

# **Textual Perspectives on Prehistoric Contacts: Some Considerations on Female Death Demons, Heroic Ideologies and the Notion of Elite Travel in European Prehistory**

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In 2005, Kristiansen and Larsson proposed a reconstruction of the European Bronze Age as an epoch characterised by a heroic ideology and long-distance travels of warrior-aristocrats. The present article comments on the general plausibility of this hotly debated theory from an inter-disciplinary perspective. Reviewing some results of on-going work on the early Irish, Norse, Etruscan and Greek demonologies of death, it notes that the combination of the motifs of the female bird-shaped demon, her functioning in the transition to a blissful afterlife and her marked sexuality reoccurs throughout early European demonologies with a frequency which might be taken to indicate a (pre-)historical connection between the corresponding figures. The complete lack of meaningful archaeological evidence for the respective demons in most of north-western Europe precludes a strictly archaeological tracing of the route of transmission of such figures. Yet the particular nature of the phenomenon suggests a transmission based on circumstances strikingly similar to those which Kristiansen and Larsson suggested for the European Bronze Age. As such conclusions have been reached on the basis of material entirely distinct from the data used by Kristiansen and Larsson, this might give some support to the general notion of the reconstruction of a 'heroic (Bronze) Age' in European prehistory.

*heimskt er heimalit barn*  
"homish (silly) is the home-bred bairn"  
(Icelandic proverb)

In 2005, Kristiansen and Larsson presented their views of the Bronze Age in an extensive monograph describing it as an epoch characterized by an obsession with travel and the acquisition of knowledge and prestige by means of travelling.

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Particularly the area from Scandinavia to the Aegean is depicted as a tightly interconnected region where travelling warrior-chiefs established long-ranging personal contacts. In doing so, these travelling chiefs are perceived as creating a basis for their later high status among their own people by establishing on the one hand the connections necessary to obtain the raw materials for producing bronze, and on the other hand acquiring prestigious knowledge of both technological and cosmological kinds. These ideas have been received positively (Klejn 2008 [cf. the response by Kristiansen and Larsson 2008]; Vander Linden 2007; Jones-Bley 2006 [reviewing the book from an Indo-Europeanist's perspective]), as well as critically (Nordquist and Whittaker 2007 [but cf. the response by Kristiansen and Larsson 2007]; Harding 2006). In the following I want to present some (largely non-archaeological) observations made on the basis of material entirely distinct from the sources used by Kristiansen and Larsson, which might likewise suggest the reconstruction of a 'heroic age' characterised by long-distance cultural contact in European prehistory. That my discussion reaches parallel results on the basis of a fundamentally different methodology and data set might lend some support to the theory of a heroic Bronze Age, though it is neither claimed that my observations offer definite proof for such a characterisation of the Bronze Age nor that the theories of Kristiansen and Larsson are the only viable way of explaining them.

My starting points are specific similarities between pre-Christian religions in north-western Europe and the Mediterranean. In the north, particular attention will be paid to mythological characteristics of the Norse Valkyries and Irish demons, such as the *Bodb*. Both are female supernatural figures of the battlefield, associated with violent death, are markedly sexual and sometimes appear as birds. Such similarities have been discussed since Lottner (1870), and scholarship frequently concluded that they indicate a genetic relationship or at least some mutual influence between these figures.<sup>1</sup> The underlying assumption is that recurring close and

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<sup>1</sup>Lottner 1870; Donahue 1941; Birkhan 1970: 509-515, 583; Gulermovich Epstein 1997, 1998a, 1998b. Ellis Davidson 1988: 97-100 notes the similarities without drawing explicit conclusions; in the light of the works of Gulermovich Epstein, I am not convinced by the rejection by Herbert 1996: 149.

complex similarities between mythological figures of geographically close cultures are indicative of interdependence. In the present article, the case for a connection between the Irish and Norse figures will be outlined. Furthermore, I shall posit that this connection can be extended to Mediterranean figures. Finally, I shall discuss which type of historical background would allow cross-cultural connections of this particular kind to arise.

Given the diversity of the available material and the wide chronological and geographical span of the relevant demons, such an investigation into the possibility of cultural contact requires an explicit methodology for the assessment of any similarities. As a means to determine whether such similarities suggest cultural contact, I propose the following methodological points: (1) to allow the conclusion of a historical relationship, a motif combination should be complex; (2) to indicate a prehistoric date of such a connection, the motifs should appear already in the earliest available sources; (3) the notion of interdependency is strengthened if the motifs in question were distributed across a geographical continuum; and (4) a viable theory of the path of transmission must be offered.

