

The Indo-European Religious Background of the Gygēs Tale in Hērodotos

Ethan M. A. Rite

The first “short story” included in the *Histories* of Hērodotos narrates the rise of the Mermnad dynasty of Lydia through an act of assassination and usurpation by their founder, Gygēs.¹ To make a long tale short, the Lydian king Kandaulēs, being obsessed with his wife, contrives to show her naked to his bodyguard Gygēs. After catching him in the act, the queen confronts Gygēs and forces him to choose between murdering his master or being killed himself. He takes the former option and establishes himself and his descendants as rulers of Lydia up to the time of Kroisos. In the commentary of Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella, this story is characterized as a “court tale,” but is further analyzed neither with respect to its oral-historical background nor its motivic structure.² This paper will argue that the Gygēs narrative reflects a far more ancient, Indo-European ideology representing the sovereign power as a goddess wedded to the sovereign himself in a sacred marriage.

What is the Sacred Marriage?

As employed in this article, the term “sacred marriage” refers to a meme in the religions of ancient Europe and West Asia which metaphorically cast good rulership as a harmonious wedding between the king, the representative of his people, and the earth, personified as a female divinity. The origin of this concept is readily apparent, as the successful maintenance of civilization depends upon an ecological balance between the human population and all other organisms, on whom they rely for nourishment and whom they, in turn, feed and cultivate. Chief among the king’s functions was the maintenance of justice, not just between members of the tribe, but also between mankind and the wider cosmos.³ Here the goddess is also involved, as she represents not simply a patch of dirt, but the generative process, literally “nature,” which links all creatures in the cosmic hierarchy. The legitimacy of a given ruler was linked to the health of the generated world, which was thought to flourish under a just king and wither under a despot.⁴ Thus, divinized nature conferred upon the mortal king his right to rule, and for this reason she is herein labeled Sovereignty.

The information used in this article concerning the sacred marriage in Indo-European-speaking Anatolia and in non-Indo-European cultures of the Near East will largely come from *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia*, which analyzes Kybelē as a Near Eastern divinity incorporated into Greek religion through contact and conflict with Anatolian civilization. Evidence for the existence of the sacred marriage as a concept in the wider Indo-European

¹ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars, Volume I: Books 1–2*, ed. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library 117 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 1.7–12; David Asheri, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella, *Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*, eds. Oswyn Murray and Alfonso Moreno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.

² Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella, *Commentary on Herodotus*, 81.

³ M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 421–24.

⁴ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 421–24.

linguistic and cultural clade will be drawn from *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, a comparative study of Indo-European literature and religion with respect to shared concepts and motifs, as opposed to strict linguistic heritage.

Mark Munn cites appearances of the sacred marriage as a topos in Sumerian literature as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur.⁵ The presence of sacred marriage in Mesopotamia at the end of the third millennium B.C.E. and in Proto-Indo-European is significant, as the Indo-European family was likely at a very early stage of diversification at that point. The coeval attestation of the topos in civilizations as separate as the city-states of Mesopotamia and the pastoralists of the Eurasian steppe suggests that it was not diffused from one to the other. It is likely that Near Eastern and Indo-European traditions of the sacred marriage form part of a wider, Eurasian religious ideology with probable origins in a culture or cultures that flourished prior to the coalescence of the Indo-European dialect continuum.

Literary and linguistic evidence for the Indo-European ideology of sacred marriage comes from several branches of the Indo-European family. It is particularly rich within the Anatolian branch, of which Lydian is itself a member. Beyond Anatolia, figures representing Sovereignty or some of her functions are found in stories from the Celtic and Hellenic subfamilies, as well as in Sanskrit. What follows is a review of the reflexes of Sovereignty found in those sub-branches of Indo-European, which will enable their shared characteristics to be identified and a Proto-Indo-European ideology of Sovereignty and the sacred marriage to be outlined. In addition, archaeological evidence will be used to illuminate the ritual execution of the sovereign that formed a key part of this ideology within Indo-European cultures. Finally, an analysis of the story of Gygēs’ usurpation as told by Hērodotos and others will reveal its connection with the Indo-European concept of Sovereignty and highlight internal evidence for its origin in myth rather than “pure” history.

Kybelē – Sovereignty in Anatolia

In his study on the Mother of the Gods, Mark Munn analyzes the eponymous goddess, who provided the justification for the sovereign’s power in the Phrygian and Lydian kingdoms of late Bronze Age and Archaic Anatolia. The Mother of the Gods, also called Kybelē, was a chthonic fertility deity associated closely with wells, springs, and mountains.⁶ Shrines to her were carved into cliff faces with nearby water sources across the Phrygian domain, manifesting her identification with the physical landscape of the kingdom.⁷ The goddess’ very name, *Κυβέλη*, is plausibly derived from the Phrygian word for “mountain,” making her the “Mountain Mother.”⁸

In traditional Phrygian narratives Sovereignty is portrayed as a mortal woman who bore the archetypal king Midas and, on account of her piety, received divine honors from him after her death.⁹ From such tales, Munn extrapolates an archetypal “life history” for Kybelē. She begins her career as a virgin and goes on to become the bride of the king and mother of his son before dying, after which she is divinized.¹⁰ In Munn’s interpretation, Kybelē was “assimilated to the role of the consort herself” and her life narrative was continually reenacted across generations through the

⁵ Mark Munn, *Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 132–33.

