The kingly inauguration ritual described by Gerald of Wales has often been compared with horse sacrifice rituals in other Indo-European traditions, in particular the Roman October Equus and the Vedic aśvamedha. Among the doubts expressed about the Irish account is that it is the only text that describes the ritual. I will argue, however, that a similar ritual is found in another text, the Irish Life of St. Molaise of Devenish (*Betha Mholaise Daiminise*), not only confirming the accuracy of much of Gerald’s account, but providing additional details.

Gerald of Wales’ (Gerald Cambrensis’) description of “a new and outlandish way of confirming kingship and dominion” in Ireland is justly famous among Celticists and Indo-European comparativists. It purports to give us a description of what can only be a pagan ritual, accounts of which from Ireland are in short supply, surviving into 12th century Ireland. He writes:

*Est igitur in boreali et ulteriori Uitoniae parte, scilicet apud Kenelcunnil, gens quaedam, quae barbaro nimirum et abominabili ritu sic sibi regem creare solet. Collecto in unum universo terrae illius populo, in medium producitur jumentum candidum. Ad quod sublimandum ille non in principem sed in beluam, non in regem sed exlegem, coram omnibus bestialiter accedens, non minus imprudenter quam imprudenter se quoque bestiam profiteatur. Et statim jumento interfecto, et frustatim in aqua decocto, in eadam aqua balneum ei paratur. Cui insidens, de carnibus illius sibi allatis, circumstante populo suo et convescente, comedit ipse. De jure quoque quo lavatur, non vase aliquo, non manu, sed ore tantum circumquaque haurit et bibit. Quibus ita rite, non recte completis, regnum illius et dominium est confirmatum.*

*(Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores*
There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred (O’Meara 1951, 1982: 109-110).

In his 1927 article, “Ein altirischer Krönungsritus und das indogermanische Rossopfer,” Franz Schröder first suggested a common Indo-European origin for this inauguration ritual and the Vedic aśvamedha. The two do indeed possess some striking similarities.

The aśvamedha is designed to confirm a king as a samrāj, a “self-ruling king;” i.e., an overking. A stallion, which must “be without its match under the right-side yoke” (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 13.4.2.1; Eggeling 1900: 353), (the test of which would have required a race), is tied to a post. Hymns are recited, and the horse is purified. It is then untied and driven into a pond with a broom. A dog is clubbed to death, and floated under the horse. The stallion is set free to roam, which it does for a year, accompanied by an escort of four hundred. If it should wander into another kingdom, that realm’s ruler must submit to the sacrificer or face a war. During this period, neither the stallion nor the king may have sexual intercourse. After a year, the horse is returned to where it set out from. More rites follow, including the agnicayana,
which is the creation of a sacred hearth, a ritual used in other instances as a way of claiming territory. Next comes an \textit{agniṣṭoma}, a three-day ritual in which the sacred drink soma is created and offered to a variety of deities. The second day is the significant one. On this day, the horse is yoked to a chariot, and driven by the king into a pool (presumably the one which had been used previously), where it must drink or at least smell the water (Dumont 1948: 479). It is returned to the sacrificial ground, where it is consecrated and adorned by the king’s wives. It is then tied again to the sacrificial post and smothered (the usual Vedic method of killing sacrificial animals). The king’s chief wife lies down next to the dead horse and is covered by a blanket. She puts the horse’s penis against her vulva and conducts a back and forth dialogue with the priests, in which she complains that no one is having sex with her. This completed, the horse is cut up, and its parts disposed of in various ways, including cooking them by boiling (other parts are roasted on a spit). The king must smell some of the broth in which the horse’s marrow has been cooked. On the third day, soma is again pressed and offered. The implements of sacrifice are thrown into the water, and the participants are purified. The entire ritual ends with the sacrifice of sterile cows and the distribution of gifts.

Since this is, after all, a Vedic ritual, it is very detailed and complicated, and I have simplified greatly. The description of the ritual is scattered through a number of Vedic and post-Vedic texts (among them \textit{Brhad Āranyakā Upaniṣad} 1.1 - 2 (Hume 1971: 73-76); \textit{Rig Veda} 1.162, 163; \textit{Satapatha Brāhmaṇa}, Kāṇḍa 13 (Eggeling 1900: 274-440); and \textit{Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa Kāṇḍa} 3 (Dumont 1948)), but it has been summarized many times (e.g., Dumont 1948: 449-451; Fuchs 1996: 17–37; Keith 1989: II, 346-347).

The Roman October Equus ritual had been compared with the aṣvamedha as early as 1925 (Keith 1989: 346). In this, a chariot race is held on the Campus Martius, a low-lying piece of ground near the Tiber that occasionally floods. The right hand horse of the winning team has loaves of bread tied to its head and is then sacrificed with a spear. Its head and tail are severed, and the head is fought over by the inhabitants of the city quarters of Subura and...
the Via Sacra, the winner having the right to hang it up in their section of the city until the following year. The tail of the horse is carried to the Regia, the home of the ritual king of Rome, where the blood from it is sprinkled on the hearth. (The sources may be found in Vangaard 1979.)

The relationship of these three rituals (which Jaan Puhvel (1970: 159) has called “a kind of triptych depicting Indo-European horse sacrifice”) has been analyzed numerous times, among others by Dumézil (1970: 224 - 228), Koppers (1936), O’Flaherty (1980: esp. 149 - 165), and Puhvel (1987: 270 – 276). There have been attempts to add to these canonical examples. The sexual element of two of them led Puhvel himself (1970) to suggest that a Hittite law mitigating the punishment for bestiality, provided it be with a horse or mule, might hint at such a rite. Calvert Watkins (1995: 266–267) added a relief on a vase from İndandık showing a hieros gamos and a woman copulating “in the manner of beasts.”

Jón Ádalsteinsson (1998) connects the sacrifice of a horse with the consumption of its liver in chapter 27 of Hákonar Saga góða with the legitimacy of kingship. Ibn Fadlán’s early 10th century account of the funeral of a Rus chieftain (Montgomery 2000) may make for a good addition, as it contains elements found in the other rituals, namely races, sexuality, a connection with kingship, and the sacrifice of two horses who have been made to gallop until they sweat.