To enhance clarity, the discussion of each class of demon will follow the same structure. It will treat the relationship of the demon to *death*, and its affinity to *birds*. It will be asked whether the demon *feeds on corpses*, whether it 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 surveyed. In the interest of brevity, examples shall be sampled; for a fuller account cf. Egeler (forthcoming).

The starting point will be the Irish class of demons represented by the Bodb.<sup>2</sup> Figures appearing as the Bodb, Némain, Macha or the Morrigan are regularly mutually identified by native Irish tradition (e.g. *O'Mulconry's Glossary* 813) and have been so thoroughly conflated that it seems preferable to sum up the characteristics of the class as a whole,

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<sup>2</sup>Fundamental on these figures was Hennessy 1866-1869 and 1870; more recent are Carey 1982/83; Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h 1983; Clark 1987; Clark 1991: esp. 21-52; Bauer-Harsant 1996; Herbert 1996; Gulermovich Epstein 1997, 1998a, 1998b. So the Irish evidence and its Irish context are well established, which makes it legitimate to explore a wider European context. – Unless indicated otherwise, all datings of texts are taken from the respective editions or Thurneysen 1921.

rather than to get lost in an attempt to grasp individual characters.

The Bodb is fond of death. As *Bruiden Meic Dareó* 5 relates: after a great massacre “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 *Táin Bó Regamna* 5 (9<sup>th</sup> century), the Morrígan takes the form of a black bird. She is called ‘red-mouthed’, as in *Táin Bó Cúailnge II* line 3431 (12<sup>th</sup> century). In *Tochmarc Ferbe* (lines 623f.; 12<sup>th</sup> century), warriors are told that they have fed the Bodb by means of their weapons. This reference to her feeding makes clear that the Bodb feeds on the dead, which suggests why she is red-mouthed: the red is the blood of the corpses that she devours. Correspondingly the native Old Irish (cf. Mac Neill 1932) glossary of O’Mulconry explains “the mast (*mesrad*) of Macha, that are the heads of men after they have been slaughtered” (813). The term *mesrad* denotes both ‘harvest, mast’ and ‘feeding with mast’; so the heads of the dead warriors may not only be harvest, but also harvest for eating (Gulermovich Epstein 1998a: 48 note 10). Thus the Bodb is intimately linked with war. In *Tochmarc Emire* 50 (Version III, 12<sup>th</sup> century) she is explained as ‘goddess of battle’; but she is also fond of sex. In *Cath Maige Tuired* 84 (probably an 11<sup>th</sup>-century recension based on 9<sup>th</sup>-century material), the Morrígan grants help in war in exchange for intercourse. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge I* lines 1845-1871 (a 9<sup>th</sup>-century passage), she asks the hero for sexual favors and offers help in battle and riches in return. So, in sum, the Bodb appears as a demoness 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 markedly sexual. A Gallo-Roman dedication stone to [*C*]athubodua (CIL XII 2571, from Haute-Savoie), meaning “battle-Bodb”, might indicate that she was also known among the continental Celts and possibly a pan-Celtic demon (Pictet 1868: esp. 11, 16f.; Hennessy 1870: 32f.; Gulermovich Epstein 1998a: 220f.; cf. Donahue 1941: 8; Birkhan 1970: 492; Green 1995: 43). Also numismatic evidence for the Bodb in Gaul has been suggested (Allen 1980: 142f.).

In Scandinavia, the Valkyries show similar affinities.<sup>3</sup> Their name means ‘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 *Volsunga saga* 1 (13<sup>th</sup> century) a Valkyrie uses a crow-dress to fly, though Valkyries in bird-shape more frequently appear as swans, as at the beginning of the *Völundarqviða* (probably 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century). There are only uncertain hints that the Valkyries might have fed on the slain: associations with and terminological parallels to corpse-devouring beings led Neckel (1913: 75-79, 81) to conclude that the Valkyries were also sucking the blood of the fallen warriors.

The Valkyries are prominently involved in the transition of the dead to their afterlife: thus in the *Hákonarmál* (10<sup>th</sup> century), Odin sends two Valkyries to fetch the dead king Hákon from the battle-field to Valhalla; in the same poem they also determine the outcome of the battle. As for their sexuality, they frequently appear as the mistresses of heroes, as in the Helgi poems of the Poetic Edda (perhaps 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century). That their relationship to the dead warriors in Valhalla also showed sexual aspects and the corresponding problems is implied by the *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* 38 (pre-dating c. 1250), where someone is, among other charges of sexual misbehavior, also accused of having been a shameful Valkyrie about whom the dead warriors in Odin’s hall were brawling. So some of the main characteristics of the Valkyries can be summed up as a close relationship to violent death, an affinity to birds by appearing in the shape of a crow or swan, 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.

