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Canes inferni

The Indo-European pedigree of Cerberus, a hellhound

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Orientador: Vicente Dobroruka

Brasília – DF

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Qualquer árvore que queira tocar os céus precisa ter raízes tão profundas a ponto de tocar os infernos.

Carl Jung.

RESUMO

Esta monografia se propõe a investigar o desenvolvimento dos mitos de cães infernais em culturas ligadas linguisticamente ao *protoindo-europeu, uma língua hipotética que teoricamente deu origem a outras línguas antigas. O estudo recua o desenvolvimento do conteúdo dos registros até um mito do cão infernal indo-europeu, que ilumina nossa compreensão não apenas de como os mitos de cães infernais podem ter se afastado do mito em *PIE, mas também como se desenvolveram em cada cultura que apresenta registros nesse assunto.

Palavras-chave: Estudos indo-europeus; mitologia; cães infernais; poesia antiga.

ABSTRACT

This monography aims to investigate the development of hellhound myths in cultures connected linguistically to *Proto-Indo-European, an hypothetic language that theoretically gave birth to other ancient languages. The study traces the development of the content of the accounts back to an Indo-European hellhound myth, which enlightens our comprehension of not only how the hellhound myths could have strayed away from that *PIE myth, but also how they have developed in each culture that presents accounts on that matter.

Keywords: Indo-European studies; mythology; hellhounds; ancient poetry.

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Illustration 1. "Hérakles et Cérbère".

Introduction

Indo-Europeans, *PIE¹ and comparative method

Scholars from various countries and academic backgrounds have dedicated their time and effort to understand the *Proto-Indo-European (or *PIE, for short) related phenomena. This field of knowledge supports itself primarily on linguistic evidence and investigation. However, a lot can be clarified about the cultures and languages that derived from *PIE in other aspects as well, such as social hierarchies, laws, myths and culture overall. Some of those similarities are quite clear, while others appear to be way more obscure; like the linguistic connection between the gods Zeus, Jupiter, Tyr and words like Latin *deus* and Sanskrit *deva* (FORTSON, 2010, p.48-49) in contrast with the Sanskrit word *sábala*, which apparently shares a linguistic background with the Greek hellhound *Kerberos*, but is still quite debatable (LINCOLN, 1991, p.96-97 & WEST, 2007, p.392). Although the task of deciphering this development from a culture and language that has left nothing substantial in practical terms seems incredibly difficult, many researchers tried to apply precise methods and techniques in order to be more accurate in their statements when it comes to Indo-European studies.

According to Fortson, there are three main possibilities from which such linguistic similarities in both sound and meaning can come from. The first would be simply chance, as humans can produce a limited amount of sounds and the combinations of them to form words are also limited. The second would be linguistic borrowing, a situation in which the speakers of a language introduce words from another language into their own, and the contact between peoples does not result only in linguistic exchange, but cultural as well. This is very likely to happen in colonization or domination processes. The third possibility is that of “language universals”. Forston gives us two examples, the first being onomatopoeic words, usually referring to animals, whose names sound like the noises such animal can produce. The second refers to words derived from the way babies try to communicate. This generates similar words in unrelated languages, which happens often with words that mean “mother”, for example. If none of those cases happen in a collection of similarities between languages, the possibility of a common origin is clearer and should be studied (FORTSON, 2010, pp.27-28).

¹ An asterisk symbol is used to indicate that this is a reconstructed language, as it has no material evidence that supports it and its existence is recognizable only through linguistic reconstruction.

This same method can be applied to other instances which are not necessarily linguistic, such as religion, laws and culture in general. Although Indo-European studies usually surround *PIE and linguistics even when dealing with other kinds of subject, the scope of this monography is primarily the narratives of hellhounds from cultures which the language had been developed from *PIE. The occurrence of mythical hellhounds in several texts from cultures already binded by *PIE linguistic background indicates the possibility of an Indo-European hellhound myth from which the Greek-Roman Cerberus, the Norse Garmr and others derive. However, this does not mean that the linguistic aspect of this problem will be put aside – it just means that this is not a work about linguistics, but rather a work about the development of the Indo-European hellhound myth. Therefore, the aim of this research is to define whether the hellhound myths came from an Indo-European context or not and how far it is possible to dig into such roots.

Methodological issues concerning working with Indo-European myths

The hellhound myth is present in many traditions related to *PIE. Our scope covers most of the appearances of what we can consider hellhounds, even though some of them could not be covered due to limited time and resources.² The sources were selected based on narrative patterns that could be found in Greek-Roman, Iranian, Norse and Indic traditions. Several elements of the hellhound myths will be looked through, like the events, characters, places and intention of the tales. As long as we can find a common ground between all those, a *PIE background starts to become way more visible.

