

# The Hellhound Myth: Polytheistic, Zoroastrian and Christianized Sources of Indo-European Mythology

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**Résumé :** Le mythe du chien de l'enfer est visible dans de nombreuses traditions indo-européennes. Cependant, ce motif a une grande variété d'expressions en Eurasie et dans le continent américain. De plus, il est clair que les peuples IE étaient polythéistes, mais certains des registres qui pointent vers une mythologie IE ont été conçus dans des contextes zoroastriens ou chrétiens. Pourtant, il semble que dans certaines de ces sources, la valeur eschatologique des chiens de l'enfer soit restée centrale dans les récits, même s'il existe un degré considérable de divergence entre eux – notamment en ce qui concerne la fusion des récits des chiens de l'enfer avec ceux des héros identifiés comme « tueurs de dragons » dans certains registres. L'objectif de cet article est donc de comprendre comment les réformes religieuses et autres processus ont pu remodeler le mythe du chien de l'enfer et quel type de continuité peut être trouvé dans ces récits; ainsi que de concevoir, dans une perspective comparative et historique, à quoi aurait pu ressembler un véritable mythe indo-européen du chien de l'enfer.

**Mots-clés :** chiens d'enfer; résistance religieuse; réformes religieuses; tueurs de dragon; études indo-européennes.

**Abstract :** The hellhound myth is visible in many Indo-European traditions. However, this motif has a large variety of expressions in Eurasia and the American continent. Furthermore, it is clear that IE peoples were polytheistic, but some of the accounts that point towards an IE mythology

were conceived in either Zoroastrian or Christian contexts. Still, it seems that in some of those sources the eschatological value of hellhounds remained central in the narratives, even if there is a considerable degree of divergence between them — especially concerning the merging of hellhound narratives with those of heroes identified as “dragon-slayers” in some accounts. The aim of this article is, therefore, to understand how religious reforms and other processes might have reshaped the hellhound myth and what kind of continuities can be found in those accounts; as well as to conceive what a proper Indo-European hellhound myth might have looked like in a comparative and historical approach.

**Keywords:** hellhounds; religious resistance; religious reforms; dragon-slayers; Indo-European studies.

The hellhound motif is common to a large variety of societies.<sup>1</sup> Some of them are those which have the Proto-Indo-European language as their linguistic background — suggesting that its speakers had a hellhound myth of their own.<sup>2</sup> Even though the Indo-European religious system is most likely to be polytheistic<sup>3</sup>, it is possible that only Indic and Greek accounts reflect this system directly when it comes to this character. Iranian accounts also have “spiritual dogs” related to death, but this concept is portrayed in Zoroastrian texts — which is fair to

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1 A study by Berezkin compiled the hellhound motif in a large variety of cultures throughout Eurasia and the American continent (2005, p. 134-136).

2 The IE hellhound myth has been assumed since the late nineteenth century, in the works of Max Müller (1890, p.180-181) and Gheyn (1883, p.15-16), and stayed that way in later works by Mazzorin and Minniti (2006, p. 63-64), West (2007, p. 392) and Lincoln (1991, p. 96-106).

3 West, 2007, p. 120; Fortson, 2004, p. 22.

consider as a monotheistic religion.<sup>4</sup> Scandinavian and Irish sources also contain mythic dogs; in both cases, however, the texts were written after the conversion of these areas to Christianity. Thus, the first questions we might ask when it comes to this problem are: what kind of shape did the hellhound take in consequence of such transitions of religious thought? And what kind of quality do such sources provide for the reconstruction of IE myth and for comparative mythology? To answer that, a comparative study of the accounts on this motif in cultures related to PIE is necessary. If we can reconstruct with some precision the picture of what the IE hellhound might have looked like, we can also observe how it changed in each tradition — and, perhaps, recognize the reasons *why* it changed. Still, the search for this answer finds some problems at its start: the relationship between dogs and death is not exclusive to cultures related to PIE. Then, how can

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4 There are discussions over Zoroastrianism's classification as monotheistic, overall in virtue of the presence of other spiritual beings taken as deities (like Mithra, for example) other than the supreme god Ahura Mazda. In such debate, I favor Hintze's take on the subject, which criticises a distinction between "monotheism" and "polytheism" oriented in comparison with other traditions, especially Judeo-Christian thought (2014, p.226). She also states that, when regarding mainly internal sources of Zoroastrianism, "Mazdayasnians thus perceive of themselves as worshippers of one god, Ahura Mazda" and that "Notions of monotheism, dualism and polytheism are so closely intertwined in the Zoroastrian religion that it is difficult, if not impossible to separate them from each other without causing the whole system to collapse" (2014, p. 244).

we conceive that these accounts reflect an IE myth — and not a polygenic or maybe Paleolithic feature — in the first place? The goal of this article is, therefore, to recognize which elements of the hellhound myth are particularly Indo-European in the accounts we have available, as well as to recognize how the conversion to Christianity, the Zoroastrian revelation and other processes within polytheistic context reshaped this character in each tradition.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that this study is derived from another ongoing research that has its scope more restricted to Cerberus and Greek-Latin written tradition, but that has used a fair amount of comparative IE concepts. Most part of the analysis relies on compared translations, instead of a reading from the texts in their original languages — which means the reader will find a discussion more inclined to the articulation between versions of the myth and their recognizable common elements, rather than a fully developed linguistically-based study. Therefore, the scope of this article is not as broad as it can be when it comes to source and selection and theoretic framework. More solid (and different, perhaps) answers might arise with further research.

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5 It must be pointed out that a motif similar to that of the hellhound is present in proper Christian and Islamic texts; those, however, seem unrelated from the IE conception and are fair to be understood as the result of cultural exchange in Hellenistic and Roman periods at best. On that matter, see Archer (2016) and Stefanovic (2013).

## Accounts on the Indo-European hellhound myth

According to B. Schlerath, the hellhound motif is expressed in IE cultures in three forms: a swarm of restless souls that take the shape of dogs, the guides or companions of the soul to the afterlife, and Cerberus — which we can conceive as the guard of the afterlife more generally.<sup>6</sup> The author recognizes that those categories intertwine and belong to the same concept; however, this work will approach more deeply accounts that fit to the two latter, as their connection concerning both structure and symbolism seem more evident.

One of the examples of the hellhound myth in Indo-European cultures is expressed by Yama's dogs, accounted in the *Rigveda* — perhaps the oldest written source available when it comes to IE religion, dating back to its context's Bronze Age, around 1200-1000 BCE.<sup>7</sup> The tenth Mandala of the *Rigveda* tells us about the god Yama, the first to die and to find the path to afterlife, thus becoming the king of the underworld. The account we have on his hounds is the following:

“Outrun the two dogs of Saramā's breed, four-eyed and brindled, along the path that leads straight to the goal. Then approach the forefathers who are good to find, who reach exhilaration in joint revelry with Yama. Your two dogs, Yama, who are guardians, four-eyed guards of the path with their eyes on men — to them deliver him, o king. Provide for him well-being and freedom from disease. The two broad-nosed,

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6 Schlerath, 1954, p. 25.

7 Jamison, 2020, p. 14.

reddish-brown messengers of Yama, stealers of lives, pursue the peoples. Let these two here today grant a fortunate life again to us, to see the sun.”<sup>8</sup>

The dogs of Yama seem quite ambiguous in this passage. As Schlerath noticed, they seem to be simultaneously benevolent and dangerous.<sup>9</sup> At first, it seems that the dead have to escape from them to meet their ancestors in the afterlife. Then, they are referred to as guards of the underworld and their master Yama can provide the soul with “well-being” and “freedom from disease”. After that, they are called “stealers of lives” and pursuers, but can also provide “a fortunate life” in the afterlife. We can interpret the dogs of Yama as some kind of filter in the entrance of the realm of the dead. Maybe they can grant such “fortunate life” whilst devouring those unworthy of it; escaping them, perhaps, is what makes one deserve entering the Vedic underworld.

Accounts in the *Atharva-Veda* make further development of this myth. One of its hymns suggests to its reader (or listener) to ascend to the heavens and unite with the gods, instead of going towards the underworld and uniting with the ancestors:

“Thy mind shall not go thither, shall not disappear! Do not become heedless of the living, do not follow the Fathers! All the gods shall preserve thee here! Do not long after ‘the departed, who conduct (men) afar! Ascend from the darkness,

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8 *Rigveda*, 10.14.10-12. All translations from the *Rigveda* are by Brereton and Jamison (2014), sometimes with adaptations.

9 1954, p. 28.

come to the light! We lay hold of thy hands. The two dogs of Yama, the black and the brindled one, that guard the road (to heaven), that have been despatched, shall not (go after) thee! Come hither, do not long to be away; do not tarry here with thy mind turned to a distance!”<sup>10</sup>

There seems to be another conception of afterlife in the *Atharva-Veda*; now we have a heavenly place with the gods, in opposition to Yama’s dark underworld. When it comes to the hellhounds, now we have a distinction between them — one is black and the other is brindled. This “alternative” afterlife seems to be also free from their pursuit. The *Atharva-Veda* also has a passage that conveys basically the same Rigvedic portrayal of the hellhounds, but a description of them as “copper-colored” is added.<sup>11</sup> It seems that, in most cases, Yama’s hounds are conceived as identical, except in that which distinguished them by color.

Still concerning the Indo-Iranian branch, we have mythic dogs in Zoroastrian sources, which are different from the Vedic religion in many aspects — Zoroastrianism worships a supreme god called Ahura Mazda and its doctrine supposedly was revealed by the legendary prophet Zarathustra, thus it is supposedly not as close to IE polytheism. The earliest accounts on the Iranian hellhound myth remain in the *Vendidad* — the only Avestan text to survive in its entirety and which was

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10 *Atharva-Veda*, 8.1.7-9. Translation by Bloomfield. Also checked in Whitney’s edition.

11 *Ib.*, 18.2.11-13.

probably written during the Sassanian period, around the third and fourth centuries CE.<sup>12</sup> The narratives mentioning the mythic watchdog usually surround the Kinvad bridge – or the bridge of judgment – and the passing of the souls through it. The *Vendidad* bans dog killing and contains a passage about the afterlife punishment for whoever does it:

“Whosoever shall smite either a shepherd’s dog, or a house dog, or a Vohuznaga dog, or a trained dog, his soul when passing to the other world, shall fly amongst the howling and fiercer pursuing than the sheep does when the wolf rushes upon it in the lofty forest. No soul will come and meet his departing soul and help it through the howls and pursuit in the other world; nor will the dogs that keep Kinvad bridge help his departing soul through the howls and pursuit in the other world.”<sup>13</sup>

Here we can start to draw the Zoroastrian concept of the hellhound in our minds; the watchdogs of the Kinvad bridge, the passage between the realm of the living and that of the dead. However, as simple as this passage might appear to be, it already presents a problem: in Darmesteter’s translation, we have “the

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12 Boyce, 1979, p.17; cf. Malandra, 1983, p.25. I am particularly more convinced of a later dating of the writing, rather than a previous dating of the Avesta around the fourth century BCE under the Achaemenid Empire. Mentioning the date of its writing rather than the date of its composition was a choice based on the difficulties and debate concerning the dating of oral composition before its writing in many fields. Malandra states that the Younger Avesta “is mostly the redaction of older materials by people who poorly understood the language of the original” (1983, p. 25)

13 *Vendidad*, 13.8-9. Translation by Darmesteter, chosen for clearer reading.

dogs that guard the Kinvad bridge” in plural; however, Anklesaria’s edition, which contains a transliteration and a translation from the Pahlavi *Vendidad*, presents the word *sag* (or “dog”) in singular. The dog of the Kinvad bridge is then conceived as “the dog of dogs” (*sag î sagān*). This Pahlavi version also presents a commentary on this dog — “There is one who says: the beneficent bridge-protector” — with a following quotation from Avestan: “Of which two, the other is the most righteous Rashnu”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we have some kind of inconsistency with the number of mythic dogs in this passage; perhaps, this is a reflection of the Middle Persian language, or there might have been a shift of content between Avestan and later Pahlavi versions. Also, one of these dogs seems to be identified with the justice deity Rashnu. A further extract of the *Vendidad* retakes this theme and might clarify it, as shown below:

“Then the fiend, named Vizaresha, carries off in bonds the souls of the wicked Daêva-worshippers who live in sin. The soul enters the way made by Time, and open both to the wicked and the righteous. At the head of the Kinvad bridge, the holy bridge made by Mazda, they ask for their spirits and the souls the reward for the worldly goods which they gave away here below. Then comes the well-shapen, strong and tall-formed maiden, with the dogs at her sides, one who can distinguish, who is graceful, who does what she wants, and is high of understanding. She makes the soul of the righteous one go up

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14 Translation by Anklesaria, with small adaptations for clearer reading (1946, p.279). Rashnu is an Iranian deity related to justice.

above the Hara-beirazati<sup>15</sup>; above the Kinvad bridge she places it in the presence of the heavenly gods themselves.”<sup>16</sup>

Here we have the same basic concept given in the previous passage, but this time the dogs are the companions of a spiritual maiden, as she is described as “possessing the dogs” (*sag-aûmand*, where *sag* seems to be indefinite in number) in Anklesaria’s translation.<sup>17</sup> In Iranian eschatology, this character is a personification of the dead’s behavior or conduct (in Zoroastrian standards). Her appearance might vary depending on the quality of them and their adherence to Zoroastrian morals, being more pleasant if the dead soul has been good in life — or more unpleasant if they have not. It is also clear that the passing through the Kinvad bridge is the moment when the soul is judged and where its destiny is decided. The dogs seem to not only guard the passage to afterlife, but also to be part of the judgement itself. Even though no specific number of dogs is mentioned, West conceives it to be two, in comparison to other IE traditions.<sup>18</sup> This is supported by the quotation from Avestan we have seen before.

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15 According to Darmesteter in a comment over his translation (1880, p.213): “The heavenly mountain, whence the sun rises, and upon which the abode of the gods rest”.

16 *Vendidad*, 19.29-30. Translation by Darmesteter.

