

# Death, Wings, and Divine Devouring: Possible Mediterranean Affinities of Irish Battlefield Demons and Norse Valkyries<sup>1</sup>

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In early European demonologies, death frequently came on wings. The Irish *Bodb* rejoices in slaughter in the shape of a hooded crow, and the Norse Valkyries—who can appear as swans or crows—choose the slain on the field of battle. In Etruria, the winged demoness *Vanth* meets the dying and guides them to the realm of the dead. In Greece, the *Erinyes* hunt down their victims in winged flight in order to drag them down to the netherworld, and the *Sirens*—half women, half birds—are not only depicted as mourners on Classical tombstones but also appear carrying the souls of the dead to their afterlife.

Such a dense reappearance of bird-women of death from the western shores of Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean attracts attention. The question arises, whether the repeated appearance of such a motif is nothing but chance, or if these figures are historically connected. The cultural history of Europe is a history of cultural contacts, for which the spreads of agriculture and metalworking are just the most obvious examples.<sup>2</sup> So the possibility of common roots of such demons should not be ruled out from the beginning and deserves some discussion. The present article will attempt to juxtapose a sample of such figures in order to get a preliminary idea of how far the similarities between them go and whether they might be able to answer the question whether there is a historical connection between the Irish, Norse and Mediterranean demonologies of death.

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2 Compare Maier 1999 on a probable diffusion of a mythological motif complex in the course of the Neolithisation or the ideas of Kristiansen & Larsson 2005 on the Bronze Age.

This investigation builds upon an older debate about the long-noted similarities between the Irish ‘goddesses of war’ and the Norse Valkyries. Such similarities have been remarked upon since Lottner 1870 and have found considerable scholarly attention which frequently concluded that they are best seen in terms of a genetic relationship or at least some extent of mutual influences between these figures.<sup>3</sup>

Given the diversity of the available material—both textual and iconographic sources—and the wide chronological and geographical span of the demons which I shall attempt to compare—stretching from Iceland to Asia Minor and from the late Middle Ages to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC—such a question requires an explicit methodology for the assessment of any similarities that might become visible. As a measure to determine whether such similarities go back to cultural contact, I propose the following methodological points: (1) a motif combination should be complex to allow the conclusion of a historical relationship; the more traits different figures have in common, the more likely they are to be dependent upon each other. (2) Furthermore, if there is to be a borrowing, there should be attested cultural contact between the areas in question. (3) To allow the conclusion of a pre-historic date of such a borrowing, the motifs should appear already in the earliest available sources, and, while not logically necessary, (4) it would support the notion of borrowing if the motifs in question can be shown to be distributed in a geographical continuum so that the motif complex would not have to have somehow ‘jumped’ over an area.

In order to give some system to the following discussion of selected death demons, the discussion of each class of demons will ask the same questions. It will treat the relationship of the demon to *death*, and the nature of its affinity to *birds*. It will be of interest whether the demon *feeds on corpses*. It will be asked, whether the demon plays a role in the *transition of the deceased to the realm of the dead*, and how it is related to *violence and warfare*. Finally, its *sexuality* will be observed.

## I. The Bodb

The first figures of interest are the members of the Irish class of demons represented by beings such as the Bodb.<sup>4</sup> Figures appearing as the Bodb, Némain, Macha or the

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3 Lottner 1870; Donahue 1941; Birkhan 1970, 509-515, 583; Epstein 1997, 1998a, 1998b; the similarities are furthermore noted by Ellis Davidson 1988, 97-100 without clear explicit conclusions as to their origin; I am not convinced by the rejection by Herbert 1996, 149, particularly in the light of the works of Epstein.

4 These Irish ‘goddesses of war’, as they are conventionally termed, have received a considerable scholarly attention. Fundamental was Hennessy 1870 (a slightly revised version of Hennessy 1866-1869); more recently these demons have been the object of both monographs (Le Roux & Guyonvarc’h 1983; Clark 1991, esp. 21-52; Bauer-

Morrígan are frequently mutually identified by native Irish tradition, or summed up together under the heading of the three *Morrígnæ*. Examples are: *O'Mulconry's Glossary* No. 813 (Old Irish with later accretions: Mac Neill 1932, esp. 113, 116, 119), where Macha is identified as *badb* and one of three Morrígans; in the Early Middle Irish tale *Táin Bó Regamna*, § 7, the manuscript Egerton 1782 reads 'Morrigan', whereas the Yellow Book of Lecan in the corresponding passage reads 'badb'; and Némain in TBC II. 210 is glossed as *badb* in two manuscripts. If these figures originally were individually separate entities, they have been so thoroughly confounded in native tradition that it seems for the present purpose preferable to sum up the characteristics of the class as a whole, rather than to get lost in an attempt to sort out individual characters.