In *PIE studies, scholars usually face a quite unique challenge in the field: the chronological distance between the materials that are of use as evidence. The contextual differences due to geographical distances are already very demanding, but the timespan between sources also matter. There is a time gap of possibly 2,000 years between Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Poetic Edda, to mention two of the sources that will be covered in this work.³ However, when working with myths specifically, there are two aspects that we must consider: sacrality and versification.

² Examples are the wolves Hati and Sköl and some of Fenrirs narratives from Norse tradition, or Indra's hound in Indic tradition.

³ Hesiod dates back to the Eighth Century BCE according to Gardiner (2019, p.9), and the Poetic Edda is available in a fragmentary copy of a manuscript dated around 1270 CE according to Pettit (2023, p.1)

The holy character of a poem makes it more likely to be referring to tradition. The acceptance of a text like Hesiod's *Theogony* in ancient Greece means that it had something to do with characters that were already well established in his public's mindset. This does not mean, however, that Hesiod did not have any poetic license to change the stories and characters somehow, but rather points out that he needed already known characters to work with in the first place. Hesiod would not create a whole new pantheon in order to get an idea across; it just makes sense that the divine characters in his works had at least parts of their narratives very close to what people would expect and relate with. Otherwise, the characters and stories would have no weight to their listener or reader, since none of it would reflect in their lives or cosmology and, therefore, none of it would be relevant. A connection to such sacrality in written accounts implies the necessity of ancient poets to stick a religious tradition in order to remain relevant to their audience. Also, the fact that most myth themed texts were written in verses and not in prose form means that they probably make reference to an oral poetic tradition, since a versified form of speech would be easier to memorize. This means that poets probably had the intention to retain the tradition in their memory and pass it on as close as possible to the version of the poem that had been told to them in the first place.

Clearly, this does not guarantee that divergences in these poems would not occur over the course of time. Such differences can be born either from the poets forgetting parts of the poem – and perhaps trying to fill those blanks – or from their own choice to bring new elements or erase others to make the narrative more interesting for themselves or their audience. This is actually what is expected to happen between the time and space distances of the texts we work with in *PIE studies. However, the undeniable similarities between such texts is quite surprising, and that is what makes it likely that ancient poets intentionally maintained at least core elements of the mythical narratives. And as we will see, the hellhound apparently is one of the core elements of Indo-European mythology, especially in poems that display an escathological character.

It should also be clear that the study of resemblances in *PIE related myths isn't a new field of study. The type of evidence gathered to cover hellhounds' links to such roots and the method applied to clarify them can also be used when studying other characters and narratives from mythologies of cultures derived from *PIE. A lot of that reconstruction has already been covered by West's and Fortson's work.⁴

⁴ Both Fortson (2010, pp.48-49) and West (2007, pp.120-279) have covered qualities and names of deities that might have come from *PIE, like the names of the gods Zeus, Jupiter and Tyr; from Greek, Latin and Norse

Another important problem in this kind of research are the peculiarities of each tradition we cover. We not only have to deal with the methodological issues of comparing all of the traditions, but it is also crucial that we keep in mind such issues when it comes to each tradition and each text. Even within the same literary tradition, we have divergences that should be strictly analyzed. If we take Greek tradition, for example, the first mention to a hellhound is in Homer's work, dating around 800-750 BCE. Then we have Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which dates around the year 405 BCE (GARDINER, 2019, p.1 and p.15). These records not only have a chronological distance of almost four hundred years, but they were also born in different contexts of Ancient Greece. And more importantly, their approach to the character in question – in this case, Cerberus – is definitely different. While Homer's approach is overall epic, Aristophanes' approach is meant to be amusing, as expected from a Greek comedy.

Working with myths and former oral tradition

There is no field of science dedicated specifically to myth. What happens is that a larger field covers this kind subject eventually. As an example, when anthropologists face this matter, they are actually trying to figure out something concerning culture, as much as psychologists would be trying to understand the mind (SEGAL, 2004, p.2). Therefore, our goal when studying the hellhound myths is not to simply understand it, but rather to use it as a mean to understand historical processes. In this case, the development of this myth over time.

According to Segal, studying myth usually surrounds the questions that concern the researcher. In his own words:

The three main questions are those of origin, function, and subject matter. By 'origin' is meant why and how myth arises. By 'function' is meant why and how myth persists. [...] By 'subject matter' is meant the referent of myth. Some theories read myth literally, so that the referent is the straightforward, apparent one, such as gods. Other theories read myth symbolically, and the symbolized referent can be anything (SEGAL, 2004, p.2).