17 Anklesaria, 1946, 384.

18 West, 2007, p. 392.

To continue this analysis, a later Middle Persian account from the *Bundahišn* (or “The Book of Creation”) also portrays the bridge of judgment, here called *Činwad*:

“A peak in the middle of the world, as tall as the height of one hundred men, which they call the Peak of Dāitī, is the fulcrum of divine Rašn’s scales. One edge stands on the base of Mount Harburz in the north, and the other edge on the peak of Mount Harburz in the south, and the middle stands upon the Peak of Dāitī. In the middle, there is an edge as sharp as a sword that is as high, long, and wide as nine lances. There stand the spirits who spiritually purify the souls of the righteous. A spiritual dog is at the end of the bridge, and hell is underneath it.”<sup>19</sup>

This account develops the description of the bridge with more detail when compared to the previous extracts from the *Vendidad* and, once again, reinforces its judgmental attribute with the presence of Rašn (or Rashnu). The “spiritual dog”, however, has no further development, as well as the spiritual maiden, who is either omitted or forgotten. Like in the Pahlavi version of the first passage we have seen of the *Vendidad*, we only have one dog on the bridge. From the reading of these sources, it seems that Zoroastrianism conceived multiple dogs at the Kinvad bridge in earlier times, whereas later Middle Persian tradition conceived it to be only one. As we have seen, since one was identified with Rashnu, it is possible that only one of the dogs kept its role as watchdog of the Kinvad bridge.

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19 *Bundahišn*, 30.1-3. Translation by Agostini and Thrope.

Finally, a fragment edited and translated by Mills can also be of our interest when it comes to Zoroastrian mythic hounds:

“I confess myself a Mazda-worshipper — for the praise of Thraetaona, the Âthwyan. Let them declare it —. Propitiation be to the Fravashi of Thraetaona, the Âthwyan, the saint. We sacrifice to Thraetaona, the Âthwyan, the holy lord of the ritual order; and may we be free from the dog Kuro, and the Tarewani, and the Karpan<sup>20</sup>, (we who are) of those who sacrifice in order.”<sup>21</sup>

Mills comments in a footnote<sup>22</sup> that the terms *Kuro* and *Tarewani* are obscure; no other mentions to those could be found in other texts. However, the only other mythic dog in Zoroastrian texts might be that (or those) of the Kinvad bridge. Given that the fragment’s writer desires to “be free from the dog Kuro”, it can be read as an allegory to be free from death or from hellish punishment in the afterlife. This could be the only mention of a proper name for at least one of the spiritual dogs; however, the fragment for itself might not be enough to conceive such an assumption. However, we can speculate that Kuro and the deity Rashnu became identified with the two dogs at the Kinvad bridge. The fragment also mentions Thraetaona, who is a hero known for being descendant of Âthwyan and enemy of the three-headed

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20 *Karpan* is a term used to refer to priests who were somehow antagonistic to Zoroastrian cult, who worshipped *daêva* or deities prior to the revelation of the prophet Zarathustra (Boyce, 1984, p.36; Malandra, 1983, p.18).

21 Mills, 1887, p.389; F II, 1-2.

22 *Ib.*

dragon called Azhi Dahāka.<sup>23</sup> This is known especially from the *Yashts* and, as suggested by Boyce, such compositions seem to register earlier content, given its parallels with Vedic tradition – which means they were inspired or derived from a previous oral tradition from the Indo-Iranian period.<sup>24</sup>

It is also told in the *Denkard* that Dahāka was bound by Ferēdun (Middle Persian name for Thraetona) in the volcano of Mount Dimāvand<sup>25</sup>, since it could not be hurt by a club or a sword.<sup>26</sup> Then, the dragon would be free from its fetter and try to destroy the world, until the hero Keresāsp resurrects and crushes Dahāka with his club. This narrative is registered in more detail in the *Bahman Yasht*, where water, fire and vegetation plead to Mazda to make Ferēdun alive again, and then he sends his angels to wake up Keresāsp's body. After the fourth attempt, the hero rises and smites Azhi Dahāka.<sup>27</sup> This

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23 *Yasna*, 9.7-8; *Bundahišn*, 33.2.

24 Boyce, 1984, p. 2.

25 West, 1892, p. 198 and p. 212; *Bahman Yasht*, 3.55-61; *Bundahišn*, 12.31 (here Dahāka is called Bêvârasp); 19.7-9. It should be noted that these passages of the *Bahman Yasht* and *Bundahišn* seem to be later additions to the original text. They were taken from West's translation (1880), which is an attempt to make a clear reproduction of Zoroastrian doctrine rather than portray the inconsistencies of the original texts. Therefore, they are not present in the more recent editions of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* by Cereti (1995) and of the *Bundahišn* by Agostini and Thrope (2020). However, they seem to portray content that is related to other Indo-European traditions and are valuable for our analysis.

26 *Denkard*, 9.21.8-12.

27 *Bahman Yasht*, 3.55-61; also attested in *Denkard*, 9.15.1-2 and *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 37.97. Keresāsp's resurrection is implied from its role in the

three-headed creature can remind us of another well known mythical being: Cerberus, the Greek hellhound.

In Greek-Roman tradition, Cerberus is usually set as the twelfth and last of Herakles' works, in which the hero brings the hellhound from Hades to the surface. The hellhound seems to have played this role at least since Homer.<sup>28</sup> The accounts on Cerberus in Homeric poems, however, are very short and lack details other than Herakles' mission to fetch the dog, without even mentioning the hellhound's name and referring to it only as "the dog of Hades". Hesiod, on the other hand, has given us a proper description of the Cerberus' role in ancient Greek cosmology:

"Roaring before the houses of the god of the underworld, of mighty Hades and delightful Persephone, a horrific hound stands watching; pitiless, has an evil trick. When one enters, he wags both tail and ears; but going back is not allowed, as he pursues and devours those he catches going outside the gates".<sup>29</sup>

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renovation in the end of times and from his description as a dead or asleep hero (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 17.6; see West, 1880, p.lii; 1882, p.39, footnote) From West's edition of the *Bundahišn* (19.7), we can conceive a death-like sleep, being translated as "unnatural lethargy" caused by poison (1880, p.119). We should also note that, in West's edition of the *Bahman Yasht*, the heroes Ferēdun and Keresāsp seem to be conceived as the same. It is not uncommon for a mythical character to have more than one name in Zoroastrian sources.

28 *Iliad*, 8.357-369; *Odyssey*, 11.620-626.

29 *Theogony*, 767-773. Translation by the author.

Taking this account, it is clear that Cerberus performs a cosmological role, being the mythical separation between the world of the dead and that of the living. We can go further and consider this myth as an explanation to why the dead cannot come back to life, while the other way around is possible.<sup>30</sup> Another account in the *Theogony* portrays Cerberus as a fifty-headed hound with a bronze voice (*khalkeóphonon*), and this same account presents the hellhound's genealogy: Hesiod states that the monsters Echidna and Typhon had Orthros (another hound), Cerberus and Hydra (a multi-headed dragon) as their offspring, respectively.<sup>31</sup> These Homeric and Hesiodic accounts are the oldest we have in Greek written tradition, both conventionally dating in the eighth century BCE.<sup>32</sup> The emblematic description of Cerberus as a three-headed dog was conceived in Greek texts only later in *Herakles*, a tragedy by Euripides dated in the fifth century BCE, where he is described as *trisómaton* and *tríkranon*, “three-bodied” and “three-headed” respectively.<sup>33</sup> In that same tragedy, Orthros is also described as *amphíkranon*, “two-headed”.<sup>34</sup> Most Greek

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30 See Segal (2004, p. 14) and the conception of myth as “primitive science”, when regarding myth's explanative function of the physical world.

31 *Theogony*, 306-312. Traditionally, Orthros' name is taken as meaning “twilight”, see Max Müller, 1882, p. 182.

32 There was also a poem by Stesichorus called *Kérberos*, from which we have only the title and a small fragment, which makes it inappropriate for our comparative analysis.

33 *Herakles*, 24-25; 1277.

34 *Ib.*, 1274.

textual sources do not convey a specific number for Cerberus' heads. It was only around the first century BCE that the hellhound was sort of "canonized" like this by Roman poets interested in Greek works.<sup>35</sup> Their version of Cerberus, with three heads, snakes coming out of his back and a dragon tail is also present in later Greek tradition, particularly in the *Library*, attributed to Apollodorus. It seems that the *Library* summarizes and selects everything that was known about these myths at the time it was written, creating some kind of Pan-Hellenic "canon"<sup>36</sup> — which makes it have the most complete narrative we have concerning the hellhounds. Take a look at its description of the fetching of Cerberus:

"A twelfth labour imposed on Hercules was to bring Cerberus from Hades. Now this Cerberus had three heads of dogs, the tail of a dragon, and on his back the heads of all sorts of snakes. When Hercules was about to depart to fetch him, he went to Eumolpus at Eleusis, wishing to be initiated. However it was not then lawful for foreigners to be initiated: since he proposed to be initiated as the adoptive son of Pylius. But not being able to see the mysteries because he had not been cleansed of the slaughter of the centaurs, he was cleansed by Eumolpus and then initiated. ...When Hercules asked Pluto for Cerberus, Pluto ordered him to take the animal provided he mastered him without the use of the weapons which he carried. Hercules

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35 Some examples of accounts on Cerberus in Latin poetry are in works by Virgil, (*Aeneid*, 6.384; 6.417; 8.280), Horace, (*Carmina*, 2.19; 3.11) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 4.416; 7.404; 9.172).

36 Dowden, 1992, p.12.

found him at the gates of Acheron, and, cased in his cuirass and covered by the lion's skin, he flung his arms round the head of the brute, and though the dragon in its tail bit him, he never relaxed his grip and pressure till it yielded. So he carried it off and ascended through Troezen. But Demeter turned Ascalaphus into a short-eared owl, and Hercules, after showing Cerberus to Eurystheus, carried him back to Hades.”<sup>37</sup>

This account provides a more detailed narrative on Herakles' arrival to the underworld. The hero needs to be initiated to descend to Hades; in order to do that, he had to be cleansed from his previous deeds. Once in the underworld, its ruler requires him to overpower Cerberus without any weapons. According to Diodorus Siculus' account, Cerberus had to be chained.<sup>38</sup> Concerning Orthros, Cerberus's brother, the tenth work of Herakles is also well attested in the *Library*, as shown below:

“As a tenth labour he was ordered to fetch the kine of Geryon from Erythia. Now Erythia was an island near the ocean; it is now called Gadir. This island was inhabited by Geryon, son of Chrysaor by Callirrhoe, daughter of Ocean. He had the body of three men grown together and joined in one at the waist, but parted in three from the flanks and thighs. He owned red kine, of which Eurytion was the herdsman and Orthus, the two-headed hound, begotten by Typhon on Echidna, was the watch-dog. ... And having reached Erythia he lodged on Mount Abas. However the dog, perceiving him, rushed at him; but he

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37 *Library*, 2.5.12. Translations of the *Library* always by Frazer.

38 *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.26.1.

smote it with his club, and when the herdsman Eurytion came to the help of the dog, Hercules killed him also. But Menoetes, who was there pasturing the kine of Hades, reported to Geryon what had occurred, and he, coming up with Hercules beside the river Anthemus, as he was driving away the kine, joined battle with him and was shot dead.”<sup>39</sup>

It is quite accepted that this narrative is conceived in a similar way to others that portray a journey to the underworld, since the chthonic symbolism and narrative structure are very similar to that of the twelfth labor in which Herakles kidnaps Cerberus.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Geryon is also described as *trisómaton* in Euripides’ *Herakles*<sup>41</sup> and might also be linguistically related to *Kérberos*<sup>42</sup>, which suggests they might have been the same character in previous versions of this myth. Even though it seems that Cerberus and Orthros are expressions of the same IE concept displayed by Yama’s hounds as a pair of watchdogs of the underworld, the narratives and vocabulary used to describe them are quite different and might not be enough to conceive an Indo-European origin, so far.

What quite literally changes the picture in this discussion is the iconographic portrayal of Cerberus. According to Bonaudo in her study of the Caeretan *hydría*, “in every Attic image,

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39 *Ib.*, 2.5.10.

40 As discussed by Ragusa (2025, p.219) and previously by Burkert (1973, p.274-280).

41 *Herakles*, 419-424.

42 Lincoln (1991, p.99-100) states that both might come from the same IE roots *\*ger* or *\*ker*.

which constitute the majority of representations on that subject, Cerberus has two heads”, and there are also representations of him with only one head.<sup>43</sup> Take a look at the following example<sup>44</sup>:



“Amphore d'Andokidès”, displayed at Musée du Louvre.<sup>45</sup>

Credits: Wikimedia Commons / Bibi Saint-Pol; public domain.

In this amphora, which is assigned to Andokides, we can recognize that it is Cerberus and not Orthros because of the

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43 Bonaudo, 2004, p. 139.

44 Other examples are in *LIMC* VI, Kerberos 11-24; as noticed by Bonaudo (2004, p.139, footnote).

45 LP 1265 ; N 3396 ; F 204. Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines. It dates in the last quarter of the sixth century BCE and created in Athens, according to the museum's online entry; accessed on 05/02/2026 and available at: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010269614>.

serpents over his heads and his ophidian tail. This older and possibly previously more disseminated version of Cerberus sets him and Orthros very close to the Rigvedic description of Yama's hounds as *caturakṣau* ("four-eyed"), since the two-headed hound consequently has four eyes.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that the Greek hellhounds were protectors either of Hades' kine or of the underworld itself together in the past – perhaps in different versions of the same myth. Cerberus also had three-headed images like the following, which is assigned to the Eagle painter:



*"Héraclès et Cerbère", displayed at Musée du Louvre.*<sup>47</sup>

Credits: Wikimedia Commons / Bibi Saint-Pol; public domain.

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46 The Sanskrit text was checked in the *Internet Sacred Texts Archive* webpage, accessed on 05/02/2026 and available at <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv10014.htm>

47 Cp 66 ; E 701. Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines. It also dates in the last quarter of the sixth century BCE and was created in Caere (Italy), also according to the museum's online entry; accessed on 05/02/2026 and available at <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010268296>.

Even though both versions of Cerberus were disseminated around the same time, Bonaudo states that “the diffusion of the three-headed iconographic type allows to assign a circulation area of an iconographic tradition that includes the Peloponnese and Eastern Greece and arrives in Etruria and the Tirrenic coast of meridional Italy”, which occurred at the same time as the diffusion of Attic ceramic that depicted Cerberus with two heads.<sup>48</sup> That would explain why in Hesiod’s model Cerberus is not three-headed, since the poet might have grown in Boeotia<sup>49</sup> — which is closer to the Attic region — before the dissemination of that version of the hellhound. Even though Euripides’ youth apparently was spent in Athens, the tragic poet might have emigrated to Magnesia in Asia Minor for some time<sup>50</sup>, after which he might have conceived his three-headed version of Cerberus available in *Herakles*. It seems that this version became more popular from the fifth century onwards — perhaps because of its introduction in tragedy by Euripides. If one considers the Greek hellhounds and its Indo-European counterparts, it is evident that Cerberus was conceived as two-headed before it became a prominent character in written sources. However, in the iconography where he is portrayed with two heads, he is never accompanied by Orthros; so even if there is the

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48 Bonaudo, 2004, p.139.