⁶ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 84–87.

⁷ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 75–77.

⁸ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 120–25.

⁹ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 79–85.

¹⁰ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 99.

ritual pairing of the Lydian tyrant and his concubines, the favorite of whom bore his successor and thus became Sovereignty.¹¹

The progression of Sovereignty through a life cycle shows that she was not a static, timeless divinity, but instead embodied nature as a generative process which the king was obligated to maintain, and which would, in turn, uphold his rule.¹² The support given by Sovereignty to loyal kings was not just abstract, but practical, because Kybelē also had a martial function. Her ritual music accompanied Lydian military campaigns and was said to have been appropriated by the Spartans for their own marching music.¹³ Munn cites stories from Polyainos in which the processional rites of Kybelē provide the occasion and cover for acts of conquest, and he recounts a tale from Nicholas of Damascus in which her sacred artifacts instill “god-sent terror” in the enemies of the ruling house of Miletus.¹⁴ In the religious mind of Archaic Asia Minor, Kybelē was not a metaphor, but a real manifestation of the sovereign power bestowed on the monarch.

Medb – Sovereignty in Ireland

In *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, M. L. West writes that in ancient Ireland, as in Lydia, the king was legitimized via marriage to a personification of the physical turf of his kingdom who also represented the sovereignty over that particular land.¹⁵ Máire Herbert analyzes one such figure – Medb, the mythical queen of Connacht and heroine of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* – in more detail. Like Kybelē, Medb is reputed to have taken a succession of kings as husbands, no fewer than nine, according to West.¹⁶ Herbert interprets Medb’s serial polyandry as symbolizing the continuous need for good rulership and the inconstancy of power,¹⁷ which in turn explains Medb’s agency in choosing her spouse. In one narrative mentioned by Herbert, she abandons one of her husbands in favor of a “young man who was active in protecting her province” whom she made king instead.¹⁸

Although not discussed by Herbert, it merits mention that Medb performs an even more active martial role than Kybelē. While there is historical evidence that Kybelē’s insignia were carried before campaigning armies, in the *Táin* Medb is depicted instigating and commanding the armed cattle raid of the title. The action starts after she decides to go to war over possession of a famous bull, the Donn Cuailnge, in order to make the value of her property greater than that of her husband Ailill.¹⁹ On the warpath, she commands the mustered hosts of her kingdom and rides in a chariot like her husband and other elite warriors.²⁰ Medb even enters combat and gravely wounds the hero Cethern.²¹ In her role as not just a war, but a warrior goddess, Medb dramatically portrays Sovereignty pursuing the polity’s imperative to protect and extend its hegemony.

¹¹ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 100–106.

¹² Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 99–100.

¹³ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 90–91.

¹⁴ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 89–90.

¹⁵ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 415–16; Máire Herbert, “Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland,” in *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise Olga Fradenburg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 264–65.

¹⁶ Herbert, “Goddess and King,” 266; West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 416.

¹⁷ Herbert, “Goddess and King,” 266.

¹⁸ Herbert, “Goddess and King,” 266.

¹⁹ Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55–58.

²⁰ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 53, 58–60, 65–67.

²¹ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 208.

Pallas Athēnā – Sovereignty in Greece

When surveying examples of the Indo-European sovereignty goddess, the unique figure from Greek literature noted by West is Basileia, who features in Aristophanes’ *Birds* as a representation of “Zeus’ power, wisdom, and justice.”²² However, it is not difficult to posit that there *is* a sovereignty goddess among the better-known Greek deities. Pallas Athēnā is presented in the role of Sovereignty in the epic tradition and there is linguistic evidence that this was once her function.

Although she is not the wife of any king, mortal or divine, in her role as guardian and mentor of Homeric kings Athēnā performs a similar function to Medb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.²³ To give just a few examples, she stays Akhilleus from slaying Agamemnon at the inception of their storied conflict²⁴ and later sets the iconic blazing nimbus about his head to terrify the Trojans despoiling the dead Patroklos.²⁵ She strengthens Diomēdēs before his aristeia²⁶ and, recalling Medb, acts as his charioteer and companion in wounding Arēs.²⁷ Throughout the second Homeric poem she is Odysseus’ special (and sometimes literal) mentor and (micro)manages his homecoming. In her own words to Odysseus, “[I am] she who always stands by you in all trials and guards you” (ἦ τέ τοι αἰεὶ ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοισι παρίσταμαι ἠδὲ φυλάσσω).²⁸