Finding the origin of any idea is usually almost impossible, unless it came from a very specific author and the birth of such idea is well documented. Even if it is not possible to

traditions respectively. West also elaborates further on cosmology and cosmogony (p.340-374), looking for shared elements in creation myths.

recover the very spark of the hellhound myth, it is possible to see what fertilized the soil in which such myth flourished and how it grew afterwards, until Cerberus and others became the characters that we have available in the historical records. Therefore, even though we cannot reach the exact origin of the tale, a comparative study like this can provide evidence concerning where and when some of the development of the myth started or was interrupted.

In terms of “function”, studying myth can be quite challenging. Specially in the case of Antiquity, we usually cannot check any other sources than the very few written ones, which means that we have very limited access to folklore and folktales. Furthermore, the biases of a myth eventually can change from one author to another. Segal explores such divergences in the myth of Adonis, emphasizing the differences of the same myth in Apollodorus’ and Ovid’s works.

Where Apollodorus presents the story as true, Ovid presents it as fictional. Where Apollodorus tells it straight, Ovid twists it to fit larger themes [...] Where Apollodorus intends his story to be taken literally, Ovid intends his to be read metaphorically. Where Apollodorus is serious, Ovid is playful (SEGAL, 2004, p.10).

What matters for us here is the fact that our access to the myth is limited by the intentionality and subjectivity of the authors who registered it in the first place. This is what was meant to be explored before, when Homer’s and Aristophanes’ approaches to the hellhound were mentioned. However, concerning *PIE studies, we can say that the general effort of poets to memorize holy poems creates the function of keeping tradition alive to some extent. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind in which moments this function could have changed in our records – or perhaps even before them – in order to detect which elements are more likely to have Indo-European origins and which ones had their origin in later cultural traits or even specific authors.

1. Records on hellhound myths

1.1. Greek and Roman texts and iconography

Greek and Roman sources are probably the richest when it comes to narrative details concerning hellhound myths. However, this can be rewarding as much as it can be dangerous; too many details means that the myth has been more developed in this specific tradition and that it strayed away from its possible Indo-European origin. Therefore, the most reliable

accounts we have are the earliest available and the most “raw”, since they are more likely to be connected to the tales that were told in *PIE. Since we want to dive into the echoes of an ancient oral tradition, which has left us no evidence other than the already fragmented and more recent traditions that were influenced by it, we shall start our analysis with the oldest material available from each cultural context.

When we think about the earliest texts in Greek literature, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* always come to mind. It would be possible to say that Cerberus is mentioned in these texts, but we have to keep in mind that its description in these works is quite vague. The name *Kérberos* is not even mentioned, but its role in the narrative makes it very likely that the “hound of Hades” mentioned by Homer is the same as Cerberus.

Yea, he [Zeus] once sent me [Heracles] hither to fetch the hound of Hades, for he could devise for me no other task mightier than this. The hound I carried off and led forth from the house of Hades; and Hermes was my guide, and flashing-eyed Athene.⁵

This passage only refers to the hellhound as a part of a task performed by the hero Herakles. The only information concerning Cerberus here would be its relation to Hades and the god’s house, from which we can infer its role as watchdog of the underworld. In Hesiod’s work, though, Cerberus is described with much more detail than it was in Homer’s. We do not have much data available to date neither of the two authors precisely. However, according to Most, a “rough guess” situates both around the end of the 8th century and the start of the 7th (MOST, 2006, p.xxv). The first mention to the name *Kérberos*⁶ appears in the *Theogony* in the following passage:

They say that Typhon, terrible, outrageous, lawless, mingled in love with her [Echidna], a quick-eyed virgin; and she became pregnant and bore strong-hearted children. First she bore Orthus, the dog, for Geryoneus; second, she then gave birth to something intractable, unspeakable, Cerberus who eats raw flesh, the bronze-voiced dog of Hades, fifty-headed, ruthless and mighty; third, she then gave birth to the evil-minded Hydra of Lema, which the goddess, white-armed Hera, raised, dreadfully wrathful against Heracles' force.⁷

⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* (11.623-625).

⁶ The name actually appears in the accusative case of the Greek language, *Kérberon*.

⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* (306-315).