49 Most, 2006, p.xii.

50 Lefkowitz, 2012, p.91.

possibility of a version in which Cerberus is two-headed, it seems that his narrative was set apart from his brother even before three heads were assigned to the hellhound. One way or another, it is clear that such depiction might reflect a version of the Greek hellhound that is more closely related to the Rigvedic one and points towards an IE version of the myth. As we could see in Cerberus' iconography, the hellhound was assigned as one of Herakles' works before it got his three-headed depiction. Since the protagonist of these stories is the hero, not the hellhounds, Herakles became the referential point to organize these narratives; that might be the reason why both stories became Herakles' labors and their eschatological value became secondary, as well as why the Greeks did not preserve two hellhounds guarding either the underworld or Erythia in the first place.

Celtic narratives in Old Irish also present stories that can be related to the hellhound myth, even though they do not mention an "underworld" necessarily. If one considers that Ireland's conversion might have started in the fifth century CE<sup>51</sup>, it is clear that this might happen because pagan eschatology was replaced by the Christian one. Nonetheless, the hellhound myth seems to have been preserved in Irish sources, even if in a residuous state. The *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair* (or "The Death of Celtchar son of Uthechair") portrays the hero Celtchar dealing with three pests in Ulster,

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51 See Wickham (2019, p. 246) and McCone (1990, p. 71).

the first of them being the almost “invulnerable”<sup>52</sup> warrior called Conganchnes mac Dedad, who was then beheaded by the hero Celtchar.<sup>53</sup> The second was a dog called Luch Donn (or “Dun Mouse”). It was raised by a widow, but became aggressive and devastated her property; killing her sheep, kine, her son and herself. Then it attacked homesteads in Ulster every night, and finally Conchobar<sup>54</sup> asked for his help: “Every night it would devastate a *liss* in Ulster, and every day it lay asleep. ‘Free us from it, Celtchar!’ said Conchobar. And Celtchar went into a wood and brought out a log of alder; and a hole was dug in it as long as his arms, and he boiled it in fragrant herbs and in honey and in grease until it was soft and tough. Celtchar went towards the cave in which the Dun Mouse used to sleep, and he enters the cave early before the Dun Mouse came after the slaughter. It came, and its snout raised high in the air at the smell of the wood. And Celtchar pushes the wood out through the cave towards it. The hound takes it in his jaws, and puts his teeth into it, and the teeth clave in the tough wood. Celtchar pulls the wood towards him; and the hound pulls at the other side; and Celtchar puts his arm along the log (inside) and took its heart out through its jaws so that he had it in his hands. And he took his head with him.”<sup>55</sup>

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52 As described by McCone (1984, p. 1).

53 *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair*, 7-9. Ulster is an area in northern Ireland.

54 Another Irish hero.

55 *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair*, 10. Translations of this text are always by Meyer.

We can see some kind of residuous *katábasis* narrative in this story, since Celtchar has to go into a cave where the dog sleeps. According to B. Sergent, the stories of Celtchar and of the Greek hero Kephalos seem to be structured as if they were related to the trajectory of the sun: thus, Luch Donn and the Teumessean Fox would be quite compatible between Greeks and Celts.<sup>56</sup> If those stories have a common origin, it would be fair to stretch that a mouse could have been seen as some sort of “minor canid” as much as the fox; however, on the Irish side, the Teumessean Fox story might have been associated to those of hellhounds — which could have originated Luch Donn’s odd name.

The third pest was found in the cairn where the head of Conganchnes mac Dedad, the first “pest”, was buried. Cowherds heard a strange cry coming from it and unburied three puppies; one was dun, the other had small spots and the third was black.<sup>57</sup> Once again, the dogs were not only in the underground, but in a grave — reinforcing the idea that Irish mythic dogs show signs of chthonicism. Each of the dogs was

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56 Sergent, 1988, p. 273.

57 Note that the distinction of the dogs’ colors quite remind those on the Caeretean *hydría* used to depict Cerberus, where each head has a different color; white, brown and black. I could not find any plausible explanation for that, so this should be taken as a coincidence so far. However, it is rather strange that Cerberus was depicted like that in Italy, whereas most of its iconography where three heads are drawn they all receive the same color.

adopted, and the black one was adopted by Celtchar himself. However, Celtchar's black dog eventually became a problem:

"It let no man take hold of it save Celtchar. Once upon a time Celtchar was not at home, and the hound was let out, and the people of his household could not catch it; and it turned among the cattle and the flocks, and at last it would destroy a living creature every night in Ulster. 'Free us from that pest, Celtchar!' said Conchobar. Celtchar went towards the glen in which the hound was, and a hundred warriors with him, and three times he calls the hound until they saw it coming towards them, making straight for Celtchar until it was licking his feet. 'It is sad, indeed, what the hound does,' said all. 'I will no longer be incriminated for thy sake!' said Celtchar, giving it a blow with the *lúin* of Celtchar, so that he brought out its heart, whereupon it died. 'Woe!' cried everybody. 'Tis true', said he, as he raised the spear, when a drop of the hound's blood ran along the spear and went through him to the ground, so that he died of it. And his lament was set up and his stone and tomb were raised there."<sup>58</sup>

We can see that these accounts have common elements that relate them to oral tradition, like the repeatedly used phrase "free us from that pest, Celtchar!". How both Luch Donn and the black dog die, with their hearts being brought out from their bodies by Celtchar, might suggest that both stories could be different versions of the same narrative. What is quite intriguing is how Celtchar finally dies; after his black dog is

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58 *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair*, 12.

dead, its blood drips onto the hero and kills him. Did this happen because the dog's blood was magic, poisonous or something else? Sergeant noticed that another account on the Celtic side provides poison made of mixed blood of dogs, cats and druids<sup>59</sup>, which highlights the second possibility. We will see more evidence for that further.

Schlerath also noticed that a tale from Brittany — which was registered by Le Braz — quite encompasses the IE concept of hellhounds.<sup>60</sup> According to the tale, a maiden was being persecuted by two dogs that wanted to devour her. One was black and the other was white. After she reaches a crucifix, the black dog disappears and the white one remains, licking and healing her wounds.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps, the three dogs from Celtchar's story might be related to that, but a tale with the same origin as the Teumessean Fox — that of the “dun mouse” — made its way into the same collection of stories as a “minor canid” became more similar to hellhounds conceptually.

The Irish epic called *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (or “the Cattle Raid of Cooley”) tells that Conchobor<sup>62</sup> was invited to a feast by Culann and brought Sétanta along with him and his men. But he forgot to tell Culann about bringing the boy among his companions and Culann's watchdog attacked Sétanta, who smashed the hound's head against a pillar with his bare hands. Culann's watchdog is described as incredibly ferocious: “Three

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59 Sergeant, 1988, p. 269.

60 Schlerath, 1954, p. 29.

61 Le Braz, 1923, XX, p. 107-110.

62 Probably the same as “Conchobar” in *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair*.

chains are needed to hold him, with three men on each chain. Let him loose... to guard our cattle and other stock". After killing Culann's dog, Sétanta had to repair his deeds and becomes a "watchdog" himself, thus becoming Cú Chulainn — "The Dog of Culann" — at the age of six.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* tells a story protagonized by Cú Chulainn. The queen Medb of Connacht was jealous of the vigorous white bull of Ailil, her husband. So she waged war against Ulster to capture the brown bull of Cooley. The hero had to defend Ulster on its own, since its whole army was suffering from labor pain because of a curse. After long and exhausting battles fought by the hero, the army of Ulster regains its forces; but the army of Connacht manages to fetch the bull. Medb takes it to fight her husband's white bull, which is defeated by the brown one.

This Irish hero, therefore, is quite similar to Greek Herakles in many aspects, and we can begin with this so-called "cattle-raid", in which a "dog" fails to defend the kine from its stealer — quite similar to Herakles' tenth labor. There are also similarities in their births: even though the pagan aspect of such stories seems to be quite lost, Sétanta was conceived by the insemination of a virgin and his father is the god Lug<sup>64</sup> —

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63 *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, translation by Kinsella (1969, p. 83-84).

64 As seen in the *remscéla* "How Cú Chulainn was Begotten" (Kinsella, 1969, p.23) and in the ninth chapter of the *Táin* as well, where Lug chants in poetic form that Cú Chulainn is his son (p.143). Lug is one of the prominent gods of Irish culture, related to magic and to artisan skills and his name might mean "light" (see MacKillop, 1998, p. 270-271).

which can remind us of the conception of Jesus Christ, but can also be analogous to Herakles as the result of the relationship of Zeus with a mortal woman. The first can be regarded reasonably if one considers that Ireland had already been christianized by the time that the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* was first written.<sup>65</sup> This does not mean that the latter should be discarded, on the contrary. If we are regarding this account as a christianized version of a pagan myth, it is not impossible that a pagan counterpart is shaped in a similar way to that of a pre-conversion story.

Nonetheless, even if the narratives of the “cattle-raid” and of Sétanta’s birth are not enough to conceive this, we can also consider that what the young boy goes through to become Cú Chulainn also finds parallels with the Greek hero. As observed by McCone, as much as Sétanta becomes Cú Chulainn to atone for his deeds against Culann, Herakles is submitted to twelve labors by Euristeus in atonement for killing his family in a frenzy provoked by Hera.<sup>66</sup> According to him, “the tale in which he slays the hound marks a watershed in Cú Chulainn’s career”<sup>67</sup>, which definitely matches the fact that Herakles was

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65 The oldest manuscripts available are from the eleventh or twelfth centuries, while Ireland’s conversion might have been around the fifth century EC (McCone, 1990, p. 71). That does not eliminate the dissemination of this story orally and its pre-Christian roots are quite evident.

66 McCone, 1984 p. 24. This narrative of Herakles is found in Apollodorus’ *Library* (2.4.12).

67 *Ib.*, p.11.

called Alcides before killing his family and starting his career as a hero for Hera's sake.<sup>68</sup> Ancient authors even recognized that Herakles' name was in honor to the goddess<sup>69</sup>, and this atonement seems to be a central theme to both heroes. Perhaps that same meaning is preserved when the Greek hero fetches Cerberus: his works are done and he earns back his honor as son of Zeus — thus becoming immortal and then living in Olympus with the other gods, as some ancient works like to portray. Although we cannot conceive necessarily proper Indo-European features in this “atonement” motif so far, we can agree with McCone's conclusion that “some hints on the Greek side may point to an older tradition closer to the Irish one than appears at first sight” when it comes to accounts posterior to Ireland's conversion.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, what we might conclude concerning the Irish sources we have seen is that it seems that these narratives, unlike others that portray supernatural beings quite openly, rather only conceive “ordinary” beings with supernatural features. This is likely how Irish writers preferred to portray their pagan cultural references to escape censorship after the conversion of Ireland. If we conceive these stories this way, it is not impossible that Cullan's dog had three heads, as he needed three chains and three men to hold him, but was reduced to an “ordinary” dog to be accepted as a secular story

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68 *Library* (2.4.12).

69 Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.10.1.

70 McCone, 1984, p. 25.

instead of being read as a pagan myth. Perhaps we can follow the same line of argument when conceiving the three dogs that came out of the cairn, since only one of them became relevant in Celtchar's narrative. Still, it is soon to conceive those as IE features, since most of our sources point to a pair of dogs so far and our clearest connection to another culture is restricted to Greek accounts.

At last, we have at our disposal accounts in Old Norse concerning the hellhound myth. Lincoln states that "Germanic sources are good for the hellhound problem because they have a lot of mentions to it"<sup>71</sup>, to which I agree to a certain extent. Like in the previous traditions, in Norse mythology we also have dogs that protect the passage to the underworld. However, we might find some trouble when covering these accounts; they do not seem to present a cohesive take on hellhounds, especially when it comes to their names or whether they are dogs or wolves. There is no character that seems to convey the hellhound concept exclusively, but rather multiple characters and accounts that portray this myth quite diversely, if not independently. This is quite expected in a series of poems that is understood as the compilation of an ancient oral tradition.

Concerning the nature of these sources, most of them were conceived quite close to the period of the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity. However, although attempts of conversion of this region are attested at least back to the ninth

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71 Lincoln, 1991, p. 97.

century, the general adherence to the new faith was not imposed by baptized kings and it is hard to track mass conversion to Christianity until the end of the tenth century in Denmark and even later in Sweden and Norway.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, there is a lot of debate on the quality of the poetic and prose *Eddas* when it comes to pagan Norse mythology, especially towards the latter. Since both rose after the diffusion of Christianity in the north, the knowledge of their authors on the old faith is up to debate. The *Prose Edda* in particular is known to be written by a Christian author, Snorri Sturluson, who shares some of his views and even compares Christian and Classical narratives to Norse myths in his *Prologue*.

Concerning the hellhound myth, one of the most evident cases might be the unnamed watchdog in *Baldrs draumar*.<sup>73</sup> In this poem, the god Odin travels to Hel, the underworld of Norse folklore and also the name of its ruling goddess. When reaching its entrance, Odin faces a *hvelpi* (or “whelp”) that has a bloody chest and bays loudly at the god, who swiftly rides his eight-legged horse Sleipnir to run past the watchdog. Some scholars have taken that hound to be Garmr, which is mentioned in the *Grímnismál* as the best of hounds, as much as Odin is the best of Gods.<sup>74</sup> Garmr is also found in the *Völuspá* as a warning to Ragnarök, the end of the world in Norse culture (which translates to “the doom of the gods”). The prophecy in

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72 Wickham, 2019, p. 637-638.

73 Stanzas 2-3.

74 *Grímnismál*, stanza 45.

this poem says that “Garmr howls loudly at Gnipahellir” (or “Gnipa cave”) and that the *freki* – which means something like “greedy” or maybe “predator” and is a common adjective for hounds or wolves in Old Norse – will be free from its bounds.<sup>75</sup> Even though *Garmr* is mentioned as a proper name for the mythic hound in the *Grímnismál* (along with other mythic characters and their respective names), Lincoln recognized that this word can be used for dogs in general, pointing out such meaning in the use of the term *garma* in the poem *Fjölsvinnsmál* – in which two dogs guard a castle, one by day and the other by night, which are called *Geri* and *Gíf*.<sup>76</sup> Some scholars conceive that *Garmr* in the *Völuspá* is actually *Fenrir*, a prominent mythic wolf in Old Norse texts.<sup>77</sup> This finds some cohesion when the earlier *Poetic Edda* is compared to Sturluson’s later *Prose Edda*, where *Fenrir* is said to have been bound by the gods after biting off the hand of the god *Týr*. Then, in the events of the *Ragnarök*, “*Fenriswolf* will get free”.<sup>78</sup>

However, this is not enough to conceive *Fenrir* as the same character as *Garmr*, or even to conceive *Garmr* as the dog of

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75 *Völuspá*, stanzas 43, 47, and 56. All translations from the *Poetic Edda* are from Pettit.