The relationship of the Bodb to death is very clear: she likes it. Thus the tale of the *Bruiden Meic Dareó* § 5 relates that after a great massacre *ba forbhāilidh Badhbh derg dāssachtach* *ba brōnach banchuire don treas sin* 'the gory, raging Bodb was joyful, and the women were grief-stricken because of that conflict'. She frequently appears as a hooded crow (cf. Hennessy 1870, 33-35); in the *Táin Bó Regamna* § 5 the Morrígan takes the form of a black bird. Repeatedly, she is called *bélderg* 'red-mouthed', as in TBC II l. 3431 (12<sup>th</sup> century). In the tale *Tochmarc Ferbe* (ll. 623f.; 12<sup>th</sup> century), a group of warriors is told that they have fed the Bodb by means of their weapons. This reference to the feeding of the Bodb makes clear that the Bodb feeds on the dead, and this again explains why she is red-mouthed: the red is the blood of the corpses which she devours. The same is possibly meant in the native glossary of O'Mulconry, which explains *mesrad Machæ .i. cendæ doine iarna n-airlech*, 'the mast of Macha, that are the heads of men after they have been slaughtered' (No. 813). *Mesrad* can mean both 'harvest, mast' and 'feeding with mast'; so the severed heads of the dead warriors may not only be harvest, but harvest for eating (Epstein 1998a, 48 note 10).

The Bodb is thus intimately linked with war; in the tale *Tochmarc Emire* § 50 (Version III, 12<sup>th</sup> century) she is explained as *bandé in chatha* 'goddess of battle'. But her interests are not restricted to destruction; she also appears to be fond of lust. In the tale *Cath Maige Tuired* § 84 (probably an 11<sup>th</sup> century recension based on 9<sup>th</sup> century material), the Morrígan has intercourse with the Dagda and in exchange

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Harsant 1996; Epstein 1998a) and several articles (Carey 1982/83; Clark 1987; Herbert 1996; Epstein 1997, 1998b—Epstein coined the term 'divine devouring' for the behaviour of the Irish demons). So the Irish evidence and its immediate Irish context are sufficiently well established to make it legitimate to ask for the wider European context of this Irish phenomenon. Unless indicated otherwise, all datings of texts are taken from the respective editions or Thurneysen 1921.

grants him help in battle.<sup>5</sup> In TBC I ll. 1845-1871 (a 9<sup>th</sup> century passage) she asks Cú Chulainn for sexual favours and offers help in battle and riches in return. In the *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* §§ 61-63 (probably an 11<sup>th</sup> century compilation based on 9<sup>th</sup> century material) the demonic woman Cailb appears. King Conaire stands under the prohibition not to allow a single woman after sunset into his hall, and as the breaking of this prohibition will foreshadow the fall of the king, this is exactly what Cailb demands. She identifies herself in a long list of names, among them also *Badb* and *Nemain*, two classical names of the demoness of battle; so it is likely to be telling about the character of the *Bodb* that Cailb is described as having pubic hair which reaches down to her knees. When the king asks her what she wants, her enigmatic answer is: *A n-as áil daitsiu didiu* ‘that which is pleasing to you’. As nothing about her presence is pleasing to him, this may be simply biting sarcasm; but it may well be, as the Rees brothers (1961, 338), Bhreathnach (1982, 250f.) and Clark (1991, 124) have suggested, a challenge to sexual intercourse, corresponding to the emphasis put on Cailb’s pudenda in her description (Bhreathnach 1982, 250).<sup>6</sup> The king’s head, of course, is severed before the end of the tale. So, in sum, the *Bodb* appears as a female demon closely related to violent death, frequently appearing as a carrion bird and in this form feeding on the fallen warriors, closely associated with war and showing an emphasized sexual trait in her character.

The figure of the *Bodb* may also be attested in a Gallo-Roman inscription from the Gallia Narbonensis dedicated to [...]athubodua with loss of the initial letter (CIL XII 2571, from Haute-Savoie). This has been reconstructed as [C]athubodua and connected with the *Bodb* on the basis of the direct correspondence of the second part of the name to the Irish *bodb* and the semantic correspondence between the postulated first part of the name (*catu-* ‘battle’) and the behaviour of the *Bodb*; in Irish, the *Bodb chatha*, the ‘*Bodb* of battle’ also appears as a collocation, for instance in the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Emire* § 50 (Pictet 1868, esp. 11, 16f.; Hennessy 1870, 32f.; Epstein 1998a, 220f.; cf. Donahue 1941, 8; Birkhan 1970, 492; Green 1995, 43). If this is correct,<sup>7</sup> this would indicate that the *Bodb* was known even in the southern half of France and possibly a pan-Celtic demon.

5 While this has been interpreted as indicating a ‘fertility aspect’ of the Morrígan (e.g. Clark 1987, 228-230, cf. Herbert 1996, 142-143), Epstein and Bauer-Harsant have pointed out that the sexuality of the Morrígan is the very opposite of indicative of a fertility aspect: for the Morrígan has intercourse, but this does not lead to procreation but to bloodshed, and in those few instances where she does procreate, she brings forth deathly creatures: Bauer-Harsant 1996, 105f.; Epstein 1998a, 80-86, 183-185.