Likewise, in her patronage of Athens she assumes the role of Sovereignty looking after the well-being of her territory. In Book 8 of the *Histories*, Hērodotos recounts that when the Athenians evacuated their city at the approach of the Persians under Xerxēs, the goddess deserted the acropolis along with her sacred snake.²⁹ Later, a female apparition – surely her in the mind of a pious Athenian – incites the attack of the Greek fleet at Salamis, bringing about final salvation.³⁰ The name *Ἀθήνη* refers interchangeably to the Athenian πόλις and to its patron deity in Homer, suggesting her original identity with the territory of Athens.³¹

In Homeric material, the name of the goddess appears as *Ἀθηναίη* and *Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη*, apparently with the adjective-forming suffix *-αῖᾱ* descended from a Proto-Indo-European morpheme **-iyo-* of the same function.³² Munn postulates that the theonym *βασίλη* found at Athens is the nominalized form of an attributive *βασιλεία* formed with the same adjectival suffix and interprets *Κυβέλη* as an analogous back-formation.³³ The more common name *Ἀθήνη* plausibly

²² West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 415.

²³ Dean Miller, "Royalty and Mythology: Connections and Similarities Between Ireland's Kings and Monarchy in the Classical World and Elsewhere," *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 67 (2008): 110.

²⁴ Homer, *Iliadis I-XII*, eds. David B. Munro and T. W. Allen. Oxford Classical Texts, 3rd edition (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1920), 1.188–214.

²⁵ Homer, *Iliad*, 18.202–29.

²⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, 5.1–2.

²⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, 5.825–63.

²⁸ Homer, *Odysseae XIII-XXIV*, ed. T. W. Allen. Oxford Classical Texts, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), 13.300–01.

²⁹ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars, Volume IV: Books 8–9*, ed. A. D. Godley. Loeb Classical Library 120 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 8.41.

³⁰ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 8.84.2.

³¹ Richard John Cunliffe, *Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect: Expanded Edition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 452.

³² Cunliffe, *Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, 452; Benjamin W. Fortson, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 134–35.

³³ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 124.

arose the same way, when an pertinative epithet built on a toponym was rederived as a noun referring to the place’s personification.

If Athēnā’s name was in origin an epithet, it is possible that she was once simply called Παλλάς. Robert Beekes writes that “Athena’s epithet Παλλάς, ἄδος ... is isolated, among the Greeks in Thebes (Egypt), it functions as a sacral term for ‘girl.’”³⁴ Thus, Παλλάς seems to have originally been a doublet of παρθένος, with the meaning “virgin” or “maiden.” It is interesting that παλλάς appears to be the root of παλλακή, the term used for the concubines of the Lydian sovereign from among whom the avatar of Kybelē was chosen,³⁵ suggesting a likeness between the two divinities.

Furthermore, in Homer, Athēnā is described as the mother of Erekhtheus, the progenitor ancestor of the Athenians, whom the “grain-giving field bore” and she herself nurtured (ὄν ποτ’ Ἀθήνη θρέψε Διὸς θυγάτηρ, τέκε δὲ ζείδωρος ἄρουρα).³⁶ Athēnā’s cult in Greece appears to date back at least to the palatial civilizations of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. A goddess associated with militaria and the royal palace is attested in artwork even in Minoan times and an **a-ta-na po-ti-ni-ja**, possibly “Lady Athēnā,” is mentioned in Linear B texts from Knossos.³⁷ This author postulates that the Homeric passage is a reference to Athēnā as a telluric goddess and supposes that in the deep past Athens was thought to have its own “Maiden” who ritually wedded the king before becoming mother of his heir, as did Kybelē in Anatolia. With the demise of Mycenaean sacred kingship and the rise of democracy, the Maiden of Athens was left a perpetual virgin.

Mādhavī – Virginité and Royalty in India

Sanskrit literature contains the figure of Mādhavī, the daughter of the high king Yayāti in the *Mahābhārata*. Mādhavī is a royal virgin who, like Medb and Kybelē, supports princely lineages through the bearing of legitimate heirs. She bears sons to four different kings, thus ensuring the survival of their respective dynasties.³⁸ These children go on to save their grandfather, Yayāti, after he allows his superhuman rectitude to be marred by the vice of pride and thereby falls from the celestial paradise.³⁹ Unlike Kybelē, Mādhavī is not shown progressing through a life cycle, but she is “gifted with renewable virginité,”⁴⁰ which enables her to couple with multiple princes and remain a virgin after each one, just as each successive tyrant of Lydia enacted the ritual of sacred marriage with a virginal concubine. While Mādhavī is not an earth goddess who must be cultivated and appeased, the *Mahābhārata* does elsewhere propound the near-universal ideology associating a righteous king with prosperity for the land he rules.⁴¹

The Ritual Gift and the Mead of Sovereignty

In tales from the Celtic-speaking peoples, the union of the male sovereign with Sovereignty was formalized by the “proffering of a drink,” often mead, “by [the] bride to her groom.”⁴² The

³⁴ Robert Beekes and Lucian van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), s. v. παλλακή.

³⁵ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 100–02.

³⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, 2.547–48.