76 Lincoln, 1991, p. 97; *Fjölsvinnsmál*, stanzas 13-16.

77 See Crawford (2015, p. 11), who translates *Garmr* to *Fenrir* in the *Völuspá*; also Simek (1993, p.80), who considers *Fenrir*, *Garmr*, *Skoll* and *Hati* to be all the same character and that “the various names go back to Snorri’s over-zealous attempts to systematize.”

78 *Gylfaginning*, 25; 51. Translations of the *Prose Edda* are always by Faulkes.

*Baldrs draumar* in contrast with Fenrir being the *freki* of the *Völuspá*. The poem *Fjölsvinnsmál* was compiled in the *Poetic Edda* much later than the *Völuspá* and *Grímnismöl*; the first survives only in manuscripts from the seventeenth century while the others date around the eleventh century or before.<sup>79</sup> It is not impossible that the proper name for the mythic hound became a general word for mythic dogs in Scandinavia, in what seems to be an old pagan tale that got a new shape when retold by converted Christians. Its addition to the Eddic corpus, nonetheless, suggests that this tale is originally pagan and was understood to belong to a compilation where other similar texts could be found. Maybe both hounds of *Fjölsvinnsmál* were associated with the hellhound Garmr and became *garmar*, perhaps in the same sense that Bloomfield called hellhounds in Indo-European cultures *cerberi* as a general term for mythic characters that resembled Cerberus.<sup>80</sup> There were no other occasions of the usage in this general meaning of the word *garmr* found in texts contemporary to the *Eddas*<sup>81</sup> — except, perhaps, when Sturluson names the mythic wolf Hati as *Mánagarmr*<sup>82</sup>, which we will elaborate further.

Another account in the *Grímnismöl* states that there is also a wolf at the doors of *Valhöll*; another destiny for the deceased

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79 See Pettit, 2023, p. 31; p. 165; p. 831.

80 Bloomfield, 1905, p. 14 onwards.

81 This was checked on the *Poetic Edda* and in other texts in Old Norse using *Perseus Digital Library*'s general search tool. A more careful search for the term *garmr* in the sources might prove the opposite.

82 *Gylfaginning*, 12.

in Norse lore, where the slain warriors chosen by Odin stay.<sup>83</sup> This afterlife is not conceived underground like Hel, but rather in the skies, among the Æsir — the heavenly gods of Norse culture, so to speak. This same poem mentions the name *Þjóðvitnir*<sup>84</sup>, which can be assigned to that wolf. In addition, it mentions the gate called *Valgrind* and that “eight hundred unique champions walk from one door, when they go to fight the wolf.”<sup>85</sup> This could be a reference to the events of the Ragnarök: according to the *Gylfaginning*, it is predicted that Odin will fight Fenrir in the end of the world, which explains why the god is forming an army of chosen deceased warriors. This account also mentions the combat between Týr and Garmr, “which is bound in front of Gnipahellir”, exactly as seen before in the *Völuspá*.<sup>86</sup>

In Norse myth, we also have a monster genealogy like in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in which Loki’s offspring with the giantess Angrboda are Fenrir, the underworld ruler Hel and the serpent Jörmungand (or *Miðgarðsormr*, “Midgard serpent”) — the latter, as accounted in *Gylfaginning*, is thrown by Odin to the seas, “and this serpent grew so that it lies in the midst of the ocean encircling all lands and bites on its own tail.”<sup>87</sup> We should note

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83 *Grímnismöl*, 8-10.

84 *Ib.*, stanza 21. According to Miranda (2014, p.312), this is another name for Fenrir and means “Great Wolf” or “People’s Wolf”, which might be a little obscure except for the term *vitnir*, “wolf”.

85 *Ib.*, 22-24.

86 *Gylfaginning*, 51.

87 *Gylfaginning*, 34.

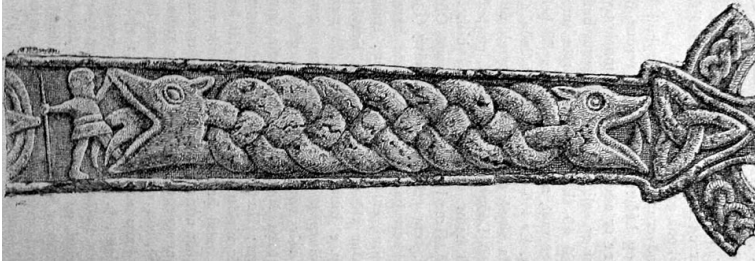
that this is quite similar to Hesiod's genealogy of Cerberus, and we can establish not only direct correspondence between Jörmungand and Hydra, but also interchangeable correspondence between Orthro/Cerberus and Fenrir/Hel. We should not disregard, however, that Sturluson was familiar with Classical mythology (as evidently displayed in the *Prologue* of his *Edda*), so it would require further examination to identify this correspondence as an IE element or rather a Greek element incorporated by Sturluson in an attempt of organizing Norse myth. But it should be noted that this genealogical motif seems to be expressed in the *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair* as well, when the hero finds the three dogs where Conganchnes' head had been buried.

Moreover, Cerberus is not the only hellhound who is associated with serpents or dragons. As noted by Langer, the Gosforth Cross in England portrays cynocephalic serpents fighting a warrior with a spear. One of the depictions seems to conceive a two-headed monster, whilst in another two similar monsters seem to engage in combat with a warrior. Apparently, these images portray the gods Vithar and Heimdall in the events of the Ragnarök.<sup>88</sup> Apart from that, this iconography has no clear parallels with written tradition, but perhaps it is relating Fenrir to Jörmungand or at least

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88 Langer, 2018, p.5-6. Heimdallr is the bridgekeeper of Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that leads to Asgard; Vithar is supposed to avenge his father Odin after he dies in his fight with Fenrir in the Ragnarök (*Gylfaginning*, 25; 51).

depicting one of the Germanic hellhounds with draconic traits, much like Cerberus.



Gosforth Cross, England, 10th century.

Credits: Finnur Jónsson (1913) / Wikimedia Commons



Gosforth Cross, England, 10th century.

Credits: Finnur Jónsson (1913) / Wikimedia Commons<sup>89</sup>

What is quite interesting about the Gosforth Cross is that it portrays two monsters and a two-headed monster. Even if we

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89 Both images are in public domain and were accessed on 06/02/2026; available at the Wikimedia Commons:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gosforth\\_Cross\\_V%C3%AD%C3%B0a\\_rr.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gosforth_Cross_V%C3%AD%C3%B0a_rr.jpg) and  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gosforth\\_Cross\\_monsters.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gosforth_Cross_monsters.jpg)

consider its shape as the result of the contact between Scandinavian settlers<sup>90</sup> with Christian and maybe Classical culture, this is unlikely to come from that older conception of Cerberus, and might also be as unlikely to come from Orthros, since this character was definitely less relevant in Classical culture than his younger brother and did not have the same draconic traits. Moreover, Fenrir is not depicted as a dog with serpents around his neck or a draconic tail like Cerberus; he rather looks like a wolf-headed serpent. Cerberus and Fenrir ended up in quite different shapes; which may suggest that this feature was already conceived in Germanic culture independently of any contact with Classical mythology.

What we can extract from Old Norse accounts is that, in Norse mythology, the dogs or wolves were organized in pairs, not so differently from Vedic, Greek and perhaps Iranian cosmologies. However, this feature is expressed not only by Garmr and Fenrir, but through multiple other mythic canids. Examples are Geri and Freki in the *Grímnismól*, Geri and Gíf in the *Fjolsvinnsámál*, and especially Skoll and Hati (or *Mánagarmr*) — sons of Fenrir, the wolves that chase the sun and the moon and will devour them in the Ragnarök — in the *Gylfaginning*.<sup>91</sup> The eschatological meaning of some of these myths, therefore, are also a core element of Norse cosmology and might reflect aspects of Indo-European culture, as we will see further.<sup>92</sup>

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90 See Doviak, 2021, p. 1.

91 *Grímnismól*, 19; *Fjolsvinnsámál*, 13-14; *Gylfaginning*, 12; 51.

92 Langer (2018, p.7; 2012, p.1-30) postulates that the emphasizing of eschatological matters in Norse myth might actually be a reflex of the

The shape of the IE hellhound myth that we have discovered so far contains the hounds in pairs who guard the entrance to the underworld (except in Zoroastrianism, where the Kinvad bridge leads to heaven), but sometimes in a trio of monstrous siblings. It seems that the “four-eyed” description, more evident in Vedic sources, also survived in Greek and Norse cultures. Another fairly displayed feature are the heroes or gods (in heroic acts) involved with the hellhound. In Greek mythology, this relationship is very evident: Orthros is killed by Herakles with his club, along with his master Geryon.<sup>93</sup> Cerberus is not killed by Herakles (probably because of its role in Greek cosmology), but is still an enemy that needs to be overcome by the hero. This also finds parallels with Odin overcoming Garmr with his horse’s speed in *Baldurs draumar*, or with the apocalyptic events of Ragnarök, where Odin is killed by Fenrir and Týr is killed by Garmr. Irish accounts are not different in that matter when it comes to the narratives of Cú Chulainn and Celtchar. However, this does not manifest in hellhounds when it comes to Indo-Iranian traditions. But if we take into account stories that portray heroes who are identified as “dragon-slayers”, we can identify similar traits to those of Greek and Norse hellhound myths. Ogden classifies Herakles as such, and includes his fetching of Cerberus in this category due to its draconic traits —

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contact of Norse peoples with Christianity. However, even if that is the case, its IE elements should not be disregarded and the antiquity of Ragnarök has been recognized by the author in a posterior study (2018, p. 6-7)

93 How Geryon is killed finds some variation, but it is mostly with a dart.

like the serpents on his back or his genealogy.<sup>94</sup> In fact, dogs probably had been associated with chthonic forces in all of ancient Greek history, not only by Cerberus' connection with the underworld.<sup>95</sup> This has been recognized by many authors and is expressed in a variety of accounts. Although dogs are not always assigned as chthonic<sup>96</sup>, some passages show this direct association with dragons or serpents, like Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, in which the goddess Hekate is accompanied by her *chthonioi kynes* ("hell hounds") and serpents<sup>97</sup>, or like the following passage from Pausanias:

"Homer, who was the first to call the creature brought by Heracles the hound of Hades, did not give it a name or describe it as of manifold form, as he did in the case of the Chimaera. Later poets gave the name Cerberus, and though in other respects they made him resemble a dog, they say that he had three heads. Homer, however, does not imply that he

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94 Ogden, 2013, p. 63-64.

95 See Mazzorin and Minniti (2006, pp.62-63); Franco (2014, p.116) and Dias and Borges (2020, p.57-60). There is plenty of Greek accounts on that, which convey dogs connected to the chthonic goddess Hekate (*Orphic Hymns*, 1.2-5; *Argonautica*, 3.1211-1217; *Idyllia*, 2.11-13; 2.33-36; *Quaestiones Romanae*. 52, 277B) or general and nameless "dogs of Hades" that do not perform the same role as Cerberus or Orthros (*Frogs*, 472; *Argonautica*, 4.1665-1667).

96 As some evidences show, like the cosmogonical view of dogs being created by Apollo and Artemis in *Cynegeticus* (1.1), Pausanias' description of a statue of the latter accompanied by a dog (*Description of Greece*, 10.37.1) or even the ritual sacrifice of dogs for the war god Enyalios (*Quaest. Rom.* 111, 290D; *Description of Greece*, 3.14.9-10).

97 *Argonautica*, 3.1211-1217.

was a dog, the friend of man, any more than if he had called a real serpent [*drákonta*] the hound of Hades.”<sup>98</sup>

As we can see, this extract from the *Description of Greece* relates Cerberus directly with serpents — therefore, it is not just about the serpent heads on its back or its dragon tail, but rather about a deeper symbolic association that Greeks generally had that put dogs, serpents and other chthonic symbols in a quite interchangeable spectrum.<sup>99</sup> This has also been addressed by scholars for the past centuries, as in Gheyn’s proposal that the hellhound’s original form was that of a gigantic serpent<sup>100</sup> — and this also seems to appear in Norse culture, manifested in the Gosforth Cross. As we could see, the argument that this had been borrowed from Classical culture is not free of inconsistencies; and Indo-Iranian accounts, on the other hand, set hellhounds and the fight between dragon-slayers and serpents completely apart. Therefore, if we want to be precise on how the mythic heroes overlap with hellhounds — thus becoming an essential component of these stories —, we might need to address other aspects of such heroes.

### Accounts on IE heroes and antagonistic dragons

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98 *Description of Greece*, 3.25.6. Translation by Jones and Ormerod.

99 It should be noted that this varies with location and time; therefore, this general association should not be taken as a rule and such symbolic associations are very complex and have many exceptions.

100 Gheyn, 1883, p. 17.

There is a high number of stories that portray dragon-slaying heroes in IE cultures; and as we will see, in some traditions dragons perform the roles that hellhounds portray in others. Nonetheless, only those which were considered fitting for solving the hellhound problem were selected to be discussed here.

Perhaps the story that can set the mood for this discussion is found in another IE branch that has not been considered so far. That would be the Anatolian one — the first to split from PIE — and a valuable account is found in Hittite mythology: the slaying of the dragon called Illuyanka, which is a synonym for “snake”.<sup>101</sup> According to the legend, the storm god Nerik was defeated by the serpent in the town of Kiškilišša. After that, he summoned all the gods, saying that the goddess Inara<sup>102</sup> had prepared a feast. Then, she invited Illuyanka from his hole, who came with his children and drank the beverage prepared by her. They could not return to their hole, so a mortal who had slept with Inara (presumably in exchange for this favor) tied them with a cord. After that, the storm god came back and slew the serpent in the company of the other gods. When Nerik was defeated by the serpent, his eye and his heart were stolen by Illuyanka. Nerik had a son who married Illuyanka’s daughter, so the storm god asked him to recover his organs. Once he had both, he went to the sea and battled

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<sup>101</sup> Beckman, 1982, p.11.

<sup>102</sup> Hoffner describes her as the daughter of the Storm God and “a goddess of the wild animals of the steppe land” (1998, p. 11).

Illuyanka again. Nerik's son asked him to show no mercy to him as well (possibly because he was ashamed for betraying his wife's father), so the storm god killed both of them.<sup>103</sup>

Here we have a prelude to other dragon-slayer stories that we might see in other IE branches. This account portrays a storm god who is first defeated, but once the dragon is bound, he slays the serpent. However, it seems that the serpent comes back or that we have another version of its slaying, where Nerik goes to the sea to kill Illuyanka.