So both the Bodb and the Valkyries are female demons closely associated with death – be it by rejoicing over slaughter or as ‘choosers of the slain’ (Figure 1). Both have a marked affinity to birds, appearing as hooded crow or crow and swan

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<sup>3</sup>On Valkyries in general cf.: Golther 1890; Kaufmann 1892; Neckel 1913: 74-89; Ellis 1943 (cf. index); Steblin-Kamenskij 1982; Lorenz 1984: 448-451; Ellis Davidson 1988: 92-97; Price 2003: 331-346; Zimmermann 2006, 2007; Egeler (forthcoming). – Unless indicated otherwise, all datings are taken from the respective editions, de Vries 1964, 1967 or the commentary of von See *et al.* on the Poetic Edda

The Bodb	The Valkyries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Female demon</i></li> <li>• <i>Death:</i> rejoicing over bloodshed</li> <li>• <i>Birds:</i> appearance as hooded crow</li> <li>• <i>Devouring:</i> red-mouthed; severed heads as mast</li> <li>• <i>Transition to the realms of the dead:</i> -</li> <li>• <i>Violence and war:</i> 'goddess of battle'</li> <li>• <i>Marked Sexuality:</i> demanding sexual favors from heroes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Female demon</i></li> <li>• <i>Death:</i> 'choosers of the slain'</li> <li>• <i>Birds:</i> appearance in form of a swan or crow</li> <li>• <i>Devouring:</i> ? cf. parallels to/ associations with devouring beings</li> <li>• <i>Transition to the realms of the dead:</i> fetching slain heroes to Valhalla</li> <li>• <i>Violence and war:</i> deciding death and victory</li> <li>• <i>Marked Sexuality:</i> mating with dead and living heroes</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Summary and juxtaposition of some main characteristics of the Bodb and the Valkyries.

respectively. Both make their main appearances in contexts of warfare, and both show a strongly sexual trait in their relationship with heroes. Within my proposed comparative framework, the main differences between them are that the Valkyries may not devour corpses, whereas the Bodb does not seem to function as a psychopomp, as there is no clear evidence for Ireland that the demonic bird feeding on the corpse played such a role.

**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:* -

Figure 2: Main traits of the Celtiberian 'rite of the vultures'.

But at least in one Celtic area, among the Celtiberians, 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). According to Silius Italicus, *Punica* III, 340-343 and Aelian, *De natura animalium* X, 22 those – and only those – fallen in war were fed to the vultures, and these vultures were thought to carry their souls to heaven (Figure 2). The existence of this ritual may be supported by scenes on Spanish ceramics and stone monuments (Marco Simón 1998: 126f.). In this Celtiberian ritual the vulture feeds on the dead like the Bodb, and this brings about the transition of the deceased to the realms of the dead; furthermore, the 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 our knowledge about this ritual is very limited, everything that is known about it strongly recalls the Bodb. Perhaps it was due to similar ideas about the transition of the warrior to his afterlife that the Celts did not bury their fallen warriors after the battle of the Thermopylae during the invasion of Greece in 280 BC (Pausanias 10.21.6f.; Marco

Simón 1998: 127f. with further possible continental Celtic parallels; cf. Sopeña Genzor and Ramón Palerm 2002: 228f. note 3). If all this is taken together with the possible attestation of the Bodb on the Gallo-Roman dedication stone, this might indicate a direct link between the Bodb and the beliefs standing behind the Celtiberian ritual (Gulermovich Epstein 1998a: 228f. *et passim*; cf. Marco Simón 1998: 128 note 36).

**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

*Figure 3:* Summary of main characteristics of Vanth.

In Etruria another winged female death demon appears, the demoness Vanth (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> For her, no literary sources are extant. She is securely attested only on images, some 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 (e.g. Paschinger 1992: 25f., 303, with fig. 9). Mostly she has large wings (e.g. Paschinger 1992: 17, 20, with fig. 1), which may be a different way of expressing the affinity to birds that the northern demons exhibited by transforming themselves into birds. Frequently, Vanth accompanies the deceased on his journey to the netherworld (e.g. Weber-Lehmann 1997a no. 21), which recalls the Valkyries as choosers of the slain and the function of the Celtiberian vultures. Vanth is often