As we can see, this passage refers to Cerberus' genealogy. According to Hesiod's view of Greek myth, Echidna the monster had a relationship with Typhon, whose offspring were the dogs Cerberus and Orthus and the well known monster Hydra. We also have a more detailed description of Cerberus, one that emphasizes a monstrosity that matches that of its parents. Perhaps this attention to Cerberus in Hesiod's work was responsible for its maintainance in Greek and Roman stories, while Orthus was mentioned in a way smaller number of later accounts. Going further in that same text, another dog is mentioned. This time, its role is very similar to that of the hellhound that appears in Homer's works. It guards the front of Hades' *domoi*:

That [Tartarus] is where, in front, stand the echoing houses of the earthly god, of powerful Hades and of dread Persephone, and a terrible dog guards them in front, pitiless. He has an evil trick: upon those going in he fawns alike with his tail and with both ears, but he does not let them leave again: instead, observing them closely he devours whomever he catches trying to go out from the gates of powerful Hades and dread Persephone.⁸

This passage focuses more on the cruelty and pitilessness of the character than on its physical features. We should also consider that, as in Homer's works, no name has been given to the hellhound mentioned. However, there is no reason to suppose that these hellhounds are different characters. We can comprehend this as an artistic choice, since both would be Hades' watchdog and, therefore, the same. It is also clever to consider a passage in the *Theogony* next to the first mention of Cerberus, which is exactly the same as one present in the *Iliad*.⁹ This passage does not refer to Cerberus or any hellhounds at all, but although many editors do not consider it (MOST, 2006, p.29), this could be evidence for the possibility that Hesiod actually read and was inspired by Homer's works. This means that the hellhounds mentioned by both authors are more likely to be referring to the same mythical character.

As said before, Cerberus is also mentioned in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. The first time it appears in the comedy is merely a reference to Herakles' work.¹⁰ Then, the hellhound appears again in a funny passage, where the god Dionysus dresses up as Herakles and is confronted by Aeacus:

⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony* (767-774).

⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*. (323-324).

¹⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs* (111).

O you abominable, you shameless reckless wretch — / villain, villain, damned smiling villain — / the man who made of with Cerberus my dog! / You grabbed him by the throat and throttled him, / then took off on the run, while I stood guard. / Now you're caught — black-hearted Stygian rocks, / and blood-dripping peaks of Acheron will hold you down. Roaming hounds of Cocytus / will gnaw your guts to bits — Echnida, too, / and she's a hundred heads.¹¹

This passage not only mentions Cerberus, but also other hellhounds that surround Cocytus river in the underworld. It shows that the idea of a hellhound is not necessarily restricted to Hades' watchdog in Greek folklore. Other passages show the same, specially those where hellhounds accompany the goddess Hekate.¹² However, such passages do not contribute as much to this research, since they do not fall into the pattern of myths that are within our scope. As will be seen further ahead, the hellhound myth usually is about a watchdog. A pack of dogs without a very defined role does not necessarily fall into any of the categories in which the hellhound myths tend to fit in. Nonetheless, their existence is worth mentioning, since this monography covers the hellhound myth after all.

In another passage in Aristophanes' works, but this time in *Knights*, the author makes a fun description of Cerberus' behavior, comparing him to a common dog.

'Son of Erechtheus, beware of Cerberus, the dog which kidnaps men. When you are at a meal he fawns on you with wagging tail, but he's watching to devour your dishes, when you look away, your mouth agape. Often in the night he sneaks into your kitchen rooms, while you are unaware, and, like a dog, licks clean your plates and islands.'¹³

The comic aspect of this passage can make us infer that the public of Aristophanes' comedies was already very familiar with Hesiod's work, given that there are some clear resemblances with the *Theogony*. Like in Hesiod's version, Cerberus here is docile at first, but shows its true beastly nature given the certain circumstances. In the *Theogony*, Cerberus is friendly when the dead enters Hades' gates, while it shows this behavior when watching someone have their meal in *Knights*. After that, Cerberus is violent and devours whoever he catches trying to escape death in Hesiod's account, while it is tricky and devours one's food when sleeping in Aristophanes'. Perhaps it means that most Greeks – including both authors –

¹¹ Aristophanes, *Frogs* (465-474).

¹² Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* (3.1217).

¹³ Aristophanes, *Knights* (1030).

were all familiar with a general concept of that myth. This would determine both the acceptance of Hesiod's version of it and Aristophanes' efficiency in amusing his public. Since it is a play, it is more likely that Aristophanes' public was not restricted to higher classes and literate people, which means that this joke was made over a general comprehension of Cerberus' myth. The question is whether this general comprehension came before it was recorded in Hesiod's works or the inverse, with the *Theogony* being so acclaimed that all sorts of people would be able to draw references from it, specially those who listened to someone reading it rather than reading it directly.