Another of the oldest dragon-slayer myths might be protagonized by Indra and antagonized by the serpent Vṛtra. As summarized by Jamison<sup>104</sup>, "Vṛtra was a gigantic cobra, who was coiled around a mountain that enclosed the waters. In order for life to exist Vṛtra had to be destroyed". According to her, the most complete account on Indra's slaying of the serpent is portrayed in *Rigveda*, as shown below:

"Now I shall proclaim the heroic deeds of Indra, those foremost deeds that the mace-wielder performed: He smashed the serpent. He bored out the waters. He split the bellies of the mountains. He smashed the serpent resting on the mountain—for him Tvaṣṭar had fashioned the resounding sunlike mace. ... When you, Indra, smashed the first-born of serpents and then beguiled the wiles of the wily ones, then,

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103 Story summarized from the reading of Beckman's edition and translation of the original text (1982, p. 18-20)

104 2020, p. 69.

giving birth to the sun, the heaven, and the dawn, since that time you have surely never found a rival.”<sup>105</sup>

So far, it is hard to associate that with Yama’s hounds (or any other). But the *Rigveda* also portrays another myth through its extension which portrays Indra’s rescue of a cattle, perhaps similarly to Herakles’ tenth work and the cattle-raid portrayed in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. It does not seem to have one account that tells this story in its entirety, but it was summarized by Brereton and Jamison as such:

“The Paṇis have entrapped cattle in a cave. Indra and the ancient Vedic seers wish to release the cattle. Therefore, Indra sends his dog Saramā to track down the Paṇis and to demand the release of the cattle. She crosses the Rasā, the river at the border of the world that separates heaven and earth, and finds the Paṇis. The Paṇis refuse to surrender the cattle, however, and at the end Indra and the seers—the Aṅgirasas and Navagvas—themselves come to the place where the Paṇis have hidden the cattle. They break open the cave through the power of the hymns they compose and chant.”<sup>106</sup>

Although this story does not portray neither dragons or Yama’s hounds, there seems to be another version related to it in another account of the *Rigveda*, which includes the slaying of the dragon Vṛtra:

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<sup>105</sup> *Rigveda*, 1.32.1-2 and 4.

<sup>106</sup> Brereton and Jamison, 2014, p.1572. Evidence for this narrative is found in *Rigveda*, 2.24; 10.108.

“You smashed away Vṛtra, who had been enclosing the waters. Of one mind with you, Earth helped your mace. You sped the seaward floods forward, becoming their lord by your power, you daring champion. When you tore open the rock for the waters, o much-invoked one, Saramā had appeared to you before: “As our leader, tear out an abundant prize, breaking apart the cowpens, being sung by the Aṅgirasas.”<sup>107</sup>

As we can see, it seems that Indra’s smashing of Vṛtra and the mountain where the monster stands is related to the smashing of a mountain or cave where the cattle is retained. In the *Rigveda*, Indra is also called “The able one, knowing all manly (labors), together with his eager companions, gave leave to the waters.”<sup>108</sup> Eventually, the Vedic hero became more recognized as a storm god, as his mace — the *vájra* — became a thunderbolt in later tradition.<sup>109</sup>

The Iranian hero called Keresāsp, who has been mentioned here before, personifies the dragon-slayer motif in Zoroastrianism quite often. We might also be able to relate this hero to Indo-European mythology, especially if we take the perhaps most complete account of him from the *Bundahišn*:

“Regarding Sām<sup>110</sup> it says, that he became immortal, but owing to his disregard of the Mazdayasnian religion, a Tûrk<sup>111</sup> whom

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107 *Rigveda*, 4.16.7-8.

108 *Ib.*, 4.16.6.

109 Jamison, 2020, p.69.

110 Keresāsp’s ancestor, sometimes used as a synonym for Keresāsp himself.

111 It is not uncommon that Zoroastrian sources characterize foreigners and enemy armies also as religious or eschatological enemies, including Turks; see Nascimento (2020, p. 304-306).

they call Nihâg wounded him with an arrow, when he was asleep there, in the plain of Pêsyânsaî; and it had brought upon him the unnatural lethargy (bûshasp) which overcame him in the midst of the heat. And the glory (far) of heaven stands over him for the purpose that, when Az-i Dahâk becomes unfettered (arazak), he may arise and slay him; and a myriad guardian spirits of the righteous are as a protection to him. Of Dahâk, whom they call Bêvarâsp, this, too, it says, that Frêdûn when he captured Dahâk was not able to kill him, and afterwards — confined him in Mount Dimâvand; when he becomes unfettered, Sâm arises, and smites and slays him.”<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps like Nerik, Keresâsp is defeated and put to eternal sleep before he rises again and slays Azhi Dahâka. He is also known for doing many works and slaying all kinds of demons before being put to sleep. He uses it as an argument with the Zoroastrian supreme god, pleading to him for the recognition of such acts, so the hero can go to a “better existence” — presumably a heavenly afterlife. However, Keresâsp is still condemned to “ever-estationary existence” until the renewal.<sup>113</sup> In *Bahman Yasht*, we have accounted his rise after Dahâka is freed and starts to spread horror; as the supreme god Mazda says:

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112 *Bundahišn*, 29.7-9. Translation by West.

113 *Rivâyât*, 18.f1-g1; *Denkard*, 9.15. West comments in a footnote that such “ever-estationary existence” is “A locality intermediate between heaven and hell, where the souls of those whose sins and good works exactly balance remain in a passive and immovable state till the resurrection” (1892 p. 199).

“Then Srôsh and Nêryôsang the angel go to Keresâsp!; three times they utter a cry, and the fourth time Sâm rises up with triumph, and goes to meet Az-i Dahâk. And Sâm does not listen to his words, and the triumphant club strikes him on the head, and smites and kills him; afterwards, desolation and adversity depart from this world, while I make a beginning of the millennium.”<sup>114</sup>

Keresâsp is not different from other mythological heroes in many aspects. Like Indra, Herakles and Cú Chulainn, many heroic deeds are assigned to him. Another of them is accounted on the *Rivayât* and seems to find a lot of parallels with other myths in IE traditions and express quite evidently the dragon-slayer motif:

“Krišâsp said: O Ohrmazd, grant me that which is the Best Existence and Gārōdman, for I slew Gandarw, who devoured twelve villages at one time. When I looked into the teeth of Gandarw, then (I saw) dead men were hung on the teeth; and he seized my beard, and I was dragged by him to the sea, and for nine days and nights we struggled in the sea; and then I prevailed upon Gandarw. And I seized the sole of the foot of Gandarw, and I flayed the skin up to the head, and with it I bound the hands and feet of Gandarw, and I dragged (him) to the edge of the sea, and I entrusted him to Āxrūrag. And I slept in the nest of the horses, and Gandarw dragged off (my) friend Āxrūrag, and dragged off this my wife, and he dragged off my father and mother. And I was wakened from sleep by

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114 *Bahman Yasht*, 3.60-61. Translation by West.

everyone, and I rose and I sprang forward a thousand steps for every step, and everything that was struck by that which leapt from (under) my foot burst into flames. I went to the sea and I brought them back, and I seized Gandarw and slew him. If he had not been slain by me, Ahreman would have become king over your creation”.<sup>115</sup>

It has been noticed by Lajoie that this narrative finds parallels with that of the Russian saint Fedor Tirin. His reading and comparative analysis of both stories can be summarized as such:

“Common elements between the Russian religious bylina and the Iranian myth are numerous. The hero, whose youth is sometimes underlined, fights first a monster, which in one case floods the earth with blood, and in the other case, is skinned. In Russia, the hero's mother is waiting on the shore, with his horse. She is kidnapped by a dragon - and the old icon shows that it was with the horse. In Iran, the hero brings the monster on the shore, but it devours his horses, then kidnaps a friend, his wife, his father and his nurse. In Russia, the hero, to cross the sea, calls upon a whale, which allows him to pass dryshod. In Iran, the hero invokes a water-deity<sup>116</sup>, who allows him to pass dryshod. A new fight begins, the monster is defeated and the captives are released. We could add that the Russian dragon has got twelve heads and twelve

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115 *Rivayāt*, 18.f9-f14. Translation by Williams (1983).

116 Although this is not accounted in the Pahlavi *Rivayāt*, in the Avesta Keresāsp offers a sacrifice to Aredvi Sura Anahita ("Moist Powerful Immaculate"); see Lajoie, 2016, p. 124-125.

sons, while in Iran, it is said that Gandarəḅa<sup>117</sup> could swallow twelve provinces or villages at once.”<sup>118</sup>

These dragons are not the only cattle destroyers in IE cultures; we had examples of that with Luch Donn and Celtchar’s black dog in Irish accounts. Another account like this is Herakles’ second work: the slaying of the Hydra. Concerning this, here is the account we have available in Apollodorus’ *Library*:

“As a second labour he ordered him to kill the Lernaean hydra. That creature, bred in the swamp of Lerna, used to go forth into the plain and ravage both the cattle and the country. Now the hydra had a huge body, with nine heads, eight mortal, but the middle one immortal. ... Nor could he effect anything by smashing its heads with his club, for as fast as one head was smashed there grew up two. A huge crab also came to the help of the hydra by biting his foot. So he killed it, and in his turn called for help on Iolaus who, by setting fire to a piece of the neighbouring wood and burning the roots of the heads with the brands, prevented them from sprouting. Having thus got the better of the sprouting heads, he chopped off the immortal head, and buried it, and put a heavy rock on it, beside the road that leads through Lerna to Elaeus. But the body of the hydra he slit up and dipped his arrows in the gall. However, Eurystheus said that this labour should not be reckoned among the ten because he had not got the better of the hydra by himself, but with the help of Iolaus”.<sup>119</sup>

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117 The same as *Gandarw*, as seen in the *Rivayāt*.

118 Lajoie, 2016, p. 125.

119 *Library*, 2.5.2. Translations always by Frazer.

Like in the Zoroastrian myth concerning the smiting of Gandarw, Herakles also had the help of someone in this work — which is not that common in his labors, unless the help comes from a deity. Perhaps this finds parallels with Inara helping Nerik. It should be noted that Herakles fights Hydra in the swamp of Lerna — perhaps expressing the same theme of a sea battle — and the monster is also a cattle destroyer. Herakles' eleventh work — against the dragon of the Hesperides — is also very similar to his fight against the Hydra, and might help us in this discussion:

“When the labours had been performed in eight years and a month, Eurystheus ordered Hercules, as an eleventh labour, to fetch golden apples from the Hesperides, for he did not acknowledge the labour of the cattle of Augeas nor that of the hydra. These apples were not, as some have said, in Libya, but on Atlas among the Hyperboreans. They were presented by Earth to Zeus after his marriage with Hera, and guarded by an immortal dragon with a hundred heads, offspring of Typhon and Echidna, which spoke with many and divers sorts of voices. ... some say that he did not get them from Atlas, but that he plucked the apples himself after killing the guardian snake. And having brought the apples he gave them to Eurystheus”.<sup>120</sup>

Thus the Greek demigod faces not only one, but two immortal dragons. Not surprisingly, both are descendents of Echidna and Typhon. Curiously, this dragon is described “with a

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120 *Library*, 2.5.11.

hundred heads” and “with many and divers sorts of voices”, which matches much of Hesiod’s description of Cerberus — with fifty (half of a hundred) heads and “bronze-voiced”, an allegory for multiple voices also present in the *Iliad*, as noticed by Zanon.<sup>121</sup> It should be noted that Hydra is also described with a hundred heads by Diodorus Siculus.<sup>122</sup>

One can notice, however, that there are no hellhounds in those dragon-slaying myths. What might change the picture is Ragnarök in Old Norse accounts and the Irish narratives we have seen before. The *Gylfaginning* portrays the god Thor fishing the monster Jörmungand in open sea; then, he kills the monster by throwing his hammer on its head. The “High One”, a narrator character of this story and presumably Odin, states that “the contrary is correct to report to you that the Midgard serpent lives still and lies in the encircling sea”<sup>123</sup>, presumably because of Jörmungand’s role in Ragnarök, which is also portrayed in *Gylfaginning*: “Thor will be victorious over the Midgard serpent and will step away from it nine paces. Then he will fall to the ground dead from the poison which the serpent will spit at him.”<sup>124</sup> This happens in the same event, the Ragnarök, where

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121 Zanon (2016, p.147) noticed that Hera receive the same adjective (χαλκεόφωνος) when her voice equals to that of fifty men in the *Iliad* (5.785), so there seems to be some kind of association between bronze and the number fifty.

122 *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.11.4-12

123 *Gylfaginning*, 48.

124 *Ib.*, 51. There is another dragon-slaying myth in *Fáfnismál*, where the dragon Fáfnir spits poison over Sigurd’s head when struck by his sword.

Odin and Týr are also killed by those who would be the Norse hellhounds, Fenrir and Garmr — thus, all of these narratives are tied to Norse conception of the end of times.

This theme seems very close to the death of Celtchar, who died after being touched by the black dog's blood once the beast was killed. That along with the genealogy motif mentioned before — where the last born of the three monsters are dragons, which is the case of Hydra and Jörmungand — suggests that this dog might have had draconic features before its “depaganization” after the conversion of Ireland. Like said before, it seems that the Irish accounts on hellhounds would rather portray ordinary characters with supernatural abilities than actual monsters. Another interesting fact is that hellhounds are antagonists in such narratives: Herakles has to defeat both Cerberus and Orthros; Odin and Týr are killed by Fenrir and Garmr; Celtchar deals with the second and third pests of Ulster and is killed in the process. What seems common between such narratives is that we have evidence for draconic features in canids in all of them. Indo-Iranian accounts, on the other hand, never portray either Yama's dogs or those at Kinvad bridge as antagonists and as victims of a hero.