Earl Anderson (1999: 379–393) has attempted to extend the ritual beyond the Indo-Europeans, arguing it to be a steppe tradition. This is a fruitful direction of research, and there do indeed seem to be many parallels. The proposal may aid in identifying other Indo-European myths and rituals which belong to the complex, and is, of course, interesting in its own right. I would never suggest, however, that a particular form of horse sacrifice was limited to the Indo-Europeans, only that it was found among them.

The resulting dossier is an impressive one, and has generally been taken seriously by Indo-Europeanists.

This is not to say that the concept of an Indo-European horse sacrifice of a particular kind has been
without its detractors. Some of these have criticized the connections among the rites. Vangaard, for instance, finds it “strange” that anyone has connected the October Equus and the aśvamedha, holding that the only thing the two rituals share is that “in both a horse is killed” (1979: 94–95).

In particular, the response of critics to Gerald’s account has sometimes been quite heated. Reactions have ranged from Geoffrey Keating’s 17th century comparison of Gerald to a dung beetle, who ignored flowers for the sake of manure (2002: section 1), calling the report a “malicious unwarranted lie” (2002: section 3); to John O’Meara’s description of Gerald’s “apparent credulity which must have delighted the hearts of the Irish” (1951, 1952: 17), to Katherine Simms’ suggestion that the sacrifice “derived from a literary or oral tradition about a long discontinued rite“ (1987, 2000: 21). Gerald certainly had a motive; as a prominent member of the invading Norman-English, it would have been to his advantage to paint the Irish as barbarians, with the invasion being therefore a civilizing mission. A ritual which involved not just pagan sacrifice, but bestiality, would have been a fine contribution to this. I would add the possibilities that either Gerald mistook the symbol of a marriage of a king to a woman described as a horse for its reality, or, that when hearing of a ritual of that type, he was taken in by a local who said something like, “That’s nothing; in Ulster they use a real horse.”

The criticisms gain strength from Gerald’s status as the only person to report the ritual; there is no independent confirmation to counter any biases he may have had. I will argue here, however, that there is indeed a second source, one that, furthermore, strengthens the comparisons with the other Indo-European rituals, and allows us to find still more Irish parallels.

The source in question is the overlooked Lives of Saint Molaise of Devenish (also known as Lasrian, and not to be confused with the other Saint Molaise of Leighlin); in particular, the Irish Life, Betha Mholaise Daiminse (BMD), seems to have preserved details of a ritual similar to that of Gerald. There is a Latin Life as well, Vita Sancti Lasriani (Plummer 1922, 2: 131-140), which in turn
provides some supporting evidence, and to which I refer, but the meat of the evidence is in BMD.

At the very least, the location of Devenish, one of a large number of islands in Lower Lough Erne, should earn BMD a glance, as it is in County Fermanagh, neighboring Tir Conaill, where Gerald’s sacrifice took place. Indeed, the two kingdoms were united at the end of the thirteenth century, which is of course post-Gerald, but well within the possibility of a time when BMD was composed.

This early Modern Irish Life is found in a 16th century manuscript. Standish O’Grady, who edited and translated it in his Silva Gadelica, certainly did not think much of it; not only did he find it devoid of literary merit, but “in places defective or obscure” (1892: vii; he also criticized the spelling). The shorter Latin Life is from a 14th century manuscript; its editor Charles Plummer (1997 I: lxxiv; II: 131) suggests that it was intended to be read on the saint’s feast day. The link between the two Lives is strong, with in many cases almost identical wording, as far as the differing languages will permit, although there are systematic differences which will be seen to strengthen my case. The central event of the scene we will be looking at is not in the Latin Life, but that version can shed some light on our scene, so I will have cause to refer to it.

Much of BMD is a typical saint’s Life: noble ancestry, prophetic birth, list of miracles. Its foundation legend for Mholaise’s monastery on Devenish rescues it from the place O’Grady seems to want to banish it to. We read there:

\[
\text{Is é ro bo rí ar in ferann sin in tan sin Conall mac Daimín . adubairt a dhráí frisséin : mina innsaighe Mholaise co Daiminis ocus mina bháidi a theine anocht is é bhu tigerna ar in críchse ocus ar in loch ar a fuil . ocus is é a combarb ina dhegháidh bus mó guth ocus neart ocus cadhas. ar sén gabtar a eich do Chonall derg ocsus táinic roime d’innsaighidh Daiminnisi ocus do eachlaisce co dighair iat co ráinic cusin inadh frisanabar omhna gabtha . uair ro gabadh cosa na nech ann sin co nach raibhe caiscéim imtehta acu acht ba machtnugad frisin righ sin ocsus lás mhuinntir .ro b’ingnadh ocsus ro b’olc leo fós ocsus asbért óclách dá mhuinntir frisin righ : sóither cinn na nech sair ocsus dá nimthighset can fhuirech is duine dé Mholaise . ro}
\]

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sóadh cinn na neach sair ocs ro intighset fó chétoir. imthúsá Chonaill deirg imorro do léc [a] oenar na heich ocs ráníc reime dá chois dochum Molaisi. ocs tuc in tethar draighin do bhí aice ar linn in tairbh ocs tarbh bruithe ar a lár cor ling in tarbh isin loch ocs gur básed in teathar. dá each gheala imorro ro bhádar ag in righ. monga ocs scuaba corra forra. adbathatar fó chédór, do ghabh ecla Conal derg ann séin ocs docuas uadha ar ceann Molaisi ar co todhúsceadh na heocha a bás. tánínic Mholaise ocs tuc na heocha chum beathadh dorísí ocs ro bo maith lasan righ séin. dénam cennach anois bar Mholaise dobersa a hucht mo thigéarna righe na crichise duit féin ocs dot mhac it dheagaid ocs léc damsas in feramnsa forsatú. asbert in rí: nocha beirim a bhuide fritsá mo ferann féin ocs ferann m’athar ocs mo sheanathar romam. maseadh sin rádhe bhar Mholaise nír ghabha do mhac dá duine dot shiol co bráth || righe in fearainnsi. ro shóidh Mholaise a druim fris ocs rucad a shuíle a cédór ó’n righ. imthúsá in righ imorro is dáine do bhí ina chionn ar brith eolais do co ráníc a theach. ar séin dorighne fleidh móir ar tinnensu ocs do inonnlaisc do Mholaise i. ocs tuc an fearann do léi ocs tuc a maincheine co bráth as a aithhe. dobeirmisi a hucht mo thigéarna ar Mholaise do shuíle slán duit ocs ní ticfúdheh rea rath ná red righe féin eiret mhairi. ocs is cinnite nach gělbh righi ót shlocht etir. O’Grady, 1982, I: 25-26.)