Although Cerberus is usually depicted as a three-headed dog in pop culture¹⁴, such description is comparatively recent in classical literature. The first time the hellhound is described like this is in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which is dated back to the First Century BCE (GARDINER, 2019, p.41). The first passage where Cerberus might have appeared in Virgil's work is rather an inference than a clear reference to the hellhound:

And besides there are many monsters of diverse wild beasts: the Centaurs make their stall in the doors, and the Scyllas of double shape, and Briareus the hundred handed, and the monster of Lerna hissing terribly, and the Chimaera with armed with flames, Gorgons and Harpies, and the form of the three-bodied shade.

[...]

Mighty Cerberus makes these realms resound with triple-throated bark, reclining huge at the entrance of the cave. To him the priestess, seeing that his neck already bristles with snakes, throws a cake drugged with honey and medicated meal. He [Aeneas], opening his three throats in ravening hunger, catches the cake thrown him, and relaxes his mighty back, spread out on the ground, and stretches huge along the whole cave. Aeneas seizes on the approach when the guard is buried in sleep, and quickly passes beyond the bank of the stream whence none returns.¹⁵

In the first passage, Cerberus is possibly mentioned along other monsters that inhabit the underworld. Once again, the monstrosity of the hellhound is enhanced in written tradition. Subsequently, with a more straightforward mention to Cerberus, we can see that now the hellhound is described with three heads, which is a new feature in written tradition. We could speculate that this innovation occurs due to some kind of mixture of Italic oral tradition with Greek imported written tradition, but *Cerebus* in any Latin text is much more likely to have

¹⁴ This can be seen in movies like Disney's *Hercules*, *Harry Potter* or *Percy Jackson*.

¹⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* (6.285-288 & 417-425).

been borrowed from Greek tradition's *Kérberos* than to have been developed from Latin oral tradition; specially in the case of the *Aeneid*, where many other Greek characters are mentioned.¹⁶ This description of Cerberus, however, is the first of many in Greek-Roman sincretism and might be helpful to determine the relationship that Greek authors had with other written sources – some of them of Roman origin – or with Greek folklore and oral tradition.

One text that rose in this context is the *Library*, which has a quite obscure authorship, but is attributed to Apollodorus. In this account, we have another mention to Orthus, Cerberus' brother that so far had only been mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

As a tenth labour he was ordered to fetch the kine of Geryon from Erythia. [...] He owned red kine, of which Eurytion was the herdsman and Orthus, the two-headed hound, begotten by Typhon on Echidna, was the watchdog. [...] And having reached Erythia he lodged on Mount Abas. However the dog, perceiving him, rushed at him; but he 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 [...]¹⁷

We can see in this passage that Orthus now has a little more detailed description than that of Hesiod, in which he is presented as a two-headed watchdog and protector of Geryon's cattle. It is not completely clear, however, if Hades' kine was the same as Geryon's or if they were just in the same place. Later in that book, Cerberus is also mentioned:

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 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 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.¹⁸

Once more, Cerberus is given another intriguing description. But what makes this passage important is that Apollodorus' *Library* came much later than Hesiod's *Theogony*, and the authorship of this work is also frequently discussed, which might affect the definition of

¹⁶ Virgil mentions, for example, Achilles and Hector from the *Iliad* in the *Aeneid* (1.95-99).

¹⁷ Apollodorus, *Library* (2.5.10).

¹⁸ Apollodorus, *Library* (2.5.12).

the quality of this source. This happens because this work mentions Castor – who was probably born in the First century BCE – which would be impossible for Apollodorus the Grammmariam, who lived around 140 BCE (FRAZER, 1921, p.ix-xi). That means that this account might not refer to a Classic comprehension of Cerberus and Orthos, but rather a later and probably romanized version of the myth. The divergences between Apollodorus’ and Hesiod’s writings concerning the hellhound myth indicates that Apollodorus might have wanted to make the myth more interesting at some point, since he was born much later than Hesiod. Also, we can see that this hellhound description matches Virgil’s description of Cerberus in the *Aeneid*, which only came in the First Century BCE.

This issue gets more complex as soon as we start analyzing art in vases that depict Cerberus or Orthus. The Caeretan hydria, a collection of vases made by the Eagle Painter, show a series of illustrations of the hellhound myths in Greek culture.



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As we can see, Cerberus is depicted with three heads in this vase. It was found in Italy – more precisely, in Caere or modern Cerveteri – and dates around the last quarter of the Sixth Century BCE²⁰, which indicates that the idea of a three-headed hellhound might actually be older than its written account in the *Aeneid*, dating back to the Greek Archaic Period. This happens to create new questions that could turn our approach concerning the Greek-Roman hellhound myth to another way. But before entering this discussion, it is important to

¹⁹ “Héraklès et Cèrbère”, available at the Musée du Louvre (Cp 66; E 701). Photo by Hervé Lewandowski, 1993.