<sup>4</sup>In general on Vanth cf. e.g. von Vacano 1962; Krauskopf 1987: esp. 78-85; Paschinger 1992; Weber-Lehmann 1997a; de Grummond 2006: 220-225; on her general context within the Etruscan demonology of death cf. Krauskopf 1987. Her resemblance especially to the Valkyries has in passing already been noted by Enking (1943: 65), Richardson (1964: 243) and de Grummond (2006: 223f.).



depicted in a dress borrowed from the iconography of the classical Erinyes, but in many instances she appears in a purely Etruscan way largely or entirely naked (e.g. Cappelletti 1992 nos. 61, 62), iconographically identical with the *lasas* of the retinue of the Etruscan goddess of love (for the *lasas* cf. Lambrechts 1992). Vanth may even appear as explicitly presenting her pudenda (disputed, cf. Weber-Lehmann 1997a no. 57 and 1997b; Krauskopf 1987: 82; de Grummond 2006: 224-226 with fig. X.21, 254 note 25), which would strengthen the suspicion that her iconographic similarity to the *lasas* is indeed again indicative of a marked sexuality. Thus Vanth shows a pattern of character traits very similar to those observable in the Irish Bodbs and the Norse Valkyries: she as well is a *female* supernatural figure embedded in the realm of *death* – including *violent* death – who shows the *avian* trait of being winged, functions as a *psychopomp*, and can iconographically be identical with markedly *sexual* figures.

Other Mediterranean cultures also know supernatural figures with this and closely similar patterns of character. Several demons can only be mentioned in passing which come close to the motif complex under discussion without making a perfect match: thus, the Roman Furies can appear winged (e.g. Virgil, *Aeneid* VII, 408f.) and show a close relationship to the underworld by appearing as gatekeepers of the region where the condemned are punished (e.g. *Aeneid* VI, 548-558). This office also assigns to them a central position on the route of this particular group of the dead to their infernal destiny. An isolated passage in Statius may even hint at a more general role of the Furies in the ritual initiation of the dead to the netherworld (*Thebaid* VIII, 9-11). And Horace mentions the Furies as death demons of battle who hand their victims over to the entertainment of Mars (*Carmina* I.28.17). The Greek Erinyes have their home in the realm of the dead (e.g. *Iliad* IX, 571f.), are frequently described as winged (e.g. Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 289), suck the blood of their prey from its limbs (e.g. Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 264-266), and drag it still living to Hades (*Eumenides* 267f.). Later, they lead the condemned souls to their chastisement in Pseudo-Plato, *Axiochos* 371E, and appear on the battlefield in Quintus Smyrnaeus V, 25-37. The Keres are a synonym of perdition (e.g. *Iliad* II, 301f.), fly through the air (Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* IV, 1665-1667), appear among the demons of the

battlefield (e.g. *Iliad* XVIII, 535-540), feed on the blood of slain warriors (Hesiod, *Scutum* 248-257) and drag their victims to the netherworld (e.g. *Odyssey* XIV, 207f.). Finally, also the Harpies appear snatching away their victims to Hades (*Odyssey* XX, 61-78); iconographically, they are normally depicted as winged women (cf. Kahil and Jacquemin 1988), and in the *Aeneid* their hunger is much emphasized (III, 216-218). So several of the motifs discussed here reappear with some frequency in Mediterranean mythologies. There, the deadly bird-woman seems to have been ubiquitous.

It might be important to note the frequent appearance of demons which partake to some extent in the motif complex of the devouring, warlike, markedly sexual supernatural bird-woman guiding the dead to the otherworld. However, passing them by and proceeding to a much better match, the Greek Sirens come into focus (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

**Greek: The Sirens**

- *Female demon*
- *Death:*  
common in funerary art
- *Birds:*  
half bird, half woman (rare instances of male sirens)
- *Devouring:*  
devouring their victims on their island
- *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 sexuality  
(but virgins according to the later scholia on Homer)

Figure 4: Summary of main characteristics of the Sirens.

Iconographically, Sirens are represented with bodies composed of parts of women and birds (though rare male sirens occur, cf. e.g. Hofstetter 1990: 26). They are closely related to death: from at least the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, they are common in funerary art (Hofstetter 1990: 26-28, 151-186 *et passim*). Already on an Attic pinax dating c. 590/80 BC, a Siren is depicted under a death bed (Hofstetter 1990: 81, 88f. [A 55]). They also appear as devouring beings:

<sup>5</sup>On Sirens in general cf. e.g. Weicker 1902; Buschor 1944; Hofstetter 1990, 1997.

in the *Odyssey* (XII, 45f.) they sit among the remains of their victims, and that they devour them is mentioned explicitly from Hellenistic times onwards (e.g. scholion Q on *Odyssey* XII, 184).