Russian tales are also fitting for this analysis. One of them, entitled *Ivan the Cow's Son*, tells a story in which a queen, her maid and a cow eat a certain fish and become pregnant on the same day. Their children looked like each other, grew inhumanly fast and were all called Ivan, of which the cow's son got nicknamed *Buria Bogatyr*, or the “Storm-Hero”. After a

disagreement of who of the siblings should be considered the eldest, they went separate ways and Buria Bogatyr went home by himself. The king locked him up in a prison for three days, but the hero was then released to search for his brothers, since they had gone to the land of the dragons near the Black Sea, and only he was powerful enough for this mission, taking a mace and a sword with him. He found his brothers by the Kalin bridge, which is between the world of living and that of the dead, and the three of them took shelter in a magic hut. Then, the sea monster and six-headed dragon Chudo Yudo appears, who rides his horse to meet Ivan the Cow's Son.<sup>125</sup> They fight, Ivan cuts Chudo Yudo's heads with his mace and dismembers his body, throwing his bodyparts into the Black Sea; then the hero hides the monster's heads beneath the bridge. He gives the dragon's steed to his younger brother, Ivan the Scullery Maid's Son. Chudo Yudo returns the next night with nine heads and summons a new horse. The fight happens again and is finished the same way; then the hero gives the dragon's steed to his other brother, Ivan the Prince. The third night, Buria Bogatyr warns his brothers to be ready to help, and Chudo Yudo emerges from the sea once again; this time, twelve-headed. The dragon summons another steed and rides to the hero, saying that he would not be defeated like his two brothers. They fight, but this time Buria Bogatyr's mace breaks; he tries to awaken his brothers by throwing his

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125 Apparently, in some versions Chudo Yudo is accompanied by a vulture and a hound, but no reliable source regarding that was found.

boots on the hut, unsuccessfully. The hero then throws a piece of his mace and breaks the doors of the stable, and the steeds he had collected from the previous fights run over the bridge and knock Chudo Yudo out of his horse. The hero manages to behead the dragon and follows the same as in the other fights, escaping with his siblings afterwards.<sup>126</sup>

In this story, it seems that the dragon Chudo Yudo performs the role that the hellhounds would elsewhere, as the watchdog of the underworld. Sometimes, it seems that the dragon is immortal and comes back each time stronger, but it seems also that there are actually three sibling dragons called Chudo Yudo and the following narratives support that, as their wives mourn their deaths. Besides that, from here we can also draw a clear view of how the dragon-slayer in our sources is typically portrayed: he usually uses a bludgeoning weapon — either a club, a mace or a hammer — and fights a serpent or dragon. He is also related to storms: Indra eventually became a storm god like Thor and Nerik; and Herakles, though not a god, is the son of Zeus, which makes him somehow close to Buria Bogatyr in concept. We should also note that Ivan hides the dragon's heads beneath the bridge, much like Herakles puts Hydra's heads beneath a rock.

There is another Russian story that might be of our interest; in the late nineteenth century, Jeremiah Curtin registered several East European tales that were published posthumously. One of them particularly stands out for us, and can be

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126 Afanas'ev; Haney, 2014, 284-289.

summarized as such: the king of the underworld has three daughters that wanted to see the “world of light”. Their father does not allow them at first, but their insistence convinces him to allow their visit to the world above. Once there, a whirlwind swirls the princesses away and the king sets word so they can be found. An old widow answers his calling and sends her three sons to find the princesses: Twilight, Midnight and Dawn. In their journey, they stop by a house and take shelter in it. First, Midnight and Dawn go hunting while Twilight stays at home. The oldest brother sets the fire, takes wood, kills a sheep, makes clothing and cooks the sheep's meat. Then a short height and long bearded old man appears and argues with Twilight, questioning his use of his property. He gets furious and attacks Twilight with a club. Twilight passes out, takes care of his injuries once awake and finally his brothers arrive. He does not tell them what happened and says that he got sick from the fire's heat. The next day, Midnight stays while his brothers go hunting and the same happens again. Midnight tells the same thing Twilight told to his brothers. The third day, Dawn stays at home while his older brothers go hunting. The same happens, until the old man arrives: when they start arguing, Dawn pulls his beard and smashes his head to the ground. Then he binds the man to a tree with a rope. When Twilight and Midnight come back, the old man is gone and Dawn decides to look for the princesses. The younger brother finds a passage to the underground, where he finds one of the princesses. After they

meet, Dawn protects her (with her help) from three dragons: with three, six and nine heads, respectively. He rescues the princesses and brings them back to the king, who marries them with the brothers in gratitude.<sup>127</sup>

This account is quite similar to the other we have seen, but there is something odd: whilst the man with a blunt weapon is typically the hero of the tale — either a *katábasis* one or a dragon-slaying one —, here he is portrayed as an antagonist. This, perhaps, reveals to us a bit of the nature of Russian tales, which were registered much later than our other sources: it is known that these stories were under ecclesiastic censorship<sup>128</sup>; thus, what we can understand as a prominent pagan character might have been readjusted in different ways. It seems that in the last tale we have seen, what originally would be the same character that protagonizes *Ivan the Cow's Son* becomes an antagonist. We can extend that to hellhounds; since they seem to be a central part of IE polytheistic eschatology, their apparent absence in Russian sources might reflect the replacing of that part of polytheistic cosmology with a Christian one — much like it would be the case with Irish sources, as previously discussed.

From such accounts, we can draw a lot of similarity points. In most of them, we have a hero that uses a bludgeoning weapon to crush his enemy — a club for Keresāsp and Herakles; a mace for Indra, and a hammer for Thor. This hero seems to be an IE

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127 Curtin, 1914, p. 15-23.

128 Lajoie, 2016, p. 126; see Jakobson in Afanas'ev, 1945, p. 632-635.

storm god or hero, as expressed by Nerik, Indra, Thor, Herakles and Buria Bogatyr. The Celtic heroes, however, are exceptions to that. Furthermore, the killing of Vŗtra occurs in a mountain, much like that of Dahāka and the dragon of the Hesperides, and it seems that Thor and Celtchar being killed by Jörmungandr's or the black dog's poison is related to Keresāsp being put to sleep by a poisoned arrow, as West likes to interpret it.<sup>129</sup> Other battles take place at the sea, like those of Illuyanka, Gandarw, the dragon killed by St. Fedor Tirin, Jörmungand and perhaps the swamp expresses the same with the Hydra.

There also seems to be some eschatological value in such narratives: Dahāka, Jörmungandr, Garmr and Fenrir will be killed at the end of times. The slaying of Dahāka, as seen, takes place in the *turning point* of the current era to a new one, as much as the battles between gods and monsters in the Ragnarök. Indra's slaying of Vŗtra does not escape such interpretation; even if the killing of this dragon takes place in the past instead of taking place in the future, it conveys the idea of the birth of the current age, since the sun — a characteristic component of *our* world — is also released with the smashing of the mountain; thus it also is the *turning point* from the previous era to the current one. The fetching of Cerberus is also a turning point for Herakles, as he finally finishes the labors imposed by Eurystheus and becomes

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129 1880, p.119.

immortal in some sources.<sup>130</sup> This finds parallels with Sétanta killing Culann's dog, as after that he becomes Cú Chulainn.

At first, we should notice that in Western accounts (Greek, Irish, and Norse), the concept of hellhounds seems to merge with that of dragon-slayers and the hounds themselves received draconic or serpent-like features. On the other hand, even though the hellhound exists in Vedic and Zoroastrian accounts, they are set completely apart from those of dragon-slayers; in Indo-Iranian culture the hellhound is kept in rather "personal" eschatological affairs — that means, concerning only one's death, but not necessarily the end of the world. However, it seems that such Indo-European eschatological concepts concerning destiny — either of the individual's soul passing through monsters or of the world being destroyed by them — had enough in common to collide in some cases.

For some reason, Hittite and Russian do not seem to portray the hellhound myth at all. Given that the Anatolian branch was the first to split out from PIE and that Vedic accounts are much older than others, we can assume that the hellhound had nothing to do with the works of a dragon-slayer character in Indo-European culture. Curiously, Zarathustra's revelation seems to be the main cause for keeping the hellhound in its original place in narratives; since dogs held a special status in Zoroastrian doctrine, there was no way that the spiritual dogs of the Kinvad bridge could have become an antagonist to their mythical hero. Moreover, their role as afterlife watchdogs

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130 One example is the *Theogony*, 940-955.

might be very important for keeping the idea of immoral deeds that would not allow one's crossing of the bridge of judgement.

### **Shaping the IE hellhound**

Back to the hellhounds, there are some clear parallels that can be found between the hellhounds of these sources. The first of them is its connection with the afterlife and with *post mortem* processes that the soul goes through in the conceptions of the cultures within our scope. This is most evident in Rigvedic, Zoroastrian and Hesiodic texts. In the Eddic accounts this is not as explicit, but can be inferred by the nameless dog that guards the entrance to Hel in *Baldur's draumar*. Irish accounts are even more subtle in the characterization of the dogs as "hellhounds".

Concerning such processes of the soul, the *Rigveda* seems to convey some kind of merit in crossing the passage to the underworld and outrunning Yama's hounds, much like the Kinvad bridge is an exam of a soul's merit to cross it and is the moment of the judgement of the soul. Old Norse accounts seem to grant a more fortunate afterlife to slain warriors, with the possibility of going to *Valhøll* instead of Hel. Greek accounts seem to conceive only one afterlife in Hades, whereas heroes or mortal demigods might be rare exceptions and have the possibility of going to Olympus after death.<sup>131</sup>

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131 Possible examples are Herakles and Dionysus (*Theogony*, 940-955); though Dionysus might have earned it when born immortal from a

Therefore, no clear process of the judgement of the soul is conceived in Greek culture (generally) and the dead have Hades as their destiny by default. The Irish and Russian accounts we have seen are more focused on heroic deeds than in eschatological matters, perhaps because of the already dominant Christian faith by the time they were written. Some of the pagan elements of the story might have had to be omitted, or maybe survived in versions that would be acceptable in a Christian society.

Even though this does not find exact parallels with Greek and Irish sources, it seems that earning an afterlife among divinity is a common concept in IE cultures. In Zoroastrianism, the Kinvad bridge leads to the realm of the divines. The *Atharva-Veda* also portrays the possibility of ascending to heaven instead of reuniting with the ancestors in the underworld, as seen before. We can conceive the same from the contrast between *Valhøll* and Hel in Norse culture. Therefore, Zoroastrian conception of ascension to heaven and descent to hell might also be of IE origin, rather than a rupture with previous religious thought by Zarathustra's revelation and Zoroastrian morals, although somehow reshaped by them.

Another element is that the hellhound is not portrayed as the watchdog of the afterlife on its whole, as inspector of the realm of the dead; this character is responsible solely for the entrance or passage to the afterlife in most of the narratives we have seen. The only exceptions are found in Old Norse

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mortal woman, whilst Herakles earned it by finishing his labors.

accounts, where the mythic canids perform more roles in this culture's narratives of the end of the world. Although such passage to the underworld might vary in each culture, the Iranian Kinvad bridge is not the only one. We also have Bifrost in Norse myth, which leads to Asgard — the home of the Æsir — and the Kalin bridge in Russian tales; however, the first is guarded by the god Heimdallr and the latter by the dragon Chudo Yudo, instead of a dog.<sup>132</sup> But since there is a general idea of a crossing to the afterlife in IE thought, the idea of a bridge at which such crossing is made is not necessarily of IE origin and is quite fair to understand it as a poligenic trait, since such a bridge is absent in the other traditions within our scope — especially in Vedic, which is more closely related to Iranian culture.

The organization of the mythic hounds in pairs is also quite evident in the sources, as discussed before. We can argue that this is common to all the traditions within our scope. Greek accounts do not portray this as explicitly as in Indic and Norse ones, and Iranian accounts seem even more obscure in this matter. Besides that, as discussed before, Greek iconography allows us to draw a clearer relationship between Cerberus and Orthros as a pair of hounds similar to those of Yama. Vedic and Norse texts support that the IE underworld watchdogs were two in number, and this concept is also present in Greek and Iranian traditions, even if in some kind of residual form.

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132 *Gylfaginning*, 13; 27.

Furthermore, the environment of the narratives themselves can also help us figure out why such obscurity falls upon Greek and especially Iranian sources. While Norse and Indic texts conceive two different paths to each afterlife, Greek conceives only one afterlife. The main difference between Norse and Indic conceptions of the myth is that Yama's hounds are both keepers of the road to the underworld and do not watch the path to heavens, as seen in the *Atharva-Veda*. Meanwhile, Eddic canids are positioned in contrast: from our reading from the sources, we can conceive the dog Garmr as watchdog of Hel and a wolf (presumably Fenrir) guarding *Valhøll*. On the other hand, Greek culture has no alternative afterlife from Hades and the Kinvad bridge reflects Iranian conception of one path to both heaven and hell — or a bridge that leads to heaven, but from which one can fall to hell, to be more precise. This could be why the number of watchdogs might have been reduced to one in Greek and Iranian sources, whereas in Indic and Norse traditions the conception of hellhounds in pairs was better preserved.

We can also consider linguistic aspects that might have affected the oral transmission of these myths. Sanskrit has preserved dual number in its grammar; therefore, in both *Rigveda* and *Atharva-Veda*, Yama's hounds always appear together besides the possibility of ascending to heaven instead of descending to the underworld — perhaps because the language in which they were transmitted forced them to be portrayed that way. In the account taken from the *Rigveda* that

we have seen before, the dogs are declined in dual *sārameyau* instead of plural *sārameyāḥ*.<sup>133</sup> Old Irish — the language in which the *Táin* and the *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair* were written — preserves the dual number if accompanied by the numeral *dá* (“two”) before the noun.<sup>134</sup> Old Norse language also kept the dual declension feature in personal pronouns, such as personal first and second person *vit* and *þit* (“we two” and “you two”) in the nominative case. Greek also has dual number in its grammar, but it was already declining in Homeric poems and kept going that way, being used only in very rare occasions.<sup>135</sup>

However, even if those are just residual forms of PIE grammatical dual number, their survival means that the concept of two afterlife watchdogs performing this role together could have been better preserved for more time. In the *Eddas*, the hellhounds are not as closely related as Yama’s dogs, but the pairing of them is very evident. In Greek mythology, we can suppose that Cerberus might have been replaced by Geryon at some point, but the hound of Hades and

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133 Both dual and plural forms in the example are in the nominative case. What *sārameyāḥ* precisely means could not be found in the dictionary (MacDonnell, 1929), but the meaning “dog of Sārama” can be inferred from the translations and from the word itself, as *sārameya* is the genitive case of *sārama*. The Sanskrit text was checked in the *Internet Sacred Texts Archive* webpage, accessed on 26/12/2025 and available at <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv10014.htm>

134 O’Connel, 1912, p.26-27.

135 See Viti, 2011.

his brother Orthros might have played this role together in a distant past. Avestan actually kept this feature, but it was lost in Middle Persian. Therefore, the loss of a grammatical component that might have been used for the transmission of the myth occasioned in the loss of accuracy in its preservation; thus there seems to be some kind of difficulty with defining a number for the dogs in the Kinvad bridge from the Pahlavi version of the *Vendidad* and later Pahlavi texts. The point is that the languages that kept this trait — and *how* they kept it — somehow match not only with the conservation of the hellhounds in pairs in their respective mythological accounts, but also *how* they are conserved.