³⁷ Paul Rehak, “Mycenaean ‘Warrior Goddess’ Revisited,” *Aegaeum* 19 (1998): 236–38.

³⁸ Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 258–59.

³⁹ Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 259–60.

⁴⁰ Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 258.

⁴¹ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 422–23.

⁴² West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 416.

ritual drink motif is exemplified in the origin myth of the Greek colony of Massalia, founded in Gaulish territory in what is now southern France. In the tale, a native princess of Gaul, in accordance with the local custom for selecting a husband from among many suitors, offers a drink to a Greek settler, who is thus legitimized as the founder of the colony.⁴³ The same motif is attested later in an Irish work from the 11th century, in which the “Sovereignty of Ireland,” portrayed as the wife of Lug, the chief god, “offers the drink of sovereignty” to a succession of rulers.⁴⁴

M. L. West writes that the ritual gift of a beverage was a “Celtic marriage custom signifying the couple’s mutual consent to the union.”⁴⁵ However, after reviewing a number of courtship tales from India, Greece, Persia, Germany, Latvia, and Scythia, as well as the Gaulish example above, he concludes that, within the context of nuptials between mortals, the more common gift from the bride was a garland of flowers.⁴⁶ In light of this, the beverages in the tales above connote the sacred marriage specifically and are not simple wedding presents.

A deep relationship between the ritual drink and the sacred marriage is revealed by linguistic comparison. West analyzes the name “Medb” as a reflex of **med^hu*, the Proto-Indo-European term for “mead.”⁴⁷ The word **med^hu* is also ancestral to the Sanskrit name *Mādhavī*.⁴⁸ Puhvel explains the shared name of Medb and *Mādhavī* as an adjectival patronym built on the term for mead, which he understands as signifying by extension “libation” or “sacrifice.”⁴⁹ The name of the goddess would thus mean “of the libation,” explicitly associating Sovereignty and the mead given to a prospective king with his duties as officiant at rites of sacrifice. The ritual drink not only functioned as a gift formalizing the sacred marriage, but also emblemized the sacral role of the sovereign. The association of mead with sovereignty goddesses in languages as distantly related as Sanskrit and Irish suggests that this motif was present and productive in Proto-Indo-European culture.

King Sacrifice and Threefold Death

In his sacral office, the Indo-European king served both as priest and victim. Obtaining the favor of divine Sovereignty granted the earthly ruler ideological legitimacy and sometimes even miraculous intervention against his political foes. However, this relationship was not at all one-sided. In myth, the Irish Medb was firmly in control of her choice of consort and could expel an inferior king for a better ruler. There is evidence that when the land did fall into the hands of a wicked monarch, very real punishment was meted out to such an abusive husband. The sacrifice of a failed sovereign is associated with a topos called the “threefold death” – typically by hanging, stabbing, and drowning – which appears in executions of rulers throughout Indo-European lore.

An archetypal instance of the threefold death is seen in the fate of Agamemnōn in the Greek epic cycle. A cruel and unjust man in Homer’s telling, the lord of Mykēnai is murdered shortly after his homecoming by his wife Klytāimnēstra and the younger surrogate lord she has taken in his absence.⁵⁰ In Aiskhylos’ rendition of the tale, the slaughter is famously carried out by ensnaring

⁴³ Herbert, “Goddess and King,” 265; West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 435.

⁴⁴ Herbert, “Goddess and King,” 269–70.

⁴⁵ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 416.

⁴⁶ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 433–36.

⁴⁷ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 416.

⁴⁸ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 416; Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 261.

⁴⁹ Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 260–61.

⁵⁰ Miller, “Royalty and Mythology,” 110.

the king with a net in his bath before stabbing him to death.⁵¹ This method of execution is heavy with symbolism, as each of the three methods corresponds to a different class of society in Indo-European trifunctional ideology. The net, a fisherman’s tool, used to entrap the king represents the third order, associated with fertility and subsistence.⁵² The blade represents the second order, the military class, and the washbasin – metaphorically a libation vessel – represents the third order, the priesthood.⁵³ Aiskhylos portrays Agamemnon’s death as a sacrifice merited by his offenses against each of these three social orders. His sins are the sacrifice of his own daughter – a sin against the priestly order, the tremendous waste of human life on the plains of Troy – a sin against the martial order, and the avarice inherent in sacking Ilion and going to war over possession of a woman – a sin against the agricultural order.⁵⁴ In offending against all three estates of the realm, Agamemnon has upset social and cosmic order and thrown away his right to kingship.