The 'Siren Tomb' in Xanthos in Lycia (Asia Minor) is a 5<sup>th</sup> century BC pillar tomb of a local dynast (Hofstetter 1990: 243 [O 61]; Gabelmann 1984: 43).<sup>6</sup> On four corner slabs, Sirens are carrying small anthropomorphic figures, while the other reliefs mostly depict the heroised ancestors of the deceased (Hofstetter 1990: 248): so the Sirens appear to be carrying the souls of the dead to the realms of their ancestors (Hofstetter 1990: 248; Buschor 1944: 36-38; cf. Zahle 1975: 75). Here Sirens appear as psychopomps. That such a functioning as carriers of souls was a widespread connotation of Siren-figures might be indicated by 4<sup>th</sup> century BC terracotta Sirens from Southern Italy, where they are depicted as carrying small anthropomorphic figures (Hofstetter 1990: 255f. [W 20] with plate 31,1; Hofstetter 1990: 302; Buschor 1944: 35f. with fig. 26), or 6<sup>th</sup> century BC gemstones showing the same motif (Hofstetter 1990: 293-295 [V 33 and V 35], 390 note 1131; cf. with further material Zahle 1975: 75; Buschor 1944: 35f.).

Sirens do not appear particularly linked to warfare, but they can appear in scenes of violence. Thus a Corinthian vase dating *c.* 590-570 BC shows two Sirens framing the combat of two warriors (Hofstetter 1990: 49, 52 [K 64]; cf. Hofstetter 1997 no. 71 with illustration). Similarly, one may also recall the promise of wisdom that the Sirens make to Odysseus: it is a promise of deeper knowledge about the Trojan war (*Odyssey* XII, 184-191).

As to the Sirens' sexual aspect, the scholia on Homer claim that the Sirens were virgins (scholia H.Q.T. and V. on *Odyssey* XII, 39). In iconography, however, a clear and much earlier link exists between Sirens and sexuality. On an Attic vase dating *c.* 480 BC (Hofstetter 1990: 122 [A 178]) a Siren named Ἰμερόπα "voice of desire" appears to be wooed by an Eros-figure named Ἰμερος "desire" – this desire is clearly sexual (cf. Hofstetter 1990: 131; Weber-Lehmann 1997b: 230). This survey therefore suggests that Sirens may be associated with

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<sup>6</sup>Its traditional designation as 'Harpy Tomb' has been shown as a misnomer: Zahle 1975: 74; Hofstetter 1990: 389 note 1113.

	The Bodb	The Valkyries	Celtiberian Vultures	Vanth
Female Demon	X	X		X
Death	rejoicing over bloodshed	'choosers of the slain'	feeding on slain heroes	appearing in scenes of death
Birds	hooded crow	crow or swan	vulture	winged
Devouring	red-mouthed; severed heads as mast	? cf. parallels to/associations with devouring beings	feeding on slain heroes	-
Transition to the Realm of the Dead	-	fetching slain heroes	carrying to heaven by feeding	guiding the dead to the netherworld
War	'goddess of battle'	deciding victory	restricted to martial heroes	in scenes of violent death
Marked Sexuality	sexual favours from heroes	mating with dead and living heroes		nudity; exhibition of pudenda

Figure 5: Summary table of central traits of several Irish, Norse and Mediterranean female demons associated with death.

The Furies	The Erinyes	The Keres	The Harpies	The Sirens
X	X	X	X	(rare male Sirens)
gatekeepers of the place of punishment in the netherworld	beings of the netherworld	synonym for perdition	snatching away to the netherworld	in funerary context
winged	winged	? cf. flying	winged	half bird, half woman
-	drinking the blood of their victims	drinking blood of slain warriors	? cf. hungriness in the Aeneid	devouring their victims
gatekeepers of the place of punishment in the netherworld	dragging to Hades; leading souls to punishment	dragging to Hades	snatching away to the netherworld	carrying souls in Xanthos
handing over victims to Mars	in later literature on battlefield	appearing in battle scenes	-	knowledge of Trojan war; in combat scenes
-	-	-	-	'voice of (sexual) desire'

the complete set of motifs under discussion. Figure 5 tabulates the occurrence of these motifs.

A frequent recurrence of a motif complex as summed up in Figure 5 raises the question of its interpretation. Such recurrences might reflect mere chance. But they might also indicate historical relationships between these mythological figures. To assess this question, the methodological points suggested above may be considered. Firstly, in order to make chance unlikely and to indicate interdependence, the motif combination should be complex. The motif combination in question does indeed seem reasonably complex: (1) female (2) bird-like demons of (3) death who occasionally (4) devour the slain, (5) play a role in the passage of the deceased to the realm of the dead and (6) are markedly sexual.