He that at this time was chief over that land was Red Conall son of Daimhín, to whom his wizard said: “unless thou go to Molasius to Devenish, and unless this night thou quench his fire, he it is that shall be lord over this domain and over the [whole] loch in which it is; and his successor after him it is that in voice, in power and in privilege, shall preponderate.” Then for Red Conall his horses were harnessed, and he took his way to Devenish, lashing them hard until he attained to the place that has the appellation of omna gabtha [i.e. ‘the sticking oak’] for there [hard by an oak-tree] the horses’ feet were held fast so that they could not stir a step [lit. ‘so that they had not a step’]; but to the king and to his people this was a wonderment, a marvel, and moreover most displeasing to them. Said a young man of his people to the king: “let turn the horses’ heads eastwards and, if straightway they start, then is Molasius a man of God.” The horses’ heads were turned to the east and
they went at once.
As for Red Conall: the horses he let be, and made his way on foot; the wicker boat that he had he launched upon *linn an tarbh* [i.e. ‘the bull’s pool’] with, in the bottom of it, a bull all cooked [lit. ‘sodden’], but the bull leaped into the loch and the boat was swamped. Further: two white horses that the king had, with crimson manes and tails on them, they died out of hand. Then fear took Red Conall, and by him an embassage was sent to Molasius in order that he should raise the horses up from death. Molasius came, brought the horses to life again, and that pleased the king well. Molasius said: “make we now a bargain: I of my Lord’s part will to thyself, and to thy son after thee, grant this region; and leave thou me this spot of land upon which I am.” Quoth the king: “I thank thee not for that: mine own land, and my father’s and my grandfather’s before me!” “If that be what thou sayest,” Molasius answered, “may neither thy son, nor yet man of thy seed for ever, have the dominion of this land.” Molasius turned his back on him, and on the instant the king’s eyes [i.e. sight] were taken from him.

To continue the king’s story: [I]t was people he had leading him, to shew him the way, till he gained his house. Thereupon in all haste he had a great feast made, which he sent as a present to Molasius, and with it conveyed the land to him; then besides settled on him all its dues for ever. “On my Lord’s behalf” Molasius said, “I restore to thee thine eyes whole and, so long as thou livest, neither thine own fortune nor thy rule shall be opposed; but certain it is that by no one of thy posterity shall the rule ever be assumed” (O’Grady 1892, II: 24-5).

This is followed by a poetic version. The language here is difficult; according to Alexei Kondratiev, whose translation I give here, “it looks like an older text that was copied and partly updated by a speaker of Early Modern Irish” (personal communication). The translation must therefore be considered provisional:

*Tarla cagadh cruaidh gan cert . etir Mlaise na móirfert: dar dongaing cach ceig do’n righ . is Conall derg mac Daimhin*
Eirg ar an draoi ro chiaon ciall . innsaigh daimhinis co dian:
cuir Mlaise co neamhfhann tra . dot ferann is dot fhorba
Gabthar a eich do’n righ ruadh . nír ìsligh aítheasc an
druadh:
ní dá tseomra táinich tra . co ráiníc magh gabhtha
Gabthar cassa na neach ann sin . co derb oclus co deimin:
bátar gan tsegh gan taimr tra . dar lean in tainn in omhna.
Sòitear cinn na neach fò dhes . ar fer dá muinhntír gan ches
dá mbéarán raon luath mar sin . is é in naom tuc [a] fhuath
oraib
Ar sóidh na neach socair seang . ba luathi iná gaoth tar
gleann
lasin rig nír mhaise sin . do bhí Mlaise ina agaid
Marbthar tarb bruitter ar sin . ac Conall derg co deimhin
berar na ethar leis é . ar lethan locha Eirne
Ní cian dá rabhadar ann . in tan do éirig in tarb
tuc léim láidir oclus car . nó gur bháidh sin in teathar
Ar éicín in rígh fò thir . báidhter an muinhntír nár mhín
linn in taibh go ghrinne nglan . ainm an inaidh ar
báidheadh
Dá each gheala co folt nderg . do bádar ac rígh na redg
gër mhór in béd mar do bhá . tiaghait d’eig san lo cétin
Ar séin téit Conall na cealg . co Mlaise gër mhór a thearg
a náim thaghaim as mo thaigh . tabhair ainim in eachaib
Dobérsa tré dia na ndúil . ainm it eachaibh co húr
co mbeit na srianaibh mar sain . fregair mo riár na degaid
Dogní Mlaise ba maith mod . fert fiadhach gan chlaon gan
chor
éirgid na heich suas ar sein . leor a luas ar in láitheir
Dénam cennach nach bia cealg . ar Mlaise re Conall ndearg
righe nErenn duît ’s dot shiól . damsai in ferann gan
imshníom
Asbert Conall atái ar bás . chléirigh ni chanai gáis
atái ar thí thachair go trom . mh’athair ro bo rígh romhan
Budh ri romam in ri áig . ort nocha n[an]fa[m] a [dáil]
... ire duît . co tidhlacad ríge ...
Máseadh sin raidhe co ... ar Mlaise ...
dot shiól nocha bhia afos . na ríg budh [o]r[t] co follos
Sóais Mlaise a dhruim co dian . re Conall nderg ba maith
sgiam
fácbais in rí gann iartain . co roibh dall ar in láthair
Daigh adbatar imaithebr oll . acon ríg gër gharbh comlónn
do smuin fá thí gann taisi thair . síth re Mlaise gan
meabail
Dorighne flead tall na thigh . ruc leis dochum an cléirigh
do slánaighedh súile in rígh . is gach taccra má tarrla
Do slánaighedh súile in rígh . tucadh dó cobair co fir
Tuc a mainchine co fir . do Mhlaise is do rígh na rígh
tic craidhe in chléirig gan cheilg . gur réidig as [a] ardsheig
Do slánaighedh súile in rígh . tucadh dó cobair co fir
Tuc a mainchine co fir . do Mhlaise is do rígh na rígh