The removal of unsatisfactory kings is documented among the Germanic peoples of northern Europe. West reports that the Burgundians were ascribed the custom of deposing their ruler “if the nation fares ill in war or if the earth gives poor crops,” while the early medieval Swedes were alleged to have sacrificed their kings after a bad harvest.⁵⁵ The threefold killing of a Germanic king is described in the Old Norse *Gautrek’s Saga*. In one episode from this tale, King Vikar and his warband encounter contrary winds while on a raid and must drop anchor.⁵⁶ Divination reveals that a sacrifice to Odin – a god associated with sovereignty among the Germanics – must be chosen from among the crew by lot, which lot falls to the king.⁵⁷ At the instigation of Odin himself, the king’s retainer Starkad arranges what appears to be a mock sacrifice, using a reed in place of a spear and tying a calf’s entrails to a young pine branch to serve as a noose.⁵⁸ King Vikar suffers Starkad to place the mock-noose about his neck, deeming it safe.⁵⁹ However, when Starkad stabs the king with the reed it is immediately revealed as a spear, the noose transforms into a stout rope, and the pine branch sprouts into a mighty bough, hoisting the king’s perforated body high into the air.⁶⁰

There is archaeological evidence that such sacrifices were carried out at certain times in the remote past. Throughout Ireland, items of royal regalia, e.g. chariot components and golden collars, have been found deposited in bogs on the boundaries of old regional political units, such as baronies, parishes, and counties.⁶¹ These finds are thought to have been ritually buried after royal investiture ceremonies.⁶² Several of the infamous Iron Age “bog bodies” were likewise found along these political boundaries, indicating that they also were involved in royal ritual.⁶³

⁵¹ Aeschylus, “Agamemnon,” in *Aeschylus, Volume II*, ed. Herbert Weir Smyth, Loeb Classical Library 146 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 1125–1129; David Evans, “Agamemnon and the Indo-European Threefold Death Pattern,” *History of Religions* 19, no. 2 (1979): 160–61.

⁵² Evans, “Agamemnon,” 163.

⁵³ Evans, “Agamemnon,” 163.

⁵⁴ Evans, “Agamemnon,” 164–65.

⁵⁵ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 423.

⁵⁶ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 155.

⁵⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, 155.

⁵⁸ Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, 156.

⁵⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, 157.

⁶⁰ Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, 157.

⁶¹ Eamonn P. Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” *Scéal na Móna* 13, no. 60 (2006): 58; Eamonn P. Kelly, “Secrets of the Bog Bodies – The Enigma of the Iron Age Explained,” *Archaeology Ireland* 20, no. 1 (2006): 26–27.

⁶² Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 58; “Secrets of the Bog Bodies,” 28–30.

⁶³ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 58.

Two well-preserved specimens, Oldcroghan Man and Clonycavan Man, are especially instructive. These two men were evidently of the elite and enjoyed a cultivated lifestyle free from manual labor and furnished with exotic luxuries before their decease.⁶⁴ Both the corpses displayed damage from violent trauma: Clonycavan Man suffered several blows to the head and disembowelment, while Oldcroghan Man was stabbed, beheaded, mutilated, and cut in two at the waist.⁶⁵ Although it has been suggested that these sacrifices were elite hostages, the removal of Oldcroghan Man’s nipples has been taken as the mark of a failed king sacrificed to Sovereignty.⁶⁶ Oldcroghan Man represents an exceptionally strong candidate for a victim of threefold death, as his arms were found tied with osiers, completing the trio of binding, stabbing, and submersion.⁶⁷ Iron Age bog bodies executed in like fashion to the Irish examples have been found in Denmark, England, and the Low Countries, corroborating the account of ancient Sweden and giving vivid reality to the fate of King Vikar.⁶⁸

The Indo-European Sovereignty

Based on the comparative evidence surrounding the Anatolian Kybelē, Celtic Medb, Hellenic Pallas Athēnā, and Mādhavī in Indic Sanskrit, it is concluded that Proto-Indo-European speakers conceived of the sovereign power within their tribal kingdoms as a female divinity. Like Kybelē, Medb, and Athēnā, this divinity personified the physical territory under the control of the king, who was mythopoetically her husband. Three reflexes of Sovereignty – Mādhavī, Kybelē, and arguably Pallas Athēnā – had their virginity renewed for each successive king that they coupled with, suggesting that their Proto-Indo-European equivalent was thought to pass through the life cycle of a mortal being and that living royal consorts adopted her persona or function in ritual and narrative.

The prosperity of the entire people was thought to rest on the king’s treatment of his bride, and bad kings could be disposed of and replaced. The decommissioning of a failed sovereign was a violent ritual attested historically, archaeologically, and in literature which archetypally took the form of a threefold killing. Each element of the threefold death by hanging, stabbing, and drowning corresponded to a social class and thus was symbolic punishment for a particular failing of the ruler. The ritual drink motif in Ireland and the association of Medb and Mādhavī with mead suggests that the sacred marriage was formalized and the king vested with his office by the ritual imbibing of a beverage. The militarism of Kybelē and Medb and the protective role of Pallas Athēnā indicate that their prototype had similar associations and may have been invoked as intercestrix in time of war.

The Sovereignty of Gygēs

As stated at the beginning of this article, it can be argued that the archetype of the Indo-European sovereignty goddess is instantiated within the *Histories*. In his telling of the Gygēs story, Hērodotos twice associates Kandaulēs’ wife with sovereignty by his choice of words. This first occurs when the queen presents Gygēs with the choice of dying or murdering Kandaulēs and seizing power. She expresses the latter option with the words “take both me and the kingship of

⁶⁴ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 57; “Secrets of the Bog Bodies,” 30.