6 Bhreathnach sees this sexual trait in a sovereignty context, also using Scandinavian parallels (1982, esp. 252f.).

7 According to the usual orthography of Gaulish inscriptions a spelling [C]atubodua would be expected (Pictet 1868, 11; Hennessy 1870, 33; Schmidt 1957, 100, 136 note 2, 167; Epstein 1998a, 227); to collate the original stone would therefore be desirable, even though the problem is usually not considered as significant (Pictet 1868, 11, 16f.;

## 2. The Valkyries

The Valkyries show similar affinities.<sup>8</sup> They are by name ‘choosers of the slain’, which may indicate choosers of which warrior dies in battle or which of the dead warriors goes to Valhalla (cf. Ellis 1943, 67). In the *Vǫlsunga saga* § 2 (13<sup>th</sup> century) a Valkyrie uses a crow-dress to fly. Valkyries in bird-shape can also appear as swans, thus at the beginning of the *Vǫlundarqviða* (earlier than 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>9</sup> There are only uncertain, though suggestive hints that the Valkyries might have fed on the slain: associations with and terminological parallels to corpse-devouring beings—as *Níðhöggr*, the *gífr* and carrion birds—led Neckel (1913, 75-79, 81) to conclude that the Valkyries were also beings sucking the blood of the fallen warriors. On this one may compare Osborn’s suggestion that the raven featured in Anglo-Saxon belief both as a carrion-bird feeding on corpses and as a psychopompos (1970, 187-194). The latter trait, an involvement in the transition of the dead to their afterlife, is a central characteristic of the Valkyries: in the *Hákonarmál* (10<sup>th</sup> century) Odin sends two Valkyries to fetch the dead king Hákon to Valhalla. Similar imagery appears in the *Krákumál* 29 (12<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Gylfaginning* § 36 (13<sup>th</sup> century), and in *Atlamál in grænlenzco* 28 (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century) four ‘dead women’ appear in a dream to call a man doomed to death to them. Furthermore, the Valkyries influence the course of battle as in the *Darraðarljóð* (10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century: Poole 1991, 120-125).

The Valkyries are also markedly sexual, as emphasised already by Kauffmann 1892. Frequently they appear as the mistresses of heroes, as with Helgi Hundingsbani, Helgi Hjörvarðsson and Helgi Haddingjaskati in the three Helgi poems of the Poetic Edda (perhaps 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century), or one may think of the relationship of Sigurd to the Valkyrie Sigrdrífa and to Brynhild (*Sigrdrífomál*, before 1250; *Helreið Brynhildar* 14, around 1200; etc.); the three Valkyries who mate with three brothers at the beginning of the *Vǫlundarqviða* stay with them for seven years, before they depart to search for battle. In the augury of death in the *Atlamál in grænlenzco* 28 death is presaged to a man by the appearance of four ‘dead women’, who call this man to their benches when he is about to die. That this calling of the man to their benches perhaps had a sexual undertone is indicated by

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Hennessy 1870, 33; Epstein 1998a, 227; cf. Schmidt 1957, 100). For possible (albeit speculative) numismatic evidence for the Bodb in Gaul cf. e.g. Allen 1980, 142f. (on which cf. Pictet 1868, 15).

8 In general on the Valkyries cf. most recently Zimmermann 2007. – Unless indicated otherwise, all datings are taken from the respective editions, de Vries 1964 and 1967 or the commentary of von See *et al.* on the Poetic Edda.

9 The Valkyries are identified as such in the prose introduction; however, Dronke 1997, 301f. has rejected both that these figures really are Valkyries and that the appearance of a Valkyrie as a swan also in the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Griplur* IV, 43 and 58 reflects a genuine trait of Valkyries.

the *Völsunga saga* § 35 which contains a prose paraphrase of the poem. There, these women choose the doomed man as their husband. That the relationship between the Valkyries and the dead warriors in Valhalla was not free of amorous traits and the corresponding problems is implied by the *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* 38 (before c. 1250), where someone is, among other charges of sexual misbehaviour, also accused of having been a shameful Valkyrie about whom the dead warriors in Odin's hall were brawling. Passages of the *Gísla saga* (13<sup>th</sup> century) appear to point in a similar direction (§§ 30, 33; cf. Ellis 1943, 72f.; Price 2003, 336). In an Anglo-Saxon gloss, *wælcyrrie* is identified with Venus (Ellis 1943, 71; Napier 1900, 115). So some of the main characteristics of the Valkyries can be summed up as a close relationship to death (again particularly violent death), an affinity to birds by appearing in the shape of crows or swans, a function in the transition of the dead warrior to a blissful afterlife by fetching him to Valhalla, a close involvement in war and a markedly sexual trait in their relationship to heroes.

The Bodb	The Valkyries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Female demon</b></li> <li>• <b>Death:</b> rejoicing over bloodshed</li> <li>• <b>Birds:</b> appearances as hooded crow</li> <li>• <b>Devouring:</b> red-mouthed Bodb; Macha's mast</li> <li>• <b>Transition to the realms of the dead:</b> -</li> <li>• <b>Violence and war:</b> 'goddess of battle'</li> <li>• <b>Marked sexuality:</b> the Morrigan and Cú / the Dagda; Cailb</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Female demon</b></li> <li>• <b>Death:</b> 'choosers of the slain'</li> <li>• <b>Birds:</b> appearance in form of a swan or crow</li> <li>• <b>Devouring:</b> ? cf. parallels to/associations with devouring beings</li> <li>• <b>Transition to the realms of the dead:</b> fetching slain heroes to Valhalla</li> <li>• <b>Violence and war:</b> deciding death and victory</li> <li>• <b>Marked sexuality:</b> mating with heroes; death as wedding</li> </ul>