²⁰ Data taken from Louvre’s website. Access on 28/07/2024. Available at: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010268296#>

understand what kind of methodology and implications we have when dealing with this kind of iconographic source.

Even if it is not the usual field of work of historiography, in Ancient History a lot can be appropriated from archeology and art. The main problem when dealing with this approach is that visual art and texts should be criticized by very different criteria. And in our case, in which the two different categories will be compared, we should also note that there will be a lot of divergences between the materials, and the reasons for such divergences might not be that obvious.

The reasons for the divergences in depictions in art and descriptions in texts are many. The first that can be thought of, according to Lowenstam, is that “the two media have essential differences. Some things that can be articulated in words are impossible to depict in art” (LOWENSTAM, 1992, p.167). We can only imagine how hard it would be to paint Cerberus like in Hesiod’s approach, with its fifty heads. Along with that, Hesiod could use descriptions that are not just visual and would be impossible to reproduce in a vase, like Cerberus’ bronze-like voice. Another possibility is the lack of information of painters over written tradition, either because they did not have access to it at all or because they could not remember some of it. We should also consider the possibility that painters could be relating to oral tradition instead of texts, which is likely to create such divergences. And yet, as Lowenstam criticizes, “critics often prefer to blame the painter’s memory or knowledge rather than to consider other plausible alternative” (LOWENSTAM, 1992, p.169). Finally, another reason for such deviations of art from written tradition could be simply artistic license. For example, painters could use symbolic imagery to depict a scene instead of being completely faithful to written tradition (LOWENSTAM, 1992, p.170). We should keep in mind that unlike later Christian religious thought, the Ancient Greeks were not worried with religious orthodoxy. And even in a context like that, art usually finds its way to express religious ideas outside of the religious canon. An example of that would be Dante Alighieri’s famous *Divine Comedy*. Although Lowenstam’s study concerns specifically vases that relate to Homeric poetry, his conclusions can be useful for our purpose, since the methodology over similar kinds of sources can be replicated somehow. In conclusion, Lowenstam states that “For our purposes, it is not necessary to learn the exact reason, as much as we might wish to know it, but merely to recognize the range of reasons that might explain the differences” (LOWENSTAM, 1992, p.182).

With that in mind, there are a lot of possibilities that would explain why Cerberus is depicted as a three-headed dog in a vase manufactured in the Archaic Period – and why it was only described this way five hundred years later by Virgil, a Roman author. The painter could

have had access to Hesiod's written sources on Cerberus, but a fifty-headed dog would be too difficult to paint for obvious reasons. In Indo-European cultures, the number three had a symbolic interpretation of totality²¹, which could be the reason for the painter to have chosen this number to represent Cerberus' fifty heads. However, it is plausible that the idea of Cerberus being three-headed was already present in Greek folklore, and Hesiod's description was a way to emphasize his monstrosity in order to make the myth more interesting to his readers when compared to the already established lore.

Another possibility is that the vase also depicts Cerberus with snakes coming of his body, and Hesiod could be referring not only to the dog heads, but also the snake heads. This also gives a lot more meaning to Apollodorus' account, since it refers to this very early idea – the snakes – that is not mentioned by any author previous to him. Because of the time distance, we cannot infer that Apollodorus or whoever wrote the *Library* had contact with this vase, which means that these ideas were spread through other means, probably orally. It is difficult to think of this vase as a big catalyst of change in Greek lore; therefore, this depiction is probably closer to oral tradition than we give credit for initially. Even though Virgil could have been in touch with this idea more directly – since he lived in the same region this vase was created –, the author probably relied in oral sources, given the divergences with previous Greek authors and similarities with the depiction on the vase when it comes to Cerberus' description in the *Aeneid*.

The artifact in question gives resources to rethink a lot of what is expected from a Latin source in this study. In the passage extracted from the *Aeneid*, a lot of Greek mythic characters are mentioned along with Cerberus. The very context of Roman domination of Greece – in which many Greek cultural values were adopted by the Romans – induces us to think that *Cerebus* in Virgil's work would be primarily a copy of Greek *Kérberos*. However, the vase can be evidence for the presence of a hellhound myth in Italy before the arrival of the Greeks there. The depiction could be made by Greeks, but instead of being influenced by their own tradition in its manufacturing, the artist could have found the hellhound description in Italic culture appealing. That way, he might have decided to take some elements of the Italic hellhound myth to represent Cerberus. The hellhound being represented with three heads only in the vase in question and in later Virgil's and Apollodorus' works indicates that such representation is actually an Italic idea rather than Greek. Even if the *Library* was written in Greek, its

