Republican fasts, when both began in 1913, were the fasts by Russian-inspired suffragettes, first in England from 1909 and then, from 1912, in Ireland; native Indian and Irish precedents were found only retrospectively (Grant 2006, 2011, and 2019: 8–9; Vernon 2007: 43–4 and 60–80). It seems clear, despite Hughes and Watkins, that there was no continuous, indigenous Irish tradition of hunger striking, although some suffragettes *may* have had some indirect awareness of the material that first appeared in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* in 1865, as argued by Joseph Lennon (2007, cf. Lennon 2004: 199–203).²³ Lennon (2017: 62) is certainly unjustified in claiming that 'the custom of fasting on someone was practised when the Brehon laws were in use, as late as the early seventeenth century and at least as early as St. Patrick's time'. Binchy's better informed impression was that it was 'already obsolete by the ninth century and that the later glossators and commentators, who have so much to say about it, were ignorant of its true nature and purpose' (Binchy 1975: 24).

Real, documented history is messier than the 'asterisk reality' of those who assume that institutions follow the same trajectories as languages.

²²Hughes (1977: 15). Cf. Kelly (1988: 182 n. 29): 'The use of fasting for political purposes – "the hunger strike" – is distinct from legal fasting, though its ultimate purpose is the same, i.e. to exert moral pressure on a more powerful adversary'. Note that Kelly does not connect legal fasting in ancient Ireland, India, and modern Nepal with hunger striking. Neither did Binchy, unlike Hughes and Watkins.

²³Cf. Pachet (1996: 108); Nemec (2017: 58); Bansat-Boudon (2023: 251–3). It is generally agreed that the unrevised first version of Yeats's *The King's Threshold* (1904) is unlikely to have inspired the hunger strikes: Bradley (2009); Petrizzo (2024).

3. PEDERASTY: A PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN INSTITUTION IN IRELAND?

Was male pederasty an accepted institution in early medieval Ireland, as recently maintained by Kim McCone (2023: 172–3)?

As an institution, male pederasty has been connected especially with militaristic societies and/or with initiatory rites (Bremmer 1980). Jan Bremmer (1980) and Bernard Sergent (1996), among others, have proposed, controversially, that pederasty was an element in Proto-Indo-European initiation rites and lasted long enough to be recorded by classical writers in their accounts of some Indo-European-speaking peoples.

Since such rites are attested far outside Eurasia (Bremmer 1980: 279–81, 292; Sergent 1996: 56–66, 341, 544–7), one may wonder whether those attested among speakers of Indo-European languages were really inherited from a remote Proto-Indo-European antiquity, as proposed by Bremmer and Sergent, rather than having arisen independently from time to time among various groups who happened to speak Indo-European languages. Bremmer, however, followed by Sergent (1996: 16–26, 308, 337–8, 477–88, 498, and 543), stressed a particular similarity – a hunting context – between the initiation rites attributed to the Greeks of Crete, as described retrospectively by Strabo (10.4.21), and the Germanic (or Sarmatian?) Taifali, as described, even more retrospectively, by Ammianus Marcellinus (31.9.5). Such slender correspondences led both scholars to label the relevant rites as ‘Indo-European’ and even, in Sergent’s case, as ‘Neolithic’ (Sergent 1996: 49). An apparent obstacle (as with ‘the creditor’s fast’) is the slight evidence for the institution among the majority of Indo-European-speaking peoples. Sergent gets round this by suggesting that it was suppressed by influential religious figures (cf. Demoule 2025: 412). For him, the absence of evidence for it in early Ireland is due, ‘sans doute’, to the power of the druids (Sergent 1996: 559). McCone (2023: 172–3), however, now argues that the institution survived from the Common Celtic period into Christian times and even that it was condoned by early Irish jurists (see below).