### 3. Celtiberian evidence

Juxtaposing these characteristics of the Bodb and of the Valkyries as described so far, both are female demons closely associated with death, be it by rejoicing over slaughter or as 'choosers of the slain'. Both have a marked affinity to birds, appearing as hooded crows and crows and swans respectively. Both make their main appearances on the battlefield or in other contexts of warfare, and both show a strongly sexual trait in their relationship with the heroes whose ways they cross. So within my proposed comparative framework—which looks at female demons under the perspectives of death, birds, devouring, the transition to the realm of the dead, war and sexuality—the main differences between the Bodb and the Valkyries are

that the Valkyries may not devour corpses, whereas the Bodb does not seem to be closely linked to the transition of the deceased to the realm of the dead. For the Valkyries, there is no unequivocal proof that they ever fed on the slain, though there may be hints and such suggestions have been made. Nor is there

**Celtiberian: The Rite of the Vultures**

- **Female demon:** —
- **Death:**  
feeding on fallen heroes
- **Birds:**  
vulture
- **Devouring:**  
feeding on fallen heroes
- **Transition to the realms of the dead:**  
bringing about the transition of the hero to heaven
- **Violence and war:**  
ritual feeding restricted to martial heroes
- **Marked sexuality:** —

clear evidence for Ireland that the demonic bird feeding on the corpse was involved in the transition of the dead to the otherworld. But in at least one other Celtic area the feeding of the carrion bird on the corpse *was* important for the way of the deceased to the otherworld (Marco Simón 1998, 125-128): Silius Italicus, *Punica* III, 340-343, relates about the Celtiberians that they considered death in battle as glorious and thought it an abomination to burn such a corpse: they believed that such a man was brought ‘to heaven and the gods’ if his limbs were seized by a vulture. The existence of this ritual seems confirmed by scenes on Spanish ceramics and grave monuments (Marco Simón 1998, 126f.), and Aelian, *De natura animalium* X, 22 adds that being fed to the vultures is a prerogative of the fallen warriors which is considered an honour, and that the Celtiberians believed that vultures were sacred.

Here the vulture feeds on the dead like the Bodb, and this is explicitly linked to the transition of the deceased to the realms of the dead; furthermore, this ritual is restricted to those fallen in warfare, just as the interest of the Bodb in Ireland focuses on the dead of the battlefield and the heroes of war. So while we know very little indeed about the Celtiberian vulture ritual, what we know about it is strongly reminiscent of the behaviour of the Bodb. At the same time, such beliefs and rituals may have been very widespread among continental Celtic peoples; at least this would account for the report of Pausanias 10.21.6f. that the Celts of Brennus did not bury their fallen warriors during the invasion of Greece in 280 BC.<sup>10</sup> If this is taken together with the possible attestation of the Bodb on the dedication stone from the Gallia Narbonensis, this might indicate that there is a direct link between the Bodb and the beliefs standing behind the Rite of the Vultures among the Celtiberians; parallels between the Bodb and the Celtiberian rite have already

10 Marco Simón 1998, 127f. with further possible continental Celtic parallels; cf. Sopena Genzor & Ramón 2002, 228f. note 3. I owe thanks to Dr. Andreas Hofeneder (Vienna) for drawing my attention to this article.

been noted by Marco Simón (1998, 128 note 36), and the connection between the two has been emphasized by Epstein.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Etruscan Vanth

Just to the South of the Celtic territory in Northern Italy, in Etruria, again a winged female demon of death appears. No textual sources for the demoness Vanth are extant. She appears only on images, seven of which are or may be inscribed with her name. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards she can be identified in funerary iconography and in scenes of death—not exclusively, but frequently violent death. She is most of the time characterized by large wings, which may be a different way of expressing the same affinity to birds that the Bodb and the Valkyries exhibited by transforming themselves into birds. In many depictions she accompanies the deceased on his journey to the netherworld, which recalls the Valkyries as choosers of the slain and the role played by the Celtiberian vultures. Frequently, she is depicted in a dress borrowed from the iconography of the Classical Erinyes, with nude breasts and bands going crosswise over her chest. But in many instances she appears largely or entirely naked, and perhaps once explicitly presenting her pudenda, which is likely to indicate that her character showed some emphasized sexual traits, just as such traits appeared in the Valkyries and the Bodb.<sup>12</sup>

One instance of an appearance of Vanth identified by an inscription of her name is an Etruscan wall painting from the Tomba François in Vulci, dated to the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 3). The scene shows the sacrifice of Trojan captives by Achilles at the grave of Patroclus. Vanth and the Etruscan death demon Charun are depicted standing to both sides of the

##### **Etruscan: Vanth**

- **Female demon**
- **Death:**  
appearing in scenes of dying
- **Birds:**  
winged
- **Devouring:** —
- **Transition to the realms of the dead:**  
accompanying the dead to the netherworld
- **Violence and war:**  
in scenes of violent death
- **Marked sexuality:**  
nude depiction, emphasis on pudenda

<sup>11</sup> Epstein 1998a, 228f. and *passim*. She also argues for a connection of this Celtiberian idea with the Valkyries: *ibid.* 281f.