A second methodological point is that the traits should be attested in the earliest available sources to indicate prehistoric contact. This is on the whole the case, allowing for the generally poor state of the material. Also, thirdly, the distribution pattern of the motif should constitute a geographical continuum: the assumption of interdependence is much more plausible if the spread can have taken place continuously. Yet our sources do not provide a continuum of information; while historical data are comparatively rich in the Mediterranean and in early medieval north-western Europe, the evidence from antiquity is extremely scarce for 'barbarian' Europe north of the Alps – thus, it is little surprise that the demons in question are abundantly attested in the Mediterranean and in early medieval north-western Europe, while transalpine Europe in antiquity provides little evidence for their existence. Between the Mediterranean of antiquity and early medieval north-western Europe, there is a long period bridged only by tantalizing suggestions. This distribution pattern reflects the state of evidence in general: its chronological and geographical gaps reflect general problem areas. On the other hand, for those areas and periods about which we are well informed there is evidence for such demons. In this sense – viewed in the light of the available evidence in general – there is a continuum of attestations of this motif complex; this is as good a continuum as one can expect with the available data. Nevertheless, the chronological gap between the Mediterranean and early medieval data seems at first glance to discourage the hypothesis of a historical

connection between them. But during the historical period, the Irish Bodb shows a striking longevity. She may be attested as [C]athubodua 'Battle-Bodb' already in Roman Gaul. In Ireland herself, she is first attested in a poem dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (*Táin Bó Cúailnge I*, lines 957-962; Herbert 1996: 145; Olmsted 1982, though he wishes to emend her out of the text against the evidence of all manuscripts: 171 note 17). The oldest manuscript recording her beyond doubt under her name Morrígan was written AD 876/877 (Stokes and Strachan 1901: xiii, 2). Her presence abounds throughout the whole Middle Ages, and even as late as the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century AD a native Irish vocabulary records the *Badb-catha*, the 'Bodb of Battle', translates the name as hooded crow and associates the *Badb-catha* and the hooded crow with some of the other old battlefield demons (Hennessy 1870: 34f.). Thus, there is well over a millennium of continuity attested for the Bodb even after she had ceased to be a recognised part of the religion of the island – and in all this time she did not enter the surviving Irish archaeological record. This strongly suggests that she could have been present for a very long time before the first textual attestation without becoming archaeologically visible.

So only one methodological point remains to be considered: the question of transmission. If this could be resolved, it would seem possible to consider that the Irish and Norse demonologies of the battlefield might be related reflections of a wider European phenomenon, which might also extend into the Mediterranean and may be descended in all these areas from a common root.

The question of the transmission of this motif-complex, however, struggles with a fundamental problem inherent in the available data and mentioned already above: the Bodb does not enter the Irish archaeological record; so it is not possible to trace her way to Ireland directly. The Valkyries might appear in the Scandinavian archaeological record, but the possible attestations are few, problematic and too late (Viking Age) to be of any value in establishing a theory about the spread of these figures (cf. Price 2003: 336f.; Zimmermann 2006: 50f.). Therefore, the question of transmission can only be approached on the basis of general considerations on the characteristics of the female death-demons. One has to ask: given the specific nature of the phenomenon in question,

what would an epoch of European prehistory look like which would have offered suitable conditions for this particular complex to spread? After this fundamental question has been answered, one can proceed to ask whether an epoch of such a specific character is attested in (or has been suggested for the reconstruction of) European prehistory.

The *Bodb* and the Valkyries are entirely embedded in the world of war. More specifically, they are intimately linked with the life and death of the hero; the war they are such an intrinsic part of is an aristocratic and high-status phenomenon (at least in the self-perception of the respective aristocrats, which is what matters in the current context). Since they are deeply embedded in an ideology of aristocratic heroism and the world of war one should search for their origin in an epoch which would have been characterised by such heroic and aristocratic values. As the demons would during this epoch have spread across more or less the whole of Europe, this hypothetical 'heroic age' would furthermore have been characterised by far-ranging contacts between the representatives of this heroic-aristocratic ideology. These contacts could for instance have been maintained by travels undertaken by such warrior-aristocrats. Such a link of the transmission of the female death-demons to cultural contacts within a class of warriors is also underlined by a certain shift of emphasis between the characters of the Celto-Germanic and the Graeco-Etruscan demons: while the connection to war is a core trait of the north-western European demons and the Celtiberian funerary rituals, it is peripheral in the classical Mediterranean examples. The classical demons are not so much – as the 'barbarian' demons – demons of death in battle as rather demons of death in general; mainly in this function they are also secondarily related to war. This shift from 'demon of death' to 'demon of death in war' could be explained by a transmission of these ideas by a travelling warrior-elite. Such travelling warrior-chiefs might have incorporated the foreign death demon into the way of life they followed and made it a demon of death in heroic combat, as we meet it in the north. *One plausible way of transmission for the motif-complex of the female death-demon would thus be found in an epoch dominated by a travelling warrior-aristocracy.* It is essential to emphasise that this hypothesis has been developed on the basis of the demon-data alone, without recourse to current discussions