Aristotle refers to homosexuality among the Celts (*Politics*, 2.9.1269b), as do Diodorus Siculus (5.32.7), Strabo (4.4.6), and Athenaeus (13.79), all three arguably following Posidonius.²⁴ Athenaeus specifically refers to Gaulish pederasts sleeping on the ground on animal skins between two catamites (Freeman 1996: 30–1). Although Sergent (1996: 65 n. 27, 87 n. 27, 339, 505–12, 543, 628, and 634) and McCone (2023: 171–2) accept these accounts at face value, other commentators dismiss all or some of them as ‘projection’ on the part of the Greek commentators (on such ‘projection’ see Sergent 1996: 19–20, 474, 497, 520, and 552). Bremmer (1980: 288) is sceptical, at least about the report in Athenaeus, calling it ‘a typically Greek dream-wish’ and possibly ‘just one of those features ascribed by the Greeks to the *Randvölker* to contrast them unfavourably with themselves’ – adding that ‘Early Irish and Welsh

²⁴As noted by Sheehan (2009: 58 n. 16), there is disagreement over whether they followed Posidonius.

literature has no mention of the practice at all'.²⁵ For Welsh literature Bremmer quotes a communication from Brinley Rees. So far as Ireland is concerned, Sergent at first agreed (see above on the supposed druidic suppression), but later suggested that 'In Mac Óc' corresponded to Ganymede, and detected a pederastic initiation behind the Welsh story of Pwyll and Arawn in the *First Branch of the Mabinogi* (Sergent 1996: 649–50 [addenda]), a story which in fact celebrates heterosexual chastity (Hemming 1996).²⁶

The figure of 'two' catamites, only found in Athenaeus, is significant for Sergent (1996: 510) and McCone (2023: 172), who both speculate about a connection with the Gaulish military practice of *tri-markisia*, 'three-horseness', by which a horseman was accompanied, and if necessary replaced, by two assistants (Pausanias 10.19.10–11). The only detail that might suggest the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European initiation rite is the reference to animal skins by Diodorus and Athenaeus (Sergent 1996: 510). These skins need not be the result of hunting, however. It has to be remembered that barbarous Celts sitting or lying on the ground on skins or leaves was a Greek topos (Maier 1996: 86; Sims-Williams 2012: 21).

McCone's theory (2023: 172–3) that an Old Irish institution of pederasty can be traced back to Proto-Indo-European society, via the ancient Celtic homosexuality mentioned by Greek writers, has two parts. The first part is the etymology of Old Irish *macc coím*, 'boy, young man', also current in Middle Welsh as a loanword from Irish: *macwyf*, later *macwy*. *Coím*, like its Welsh cognate *cu*, can denote familial relationships – grandparents in South Wales are *tad-cu* and *mam-gu*. It probably comes from the PIE root **k'ei-* 'to lie down', as in English *home* and German *heim*, and, with a different suffix, English *hide* 'land sufficient for a family settlement' (see Charles-Edwards 1972). McCone assigns to Celtic **koi-mo-* a 'basic sense "lying, bedmate"'. This seems reasonable, unless 'bedmate' is supposed to have its specifically sexual modern sense. Until very recently, extended families always slept together, as did total strangers in inns, sometimes several in a bed. Beds were shared whenever beds were scarce – the Three Magi, for example, in Gislebertus' sculpture in Autun Cathedral and elsewhere (Cohen 2021). In the Bible, no one suspects a sexual undertone in the verses 'Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed' or 'I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left' (Luke 11.7 and 17.34). McCone, however, speculates that Proto-Celtic **mak^wos koimos* 'would have been an apposite term for an aristocratic knight's [...] young male acolyte and, at least when on campaign [...], bedmate' (2023: 172). This sits uneasily with the Würzburg glosses where *maicc cóima* are *electi Dei*,

²⁵However, Busse (2003), Sheehan (2009), and McKibben (2013), among others, have investigated possible suppressed homoerotic traditions in Welsh and Irish literature. Some of this material is difficult to assess, but see now Ó Corráin (2025). Whether love between heroes in epics has a sexual element is often unclear. On Achilles and Patroclus the ancient Greeks, like modern commentators, disagreed among themselves, for example Plato, *Symposium*, 179e–180b (sexual), versus Xenophon, *Symposium*, 8.31 (non-sexual). See Sergent (1996: 287–98).

²⁶See also Sergent's speculative interpretation (1996: 512–16) of the story of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy in the Fourth Branch.

sancti et dilecti (*Wb.* 27b16, Colossians 3.12) and *cóim* is applied to God the Son in relation to God the Father (*Wb.* 4b12, Romans 8.32).