A harsh unjust conflict took place between Mholaise of the great miracles
(who had remained unbending before all the king's wiles) and red Conall son of Daimhin
“Go,” said the druid of cunning mind, “attack Daimhinis fiercely,
put Mholaise forcefully then from your land and your best (?)
Let his horses be brought to the red king.” The druid
did not lower his speech.
He came not to his chamber then until he reached
the plain of taking(?) [magh gabhta].
The feet of the horses are seized up then certainly
and securely.
They were without strength and without sound then,
for the soul/life had followed fear away.
“Let the heads of the horses be turned toward the south,” said a man of his retinue without weakness,
“they shall make a quick way like that - it was the saint
who gave his hate on you (pl.)
on the well-being of the fine slender horses that were swifter than a wind across a valley.”
It wasn't a good thing by the king that Mholaise was
against him.
A bull was killed, then boiled by red Conall surely.
It was taken by him in his vessel on the expanse of
Lough Erne.
They hadn't gone far before the bull rose up,
gave a strong leap and a twist so that this drowned the vessel.
The king barely made it to land, the discourteous
followers were drowned.
The lake of the bull is neatly and accurately the name
of the place where were drowned
two red-maned white horses that belonged to the king of the rages; though it was a great injury that they died, they went to death on the same day [?].

Thereupon Conall of the guiles went to Mholaise though great was his anger.

“O saint whom I choose of my own choice, give life to my horses.”

“I will through the God of the elements give life to your horses anew that they may be back in their bridles; then answer my own request afterwards.”

Mholaise the efficient one performed an evident miracle without deception or trick: the horses rose up then, sufficient was their speed on the field.

“Let us make a bargain that will not be a deception,” said Mholaise to red Conall, “the rule of Ireland for you and your descendants and for myself the land without any trouble.”

Said Conall, “you're being stupid, O cleric, you don't speak wisdom. You're on a place that was firmly established by my father who was king before me, the king of battles was king before me. It's not on you that his portion shall rest [ ] for you.

… with offering of kingship [ ]

“If that's what you say [ ],” said Mholaise, “your descendants shall have no gold (?) nor would you be a king openly (?).”

Mholaise turned his back fiercely on handsome red Conall.

After that the stingy king was left blind on the spot. The king suffered great pangs of reproach though harsh was his resistance.

He thought three times [that there would be] no weakness before him [to make] peace with Mholaise without disgrace.

He made a feast over there in his house. He brought with him (?) to the cleric, he did obeisance to the honest saint there, and he offered the land to him.

He gave his service truthfully to Mholaise and to the king of kings.
The heart of the cleric without deceit was then smoothed out of its great anger.
The eyes of the king were healed, help was given to him truly
the rulership for himself as long as he lived, and without anything (?) left after
of the conflict of Mholaise of the oaths - there never arose [another] man, I think,
who won every prosecution in a day’s time and every lawsuit if it happened.

The scene depicted in these two accounts is as a whole a boilerplate foundation tale in its own way: A saint wants land, a king says no, the saint curses the king, the king relents, the saint lifts the curse. It’s the incident at the oak that distinguishes it. It’s unnecessary to the plot; even if we wish the king’s horses to be miraculously halted so as to show the power of the saint, the detail of the oak and the turning of the horses’ heads could be eliminated with no harm to the story. In fact, that’s just what we find in the Latin Life:

XIV. Quidam autem regulus crudelis et impius diabolico spiritu instigatus, cui nomen erat Conallus rubeus, nolens in Christum credere, persecutus est eius discipulum. Qui cum suam malicia in virum Dei ac suos exercere desideraret, cum magno equitatu ad monasterium eius properavit, ut eum cum suis mos extin[u]eret. Tunc misericors Deus humiles exaltans, et superbos humilians, equos eorum deiecit in terram, nec ulterior ire valuerunt. Et cum sic essent filii Belial a desideriis suis frustrati, equos ad propria remittentes, citissime uiam currebant. Relictis ergo equis, regulus ipse cum turba sua ad extirpandum sanctum Dei de terra sua properavit. Tunc sanctus Lasrianus erat in insula quadam stagni quod vocatur Hibernice Loch Erni.

XV. Peruenientes igitur perfidi nequicia pleni ad litus predicti laci, suumentesque taurum a mago regis cum ueneno assatum, sancto uiro cum suis ad intoxicandum eos pro elemonsina [ferebant. Nauigantes autem ipsi, taurus diuino] nutu est resuscitat, mosque impetuoso precipicio se surgiti immergens, nauiculam euerit, et quotquot in ea fuerant in profundum iusto Dei iudicio ferebantur. Et hii qui naufragium euaserant, ad sua cum confessione et tristicia redieruent.
XVI. Tunc unus ex suis ad regulum rediens, sibi retulit quod duo equi eius subita morte preoccupati sunt. Quod cum regulus infidelis audisset, ad virum Dei nuncium misit, ut ad eos a morte resuscitandos properaret. (Plummer 1910: 134).

XIV. However, a certain cruel and wicked under/local king, whose name was Red Conal, impelled by a demonic spirit, and unwilling to believe in Christ, persecuted his disciple. Moreover, since he wished to exercise his malice towards the man of God, he hastened with a great many horsemen to Molasius’ monastery that he might then extinguish him with them. Then merciful God, who exalts the humble, and humbles the arrogant, at his request frustrated the horses of those sons of Belial, releasing his own horses, which ran very quickly on the road. Thereupon, abandoning the horses, the king himself hastened with his gang to expel the saint of God from his land. At that time St. Lasrianus was on a certain island in the lake which is called “Lough Erne” in Irish.