⁶⁵ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 58.

⁶⁶ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 59; “Secrets of the Bog Bodies,” 30.

⁶⁷ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 58.

⁶⁸ Kelly, “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice,” 57.

the Lydians” (ἐμέ τε καὶ τὴν βασιληίην ἔχε τὴν Λυδῶν), using the τε καὶ construction to pair herself with the rulership as a single unit.⁶⁹ The second instance appears when, having killed Kandaulēs, Gygēs “took both the woman and the kingdom” (ἔσχε καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὴν βασιληίην).⁷⁰ The queen is inextricably linked to the rulership of Lydia and Gygēs could not have taken one without the other.

An obvious trait of Sovereignty displayed by the Lydian queen is her agency in choosing a consort and her leadership in organizing the coup against Kandaulēs. The day after she is displayed naked before Gygēs, she assembles retainers (τῶν οἰκετέων τοὺς μάλιστα ὄρα πιστοὺς ἐόντας ἐωυτῆ, ἐτοίμους ποιησαμένη)⁷¹ and summons her victim (ἐκάλεε τὸν Γύγεα),⁷² all on her own initiative. Rather than killing Gygēs outright for his crime, which one would expect, the queen allows him the alternative of taking the scepter for himself. Like the Irish Medb, the queen of Lydia is custodian of the sovereign power and can bestow it upon any man she pleases. Her motive is unclear, but perhaps she was impressed by Gygēs’ moral uprightness in rebuking Kandaulēs for his obscene demand. Given that he is employed as a bodyguard, it is likely that Gygēs is younger and physically stronger than Kandaulēs, so maybe she perceives him to be more energetic and better capable of governing. That the queen has no obvious reason for choosing Gygēs specifically as ruler suggests that the tale is ultimately a *post hoc* interpretation of historical events through a mythic framework.

The queen also demonstrates agency in choosing the hour and venue of the assassination, which is to be carried out “while he is asleep” (ὕπνωμένῳ) and “from the same spot where he presented me naked” (ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ μὲν χωρίου ... ὅθεν περ καὶ ἐκεῖνος ἐμὲ ἐπεδέξατο γύμνην).⁷³ It is a fitting irony that the king’s death should come about at the same place and time as his mortal offense and recalls some of the symbolism of king sacrifice in Ireland. The remains of Oldcroghan Man were disposed of along the border of his kingdom, where ritual offerings were likely deposited at his investiture years before.

Although the specific offense committed by the disgraced monarch – exposing his queen before another man – is novel, the crime remains a violation of the natural order which he is obligated to uphold. When begging his master not to make him view the naked queen, Gygēs describes the deed as *ἀνόμων*, literally “lawless.”⁷⁴ The laws in question are those laid down by the ancestors, the “fair things invented by men long ago” (πάλαι δὲ τὰ καλὰ ἀνθρώποισι ἐξέσθηται).⁷⁵ By breaking the sacred customs established by his forefathers, Kandaulēs fails in his fundamental role as king, meriting capital punishment. Furthermore, his immoderate desire for his wife’s body betrays a self-interested attitude to his prerogatives as ruler directly contrary to the kingly ideal of generosity and impartiality.

In his analysis of the traditions concerning Gygēs, Munn recognizes the function of the queen in Hērodotos’ story as an avatar of Sovereignty. However, he connects her with Aphroditē and the Near Eastern iconographic motif of the “Naked Goddess,” an exhibitionist representation of the deity variously known as Inanna, Ishtar, and Ashtarte who demonstrates numinous erotic

⁶⁹ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars, Volume I: Books 1–2*, ed. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library 117 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 1.11.2.

⁷⁰ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.12.2.

⁷¹ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.11.1.

⁷² Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.11.1.

⁷³ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.11.5.

⁷⁴ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.8.4.

⁷⁵ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.8.4.

power as a sign of divine favor.⁷⁶ The quintessentially Indo-European crux of the tale – the ritual destruction of an unjust sovereign – is neglected by Munn.

Although the execution of Kandaulēs is not a complete threefold death, it nonetheless does partake of the archetypal immolation of an Indo-European king. Kandaulēs is dispatched by stabbing, which is associated in the trifunctional scheme with the second function, that is, the military class.⁷⁷ It will be recalled that Gygēs is one of his lord’s bodyguards or *αἰχμοφόροι*, that is, “spear-bearers” (οἱ τῶν αἰχμοφόρων Γύγης).⁷⁸ While he has generally violated his moral obligations as a king, by forcing Gygēs to partake of his crime Kandaulēs specifically offends against a member of the second order and thus merits the corresponding penalty.