The exception to this would be the Celtic versions of the myth, which do not display the hellhound concept as evidently as the other traditions — possibly in an attempt to make them look less pagan and make them accepted in a christianized Ireland, as argued before. We should not disregard that prose writing in Ireland was introduced with Christianity, along with Classical world cultural background<sup>136</sup> — however, this might not be enough to assume that Irish hellhounds were borrowed from Classical culture. Even though we can assume there is cultural exchange between those, we cannot suppose that interactions in Gaul or Britain under Roman rule necessarily shaped the hellhound in Ireland by just encompassing both Irish and other Celtic peoples simply as “Celts”. Moreover, why would the hellhound concept be censured or depaganized

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136 Ó Cathasaigh, 2014, p.39.

in the Irish accounts if they were relating only to Classical mythology? The need to include these concepts in texts that clearly reference a local culture might reflect local themes, rather than exogenous mythic characters.

The hellhounds also seem to be perceived in different ways in each culture. Whilst in Indic and Iranian accounts the hellhounds seem to be conceived rather neutral or positively, in European cultures they seem to have been assigned with a negative connotation. Franco has noticed that dogs were expected to behave like humans in certain contexts of Ancient Greece<sup>137</sup>, so their animal behavior became widely identified with *anaideía* (“shamelessness”) or the lack of *aidós*, which Franco defines as “the moral curb responsible for inhibiting any behavior subject to ethical censure”. Therefore, the word *kyon* (Greek for “dog”) is used to offend another person quite frequently in Greek texts.<sup>138</sup> This seems to have quite direct consequences to how Cerberus is conceived, since Hesiod describes him as *anaidea* (“shameless”).<sup>139</sup> Germanic sources seem to convey a negative aspect to the hellhounds as well, since they frequently are called *freki* or *geri* — which basically mean “greedy”. Irish sources also seem to portray Luch Donn and Celtchar’s black dog as treacherous: both have suddenly become aggressive and attacked those who used to take care of them.

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137 Franco, 2019, p.33

138 Franco, 2014, p.7-9.

139 *Theogony*, 309.

On the other hand, Zoroastrianism conceives eschatological punishment to those who kill a dog, as we have seen before in the *Vendidad*. Apparently, they had a high status in this doctrine. As Edrey states, “In Achaemenid Iran dogs were especially revered and were considered by the Zoroastrians as the second most important beings, after humans, to the chief deity Ahura-Mazda”.<sup>140</sup> Even though the *Atharva-Veda* conceives a better afterlife in heaven, that does not mean that Yama’s hounds are necessarily evil for guarding the underworld, as we could see in the *Rigveda*. This divergence from Western IE cultures could be explained, perhaps, by the contact between these cultures and others from Central Asia and Near East.

One of these cultures might be the Oxus civilization of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) — which took place in Central Asia around 2250-1500 BCE.<sup>141</sup> A lot of animal graves were found in the Gonur Depe settlement — which is probably the capital of this culture<sup>142</sup> — and dogs were one of the most frequent species to be found in such burials.<sup>143</sup> This animal was found buried with human beings and dog graves were found close to human “elite” burials, and this site is commonly called the “Royal Necropolis”. Sataev

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<sup>140</sup> Edrey, 2008, p. 271.

<sup>141</sup> The Oxus civilization took place in Central Asia around 2250-1500 BCE (Dubova and Lyonnet, 2021, p. 1).

<sup>142</sup> Lubotsky, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Sataev in Dubova and Lyonnet (2021, p. 388-389).

summarizes some of the explanations for the cultural significance of dogs in this culture as such:

“Either the possible special status of dogs in the religious beliefs demanded that dead animals be buried; or individual dog burials could be part of some ritual, possibly a form of sacrifice adopted in the local cults. As for the dog burials at the edge of the “Royal Necropolis,” they might have symbolized protection and watching over the remains of the representatives of the ruling elite at Gonur Depe”.<sup>144</sup>

In fact, the most likely archaeological culture to correspond to Indo-Iranians is the Andronovo culture, which surrounded the BMAC by the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Lubotsky noticed that there are loan words and religious features that are exclusive to the Indo-Iranian branch (especially in Indic) when compared to other IE cultures, which suggest that the cultural exchange between those people left visible marks on those of IE origin.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, how the Oxus culture regarded dogs could possibly have something to do with how canids are culturally assigned in the Indo-Iranian branches, which might consequently reflect on the hellhound myth.

Iranian sources, however, are much more positive towards dogs than Indic — and this seems to be closely related to Zoroastrian doctrine. Under the rule of Cyrus the Great, the Achaemenid Empire conquered a large area westwards, and

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144 Robert Sataev in Dubova and Lyonnet (2021, p. 398-399).

145 Lubotsky, 2020, p. 7-10.

that made Zoroastrian beliefs meet various religious thoughts. In fact, more than a thousand dog graves were found in the Levant — probably because of sacrificial practices — and dog sacrifice was not uncommon in Mesopotamia, especially dedicated to the goddess Gula.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps, Iranians cultivated in their Zoroastrian doctrine that same affection towards dogs that seems to be inherited from Oxus culture. Once in contact with religious practices that disregarded such affection when it came to honoring their gods, Zoroastrians might have emphasized the status of dogs in their own religion as a cultural marker — which eventually made it into the *Vendidad*, as we have seen.

Therefore, the merging of hellhound myths with dragon-slayer myths and its absence in Indo-Iranian sources can be explained by a general chthonic symbolism in Greek and Norse culture that made serpents and dogs take part in the same spectrum of symbolic association with time. We can take the absence of such merging in Vedic tradition as a reflection of its age and, as a consequence of that, closeness with prior IE tradition when compared to others. In Iranian sources, we can understand this absence as we see that Zoroastrian cosmology does not really divide the world between heavenly and chthonic forces — as it seems to be the general case in Greek and Norse cultures — but rather in two oppositions between spiritual/material and good/evil. The dogs of the Kinvad bridge are related to death; however, the soul does not meet

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146 Edrey, 2008, p. 267-268; 277-278.

chthonic forces in death like in other IE cultures, but rather spiritual ones, which can be evil or bad depending on the individual's adherence to Zoroastrian morals. Curiously, the revelation of Zarathustra — that is, a rupture with previous polytheistic thought — and its regard to dogs plays an important role in preserving the hellhound myth as it probably was in PIE stories, since this would likely make impossible for their heroes to engage in combat with them.

Even though we are getting closer to an IE hellhound myth (yet recognizing its particularities in each branch), it is crucial that we take into account that the Indo-Europeans were not the first to establish their culture in the areas where we can attest their linguistic and cultural influence. Moreover, the IE hellhound problem can be reconsidered on its whole, as mentioned in the introduction, if we take into account that the association of dogs with death is not exclusive to the Indo-European cultures. It can be found in cultures such as in Egyptian and Aztec civilizations through deities like Anubis and Xolotl, for example.<sup>147</sup> In fact, dogs show necrophagic behavior in various sources and this is well attested by many ancient peoples.<sup>148</sup> The connection of canids with death might

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147 According to Pinch (2002, p. 104), Anubis was represented as a jackal-headed god, but sometimes this deity was portrayed with the head of a wild dog. Xolotl was responsible for guiding the sun's travel through the underworld each night so the sun god could be reborn at the dawn of each day (Maffie, 2014, p. 204).

148 Examples are found in Greek (*Iliad*. 1.4-5; 8.379-380; 11.17-18; 17.125-127; 23.20-23), Iranian (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 16.7-8), Mesopotamian and Biblical

be as old as dog domestication, more securely dated around 15,000 years ago.<sup>149</sup> Thus, one should not ignore the possibility that most of the narratives we have seen could be of Paleolithic origin or simply poligenic, rather than Indo-European.

A study by Berezkin<sup>150</sup> has shown that many hellhound narratives in Eurasia and America contain shared elements. Its connection with death is probably the most evident of them, but there are other elements like mythic rivers and the Milky Way, as well as different roles that the mythic dog can perform. The data that Berezkin has collected leaves almost no doubt that the hellhound theme is from the Paleolithic period and was conceived before the arrival of humans in the American continent. However, in this article we have only compared the myth between Indo-European sources and have not considered other material. How can we be certain that the myths within our scope are of IE origin?

Firstly, we should at least recognize that the hellhound myths covered so far happen to be portrayed in cultures of which languages had been developed from PIE. Even if there were other versions of the hellhound myth in Eurasia before the spreading of Indo-European culture, we can argue that the versions we have available might be at least influenced by the version that PIE speakers had cultivated. On the other hand,

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(Vilela, 2025, p.17-19) accounts.

149 Larson *et al.*, 2012, p.8882.

150 2005, p. 130-170.

what makes the hellhound case difficult to define as distinctively Indo-European might be the fact that it has been quite challenging, at least so far, to reach a common etymology for all of its expressions in later cultures.<sup>151</sup>

Secondly, however, we should consider that a similar version could have been available in the cultures that inhabited the lands that would make home to the PIE speakers (or their descendants). If that is the case, it would not be enough to eliminate the hypothesis that the Indo-Europeans had a hellhound myth of their own. Lincoln advocates for the same when discussing the IE creation myth, stating that “Our sources contain traces of one I-E myth which happens to resemble myths from other parts of the world, but it is very definitely an I-E myth nonetheless”.<sup>152</sup> As Berezkin proposes, “one can assume that already in the early stages of peopling of the New World, complexes of folkloric motifs, which settlers brought with them, also varied to a considerable degree”.<sup>153</sup> The same can be applied to folkloric motifs in the Old World, and we can imagine that the hellhound had a particular

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151 The Greek name *Kérberos* was assumed to be related to Yama’s dogs (described as *śabalau*, “brindled”) in late nineteenth century (see Max Müller, 1890, p.180-181; Gheyn, 1883, p.13-14), but Lincoln discarded this etymology and proposed that both *Kérberos* and *Garmr* came from PIE roots *\*ker* and *\*gher-* (1991, p.96-101), which express no intrinsic meaning and are taken as onomatopoeic terms.

152 Lincoln, 1974, p.124.

153 Berezkin, 2005, p.131.

characterization in each culture it belonged to — including that of PIE speakers.

In case this is not convincing, we can also check if the narratives we have seen match their counterparts that are unrelated to PIE and recognize which elements might be particularly IE. The data compiled by Berezkin is organized in eight general motifs, and there is not a single culture where the “otherworldly dog” portrays all of them — which presupposes that each cultural stratus has its own peculiarities when it comes to that theme, as said before. Even if this myth has its origins in Paleolithic times, each culture developed it in a certain way. On that matter, the fourth motif is the most interesting to us, as it contemplates stories in which “the dog appears as the master, the inhabitant or the guardian of the other world”. This category contemplates some of the IE versions of the myth we have seen, like Greek, Rigvedic and Zoroastrian<sup>154</sup>, and we can fit Norse accounts here as well. However, although one single category for master, inhabitant or guardian of the otherworld has been useful in Berezkin’s broad scope, it is not as helpful when our focus is restricted to the understanding IE cultures.

One of the cultures that match the IE accounts in Berezkin’s table is the Egyptian one, presumably considering the deity Anubis — the jackal god, sometimes depicted as a wild dog, who is responsible for the judgement of the soul. The role of underworld master in Egyptian culture is performed by the

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154 Berezkin, 2005, p. 133-136.

Osiris, and Anubis does not seem to be a watchdog in the same sense of the Indo-European versions that we have seen before — except Zoroastrian sources, perhaps, as the Kinvad bridge is also where the soul is judged for its deeds — and is connected more deeply with ritual mummification and the judgement of the soul before it goes to the *Duat*, the Egyptian afterlife.<sup>155</sup> In Hellenistic and Roman periods in Egypt, Anubis has also been associated with Hermes, manifested by the syncretized deity Hermanubis. The fact that such cults associated Anubis with Hermes rather than Cerberus can reflect either their position as deities — which Cerberus is not — or the role of Anubis as a judge or guide of the souls rather than the watchdog of the underworld, which matches better Hermes' role as *psychopompos* and led to this syncretism in the first place.<sup>156</sup> Even if Greek, Vedic and Zoroastrian accounts on the hellhound myth are matched with Egyptian in Berezkin's table, it is clear that we are talking about different themes when Anubis is compared to Indo-European sources.

In Etruscan culture, which is so far understood as unrelated to PIE or any other linguistic branch<sup>157</sup>, the gods Aita and Calu — the first probably borrowed from Greek *Haidēs*, whilst the latter is genuinely Etruscan — are represented either wolf-headed or adorned with a wolf cap.<sup>158</sup> There is also a wolf cult practiced in a cave, where a bronze figurine of a canid was

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155 Pinch, 2002, p. 80; 104; 178.

156 Stefanovic, 2013, p. 507

157 Agostiniani, 2013, p. 469.

158 Simon, 2006, p. 57; Krauskopf, 2006, p. 80.

found and has been associated with the Etruscan god Śuri.<sup>159</sup> In this culture, the “hellhound” motif appears to be expressed as the master or ruler of the underworld, while the guards of its gates are usually associated with the feminine deities (or maybe demons) Vanth and Culśu.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, even if influenced by Greek and Latin culture, the Etruscan native conception of the hellhound myth seems much different from that of its neighbours that might express the Indo-European version of it.

The fourth general motif is also common in Northern Eurasian, Far Eastern, American and Southern Siberian cultures. Concerning the first three, considering the time that Indo-European culture spread in Eurasia and what we know about what places PIE speakers have reached, we can already conceive them so far as unrelated. The only one that seems to match more directly the IE shape of the hellhound myth is the Mari culture, which is placed around the rivers Kama and Volga in Western Russia<sup>161</sup> — a region within the geographic span of IE migrations, so we cannot exclude the possibility that their version of the hellhound could have been borrowed from the IE version. When it comes to Southern Siberia, Berezkin states:

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159 Fogliazza, 2020, p. 100

160 Simon, 2006, p. 58; Krauskopf, 2006, p. 67. Curiously, Vanth has similar iconography with that of Hekate. The Etruscan deity is depicted with serpents and torches as well.

161 Mason & Waldman, 2006, p. 517.

“It is also possible that in some regions, South-Siberian Turks borrowed the motif of the otherworldly dog from populations who inhabited this area before them and who were at least in part Indo-European. This is supported by the absence of the theme of the otherworldly dog among the Buryat and the Mongols who lived further east in the area, where Indo-Europeans were hardly likely ever to have penetrated. Both traditions, the Turkic and the Iranian, which together contain the full range of motifs examined here, might have originated in one and the same ancient culture common to the steppe and forest-steppe belt of Central Eurasia.”<sup>162</sup>

Therefore, even if the “otherworldly dog” motif is not exclusive to Indo-European peoples, we can understand that IE culture shaped it in its own way. Even in cases in which we have narrative convergences in cultures linguistically unrelated to PIE, the most evident cases could have been conceived through cultural exchange or simply by chance. Even though the hellhound myth could have its roots in a Paleolithic myth previous to that of the IE migrations, as said before, the narrative convergences in our sources match the spreading of PIE branches. Furthermore, a minuscious observation of the characteristics of hellhound myths shows that those of supposed IE origin have distinctive features that help us to assess what a previous IE hellhound myth might have looked like, which would be less likely to happen if such myths were unrelated to PIE.