XV. Arriving, therefore, at the edge of that lake, the treacherous ones, filled with perversity, and taking up a bull roasted with poison by the magician of the king, brought it to the holy man as alms, to poison him. However, while they were sailing themselves, the bull was revived by divine will, and next suddenly raising itself furiously, suddenly, rising from the depths, it overturned the small boat, and however many were in it were conveyed by the just decision of God into the depths. And those who avoided the shipwreck returned to him in confusion and sorrow.

XVI. Then one of those returning to the king told him that two of his horses had been seized by death. When the disbelieving king heard that, he sent a message to the man of God, for him to quickly revive the horses from death.

The rest of the Latin Life parallels BMD, with the saint’s demand on the land, the king’s refusal, the king’s blinding, his healing by the saint, and the proclamation that Conall is the end of his line.

In this version, the halting of the king’s horses is a
practical means of providing the saint a safe get-away with his own. In BMD, though, Mholaise seems to be already safely away, presumably on Devenish, thus necessitating the boat-crossing. There isn’t any need for the horses to be stopped at all, and if they were stopped, for them to be released, and in so unusual a way. Oddest of all, in BMD Conall doesn’t take advantage of the freeing of the horses, but dismounts and continues his journey on foot.

If it’s unnecessary to the plot, or to the function of the Life as a foundation legend (since there’s plenty else to declare Mholaise a “Man of God”), we have to ask what the scene at the oak is doing there. If it isn’t meant to serve a purpose beyond just stopping Conall’s horses for a moment, horses which then disappear from the story, O’Grady would be right in his criticisms. It is just that purpose that I will be discussing.

There are three parts to my argument:

First, that the anecdote is a contest over sovereignty, second, that this contest is expressed in terms of a pagan ritual, part of which Mholaise undoes and the rest of which he “hijacks” and third, that this ritual includes a horse sacrifice, parts of which are described in the text.

That we are dealing with a question of sovereignty is an unremarkable statement; we are told that the dispute is over who has lordship over Devenish. That it is a ritual should be equally unremarkable; it is bracketed by elements that are accepted parts of Irish inauguration rituals, and the apparent purposelessness of the oak incident suggests an ideological rather than a mundane meaning. What remains to be shown is that this ritual is pagan and a horse sacrifice.

The ritual may be charted out like this:

1. A fire is lit.
2. A king drives a chariot team as fast as it can go.
3. There is a particular oak tree.
4. Which is “sticky.”
5. There is a proclamation of kingship by a “young man.”
6. The horses’ heads are turned around the oak to the east/south.
7. The horses are released from the tree.
8. The king sets off on foot.
9. A bull sacrifice is performed.
10. Two horses die.
11. A genealogy is recited.
12. There is a feast.

The framing elements, 1 and 12, alert us to the possibility that what lies between them is an inauguration ritual, since they perform this function in other tales. Lighting a fire as a claim to lordship, is for instance, how Mholaise’s ancestor Corc mac Láire, “Corc son of Mare” won the kingship of Cashel. The swineherd of Conall mac Nenta, king of Éile, had told him the same story as Red Conall had been told by his druid, that whoever lit a fire in a place would be lord of it. This Conall made the mistake of asking his druid to confirm the story; the druid took three days, by which time it was too late (Dillon 1952: 69-72). This looks much like our story, with the exception that our Conall doesn’t intend to make the other’s mistake, and heads off to Devenish as fast as possible.

That the claiming of land through lighting a fire is not only a ritual act, but a pagan one at that, is shown not only by its appearance as such throughout the Indo-European world, as far away as India (e.g., in SB 7.1.1.1-4 (Eggeling 1900: 298)), but by its lack of appearance in the ruthlessly anti-pagan Latin Life, where we have seen Conall’s motive described thus:

Moreover, since he wished to exercise his malice towards the man of God, he hastened with a great many horsemen to Molasius’ monastery that he might then extinguish him with them.

No fire is mentioned; Conall is hurrying extinguere eum, that is, to extinguish the saint. By eliminating the fire, the composer has eliminated the involvement of the “Man of God” in a pagan ritual, while attributing to the “Son of Belial” the motive of killing Mholaise.

The end bracket element 12, the feast, is perhaps the most common act used in Celtic texts to achieve and maintain sovereignty. It is so basic as to be found in the mythical history of Ireland in Cath Magh Tuired, where we know that Bres isn’t qualified to be king because when the
Tuatha De Danann went to his hall “their knives were not greased by him” (Gray 1982, section 36). In Mholaise’s own ancestral line, Corc confirms his lordship by holding the “first banquet of Cashel” (Dillon 1952: 71).

Conall Derg doesn’t hold the feast, though; he sends it to Mholaise so that the saint can host it, a message of, “You win.” A clearer and more ritualized sign of submission would be hard to find.

Element 9, the bull, also identifies this as an inauguration. The Latin Life, by telling us that it was poisoned by the king’s magician (i.e., his druid), implies that it is a sacrifice. We can compare it with the tarb féis, familiar to us from Sercglige Con Culainn, (l. 244-253 (CELT, 2000; tr. Dillon 1951: 56)) and Togail Bruidne Da Derga, (l. 122-126 CELT, 2002; tr. Gantz 1981: 65)). In this ritual, a bull is killed, a man eats its meat and drinks its broth, and sleeps while druids chant incantations over him. In his dreams he will see the man destined to be the next king.

The first element within the frame finds Conall heading toward Devenish with all speed. This serves a plot function, of course: time is short. However, it also brings to mind the October Equus, and the aśvamedha, in both of which the horse to be sacrificed must excel on the right side of the yoke (i.e., the king must have the fastest horses to sacrifice), as well as the galloping and sweating horses of Ibn Fadlan. An Irish analogy may well be found in the De Shíl Chonairi Móir, in the eighth century version of how Conaire Mor became king of Tara. He had to drive a chariot so that its wheel rubbed against the stone Lia Fáil, which would cry out if he were the true king. Equating this with the Indic and Roman sacrifices has been objected to on two grounds; that it does not describe a race, and that it concerns the election of a king rather than his inauguration (Disterheft 1997: 106). It is, however, not in fact an election. The cry does not make Conaire king, but rather declares his kingship. When this is considered, the second objection disappears. A declaration of a candidate as a rightful king is certainly a reasonable thing to find in an inauguration ritual. The first objection can be answered by noting that although the choice of the horse in Rome is determined by a race in the ritual itself, in India, where the horse must meet the same qualification, there is only a
symbolic race. Given this, we need not be surprised at only finding a symbolic race at Tara. If I am right about BMD, a less stately race can also be found in Ireland.