Like the threefold death, the motif of the ritual gift does appear in the Gygēs story, again in a modified form. The Lydian queen does not bestow upon Gygēs a ritual beverage or even a floral garland. Instead, she gives to her new consort a dagger, with which he will slay his master (ἐγχειρίδιον δοῦσα).⁷⁹ This brief passage is rich with symbolic meaning, as the weapon encapsulates the essence of Sovereignty – the absolute power of life and death over the subject. A more blatant sign of her blessing and approval is difficult to imagine. The queen’s bestowal of the dagger has a deeper connection with the ritual gift motif. As mentioned above, the mead embodied by Medb and Mādhavī betokens the king’s role as sacrificant. Gygēs indeed fulfills this function by dispatching the incumbent sovereign according to the prescription of the trifunctional ideology.

A hint of the mythic nature of the tale Hērodotos tells comes from the name he gives to the unfortunate Heraklid dynast. In Ch. 7, he explains that Kandaulēs was dubbed *Μύρσιλος* by the Greeks (Κανδαύλης, τὸν οἱ Ἕλληνες Μυρσίλον ὀνομάζουσι).⁸⁰ However, he consistently uses the name *Κανδαύλης* thereafter. Whatever Hērodotos thought that word meant, it likely was not the given name of any Lydian ruler. Asheri et al., relying on somewhat antiquated sources, explain the name as a ritual title connected with a “cult of the dog.”⁸¹ H. Craig Melchert rejected this interpretation, instead translating it as “overpowering.”⁸² In another analysis, *Κανδαύλης* is an adjectivized form of the Carian word for “king,” loaned into Lydian due to the former’s high status in the Late Bronze or Early Iron Age.⁸³ The name *Γύγης* has also been suggested to be Carian, derived from a word meaning “ancestor.”⁸⁴ Calling the ruler in the tale “king” or “kingly” and the dynastic progenitor “ancestor” smacks of a mythic mode of storytelling rather than strict history.

The Sovereignty of Gygēs beyond Hērodotos

Outside of the *Histories*, the Gygēs narrative appears in the works of a few other early Greek writers, whose treatments likewise suggest the mytho-historical nature of their subject. At the conclusion of his story, Hērodotos states that Arkhilokhos of Paros wrote an iambic poem about Gygēs, and a fragment seemingly from that composition survives today. Analyzing the poem, Jenny Strauss Clay observes that the language in which Gygēs addresses the queen seems

⁷⁶ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 113, 117–18.

⁷⁷ Evans, “Agamemnon,” 163

⁷⁸ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.8.1.

⁷⁹ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.12.1.

⁸⁰ Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 1.7.2.

⁸¹ Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella, *Commentary on Herodotus*, 80.

⁸² Craig H. Melchert, “Greek and Lydian,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics: Volume 2 G-O*, ed. Georgios K. Giannakis (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 70.

⁸³ Ilya S. Yakubovich, “Sociolinguistics of the Luvian Language,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 11516.

⁸⁴ Yakubovich, “Luvian,” 115–16.

more proper to a deity than a mortal ruler.⁸⁵ Specifically, she interprets the words “make your mood benevolent” (θυμὸν ἴλαον τίθειο) as the sort used to appease or submit to a divinity.⁸⁶ Like Hērodotos, in his speech to the queen Arkhilokhos’ Gygēs emphasizes her power, telling her she has seized either the city or himself “by the spearpoint and won great fame” (σὺ δὲ νῦν εἶλες αἰχμῆ καὶ μέγ’ ἐξήρω κλέος).⁸⁷ His choice of words evokes the martial prowess of Kybelē and Medb.

The story of Gygēs and the queen is also attested in a fragmentary tragedy of unknown date, suggested by some to have been authored by Phrŷnikhos, but held by others to be a Hellenistic work.⁸⁸ Called simply the *Gyges Tragedy*, this drama seems to have followed the plot of Hērodotos’ narrative and it has been suggested that the latter is dependent upon it.⁸⁹ One concurrence between the two is the use of *Κανδαύλης* as the name of the deposed king rather than *Μύρσιλος*.⁹⁰ The queen refers to Kandaulēs as *ἄναξ*, rather than one of the more usual words for a mortal ruler, e.g. *βασιλεύς* or *τύραννος*, employed by Hērodotos.⁹¹ While possibly a convention of the theater, such an archaism could indicate a mythic mode for a tale of divinized ancestors and heroes rather than present-day human beings, whether that present-day fell in the 5th century or the 3rd.

Conclusions

It is always possible that Gygēs did become king of Lydia in precisely the manner described by the historian. However, considering the characteristic blending of myth and historical fact throughout the *Histories*, Hērodotos is plausibly recounting a tale put out by the Mermnad dynasty to justify their seizure of power.⁹² Munn proposes that the story of Ankhīsēs coupling with Aphroditē was promoted by the Mermnads to legitimize their rule as divine in origin.⁹³ The tale of Gygēs could likewise be propaganda, in which a more “normal” palace coup instigated by a disgruntled retainer was reinterpreted through the framework of an ancient Indo-European myth and thereby ascribed to the will of the Lydian Sovereignty herself.