about the nature of European prehistory. The material available about the nature of early European death demons has to be assessed in its own right before it is set into the wider context of discussions in archaeological theory. Only then can there be a meaningful discourse between data and theory and between the approaches of different disciplines, studying texts on the one hand and the archaeological record on the other. Meaningful inter-disciplinary work cannot consist in confounding the methods of different disciplines, but only in using the methods of each discipline to their full measure and then trying to draw a synthesis from the results achieved by different independent approaches.

After the demon-data have been reviewed in their own right, however, it is necessary to engage with current archaeological thinking about the nature of European prehistory. The question is whether European prehistory knows an epoch which is characterised by similar traits as they have been suggested as a possible, though highly hypothetical background for the pan-European phenomenon of the female death-demons.

The European Bronze Age has been described in exactly such terms by Kristiansen and Larsson (2005). They reconstructed this period as an epoch of a specific character, at the heart of which lay a heroic ideology which used travelling as a means of gaining prestige. Travels, so they suggest, were used as a way of building up long-ranging contacts between high-status persons in order to sustain the supply of raw metals. At the same time, the traveller was able to acquire new knowledge and experience. Both the personal contacts as basis of the metal supply and new technological and cosmological insights would constitute the basis of the high status of the aristocratic traveller after his return to his home country. It would be beyond the scope of the present article to sum up the methods and materials used by Kristiansen and Larsson in the reconstruction of Bronze Age ideology; the reader has to be referred to their book. Rather than present an assessment of their *archaeological* approach, the purpose of the present article is to note that the main lines of the conclusions derived from a study of the early European demonology of death strikingly coincide with the conclusions which Kristiansen and Larsson draw from the study of the Bronze Age archaeological record. So in line with the materials discussed here, their

theories have explanatory force. They underline the possibility of reconstructing at least one ‘heroic age’ for European prehistory, and they could localise the hypothetical ‘heroic age’ postulated on the basis of the demon-data in time.

It should also be noted that attitudes such as the ones which Kristiansen and Larsson reconstruct for the Bronze Age are well attested for historical periods; thus their reconstruction for prehistory is not intrinsically implausible. Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) refer to the *Odyssey*. Already in its third verse the poem tells us: *πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω* “he [Odysseus] saw the cities and learned the manners of many peoples”. One of the most illustrious Greek heroes is depicted as a far-travelled man, who has seen large parts of the world and learnt their ways. Here, travelling and the knowledge gained by it becomes a basis for prestige.

What in Greece is expressed in one verse, may be expressed in the negative in Old Norse as a single word. One term of contempt in Old Norse is the word *heimdragi*, denoting a ‘stay-at-home’: someone who never gets out into the world and has a corresponding character, i.e. limited and lazy (Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson 1913-1916 *s.v.* ‘heimdragi’). Its oldest extant attestation stems from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century (Finnur Jónsson 1912 A: 185; 1912 B: 174) – little earlier than the foundation of a Norse settlement as far west as L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland (Ingstad 1985: 453-457), and a time when warriors from the Norse settlements in Russia were already prominent in the service of the Byzantine empire (Sigfús Blöndal and Benedikz 1978: 32-46). In this oldest attestation of the word, handed down in a version of *Flóamanna saga* 24 (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsón 1991: 291f., lower text), the term appears in a stanza meaningfully inscribed on a broken oar, as the stanza contrasts the comfort of the lazy stay-at-home with the toils of the (‘real’) man who rowed on the sea. In a stanza in *Ragnars saga* 19 it is woven into an accusation of lacking military prowess; the *heimdragi* here is a man who lacks the energy to go to war abroad, and the experience thereof. In his *Háttatal* 98f., Snorri uses the term to contrast with the wise, brave, generous nobleman who sets up warships. However, while ‘going abroad’ in these instances is essentially ‘going campaigning’, the *heimdragi* is also set in opposition to travellers in slightly more peaceful settings. Thus Rognvaldr