The second part of McCone's theory is that the sexual institution is condoned in the Old Irish laws. Heptad LII permits a woman to divorce her husband if her bed is spurned and 'he prefers spending the night with boys' (glossed: *beth a nænleabaid risna gilliu*, 'being in one bed with the boys') – *MANA BE DEITHBIR DO*.²⁷ According to McCone (2023: 173), this exception, which he translates 'unless it be proper for him', acknowledges that pederasty was appropriate under certain circumstances, for instance, when absent on a military expedition.

Gildas – 'a Father of the Church' for the Irish (Sharpe: 1984) – seems to deplore sodomy in connection with the British kings Constantinus and Maglocunus (*De Excidio Britanniae*, 28.4 and 33.1),²⁸ and the Irish Penitentials clearly condemn same-sex relations.²⁹ According to McCone himself, the Laws were of likely clerical authorship and transmission,³⁰ so the idea that, contrary the Penitentials, they condoned pederasty in any circumstances is *prima facie* unlikely. It is far more likely that the clause *mana bē deithbir dō* refers to occasions when religion prohibited a husband from sleeping with his wife. According to the *Penitential of Finnian*, for example, married couples were to abstain for 120 days a year, plus either Sunday or Saturday night, also while the wife was pregnant (§46). Moreover, if either had committed fornication, they must fast for a year 'and shall not remain in the same bed': *nec in uno lecto maneant* (Bieler 1963: 90–3, §42(S)). Again, according to the 'Monastery of Tallaght', a layman under spiritual direction should keep from his wife during her monthly periods and on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday night – plus Sunday night 'if he can' (Gwynn and Purton 1911: 132 and 145–6 (§§14 and 50); cf. Breatnach 2008: 27). On such occasions, it would obviously be 'justifiable' for a husband to avoid the temptations of the marital bed and move in with the youths of the house. Spare bedrooms are a modern luxury. The point of the legal exception is probably to prevent a wife from exploiting such occasions as a pretext for divorce on the grounds of homosexuality.

Pederasty as an early Irish institution is a fantasy.

²⁷ *CIH* i 48.5–11 (*BEAN DOGUIDTAR* [Binchy (1950) favours *diguathar* with MS H 3.18; cf. *CIH* iii 906.16–17] *CAEMDA COMBI FERR LAIS FEIS LA GILLIU MANA BE DEITHBIR DO*), and variant text at *CIH* v 1848.25–8; *AL* v 292–5; on the passage see Binchy 1950: 150–1, and *eDIL* s.vv. 2 *cáemdae*, *dogaítha*, and 2 *do-goa*. Liam Breatnach (p.c.) suggested to me that *mana bē deithbir dō*, with the substantive verb, as McCone takes it, might better be translated 'unless there is a good reason for him' (or even 'for it').

²⁸ Implausibly, Sergeant (1996: 519 and 647) suggests that Gildas knew about the kings' sodomy in connection with some initiation ritual. In fact Gildas's 'of the vine of Sodom' (*de vite Sodomorum*, *de Sodomitana vite*) may well refer to their wickedness more generally, as in the source of the phrase, Deuteronomy 32.32. For the Church Fathers' understanding of this verse see *Corpus Corporum* (Universität Zürich), Browser, Full-text search, s.n. *Sodomorum* <mlat.uzh.ch>.

²⁹ Gwynn (1914: 144 (§25) and 179); Bieler (1963: 114–15, 128–9, 264, and 275 n. 10). Cf. Bhreathnach (2024: 164, 242–3 and 253). The penalisation of same-sex activities indicates that they sometimes occurred (as in every other part of the world), not that they were condoned.

³⁰ McCone (1984: 47), referring to *Críth Gablach* (Binchy 1941: 6, ll. 144–5) on abstinence.

CONCLUSION

Why do gifted Celtic philologists fall into the errors illustrated above? One reason is the assumption that cultures follow the same trajectory as languages (see above). A second is the Primitivist assumption that the Celtic-speaking peoples can and should be presented ‘in history as one people, with a common tradition and a common character’ (Schmidt 1986: 18 and 21, quoting Dillon and Chadwick 1967: 12). Few would now propose that for modern Germanic-speaking peoples (cf. Friedrich and Harland 2021), so why should modern Celtic-speakers wish or allow themselves to be subjected to such generalisations (cf. Haycock 1987–8)? A third is a notion that the long-term preservation of ancient traditions is prestigious. In the past, descent from the ancient Celts has indeed been seen in that light; in 1588 the Dutch scholar Hadrianus Junius observed that

the ambiguous term ‘Celts’ has entangled German as well as French scholars in an ongoing heated debate. Both groups are determined to lay claim to the Celts, because one reads about their glorious achievements from time immemorial.