²¹ That can be observed in many traditions and myths in cultures derived from *PIE. Examples are the three Norns of past, present and future in Norse tradition (or the three Moirai or Parcae in Greek-Roman tradition) or the triads of gods (like Zeus, Poseidon and Hades). This has also been worked through in West's work (2007, p.329).

complications concerning its authorship makes it likely to have been influenced by Roman cultural expansion. That would explain why the Greek *Kérberos* is not traditionally described the way it is depicted in the vase. Another thing that can be taken into account is the fact that *Cerebus* in Latin is not a direct transliteration of Greek *Kérberos*. Even though this does not exclude the more likely possibility that Greek oral and written traditions influenced Virgil, this could mean that there was a version of the hellhound myth among Etruscans and later Romans before Greek cultural expansion.

1.2. The Iranian *Vendîdâd* and *Bundahišn*

Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion that emerged in Iran, and it has left some accounts concerning hellhounds. In its earliest text, the Avesta, there is a book called the *Vendîdâd*, which holds the following passage:

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.²²

This passage mentions the bridge on which a soul passes after the death of its body. As we can see, it also mentions that dogs guard it, even though a number is not specified. In that same text, after a detailed advise of the god Ahura Mazda to the prophet Zarathustra concerning how to treat the body of a deceased person, Mazda tells:

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.

²² *Vendîdâd* (13.8-9).

Then comes the well-shapen, strong and tall-formed maiden²³, 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 above the Hara-beirazati²⁴; above the Kinvad bridge she places it in the presence of the heavenly gods themselves.²⁵

We can see that the description of the dogs here are not very detailed, except for their presence. The passage focuses more on the spirits involved on the afterlife process, and the dogs play a secondary role. However, we can already see some elements that are also present in Greek texts, like the passage to the world of the dead and the presence of watchdogs in it.

A later text called the *Bundahišn* (or “The Book of Creation”) also mentions a mythic hound that guards the passage to the afterlife in its thirtyth chapter. This chapter is called “On the Kinvad²⁶ Bridge and the Souls of the Departed”.

[...] 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.²⁷

In this account, instead of a plural number of dogs like in the *Vendidad*, only one dog is mentioned. We can infer that the souls that do not show enough dignity would not be able to cross the Kinvad bridge and, therefore, fall into hell. The mythic hound in these texts also do not seem to be specifically related to hell or eschatological punishment, but rather to afterlife in a broader sense.

The first problem we encounter here is the chronological distance between our two sources. In one hand, the *Bundahišn* is difficult to date. Apparently, it is an Islamic-era work, but its content seems to date way back, since it is an important part of Zoroastrian religious literature. This religion has its beginnings in the Bronze Age, around 1,000 BCE according to some scholars. Overall, this record is linked to Avestan tradition, specially to the now unaccessible *Dāmdād Nask* – the “book” of creation (AGOSTINI & THROPE, 2020, pp.xx-xxii). In the other hand, the *Vendîdâd* is also very challenging when it comes to dating. Its Avestan version is in a language that recalls the Avestan language, but it is actually some sort

²³ This character is the feminine counterpart of the dead person that is going through the described process.

²⁴ 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”.

²⁵ *Vendîdâd* (19.29-30).

²⁶ In Agostini’s translation of the *Bundahišn*, the Kinvad bridge is actually written as “*Činwad*”.

²⁷ *Bundahišn* (30.1-3).

of dialect that was probably straying away from Avestan. Since it seems to be later than the *Yašts* that were composed around the 5th century BCE, the *Vendîdâd* probably rose in the Arsacid period²⁸ – between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd CE – or even after.²⁹ Even though those seem to be walls between the composition of such texts and *PIE oral tradition, the hellhound myth itself seems to be another clue that these texts actually have something to do with earlier religious thought – which was probably related to *PIE.

In Iranian tradition, we can see that a lot of the hellhound's description is lost between the *Vendîdâd* and the *Bundahišn*. We cannot infer by that that these records refer to different myths at all, and the shrinking of details in an apparently central part of Zoroastrian eschatology means that this was not an intentional change. Therefore, this can only mean two things: either the *Vendîdâd* had some parts forgotten by whoever elaborated the thirtieth chapter of the *Bundahišn*, or that chapter was written based in oral tradition. If that oral tradition is the same that inspired the *Vendîdâd* or was actually inspired by the book, is another significant question to this matter. It is more likely that if the information in the *Bundahišn* had been passed orally, it was based on what was written in Avestan texts, given the huge impact they had in Iranian culture. Therefore, the passage in the *Bundahišn* is more likely to be linked to the Avesta and the *Vendîdâd* than to be linked to *PIE oral tradition. The hellhound myth present in the *Vendîdâd* could actually be evidence that this text was appealing because it had already established elements from Iranian religious thought that were spread before its composition, some of which can date back to *PIE. This puts this text in different place when it comes to studying *PIE or oral tradition using Iranian accounts.