In element 3, Conall’s “race” ends at an oak tree. This puts us in mind of biles, the sacred trees that often formed part of Irish inauguration rituals, and the destruction of which was a significant political act against their possessors (Byrne 2001: 27). Notice that omna gabtha isn’t a description of the tree – we are told that it is its “appellation” (frisanabar), that is, this is the oak’s actual name. Its possession of a name puts it in the same category of such biles as those “three landmarks of Erin,” the Yew of Ross, the mighty Yew of Mugna, and the red-sided Yew of Tortu” (Eó Rossa, Eó Mugna múid ocus Eó Tortan táb-rúad; Gwynn 1924, IV: 242-243, verse 25).

Element 4, the “stickiness” of the oak, will prove to be the crucial part of my argument. Its significance will be clearest if I leave it till later, however.

The young man in element 5 is necessary for plot reasons, since Conall needs to be told the significance of the horses’ “sticking.” But why a “young man?” Earlier a druid had advised Conall; where is he now? The answer may be found in some of the rituals Ireland has left us that are specifically described as ones of inauguration, in which a vassal is the one who proclaims a king. For instance, in the 12th century Life of St. Colmán mac Luacháin this is done for the king of Tara by the chief of the Uí Fhorannáin (Meyer 1911: 72). I don’t think it would be going too far to say that this is the kind of proclamation made by Lia Fáil.

Note, though, that the young man does not in fact proclaim Conall king; he proclaims him to be not king. Mholaise is a “man of God,” and the implication is that that qualifies him for sovereignty over Devenish. The young man, otherwise unidentified, does not act much like a vassal, at least not one of Conall’s. He is described as “of [the king’s] people,” to be sure, but here he goes over to the other side.

The horses’ heads must be turned sair, “towards the east, forwards” (eDIL 2011) or, in the poetic version, dhes, “right, south” (eDIL 2011, keyword dess). The poem tells us that the turning was clockwise; in the prose version, sair
has the implication of not just “towards the east,” but “eastward.” That such a turning towards the canonical Indo-European sacred direction of east is a ritual act is undeniable. Even more clearly, turning clockwise is another canonical Indo-European direction, this time of motion, and is found throughout the medieval Irish literature, as a direction of blessing. It occurs famously several times in the *Táin bó Cuailnge*, such as in Medb’s charioteer’s clockwise turn before setting off, to invoke the sun for their safe return (Lebor na hUidre 4507-4509). In BMD we find it functioning as a prophetic and a magical act. This is again reminiscent of the story of Conaire Mor; although we are not told that he had to go around Lia Fáil, the blocking of the action requires such a turn.

Element 8, that Conall sets off on foot after the incident at the sticky oak, underlines the scene’s importance and confirms that we are outside the practical realm and inside the ritual one. The king has been hurrying to Devenish, “lashing [his horses] hard,” with his horses “swifter than a wind across a valley,” and yet, after turning his forcibly halted horses’ heads to the east/clockwise, so they are now able to move, he inexplicably continues on foot. He is still in a hurry, but no longer uses his horses. What’s happening here? In the Latin Life he has left them behind because they’re still stuck, but that won’t work in BMD, where we’re specifically told that not only aren’t they stuck, they “went at once.” And yet they go without the king, or rather, without his riding in the chariot they’ve been pulling. It’s this question which makes clear the ritual nature of the scene. Unless the original composer of BMD is completely incompetent, so obvious a flaw must have had a non-plot reason.

The next time we hear of the horses, they’re dead. Or at least we learn of the death of two of the king’s horses. Oddly enough, in the prose of neither Life are we told how they die; they just die. In BMD they “died out of hand” (*adbathatar fó chédóir*), and in the Latin Life Conall is told that, “two of his horses had been seized by death” (*duo equi eius morte eius preoccupati sunt*.) In none of the versions are we told where the dead ones come from, and we have no indication in any version why the author
should mention them. The Latin Life in particular makes no sense: Conall’s horses are still stuck, so he shouldn’t have any horses at all to die.

The easiest solution to the origin of the dying horses and the fate of the disappearing chariot horses is that they’re the same pair. That is, the king has driven to the oak tree in a chariot, the horses are attached to the tree, turned around, and then released from the tree. They then die, either before or after the king continues on foot.

As for the means of their death, neither prose author seems to have any idea why, or even how they died. They just die.

In the poem, however, we are told how the horses die. They báidheadh, they drown.

It isn’t only the nonsense of the king being on foot in BMD, or, in the Latin Life, having horses which he no longer has die on him, that leads to a suspicion that the death of the horses is ritual rather than story. We find a similar tale in the Dindshenchas, in which two horses die in connection with kingship. The tale explains the name of Loch Gabor. The metrical version reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Loch Dá Gabar, gním dia fail,} \\
\text{úaim co fír rofesabair,} \\
\text{a rígad ón Bregrus balc,} \\
\text{nì do şenchus na sen-marc.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sund robáidit, bríg cen blad,} \\
\text{echrad Echach ríg Muman:} \\
\text{báeth in fiad rosforaim and,} \\
\text{Gáeth ocus Grian a n-anmann.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dorucait ria réir don ríg} \\
\text{ar feis Temrach do thairb-ríg} \\
\text{ó Eochaid maire-cend na mál} \\
\text{d’ Enna fairtend enech-nár.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Rosfiailti serrach seng sel} \\
\text{óthá in glenn imba Glasgen:} \\
\text{rocíngset reime, réim troch,} \\
\text{còr’ lingset lèim ‘sin làich-locch.)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Gwynn, 1924: 182-183).
Loch Dá Gabar
Loch Dá Gabar – the reason of the name ye shall learn from me, in sooth, O princes from strong Bregros! ‘tis a story of steeds of old.
Here were drowned (inglorious might!) the horses of Eochu, king of Munster: wanton the wild thing that chased them thither: Gaeth and Grian were their names.
They were brought with homage at the feast of Tara from the bull-king, Eochaid Marc-cend, ruler of chieftains, to the King, mighty Enna, noble and bounteous.
A slender foal drove them once in panic, issuing from the glen where Glasgen dwelt: they fled before him, a fatal course, till they leapt their leap into the warriors’ lake.

