

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF INDO-EUROPEAN HORSE SACRIFICE

Zacharias van Stek
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Introduction

- Indo-European horse sacrifice is often cited as the prime example for successful comparative cultural reconstruction, e. g. Fortson (2010: 24f.)
- The main evidence comes from the following three sources, often referred to as “the triptych”, cf. Puhvel (1970: 159–164):
 - India: *Ṛgvedaḥ* 1.162, 163 and several other Vedic texts, especially *Yajurvedaḥ*
 - Ireland: Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica* (ca. 1185)
 - Rome: Fragments in Polybius, Plutarch, Festus and Paulus Diaconus
- Other horse-related myths, rituals and law codices are often used as further evidence to support the Indo-European origin of horse sacrifice
- Unlike with e. g. phonological reconstruction, there are no series of regular correspondences in cultural reconstruction, that could verify or falsify the reconstruct
- As a result claims of cognacy need to be treated more carefully
- In this presentation I want to examine other factors that can be taken into account when evaluating cognacy of practices and myths in individual cultures

India: *Aśvamedhaḥ*

- A stallion that excels on the right part of the yoke is chosen as a victim in spring
- The king spends the night chastely with his second wife at the *gārhapatyaḥ*
- The stallion is bound with reins, sprinkled with water at a lake, and a dead dog is flushed under it
- The stallion is sent off to roam for a year, prohibited from touching water and mares, accompanied by 100 old horses and 100 or 400 young men; any area it crosses is incorporated into the kingdom
- Meanwhile preparations for the sacrifice are made, and the king’s genealogy is recited
- After the stallion returns, the main ritual begins over the course of three days
- On the second day a golden chariot is drawn to a lake by the stallion where it is bathed
- The stallion is bound to the sacrificial site, together with approximately 600 other animals, and suffocated
- The king’s main wife lays down with the stallion’s body, having symbolical intercourse with it under covers
- The stallion is cut up, fat and blood are extracted, while the meat is cooked and sacrificed to Prajāpati or Indra
- On the third day criminals are bathed and purified
- The king ascends from *rājā* to *saṃrājā*
- In the so called *Puruṣamedhaḥ* a human could be sacrificed instead of a horse:
 - The liturgy is mostly taken from the *Ṛgvedaḥ*
 - It is unclear, whether it is a predecessor, an upgrade or a theoretical afterthought of the *Aśvamedhaḥ*

cf. Hillebrandt (1897: 149–153) and Puhvel (1970: 160–163)

References

- Alberro, Manuel (2003). “El mito y el ritual indoeuropeo de la yegua. Paralelos entre la India aria, la Irlanda céltica, y la antigua Grecia”. In: *Florentia Iliberritana* 14, pp. 9–34.
- Dumézil, Georges (1974). *la religion romaine archaïque*. 2nd ed. Paris: Payot.
- Ficket-Wilbar, David (2012). “Ritual Details of the Irish Horse Sacrifice in *Betha Mholaise Daiminse*”. In: *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 40.3 & 4, pp. 315–343.
- Fortson, Benjamin W. IV (2010). *Indo-European Language and Culture. An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hillebrandt, Alfred (1897). *Ritual-Litteratur. Vedische Opfer und Zauber*. Vol. 3. Grundriss der Indo-Arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde 2. Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner.
- Hoose, Anahita (2021). “Kings, Horses and a Historian. On Herodotus IV.7 and Indo-European Horse Sacrifice”. In: *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 49.3/4, pp. 279–315.
- Puhvel, Jaan (1970). “Aspects of Equine Functionality”. In: *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans. Studies of Indo-European Mythology*. Ed. by Jaan Puhvel. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, pp. 159–172.
- (1987). *Comparative Mythology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schröder, Franz Rolf (1927). “Ein altirischer Krönungsritus und das indogermanische Rossopfer”. In: *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 16.1, pp. 310–312.
- Scullard, Howard Hayes (1981). *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Rome: *October Equus*