<sup>12</sup> In general on Vanth cf. the bibliography in Weber-Lehmann 1997a; de Grummond 2006, 220-225. On her general context within the Etruscan demonology of death cf. Krauskopf 1987. The resemblance of Vanth to the Irish demons and particularly the Valkyries has in Etruscan scholarship already been noted: Enking 1943, 65; Richardson 1964, 243; de Grummond 2006, 223f.

sacrificing of a nude Trojan by Achilles, who is just cutting the throat of the man. Vanth is depicted with large wings which seem to embrace this scene of slaughter on the one hand and the shadow of the dead Patroclus on the other, who stands behind Achilles. Achilles, also within the embrace of the wings, will not live to see Troy fall; so with her wings she frames a past death (Patroclus), a death just occurring (the Trojan with his life gushing from his cut throat), and the future death of Achilles (Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 3; Paschinger 1992, 17, 20, with fig. 1; cf. de Grummond 2006, 198f.). All these deaths are violent deaths. Vanth is very frequently associated with many variations of violent death, but not all instances of her association with death are of a violent nature. No signs of the involvement of violence appear in the mural paintings of the Tomba Golini I in Orvieto, dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 21). There Vanth again has large wings unfolding from her shoulders; this time, they stretch over a chariot and its driver, while she seems to be running along the course of the chariot next to the horses. This painting is set on the entrance wall of the tomb. The back of the chariot driver is turned to the door of the grave, as if he had just driven into the burial chamber. A central wall splits this chamber in two parts, both of which are fully decorated with paintings which form a coherent programme. The left part of the tomb is painted with kitchen scenes. Two men are working with big ladles on an oven, many others are handling pottery, preparing dough and dishes of food. One wall is dedicated to the display of the huge amounts of meat which are used: a whole cow, game and birds. So apparently a grand feast is prepared, and the second part of the tomb is decorated with corresponding paintings of feasting. Men are shown reclining on beds with drinking vessels, while musicians are playing for them. Hades and Persephone, the king and queen of the netherworld, are presiding over the celebration, both identified by inscriptions of their names. In front of them huge vessels, presumably for drink, are set on a table, indicating that this is a merry feast, even though it is located in the realm of the dead. The right hand side wall, next to the entrance wall which shows Vanth and the charioteer, is severely damaged. Yet the few remaining figures of men reclining for feasting are turning their heads towards the entrance wall where the chariot seems to enter the tomb—and thus the realm of the dead—through the door. This makes clear that the charioteer is perceived as a just arriving part of the feasting party of the dead. He makes his last journey on a chariot, next to which Vanth is running. So apparently Vanth is here seen accompanying and guiding the deceased on his way into a happy afterlife—just as the Valkyries had picked up the fallen heroes on the battlefield (Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 21; Paschinger 1992, 44 with fig. 64; Feruglio 1982 with illustrations and plans). This motif appears in many variants; a sarcophagus of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC from Vulci shows Vanth (here in a dress taken from the iconography of the classical Erinyes) with large wings and bands going

crosswise over her apparently bare breasts accompanying a rider; probably the rider is again the deceased on his way to the underworld, as suggested by the location of the relief on a sarcophagus (Herbig 1952, 31 and plate 41 fig. b; Paschinger 1992, 178f. with fig. 307c).

But also markedly sexual traits may find their expression in the iconography of Vanth. From the area of Orvieto stems a set of three vases dating around 330 BC (Weber-Lehman 1997a No. 2; Paschinger 1992, 146-148 with fig. 256). They depict the journey of a dead man to the netherworld, involving Hades and Persephone, Cerberus and death demons of the Etruscan Charun type, and Vanth. Two of these vases show Vanth naked, wearing only jewellery, a narrow ribbon tied round her waist and light shoes. She has large wings on her shoulders and reminds one less of a death demon than of a *lasa*, a figure from the retinue of the Etruscan goddess of love with strong erotic connotations (for the *lasas* cf. Lambrechts 1992). That she nevertheless is Vanth, however, is shown by the inscription of her name written on a scroll she is holding in her right hand on each of these two vases. An even clearer example for an Etruscan female winged death demon of markedly sexual character is the so-called 'Vanth of Tuscania', a fragment of a relief from the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, where an otherwise clothed winged demoness exhibits her pudenda in a gesture of sexual provocation; it is, however, under dispute whether this figure is strictly speaking a depiction of Vanth or perhaps rather a syncretism between Vanth and Sirens as death demons (Krauskopf 1987, 82; Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 57; 1997b, 214-234; de Grummond 2006, 224-226 with fig. X.21, 254 note 25). Yet that this sexual trait also characterized Vanth in the strict sense is not only indicated by the nude Vanths from Orvieto, but also by another Vanth identified by a name inscription on a sarcophagus from Chiusi from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 6). This Vanth appears next to other death demons of very similar iconography in a scene showing the departure of a dead woman from her family to the netherworld. Vanth stands next to the gate of the underworld and holds what seems to be the bolt or key for this gate. She has small wings on her head and wears a mantle. Yet this mantle is arranged in a way which does not cover her pudenda but rather frames and thus emphasizes it, thus again hinting at some kind of markedly sexual trait in the character of Vanth.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Weber-Lehmann 1997a No. 6; Herbig 1952, 41f. and plates 55-57a; Paschinger 1992, 24f., 166 with fig. 5 (wrong in the perception of the clothing, cf. the plates in Herbig and von Vacano 1962, 1537f.); von Vacano 1962, esp. 1536-1540; de Grummond 2006, 222-224 with fig. X.18.