And in the prose one:

_Da gabar Echach Cind Mairc rí Muman dobretha uadh a ngiallacht do rig Temrach do Enna Aighnech mac Oengusa Turbic Temrach fí dlíged a tuath, uair na tancatar fèis Temrach. Robaidit a eich isin loch._
_Nó dano, robáí glachullach la Glascoin ina sleib, 7 ba sed a ainm, Searrach, dia ta Glenn Serraich. Doluid for a seíchim co mbóí eiter scurú Enna Aignig do saigid echnamta, co luid ind eich riam isin loch, coros-báidte and .i. Gáoth 7 Grian a n-anmand. Unde Loch Gabar dicitur._ (Stokes, 1895: 58-59)

Loch Gabar
Two of the steeds of Echu Horsehead [Echach Cind Mairc] king of Munster were sent by him, as a sign of submission, to the overking of Ireland Enna Aignech son of Oengus Turbech of Tara, for they were due from his tribes since they came not to the Feast of Tara. Echu’s steeds were drowned in the lake.
Or also, Glascú had on his mountain (Sliab Glascon?) a grey British stallion [glashullach] named Serrach “Foal,” from which Glenn Serraig is named. This stallion went following them (Echu’s two steeds), to seek a mare to cover, till he was among Enna Aignech’s studs, and the (two) horses fled before it into the lake and were drowned therein.
“Wind” and “Sun” were their name. Hence Loch Gabar “Lake of Steeds” is said.

The metrical and the first of the prose versions involve a clear recognition (grudging in the prose) of over-kingship by a client king, “Horse Horse-head.” The second of the prose versions does this as well, even if less clearly. Unlike the other versions, in this one the submission doesn’t seem voluntary. The horses have to be chased, presumably from Echu’s herd, into that of the overking, from which they can then be drowned. Note that, as in Gerald, there is a sexual component in the second prose version. It is tempting to think that the stallion is Enna Aigneuch himself, come to cover a mare (notice that he’s just looking for one, even though two horses die).

Note especially that these horses die in the same way the poetic version in BMD tells us the Devenish horses die. All are drowned, bàdar.

That two horses die in the dindshenchas and in the two Lives rather than the one mentioned in Gerald isn’t an objection to connecting the two rituals. Gerald is only interested in the “covered” mare, but something has to happen to the other member of the team. Similarly, in the aśvamedha commentators have spent much time concentrating on the horse which is the main object of sacrifice, with few paying attention to the fate of its yokemate. (If the sacrificial horse is to “excel on the right side of the yoke,” there has to be another horse to its left.) As Heesterman (1986: 57) notes, though, the agnicayana ritual, the erection of the fire altar that is an essential part of the aśvamedha, requires the heads of five animals. Among them is a horse; i.e., the preliminary ritual requires its own horse sacrifice. He writes: “Now it is obvious that the agnicayana not only precedes the horse sacrifice, it is in its turn preceded by a ‘horse sacrifice’ which must deliver the horse’s head for the altar.” This sacrificed horse has had other things to do earlier in this ritual, and is certainly not the one in the aśvamedha proper. This second horse (first, actually, in the order of sacrifice) has practically escaped notice in all the fuss about the more famous participant in the larger ritual. In the context of our story, two things are important about its
death other than its presence. First, it occurs as part of the establishment of a fire, as important a part of the Indian ritual as it is of the one in BMD. Second, its death takes place by a body of water (as in the Lives), into which its body is thrown after its head is removed (Heesterman, 1986: 52, n. 42), as is the fate of the horses of Loch Gabar, and presumably Devenish. The main horse in the *aśvamedha* is itself twice driven into water, and the horse race in the October Equus takes place along a river, on a frequently-flooded field. Note as well the significance of the horse’s head in the Roman ritual. It might be possible to connect these two horse’s heads with the name of “Echu Horse Head” (*Echach Cind Maire*).

With Conall’s horses dead, we can now return to the *omnia gabtha*. O’Grady’s uncertainty of his translation of this as “sticking oak” is shown by his including it in his translation, putting it in parentheses. His hesitation is understandable, as “sticking oak” is not in fact what it means. The verb on which *gabtha* is based, *gaibid*, does have “stick” as one of its meanings, but *gabtha* can’t mean “sticking” because it is a past participle, not a present one (eDIL 2011). *omnia gabtha* is thus not “sticking oak,” but the “stuck oak.” This is required grammatically, but semantically the meaning must be “sticking” if the story as told is to make sense.

The dilemma can be resolved if we separate the name from the act, putting the literalness of “sticking” aside. That leaves us with a story that still makes sense, involving two chariot horses that are attached to an oak tree, but not stuck there.

This image is familiar from other Indo-European cultures. Geographically close is the Norse image of the World Tree, Yggdrasill. The name itself translates as “Yggr’s Horse,” “Yggr” being a name for Odin, who hung as a sacrifice on the tree, “riding” it, to gain knowledge of the runes (*Hávamál* 138-139; Hollander, 1962: 36). It would therefore not be wrong to call Yggdrasill “Horse Tree.” Now, Odin’s actual horse is Sleipner (*Gylfaginning* 42; Snorri, 1987: 35-36), and Sleipner has eight legs; i.e., it is two horses. Thus Yggdrasill, which Odin rides, is equivalent to a pair of horses.

Further away geographically, but closer ritually, is the...
stake to which the horse in the aśvamedha is tied, and from which it is twice released, the aśvayūpā “horse pillar” (RV 1.162.6; O’Flaherty, 1981: 90). Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1995: 467) rightly equate this with the Vedic axis mundi, aśvatthā “horse tree.”