- A Horserace takes place on the Campus Martius on the Ides of October
- The right-side horse of the winning chariot is killed by spear and sacrificed to Mars
- The horses head and tail are cut off; the head is decorated with bread
- The people of Suburra and the Sacra Via fight over the horses head
- If Suburra wins, the horses head is fixed on the wall of the Turrus Mamilia
- If the Sacra Via wins, the horses head is fixed on the wall of the Regia
- The tail is brought to the Regia, and its blood sprinkled on the hearth
- Dio Cassius describes a one-time event that resembles the *October Equus* but with human sacrifice:
 - Caesar had the leaders of a mutiny in 46 B. C. killed on the Campus Martius by the Flamen Martialis and their heads deposited in the Regia
 - This could be interpreted as a variant of the *October Equus* to prepare for Caesars’ assumption of royal power

cf. Dumézil (1974: 225–239) and Puhvel (1970: 162f.)

An Indo-European Ritual?

- A horse that excels on the right side of the yoke is chosen as the victim (In, R)
- The horse is killed (In, Ir, R)
- The king or queen has intercourse with the horse before or after its death (In, Ir)
- The horse is cut up (In, Ir, R)
- Parts of the horse are cooked (In, Ir)
- Parts of the horse are sacrificed to a wargod (In, R)
- A bath is prepared (In, Ir)
- When the ritual is over, kingship is renewed (In, Ir)
- A human can be sacrificed instead of a horse (In, R)

Further Evidence?

- Parts of the story of Saint Molaise of Devenish can be interpreted as additional evidence for the Irish coronation ritual (cf. Ficket-Wilbar, 2012: 319–340)
- Hittite law prohibits bestiality, but horses and mules are exempt (cf. Puhvel, 1970: 171)
- A Skythian ritual described in Herodot IV.7 can be interpreted as horse sacrifice (cf. Hoose, 2021: passim)
- Old Norse *Völsi*-tradition, in which a stallion’s phallus is manipulated (cf. Puhvel, 1970: 171)
- Various myths involving hierogamy with hippomorphic deities (Celtic, Greek, Indian...) (cf. Alberro, 2003: 17–26)

Ireland: Coronation ritual in Kenelcunnill, Ulster

- The people of the land gather in one place, and a white mare is brought forward
- The king declares himself to be a beast and has intercourse with the mare
- The mare is killed, cut up, and boiled in water
- The king bathes in the boiling water
- The king and his people eat of the meat of the mare
- The king drinks of the broth by dipping his mouth
- Kingship and dominion have been established

cf. Schröder (1927: 310) and Puhvel (1970: 163f.)

Evaluation of Cognacy

- Evaluation of sources:
 - Indian sources provide the most extensive description and are most likely historical
 - Roman sources are only fragmentary, but for the most part historical
 - Only one Irish source explicitly describes a horse sacrifice, and it could be biased
- Monogenesis, polygenesis or cultural diffusion:
 - Geographical distance between India and Central Europe speaks against cultural diffusion
 - Non-triviality of individual steps as well as their sequencing points towards a common precursor
- Archaeological plausibility:
 - Horses were of great importance in IE cultures
 - Animal sacrifices are common among IE cultures
 - Horse sacrifice was practiced by other steppe cultures (cf. Puhvel, 1987: 276)
- Purpose in individual cultures:
 - The Indian and Irish sacrifice renews kingship
 - The Roman sacrifice is theorized to be a harvest festival or a purification ritual for the returning troops (cf. Scullard, 1981: 193f.)
- Etymology:
 - Potential cognates of ved. *aśvamedhaḥ* in other IE branches exist but are not fully convincing

Conclusion

- *Pro* Indo-European origin of horse sacrifice:
 - Non-trivial similarities between rituals
 - Geographical distance between sources
 - Status of the horse in IE and other steppe cultures
- *Contra* Indo-European origin of horse sacrifice:
 - Irish and Roman sources are scarce
 - Roman ritual seems different from the others
 - The Irish source is rather dubious
 - No exclusivity between Irish and Roman ritual