## 5. Roman and Greek demonology

It would be of interest to remain in the area and to discuss the later, the Roman demonology of the region. The Furies would offer themselves for a comparison; one of them is in Virgil, *Aeneid* VI, 548-558 the gatekeeper of the region of punishment in the underworld, which indicates a close relationship to the realm of death. They show an affinity to birds by appearing winged (*Aeneid* VII, 476) or in bird form (*Aeneid* XII, 861-864). The presence of a Fury especially on the *gate* of Tartarus may be a hint that they are concerned with the transition of the dead to this part of the underworld (though the isolated passage Statius, *Thebaid* VIII, 9-11 may indicate a more general role of the Furies in the transition to the netherworld), and Allecto in *Aeneid* VII, 323-326 appears as eager to bring about strife and bloodshed as any Bodb. But as the Furies lack both the element of devouring and evidence for sexual traits they appear to be rather more distant relatives, and so it seems more promising to move on to Greece.

There the Keres might be of interest, who are a synonym of perdition (cf. *Iliad* XXIII, 78f.). They might show an avian aspect by flying through the air in Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* VI, 1665-1667, and they feast on the blood of fallen warriors in Hesiod, *Scutum* 248-257. They drag their victims to Hades (*Odyssey* XIV, 207f.) and appear in battle, bloodstained and deadly, as on the shield of Achilles (*Iliad* XVIII, 535-540). Furthermore, also the Erinyes are beings of the netherworld (cf. *Iliad* XIX, 258-260), who—again—are winged (Euripides, *Orestes* 275f.), and feast on the blood of their victims (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 264-266). They carry their victim off to the netherworld (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 267f.), and there they lead those of the dead deserving it to the region of punishment (Plato, *Axiachos* 371E), thus acting in a specialised way as a psychopompos. In later literature, they appear among the demons of the battlefield (Quintus Smyrnaeus V, 25-37). Yet they show no sexual traits, and on the whole they specialize on vengeance and punishment and thus differ in an important point from the Celtiberian vultures, the Valkyries and Vanth. Likewise the Harpies come merely close to the motif complex under discussion: they snatch their victims away to the realm of the dead (cf. *Odyssey* XX, 61-81; I, 241; XIV, 371), appear in iconography as winged women, and at least in Virgil their hungriness receives much emphasis (*Aeneid* III, 209-269), though this may be based on a play on literary motifs.

## 6. The Greek Sirens

While it is important to note that demons which are close to the motif complex under discussion abound in the Mediterranean, it seems preferable to move on to a complete match, the Sirens.<sup>14</sup> In iconography, Sirens are depicted with bodies composed of parts of women and birds (though rare male sirens occur, cf. e.g. Hofstetter 1990, 26), another variant of the bird affinity showed by the Bodb and the Valkyries by transformation into birds and by Vanth by a winged depiction. The Sirens' relationship to death is close and many-layered. From the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards at the latest they are frequently used in funerary art<sup>15</sup>; from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC in Attica alone eight statues and over eighty reliefs of Sirens on grave monuments are known (Hofstetter 1990, 153). They also appear associated with Persephone, the wife of Hades, the god of the netherworld. Thus Apollonius Rhodius (*Argonautica* IV, 896-899) relates that they sang to Persephone before her wedding. In a fragment of Sophocles they proclaim the laws of the netherworld (fragment 861 [Radt]), and in Plato's *Cratylus* (403D-403E) they dwell in Hades. Already on a painted tablet from Attica dating *c.* 590/80 BC a Siren is depicted under the bed of a dead woman, which is surrounded by mourners, and thus appears as a demon closely related to death (Hofstetter 1990, 81, 88f. [A 55]).

### Greek: The Sirens

- **Female demon**
- **Death:**  
dwelling in Hades; common in funerary art
- **Birds:**  
half bird, half woman (rare instances of male sirens)
- **Devouring:**  
Scholion Q on *Od.* XII, 184; Plinius, *Nat. hist.* X, 136
- **Transition to the realms of the dead:**  
carrying the souls of the dead: Xanthos
- **Violence and war:**  
depicted watching combat; knowledge of Trojan war
- **Marked sexuality:**  
early iconographic association with Aphrodite (but virgins according to Hellenistic writers)

<sup>14</sup> In general on the Sirens cf. the bibliography in Hofstetter 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Hofstetter 1990, 26-28, 151-186 and elsewhere; for a literary example cf. *Anthologia Graeca* VII, 710.