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162 Berezkin, 2005, p. 138.

Nonetheless, what would the Indo-European hellhound look like and what makes the sources arranged here so distinctive, in the first place? Previously, we have accounted for some of the common characteristics that bind mythic dogs from different traditions; but how do they help us figure out the shape of this “proto-myth” and what does this shape tell us about its descendants? Moreover, what can the dragon-slayer narratives seen before tell us about the hellhound myth?

### The Indo-European hellhound myth

Before we give this “proto-myth” a shape, we should be aware that there are some clear distinctions between Western (Greek, Irish and Norse) and Eastern (Indic, Iranian and Russian) accounts. This happens to match the grouping of IE branches into *centum* and *satem*, respectively — so we will consider two versions of the myth that seems to be related to each group.<sup>163</sup>

A common motif in the *centum* group, as we have seen, is the monstrous genealogy of which the hellhound usually takes part. Usually, the last of the offspring is a dragon, which is the case of both Hydra and Jörmungand. In Irish accounts, it seems that this was manifested in a dog, rather than a dragon

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163 One should be aware that the division between *centum* and *satem* is not linguistically solid and does not mean genealogical division; however, this does not make it impossible to notice patterns that can be assigned to each group. For more details on that matter, see Jandáček & Perdih, 2008; Hyllested & Joseph, 2022, p.238.

*per se*, as we have seen when discussing the parallels between the death of Celtchar and of Thor.<sup>164</sup> This leads us to another phenomenon that seems particular to this group: the “draconization” of dogs. As we have seen, this happens not only to Cerberus, but also to Fenrir and to Celtchar’s black dog. It seems that this led not only to ophidian features in iconography or texts, but also to narratives that seem very particular to dragons. In the *satem* group, such narratives are restricted to dragons and do not concern the hellhounds at all. Moreover, we can state with certain security that there are dragon-slayer narratives with no hellhounds in every branch — which suggests that those were originally separated from each other.

Therefore, a prominent element in our sources would be the fight with a storm god-hero; this happens with dragons and hellhounds in the *centum* group, but only with the first in the *satem* group. This dragon sometimes is bound, like Illuyanka and Dahāka, and this also happens to hounds in the *centum* group — which is the case of Cerberus, Fenrir, Garmr and perhaps the dog of Cullan, which Sétanta killed. The Iranian accounts portray Dahāka being freed at the end of times, much like Norse Garmr and Fenrir. The destruction caused by dogs in Irish and Norse narratives seems much more related to heroic deeds and dragon-slayer myths than to other

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<sup>164</sup> It is not impossible that the draconic traits of the black dog in *Aided Celtchair Maic Uthechair* became residuous not because of Christian censorship, but perhaps because Ireland had no serpents at all; see Monaghan, 2004, p. 415.

hellhound myths. We should also note that the number three (and its multiples) is quite often associated with dragons (especially the number of their heads) in every culture we have seen, but become associated with hellhounds as well only in Greek and Irish accounts.

The only possible exception to this would be the Russian dragon Chudo Yudo, who performs a role that dogs perform elsewhere. Yet, nothing else points to this character being a hellhound originally. As discussed before, it seems that a negative connotation in the *centum* group — in contrast with a rather neutral or positive one in the Indo-Iranian branches — can be the source for the assimilation of dogs with dragons. This made these narratives revolve much more around heroic deeds than personal eschatology, which is clearly the case in Vedic and Zoroastrian texts, but can also be found in Greek and Norse accounts. Therefore, evidently the hellhound myth was about only this kind of *post mortem* encounter in IE cosmology.

The reason for this “draconization” phenomenon can be explained by the fact that both dogs and serpents belong to the same conceptual sphere in IE thought, notably by its chthonic aspects. However, a study by R. Ginevra stressed that both mythical serpents and dogs remain in a conceptual periphery that characterizes them as “ontological others” — however, what enables such connection is not their association with the underground, but rather with water.<sup>165</sup>

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165 Ginevra, 2025, p.19-20.

The most visible cases provided by the author might be those of Norse *Fenrisulfr* (or “the Wolf of the Fen”) and the Irish monster *Onchú* (“Water-Dog”), which share a set of linguistic and phraseological similarities. Greek mythic beasts do not escape this — as Hydra is described as *kyna Lernas* (“the Hound of Lerna”) by Euripides<sup>166</sup> and as Scylla is linguistically close to Greek *skylax* (“puppy”).<sup>167</sup> What is most important here is that by conceiving both dogs and serpents as conceptual others, mythic tradition felt free to also conceive dogs in the same roles as serpents in dragon slaying stories.

That being said, it is also clear that hellhounds were originally two in IE mythology. There is evidence for this in roughly every tradition we went through. Although Zoroastrian accounts are not clear on what number of dogs accompany the maiden at the Kinvad bridge, the incoherence between texts concerning that was explained and we can conceive them as originally two with a certain degree of security. Norse accounts provide us with a bunch of pairs, but perhaps we can see all of them as different versions of the same IE myth divided by functions; it would not make sense to have the same pair of hounds guarding the afterlife and pursuing the sun and the moon at the same time. It seems that these functions were divided in different characters, so all of them could still be performed. The same could have happened in Greek accounts; it would not be possible for both hellhounds to be at Erythia and Hades at the same time. This

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166 *Herakles*, 420.

167 Ginevra, 2025, p. 20-24.

can be explained if we imagine that oral tradition is no sacred book and different versions of the same story are expected. However, once such divergences are confronted with each other, they have to be redeveloped to fit into a new cohesive take.

Since we can conceive that these draconic traits and heroic fights are innovations from the *centum* side, we can also state that the description of hellhounds as “four-eyed” reflects as much of the IE conception as them being two in number. As discussed before, evidence not only from the *Rigveda*, but also Greek and Norse iconography, show us that this description also fits monsters with two-heads. It is hard to determine whether the IE hounds were originally two-headed or if they had only one head with four eyes. Nonetheless, it would be hard to explain the convergence of this element in both Greek and Norse iconography and Vedic texts without the IE hypothesis. Although this survives in fewer accounts and is not as evident as the pairing, the only plausible answer for this feature so far is that it was already present in the myth cultivated by PIE speakers. This concept is clearly maintained in a way that points to its IE origin and the innovations from the *centum* part did not overtake it completely.

It should be noted, however, that the hellhound’s role as watchdog seems to imply some kind of filter in the entrance to the underworld almost everywhere it is accounted. This was visible especially in Indic, Iranian, Greek and maybe Norse accounts as well. Perhaps it is fair to assume that the

hellhounds were also performing a role like this in IE eschatology, where the dead might have had to overcome this challenge to reach their ancestors in the afterlife. It seems, however, that this challenge was rather “physical” in IE thought — as portrayed in the *Rigveda* and perhaps Norse accounts —, but became a *moral* challenge in Zoroastrianism. Concerning the latter, it seems that how the *satem* group portrayed the hellhounds was the convenient background for the status assigned to dogs in Zoroastrianism after the contact with BMAC and the Near East — which might also be seen in Indic accounts to a certain extent.

With all that in mind, we can consider some factors that could have reshaped the hellhound in our sources. As said before, it seems that there is some kind of cultural distinction between the *centum* and *satem* groups towards the hellhound myth. That suggests that the “draconization” phenomenon is previous to the linguistic branch division in which hellhound accounts are found in Western traditions.

On the other hand, we have seen some of the reasons for the positive connotation of dogs in the Indo-Iranian branch; however, Russian accounts do not seem adequate to necessarily conceive a hellhound similar to those of Zoroastrian and Vedic sources. Nonetheless, if we consider that the pair of hellhounds were a central element of IE personal eschatology, it is not impossible that it vanished from Russian tales — or replaced by a draconic enemy, in the case of the tale *Ivan the Cow’s Son* — because of Christian censorship.

From the reading of the tale of Twilight, Midnight and Dawn, where the typical dragon-slayer's role is antagonistic, we could say that this replacement of an important pagan figure or its erasing are expected. Given this and the pattern we found between the *centum* and *satem* groups, it would be fair to favor a hypothetical version of the hellhound myth more similar to that of Indo-Iranian culture in Slavic polytheism.

Unfortunately, no account on hellhounds could be found in the Anatolian branch. But since we have the dragon-slayer myth with no dogs in it, so far we can make a risky guess that if Anatolians had a hellhound myth at all, it would look much more like the Eastern version than the Western version. The lack of evidence of a hellhound myth in the Anatolian branch also suggests that it was not developed in PIE, but in the later “mature” IE (as West likes to call it)<sup>168</sup> from which the PIE branches (except for Anatolian) actually derive from. However, this is all quite speculative and more evidence would need to be gathered — if they exist at all — to be anyhow assertive about such assumptions.

Concerning Irish and Norse accounts, which were conceived under Christian context, it is plausible to say that the pagan elements are quite evident and become even more so when comparative mythology is applied. The *Eddas* are particularly interesting on that matter, because they seem to take the hellhounds more similarly to what would be the IE tradition (especially when compared to Vedic) than later accounts on

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168 2007, p. 5-6.

Cerberus or Orthros from the Greek side. It seems that, despite the fact that Sturluson was Christian, his account on the Ragnarök matches quite well with what other Indo-European sources convey about the dragon-slayer and the hellhound myths.

That reveals a lot about his intentions with this document: to register the stories that he had access to, presumably in an attempt to not let his own cultural background fade with the rise of a different culture. The very fact that the poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* were written — and quite close to the conversion of Scandinavia — reveals to us that these subjects were quite important in the cultural context of that time, in which two “antagonistic” cultures, so to speak, inhabited the same place and one was being replaced by the other. Not quite in an attempt to save the old faith, but rather in an attempt to keep track of Icelandic identity, which was largely shaped by folklore and mythology. Irish accounts seem to portray the same; even if depaganized, the writers of the stories we have seen probably were making an effort to keep an old identity alive while facing the dominance of Christian faith. They also helped to figure out the distinction between *centum* and *satem* versions of the myth; so what seemed quite residuous at first was very useful in the reconstruction of the hellhound myth.

At last, it seems that the maintenance of polytheism does not necessarily mean the maintenance of IE concepts. Even though Vedic accounts seem to preserve the IE hellhound

concept with a certain precision, it seems that Greek authors had more space for innovation. The IE aspects of this myth would not be as visible without iconography and it seems that Greek writing strayed away from the earliest conceptions of the hellhound. Zoroastrianism reinforces that, since the IE hellhound myth seems to be fairly preserved in the *Vendidad* and later texts. Even though Keresāsp's status as a god (even though referred to as "immortal" in the *Bundahišn*) seems to be lost, his recorded heroic deeds seem to have deep roots in IE tradition, as seen in other related dragon-slayer stories. Therefore, there seems to be a difference between an internal religious shift (which would be the case for Zoroastrianism) and an external one with the conversion to Christianity. Polytheistic myths seem to survive in either context, even if in residuous forms.

## Conclusions

To be brief, we can summarize the results of this study in the following statements:

- The hellhound myth in accounts related to PIE can be traced back to an IE "proto-myth", instead of being just connected to a general symbolism around the necrophagic behavior of canids or a Palaeolithic motif;
- The "proto-hellhounds" were two in number, either four-eyed or two-headed, and were the watchdogs of the passage to the IE underworld;

- The hellhound myth was originally concerned only with personal eschatology and was unrelated to heroic tales;
- The “draconization” and the merging of the hellhound with the dragon-slayer myth are innovations that can be assigned to the *centum* group;
- The dominance of a monotheistic tradition, either Christianity or Zoroastrianism, seemed less damaging to IE polytheistic concepts than other cultural processes in general, like linguistic changes from PIE, the symbolic connotation of dogs in general, contact between peoples or the reshaping of surrounding elements to the myth in question (ex.: the afterlife scenarios);
- Cultural changes (either religious conversion, reform or others) can reorganize mythic characters and their roles; ex.: the “draconization” process, hellhounds becoming part of the Ragnarök in Norse accounts, the storm god-hero becoming an antagonist in Russian tales, *et cetera*.

What we can draw from this comparative study, apart from a clearer shape of the hellhound myth cultivated by PIE speakers, is also how sources from different contexts helped to shape this “proto-myth” and how it seems to survive even after religious conversion or reform. It has shown that it is possible to identify with some precision which elements are pre-Christian in such narratives; or at least when the accounts have a latent polytheistic background — thus leading to Indo-European mythology. The divergences between traditions

could be explained with a certain degree of security, and a statement by Dowden can help us clarify this:

“In fact Greek Mythology is a shared fund of motifs and ideas ordered into a shared repertoire of stories. These stories link with, compare and contrast with, and are understood in the light of, other stories in the system. Greek Mythology is an ‘intertext’, because it is constituted by all the representations of myths ever experienced by its audience and because every new representation gains its sense from how it is positioned in relation to this totality of previous presentations.”<sup>169</sup>

I believe this can be applied to other Indo-European cultures as well; these myths were not told isolated from others and studying them without some flexibility in the scope might as well produce as result some kind of ignorance towards the flexibility of such stories. This somehow finds concordance with structuralist ideas of Lévi-Strauss, in which a “mytheme” can be arranged in a semantic field similarly to how words form sentences. Thus, the general meaning of a myth cannot be obtained by isolated components, but rather through their combination.<sup>170</sup> But that would also have to include “occult” elements that are not necessarily part of a narrative, but are voluntarily or not expressed by it; such as historical-linguistic background, cultural changes and identity, and religious conversion and reforms.

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169 Dowden, 1992, p.6

170 Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.242-244.

Of course, there is still a lot to be uncovered within these narratives if we consider the other elements (like the dragon-slayer motif) in the “sentences” that the hellhound myth takes part; such as the underworld ruler, or the bodies of water that fill the otherworldly landscape.<sup>171</sup> Nonetheless, apart from the discussion of the flexibility of those stories, it seems that myths are not only a form of religious practice, but I argue that those are the most ancient form of entertainment and formative to the identity of a people.<sup>172</sup> This might be the driving force that made polytheistic stories survive quite well under conversion and even censorship in monotheistic contexts. Through our reading of the sources, we have seen that the hellhound myth has undergone all kinds of distortions; due to time, social changes, deterioration of linguistic elements and many other reasons. In every culture, however, there seems to be two opposing forces that might make each case and version of a myth so particular, and yet, so traditional: preservation and innovation.

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171 Those have been addressed by Lincoln (1991, p. 32-48; p. 49-61).

172 See Huizinga (1949, p.129-130) and Vernant (2006, p.14).

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