This leaves us with an image from Scandinavia of a world tree which is associated with a pair of horses, and to which Odin is attached, and from India of a world tree with the name “horse tree,” and which doubled as a stake to which a sacrificial horse is tied. All of this makes us more confident in seeing the tree in our story to be a bile, a social axis mundi, and the “sticking” of the horses as rather an “attaching.”

All of which brings us back to the omna gabtha question. We have already seen how gabtha makes no sense grammatically, even if there is a semantic connection with the story. However, there is a very similar word that makes sense both grammatically and semantically, namely gabor, with the meaning “horse” (eDil 2011) About this word, which is largely confined to poetry, Patricia Kelly writes that “Textual attestations confirm the high status, often royal, of the animal so designated” (Kelly 1997: 52). In fact, the Dictionary of the Irish Language is more specific about the word’s meaning; it is “a horse (esp. a white one), a mare, mainly confined to poetic language” (eDIL 2011) This poetic word would had fallen out of use by the time of the writer of BMD. If our writer were basing his work on earlier sources, or the name of an actual tree, he could be forgiven for not knowing the word, substituting instead the semantically plausible one of the horses being “stuck” to the oak rather than “attached” to it. If gabtha is emended in this way, we find a “horse oak,” rather than a “sticky oak,” equating our tree’s name to those in Scandinavia and India. We are strongly encouraged to accept this emendation by the name of Loch Gabor, discussed earlier, the second part of which is the same word I am suggesting.

The decisive factor in accepting both the change and the incident at the oak as part of a kingly horse sacrifice is an inaugural mound on the east side of Upper Lough Erne named Sgiath Gabhra, “Fort (or Shield) of the Horse” (Fitzpatrick 2004: 84-87). Although we only know of this
site’s use as an inaugural mound in the sixteenth century, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick considers it probable that it was used in the late thirteenth century to inaugurate the Maguires. In “Sgiath Gabhra” we therefore have an inauguration site near the time and place of our story that includes the very word I am suggesting the composer of BMD was confused by. (Fitzpatrick herself (2001: 74) pondered the possibility of a connection between Sgiath Gabhra and Gerald’s sacrifice, but without the scene from BMD.)

The significance of our scene now becomes clear. In the middle of a foundation legend cast in terms of an inauguration ritual we find horses attached to a tree with the name “Oak of the White Mare,” a clockwise/eastward turning, a declaration of lordship, the detaching of the horses, and their death by drowning, near an inaugural mound called “Fort /Shield of the White Mare.” And all of this not only not far from the Kinellcunill of Gerald’s horse sacrifice, but in a territory ruled by a single king at least as early as 1333, only slightly over a century after Gerald (Annals of Connacht 1333.3).

Gerald’s sacrifice can be outlined thus:

A. A white mare is brought forward.
B. Among the assembly.
C. The king professes himself a beast.
D. The King has intercourse with the mare.
E. The mare is killed.
F. The mare is butchered and its meat boiled.
G. The king bathes in the broth, surrounded by his people.
H. The king and his people eat the horse meat.
I. The king drinks from the broth with neither a cup nor his hands.

Our story can be dropped into Gerald’s almost seamlessly, producing this ritual sequence:

1. A ritual fire is lit.
   A. A white mare (or mares) is brought forward.
   B. Among the assembly.
2. There is a chariot “race”
3. to an oak tree with the name “oak of the white mare.”
4. The horse is attached to the tree (The tree is “sticky”).
   C. The king professes himself a beast.
   D. The king has intercourse with the mare.
5. There is a proclamation of kingship by a young man who is a vassal of the king.
6. The horses’ heads are turned clockwise around the oak (or they are led around it).
7. The horses are released from the tree.
8. The king sets off on foot.
10. The horses are drowned.
   F. The mare is butchered and its meat boiled
11. The king’s genealogy is recited.
   G. The king bathes in the broth, surrounded by his people.
12. There is a feast by the new sovereign
   H. The king and his people eat the horse meat.
   I. The king and his people drink broth with neither cups nor hands.

Neither Life informs us of where the bull sacrifice (part 9), would go, although the story of Conaire suggests that it might have been performed to confirm the candidate’s eligibility some time before the ritual was started, or even scheduled. The story of the founding of Cashel, with the prophecy’s appearance in a dream, also suggests this. (Perhaps confirming one dream through another involving a bull sacrifice is what occupies the druid there for three days.)

It may seem odd that BMD has not included the most dramatic part of the hypothesized ritual, the king’s intercourse with the mare. I believe that this can be explained by the different functions of the two texts. Gerald wanted to portray a bizarre custom of the primitive Irish, while the author of BMD wanted to cast a foundation legend in the outline of an inauguration ritual. The rest of the rite wasn’t relevant to Gerald’s purpose, and the author of BMD could hardly have had the saint take part in Gerald’s rite.

The suggestion that in BMD we are dealing with a form of the Indo-European horse sacrifice is strengthened by its parallels with the elements of other rituals – the lighting of a fire, horses killed by or in water, the use of a
sacrificial post, and a “race.” The parallels with the Dindshenchas – the death of two horses by drowning as part of a test of kingship – add their own share of support.

That this composite ritual can be so easily formed is strong evidence not only that BMD contains an account of a ritual of the same kind as Gerald’s sacrifice, but that Gerald was indeed describing at the least a distorted version of an actual ritual, with each text telling us overlapping parts. The anti-Gerald forces in the centuries-old debate on the reality of his ritual have relied heavily on his being the only account of it. It can now be seen, however, that there is in fact a second one. This version has been superficially Christianized, of course. The king’s professing himself a beast has been trumped by the young man professing Mholaise a “man of God.” The saint has high-jacked a pagan ritual, and the pagan Conall has admitted his loss, using the same ritual vocabulary, by sending a feast. It is Mholaise who will give the feast, and from now on it’s the church that will decide the kingship. Without meaning to do so, however, the authors of the two Lives of Mholaise, especially that of BMD, allow us to not only confirm the existence of the Irish horse sacrifice, but to expand our knowledge of its performance considerably. Details which they might have preferred to become extinct have come down to us, stuck to the oak of Devenish.

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