In the *Odyssey* (XII, 45f.), they live on a meadow on an island, where they are surrounded by the rotting remains of their victims. That they devour their victims is explicitly mentioned only from Hellenistic times onwards (e.g. scholion Q on *Odyssey* XII, 184), but at least later it is so common an idea that Pliny the Elder finds it necessary to deny the existence of man-eating Sirens in India (*Naturalis historia* X, 136). What makes them furthermore particularly interesting is their appearance on a grave monument in Xanthos in Lycia, in Asia Minor. The ‘Monument of the Sirens’ (formerly called ‘Monument of the Harpies’) in Xanthos is a pillar tomb of a local dynast dating to the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Hofstetter 1990, 243 [O 61]). The tomb consists of a monolithic stone pillar with the burial chamber located in its top, crowned by relief slabs and two slabs closing the chamber towards the sky at a height of over 8.5 m over the bedrock (details: Zahle 1975, 12-17). The relief slabs (Zahle 1975 plates VI-X) mostly show deceased, heroised members of the Lycian dynasty (Hofstetter 1990, 248). The importance of this monument lies in the scenes shown on four slabs on the corners: there beings with the body, wings and legs of a bird and the arms, breasts and heads of women are shown carrying away small anthropomorphic figures. They carry them tenderly and carefully, and the small beings do not appear to offer resistance. So judging from the depiction of these scenes on the grave next to what probably are the ancestors of the dead dynast, this appears to be a depiction of the way in which the realm of the dead ancestors is reached: apparently, these bird-women carry the souls of the dead to their afterlife (Hofstetter 1990, 248; Zahle 1975, 75; Buschor 1944, 36-38). That this was not only a Lycian idea but a widespread connotation of the Sirens (or at least Siren-like figures) might e.g. be indicated by 4<sup>th</sup> century BC terracotta statuettes of Sirens from Southern Italy again carrying small anthropomorphic figures (Hofstetter 1990, 255f. [W 20] with plate 31,1; *ibidem*, 302; Buschor 1944, 35f. with fig. 26), or 6<sup>th</sup> century BC gemstones showing the same motif.<sup>16</sup>

The Sirens’ association with war is little emphasised. But they can appear in scenes related to warfare. Thus a Corinthian vase dating *c.* 590-570 BC shows two Sirens framing the combat of two warriors (Hofstetter 1990, 49, 52 [K 64]; 1997, No. 71 with illustration). On an Attic amphora dating *c.* 540 BC a Siren is hovering over the chariot of an armed warrior who is apparently departing for battle (Hofstetter 1990, 93, 113 [A 80]; Buschor 1944, 27-29 with fig. 18). Here it might also be interesting that the promise of wisdom which the Sirens use in their attempt to lure Odysseus to their island is a promise of deeper knowledge about the Trojan war (*Odyssey* XII, 184-191).

16 Hofstetter 1990, 293-295 (V 33 and V35), 390 note 1131; cf. with further comparative material Zahle 1975, 75; Buschor 1944, 35f.

The question whether the Sirens have a particularly sexual aspect is problematic: from Hellenistic time onwards there are occasional claims that the Sirens were virgins and had a rather strained relationship to Aphrodite (e.g. scholia H.Q.T. and V. on *Odyssey* XII, 39). In iconography, however, a clear and early link exists to the realm of Aphrodite; the hostility between Aphrodite and the Sirens which is claimed by the much later texts is not at all visible. Here belongs an Attic vase dating *c.* 480 BC (Hofstetter 1990, 122 [A 178]). On one side it shows Odysseus and the Sirens. One of them has her name written next to her: Ἰμε(ρ)όπα —‘voice of desire’ (Harrison 1908, 201f. with fig. 37). Ἰμερος can be, but is not necessarily sexual desire. But on the other side of this vase three Eros-figures are shown flying over the waves with traditional wooing-presents in their hands (Hofstetter 1990, 131). Their names as well are written on the vase: καλός, καλός, Ἰμερος—‘beautiful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘desire’. Yet ‘desire’ in the context of an Eros-figure can probably be assumed to be particularly sexual desire, and if this is the connotation of this word on the one side of the vase, it probably also is its connotation on the other side. So one of the three Sirens to whom the three Eros-figures appear to be flying to woo them seems to be called ‘voice of sexual desire’ (cf. Weber-Lehmann 1997b, 230). A similar impression locating the Sirens within the sphere of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is conveyed by a mirror dating *c.* 460/50 BC (Hofstetter 1990, 145 [A 199], 149). On this mirror the reflecting disc is mounted on a statuette of Aphrodite, and the fastening of the disc is adorned with Eros-figures, who belong to the retinue of the goddess of love, while its rim is decorated with doves, the sacred animals of Aphrodite. And on top of the mirror a Siren is seated, which may locate the Sirens as well in the retinue of Aphrodite (cf. Hofstetter 1990, 149, 151). In Roman times at the latest Sirens take active part in sexual scenes anyway, as on a relief from the time of emperor Hadrian where a Siren is lowering herself upon the *membrum virile* of a sleeping Silenus (Hofstetter 1997 No. 89b). So the Sirens as well appear as female demonic figures with a strong affinity to birds—this time by being in shape partly human, partly bird—and a close link to death, a connection to the motif of the devouring of their victims, involved in the transition of at least some dead to a probably blissful afterlife and with markedly sexual traits in their character. This leaves us with a picture as summed up on the table on page 19.

## 7. Conclusions

Demonology has not usually been the area of special interest of the kind of writers of Classical antiquity whose works are extant to us; so we are much less informed about figures even as prominent as the Sirens than we would like to be. Some information is contradictory, some ambiguous. But one thing can be said:

	The Bodb	The Valkyries	Celtiberian Vultures	Vanth	The Furies	The Keres	The Erinyes	The Harpies	The Sirens
<b>Female demon</b>	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	(rare male Sirens)
<b>Death</b>	rejoicing over bloodshed	'choosers of the slain'	feeding on slain heroes	appearing in scenes of death	gatekeepers of Tartarus	synonym for perdition	beings of the netherworld	snatching away to the netherworld	dwelling in Hades; in funerary art
<b>Birds</b>	hooded crow	crow or swan	vulture	winged	winged; bird trans-formation	? cf. flying	winged	winged	half bird, half woman
<b>Devouring</b>	red-mouthed; Macha's mast	? cf. parallels to/associations with devouring beings	feeding on slain heroes	–	–	drinking blood of slain warriors	drinking the blood of their victims	? cf. hungriiness in the Aeneid	devouring their victims
<b>Transition to the realm of the dead</b>	–	fetching slain heroes	carrying to heaven by feeding	guiding the dead to the netherworld	on gate to Tartarus	dragging to Hades	dragging to Hades; leading souls to punishment	snatching away to the netherworld	carrying souls
<b>Violence and war</b>	feasting in battlefield carnage	deciding victory	restricted to martial heroes	in scenes of violent death	instigating bloodshed	appearing in battle scenes	in later literature on battlefield	–	knowledge of Trojan war; in combat scenes
<b>Marked sexuality</b>	relationship to Cú / the Dagda; Caib	mating with heroes, death as wedding		nudity; exhibition of pudenda	–	–	–	–	association with Aphrodite

viewed from a Celtic perspective, the early European demonology of death looks surprisingly familiar.

This raises the question, how such similarities have to be interpreted. They might reflect mere chance. But they might also indicate a historical relationship between the Irish, Norse and Mediterranean death demons. To assess this question, I have proposed some methodological points: (1) in order to make chance unlikely, the motif combination has to be complex if it is to indicate historical contact. The motif combination in question seems reasonably complex: female bird-ish demons of death who occasionally like to devour the slain, play a role in the transition of the deceased to the realm of the dead and tend to show a marked sexuality. (2) A second point of method is the requirement of actually attested contact between the cultures in question. In the present case, such contacts in general are strongly attested, even though it has to be admitted that the demons of death cannot be tied to a particular spread of a feature of material culture in the archaeological record. But already such seeming trivialities as the spread of bronze or iron working over the whole of Europe show that there have been contacts, which allowed the spread of technologies of, at the time, the utmost military importance, and it might be plausible that figures of the demonology of the battlefield might have spread along similar lines. The early Bronze Age burial of the so-called ‘Amesbury Archer’ in Wiltshire, dated between 2400 and 2200 BC, might be a physical representation of a mobile prehistoric elite which might by a perhaps not quite peaceful lifestyle have been interested in such demonic figures of the battlefield and travelled widely enough to spread tales about them. This man was buried in a rich grave with golden jewellery, weapons, and other gifts, and what makes him outstandingly interesting is that it has been suggested on the basis of an analysis of his teeth that he had grown up not in England, where he was buried, but rather in central Europe, possibly close to the Alps, while the copper of his knife came from Spain (Fitzpatrick 2003; cf. Bertemes 2004a, 146, 2004b, 152; Parker Pearson 2006, 15; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2007, 635f.). Bronze Age Scandinavia had to import both copper and tin, and the high status Bronze Age burial of Kivik in Sweden has been seen as an outstanding instance of an Aegean impact on the Nordic Bronze Age (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005, 186-199; cf. Müller-Karpe 1980, 700; Sommerfeld 2004, 84). Such finds seem to hint at a mindset of the prehistoric elites of some periods and places not too much unlike the one we find expressed in the first lines of the *Odyssey* (I, 3) where Odysseus is praised for his knowledge of distant cities and the manners of many peoples (cf. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005, 32-61). In such an environment, the question of transmission of motifs would not have been a problematic one.

(3) As a further methodological point I postulated that the traits should be attested in the earliest available sources if one is to assume prehistoric contact; also this is on the whole the case if one allows for the rather bad state of our source

material in general. (4) And finally, there should be a geographical continuum of the distribution of such a motif; there should be no need to assume that it has just somehow ‘jumped’ over an area. The assumption of cultural contact is much more plausible if the spread can have taken place continuously. The problem about this is that our sources do not provide a continuum of information. We know next to nothing about the prehistoric demonology of Central Europe or Gaul, and have no single contemporary testimony for the pre-Christian demonology of Ireland. The *Bodb* does not appear in the Irish pre-Christian archaeological record, at least not in a recognizable way; but from the testimony of the later texts, she clearly must have been there. This shows that silence of the sources is not necessarily meaningful. At the same time, clear evidence for the type of demons discussed in this article is available for medieval Ireland and Scandinavia, and for Italy, Greece and Lycia in antiquity. Between the Mediterranean of antiquity and early medieval North-Western Europe there is a gap of evidence bridged only by tantalizing hints like the dedication-stone to [C]*athubodua*. This distribution pattern is not arbitrary but rather reflects the state of evidence in general. The gaps, both chronological and geographical, in the attestations of the female death-demons reflect general gaps in our knowledge of the religions of the respective times and places. On the other hand, for all those areas and periods about which we are reasonably well informed—the Mediterranean and early medieval North-Western Europe—there is evidence for this kind of demon. In this sense—viewed before the background of the available evidence in general—there is a continuum of attestations of this motif complex, and this is as good a continuum as one can hope to find with the kind of material at our disposition.

So it seems possible to seriously consider as a concluding thesis that the Irish demonology of the battlefield might be the literary reflection of a wider European phenomenon, which might extend over the entire Celtic as well as Germanic area into the Mediterranean and may be descended in all these areas from some common historical root.

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