The evidence adduced above for this latter theory is plentiful. First, Hērodotos’ diction identifies the queen with the kingdom, as does the ideology of the sacred marriage. Like Sovereignty in other Indo-European traditions, the Lydian queen is vested with the power of deposing one sovereign and choosing his successor. Significantly, the murder of Kandaulēs, like those of Agamemnōn and others, is a sacrifice orchestrated to punish his specific crimes against society. True to her prototype, the queen confirms Gygēs in his new office via the bestowal of a token. Finally, the names Hērodotos gives to his characters befit mythic archetypes more than historical individuals. Although the alternative versions of the tale contemporary with Hērodotos are poorly preserved, they likewise evince language appropriate for myth.

⁸⁵ Jenny Strauss Clay, “Archilochus and Gyges: An Interpretation of Fr. 23 West,” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 24, no. 3 (1986): 15.

⁸⁶ Clay, “Archilochus and Gyges,” 15.

⁸⁷ Clay, “Archilochus and Gyges,” 7.

⁸⁸ Clay, “Archilochus and Gyges,” 12.

⁸⁹ A. E. Raubitschek, “Gyges in Herodotus,” *The Classical Weekly* 48, no. 4 (1955): 49.

⁹⁰ Raubitschek, “Gyges in Herodotus,” 48.

⁹¹ Raubitschek, “Gyges in Herodotus,” 48.

⁹² See Charles C. Chiasson, “Myth, Ritual, and Authorial Control in Herodotus’ Story of Cleobis and Biton (Hist. 1.31),” *The American Journal of Philology* 126, no. 1 (2005): 41–64 for another mytho-historical narrative in the *Histories*.

⁹³ Munn, *Mother of the Gods*, 129.

Several lines of evidence have gone unexamined in this article, principally for want of space and time to treat them. The author has read of Hittite iconographic evidence for rites concerned with the sacred marriage and expects that Hittite ritual texts would shed light on the Anatolian tradition of sacred marriage ideology, of which Lydian partakes. Like the Sovereignty figure discussed above, the *aśvamedha* horse sacrifice which marked the inauguration of a king is attested in Hatti-land, Ireland, and India, but has been excluded from this essay as beyond its strict scope. These fields are quite open to the ploughshares of future investigation.

Bibliography

- Aeschylus. “Agamemnon.” In *Aeschylus, Volume II*, edited by Herbert Weir Smyth. Loeb Classical Library 146. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Asheri, David, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella. *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I-IV*. Edited by Oswyn Murray and Alfonso Moreno. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Beekes, Robert, and Lucien van Beek. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Chiasson, Charles, C. “Myth, Ritual, and Authorial Control in Herodotus’ Story of Cleobis and Biton (Hist. 1.31).” *The American Journal of Philology* 126, no. 1 (2005): 41-64.
- Clay, Jenny Strauss. “Archilochus and Gyges: An Interpretation of Fr. 23 West.” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 24, no. 3 (1986): 7-17.
- Cunliffe, Richard John. *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect: Expanded Edition*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.
- Evans, David. “Agamemnon and the Indo-European Threefold Death Pattern.” *History of Religions* 19, no. 2 (1979): 153-66.
- Fortson, Benjamin W. *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Herbert, Máire. “Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland.” In *Women and sovereignty*, edited by Louise Olga Fradenburg, 264-74. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992.
- Herodotus. *The Persian Wars, Volume I: Books 1-2*. Edited by A. D. Godley. Loeb Classical Library 117. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920.
- . *The Persian Wars, Volume IV: Books 8-9*. Edited by A. D. Godley. Loeb Classical Library 120. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- Homer. *Iliadis I-XII*. 3rd edition. Edited by David B. Munro and T. W. Allen. Oxford Classical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920.
- Homer. *Odyssae XIII-XXIV*. 2nd edition. Edited by T. W. Allen. Oxford Classical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917.
- Kelly, Eamonn P. “Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice.” *Scéal na Móna* 13, no. 60 (2006): 57–59.

- . "Secrets of the Bog Bodies: The Enigma of the Iron Age Explained." *Archaeology Ireland* 20, no. 1 (2006): 26-30.
- Kinsella, Thomas. *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Melchert, H. Craig. "Greek and Lydian." In *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics: Volume 2 G-O*, edited by Georgios K. Giannakis, 70-71. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Miller, Dean. "Royalty and Mythology: Connections and Similarities Between Ireland's Kings and Monarchy in the Classical World and Elsewhere." *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 67 (2008): 107-11.
- Munn, Mark. *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Pálsson, Hermann, and Paul Edwards. *Seven Viking Romances*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Puhvel, Jaan. *Comparative Mythology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Raubitschek, A. E. "Gyges in Herodotus." *The Classical Weekly* 48, no. 4 (1955): 48-50.
- Rehak, Paul. "The Mycenaean 'Warrior Goddess' Revisited." *Aegaeum* 19 (1998): 227-39.
- West, M. L. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Yakubovich, Ilya S. *Sociolinguistics of the Luvian Language*. Ph.D. thesis, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations & Department of Linguistics, University of Chicago, 2008.