(Van Hal 2013–14: 220)

Prestige is not a scientific motive for merging evidence from disparate regions and millennia, and in any case, any modern romantics who still glory in the ancient Celtic attacks on Rome and Delphi are less likely to be enthusiastic about bestiality, horse-sacrifice, pederasty, decapitations, and the rest of the freak-show orchestrated by hostile ancient and medieval outsiders.

A fourth reason for error is an often unthinking assumption that Celtic-speakers in Ireland, Britain, and Brittany *must* have inherited their cultures as well as their languages from the documented ancient Celts of the Continent, distant though these are in space and time (cf. Sims-Williams 2012). Whether that is probable, however, depends, among many other variables, on the numbers of Celtic-speakers who crossed to Britain and Ireland and the date or dates at which they did so. If, for instance, the majority of them immigrated around the beginning of the first millennium BC (cf. Sims-Williams 2020; Patterson et al. 2022; Sims-Williams 2025; Cassidy et al. 2025), they may have been assimilated into pre-existing Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures, without bringing with them the Iron Age customs described towards the end of the millennium by Posidonius and other Continental observers. In other words, what McCone (1996: 92) has called the ‘cultural inheritance that Ireland’s Celtic invaders managed to preserve (and indeed spread throughout the island!)’ may have differed a great deal from what Posidonius found in Gaul. To prove otherwise, convincingly striking parallels are needed. In 2008 McCone instanced head hunting in the Ulster cycle and in Diodorus, Polybius, and other classical writers as sufficient illustration, concluding that

It would surely be quite perverse to deny a connection between these remarkably similar Gaulish and Irish practices, which

would thus appear to continue an older Celtic custom virtually unchanged.
(McCone 2008: 47)

He did not, however, refer to Bernhard Maier (2000: 12–14), who had published illustrations of Libyans and Berbers carrying heads, or hanging them from their saddles, nor to Elfriede Regina Knauer, who assembled a massive collection of such images from across Eurasia (2001, reprinted with additions in Knauer 2009: 289–331). Since then a vast amount of evidence for head hunting from all round the world has been assembled by Roure and Pernet (2011), Armit (2012), Boulestin and Gambier (2012), Quesada Sanz (2014), and others (cf. Sims-Williams 2012: 3–7). Bearing in mind that Herodotus (4.64) says that the Scythians practised head hunting and that Strabo (4.4.5) says that it was ‘inseparably connected with the northern tribes’ (Kidd 1999: 346), it is quite uncertain that Celtic-speakers first introduced head hunting to Ireland. It could be indigenous or it may have developed independently in the later Iron Age, possibly without any external impetus.

Insular Celtic-speaking society certainly shared some more distinctive features with Iron Age Gaul – druidry, attested in both (but not in Celtiberia or Cisalpine Gaul), comes to mind (cf. Vendryes 1997: 67) – but there is no reason to suppose that these arrived with the Celtic language, rather than through the later sort of contact described by Julius Caesar in the case of druidry (*Gallic War*, 6.13). When we have archaeological evidence, ‘Celtic religion’ turns out to be ‘dynamic, constantly adapting to the changing structure of society’ rather than ‘static’ (Haeussler and King 2007: 7). Therefore we have to allow for ideologies and rituals spreading among speakers of separate, even unrelated, languages (see, for example, Anderson 1999: 387; Thuillard et al. 2018; Egeler 2011: 479; Demoule 2025: 375–8).

A fifth and final reason why Celtic philologists have fallen into error is that they have tended, unintentionally, to skew cultural evidence in favour of Celtic continuity by confining their non-linguistic reading to Celtic or, at best, Indo-European source material.