the Crusader and Sigmundr in *Orkneyinga saga* 88 swim over the Jordan after visiting the holy places in the Holy Land, and mark their travels by twisting knots in bushes, thereby uttering stanzas reviling those who were too lazy and cowardly to face the journey. In doing so, they again use the word *heimdragi* (Finnur Jónsson 1912 A: 511; 1912 B: 485). Thus the term *heimdragi* implies an attitude which sees the hero and nobleman essentially as a far-travelled man. A similar idea is expressed by the Icelandic proverb fronting this article. Both this term and this proverb express that the stay-at-home is not valued; only those that venture out into the world find respect. Prestige is linked to travelling and the experience gained. When this attitude became prominent in the north cannot be said, but on a textual basis (distinct from a strictly archaeological perspective), there is nothing intrinsically implausible about the suggestions of Kristiansen and Larsson regarding the status of travel in the Bronze Age. In this way, a model based on social values as expressed in the third verse of the *Odyssey* and by the Old Norse *heimdragi* has merit for assessing similarities between Irish, Norse, Etruscan and Greek demons of death. In such societies, which attribute prestige to the experience of travelling, ideas would have travelled together with the travelling individuals so that the question of the transmission of ideas would posit no problems.

On the basis of all this, several preliminary conclusions can be considered. First: the data available for the early European demonology of death suggest that the respective figures are part of a pan-European continuum of such demons, which are likely to be historically connected. Second: the character of the figures and the shifts in emphasis between the classical Mediterranean and the 'barbarian' area could be taken to suggest a location of the transmission of such ideas in a hypothetical 'heroic age' characterised by warrior-aristocrats with far-ranging inter-regional contacts, perhaps based on travel. Third: the hypothetical 'heroic age' postulated on the basis of the demon-material strikingly coincides with the reconstruction of the Bronze Age suggested by Kristiansen and Larsson. This both strengthens the highly hypothetical model of an early European 'heroic age' and shows that the theory proposed by Kristiansen and Larsson has explanatory force. This is the more important as the hypothetical model of cultural contact proposed on the basis of the demon-material is

both in terms of data and method independent from Kristiansen and Larsson. Fourth: a short glance at Odysseus and the Norse derogatory term *heimdragi* illustrated that 'heroic' attitudes which use travelling as a means of gaining prestige are historically well attested. To postulate such attitudes also for an epoch of prehistory therefore does not postulate something which would be typologically rare. Thus, there is nothing intrinsically implausible in the assumption that similar values might also have been prominent in parts of prehistory.

It should however be acknowledged that the data reviewed in this article do not by themselves conclusively *require* an interpretation as indicators of elite travelling. Other ways of transmission, like trade contacts, could be considered. Yet an explanation by a model based on long-distance trade would have difficulties in explaining the shift in character between the classical and the 'barbarian' demons: while the classical demons are demons of death in general, the 'barbarian' demons are demons of death in battle in particular. This might be taken to indicate that some link to warfare or an heroic ideology played a role in the transmission of these ideas; a transmission along trade routes therefore seems unlikely (though not impossible). Another and more important alternative to a recourse to Bronze Age ideologies would be an interpretation based on the historically well attested large-scale employment of Celtic mercenaries by Western Greek and Hellenistic rulers (Griffith 1935; Szabó 1991), which would accommodate the shift from demons of death to demons of death in battle. As the 'barbarian' archaeological record does not allow one to determine the time in which the female death- and battlefield-demons first occurred among Celts and Germans, such a comparatively late transmission cannot be firmly excluded. However, the motif of the devouring of the slain has in the Mediterranean of this period probably hardly any religious significance; so an explanation would have to be attempted as to how the devouring could acquire the strong religious significance which it seems to possess in the Celtiberian vulture ritual, where it appears to be firmly embedded in living religious practice. This problem might not be insurmountable and does not make it impossible to connect the similarities between the classical Mediterranean and the Celto-Germanic demons with

Celtic mercenary activity; but such a model would imply that some of the similarities between these figures would probably be due to partly independent parallel developments or involve a certain amount of ‘creative misunderstanding’. The nature of the material does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn. It can only be stated – but this can be stated – that an epoch characterised by (‘heroic’) elite travelling in European prehistory could constitute a tempting explanation how the close similarities between the Norse, Irish and Mediterranean demons could have arisen. It could serve as a model offering one possible explanation for empirical observations which a more locally restricted approach to prehistory would not be able to explain, but which seem in need of explanation.

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*The Journal of Indo-European Studies*

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