An example, to add to those discussed above, is provided by Calvert Watkins’ treatment of the Welsh *Tri Eurgrydd*, ‘Three Golden Shoemakers’, with which this paper began. It is debated whether *eur-* in this triad (and in the triad of the *Tri Eurgelein*, ‘Three Golden Corpses’) means ‘gold’ literally or has its frequent figurative sense ‘fine, splendid, noble’, as argued by Bromwich (2014: 175 and 185–7; cf. Sims-Williams 2023: 206–7), and a further problem is whether *eur-* describes the shoemakers or the shoes which they made (cf. Gruffydd 1953: 85). Watkins (1994: 668–73) takes it to refer to golden shoes and, freely associating quite disparate material under a Celtic umbrella, links the twelfth-century (?) Welsh triad to the late medieval Irish motif of the inaugurated chief as ‘the man of the single [sometimes golden] shoe’ (citing O’Brien 1954),³¹ and to the pair of golden shoes excavated at the tumulus at Hochdorf, near Stuttgart.

³¹See further Mac Cana (1973) and Fitzpatrick (2004: 2, 6, 26, 29, and 122–9).

None of this material is distinctively Celtic. Hochdorf's Celticity depends on a dubious understanding of a problematic passage in Herodotus (Sims-Williams 2020: 515). Shoes were emblems of royalty outside the Celtic world, in India and Burma (Penzer 1924–28: ii, 264, and v, 175), and *golden sandals* appear in the story of Bharata and Rama in the *Ramayana*. The 'first intimation of the shoe as a ritual prop' in Ireland is a twelfth-century reference to the inauguration of the king of Leinster, and there the *comharba* of St Máedóc of Ferns receives 'one of the king's shoes full of *silver*' (Fitzpatrick 2004: 122, *my italics*). The motif of the *single* shoe takes us in a quite different direction from the *pair* of shoes at Hochdorf. In Greek myth, Jason is 'the man of the one shoe', and monosandalism, as it is called, 'plays a role in many rituals and superstitions' elsewhere, as noted by West (2007: 419 n. 30, citing Deonna 1935).³² Outside the Indo-European-speaking world, 'single shoe' motifs appear in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25.9 and Ruth 4.7–8)³³ and in Arabic custom and poetry (Burton 1879: ii, 197; Frazer 1911: 312; Killeen 1971: 204). Monosandalism was prohibited by Zoroastrianism and Islam (Shaked 2015: 493; Hirsch 2017: 39–40), which seems to imply that it occurred in forbidden rituals. Insofar as any common purpose can be found behind all its disparate manifestations, monosandalism seems to express liminality and transition (cf. Rogov 2018; Blundell 2019: 224; Chrétien 2019: 256; Smith 2019: 205–6). As such, it fits very well into the Irish royal inauguration ceremonies. These could have been invented independently in the later Middle Ages, or introduced from elsewhere, for there is no reason to *assume* that Gaelic customs are more ancient and less innovative than those of any other language group (cf. Dooley 2014: 261 n. 21; Stiùbhart 2014: 247).

Watkins' synthesis of Hochdorf, the Welsh *Tri Eurgrydd*, and Irish monosandalism under a selective Celtic heading is a philological construct with no real coherence. The sort of Celtic research exemplified by his study – assembling data from very disparate regions and millennia – is fascinating to read and was probably enjoyable to compile. It brings to mind M. L. West, comparing his own investigations of 'Indo-European poetry and myth' as a 'professional Hellenist', to 'roaming far and wide through unfamiliar landscapes, [...] a stranger in Paradise with a clipboard' (West 2007: v).

Do the contents of selective clipboards contribute to real knowledge about 'the Proto-Indo-Europeans' and 'the Celts' or are they no more than random holiday snapshots? Clipboards of counter-evidence from outside the Indo-European-speaking world would be a useful corrective and might be equally enjoyable to compile.³⁴

³²See also Carboni (2013); Blundell (2019); Chrétien (2019); Smith (2019); Schroeder (2023). Monosandalists are depicted in the Romanesque Porte Miègeville of the cathedral of Saint-Sernin, in Toulouse.

³³Cf. Reinach (1932); Deroy (1961); Carmichael (1977). Gernet (1982: 81 n. 235) compares Ruth with the Charilla story quoted above.

³⁴For helpful comments I am grateful to Liam Breatnach, Herve Le Bihan, Ruairi Ó hUiginn, and an anonymous reviewer.

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