1.3. The Norse Eddas

The hellhound myth is also present in Germanic tradition. Our richest sources when it comes to pagan Germanic religion happen to be the Scandinavian sagas and poems, specially the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. One of the main issues with the Eddas is that they did not become written sources until the conversion of Scandinavia to christianity. However, this does not unqualify them as important sources of the study of pagan religion, cosmology and tales. Afterall, these texts do not show any concern in hiding themes and characters – specially deities – from a previously pagan context, like it happens to the later poem *Fjölsvinnsmál*, that will be

²⁸ Also known as Parthian period.

²⁹ According to Malandra in the Encyclopaedia Iranica, Access on 26/08/2024. Available at: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/vendidad>

seen further. It is somehow plausible to say that the god Odin is the main character of the Eddas, since it is the most frequently mentioned and most of the tales tell something the god supposedly has done. Furthermore, it seems that these recordings had something to do with Scandinavian people's sense of identity, since they were facing the birth of a new christian identity that was replacing their old ways. That means that even if the authors were already converted christians and writing to other christian readers, the point of the Eddas were not to make some kind of christian version of pagan myths, but rather keep their tradition and tales alive somehow.

In addition to that, the form in which the Poetic Edda presents itself makes it likely for it to come from oral tradition. The Codex Regius, which is our main source for editions of the Poetic Edda, has most of the poems recorded in it. But some poems are not present in it and others are not present in other manuscripts, which makes it possible that these codexes are not meant to be copies of each other, but actually each writer had their own database of poems to record. Even if some of the poems had arrived through other written material concerning Norse folktales, some of them could have come from oral tradition. The very frequent divergences in narrative between poems also contributes to that statement, as we will see. As Pettit states:

[...] uncertain are the poems' original dates of composition,¹⁵ although these obviously must be at least as old as the earliest manuscripts in which the poems were written down. Many of the poems may well have existed, in one form or other, centuries earlier than the surviving thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts, having been composed during the Viking Age using oral techniques (PETTIT, 2023, p.2)

Another issue that we have specifically in *PIE studies is that these accounts are much more recent than others. Although the Eddas are rich sources for studying Norse myths by themselves, they are not as close to *PIE oral tradition as Hesiod's *Theogony*, for example. That puts some limits to the comparative method we use, since Germanic myth had way more time to develop and stray away from Indo-European culture than Greek myth had until they became written sources. However, time is not the only factor that can provoke such deviations. Any substantial social change, like the proliferation of writing, the rise of an empire or the defeat by the hands of a foreign king can be the catalyst of a change in society and its elements, like oral tradition. That means that time is not necessarily what makes our sources deviate from the *PIE version of the hellhound myth after all, so instead of relying too much in which text came earlier or later, it is probably more coherent to also analyze its contents to see if they

match despite their contextual distance or if they are more likely to be copies from each other – or even completely unrelated myths.

Coming back to our main theme – the hellhound –, there is a poem in the Poetic Edda called *Baldrs draumar* (“Baldr’s Dreams”), in which a hellhound is described in a surprisingly similar way to that second time Cerberus is mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Up rose Óðinn, Gautr³⁰ of ages, / and on Sleipnir³¹ he laid a saddle; / he rode from there down to Niflhel³², / he met a whelp, the one which came from Hel³³.
It was bloody across the front of its breast, / and it bayed long at the father of incantation; / forward rode Óðinn, the earth-way resounded, / he came to the high hall of Hel.³⁴

It is possible to identify many common aspects between these stanzas of this poem and one of the passages taken of the *Theogony* shown before. First, it is recognizable that the hellhound has the same role of protecting the home of the ruler of the underworld in both texts. Also, we should take into account that “Hel” is the name of both the goddess of the underworld and the place itself, just like “Hades” in Greek culture. This suggests that it is more likely for these myths to be related to a common source, as their narrative and surroundings are surprisingly similar.

In this poem, however, we begin to face a challenge in the study of hellhounds in the Poetic Edda, which is words chosen and their semantics. Even though we can identify this poem as a hellhound myth because of its narrative elements, the word ‘whelp’ is a translation of the Old Norse word *hvelpi*, which can refer either to a dog’s or a wolf’s puppy in general. In the Poetic Edda, it is frequently hard to discriminate whether the poems refer to dogs or wolves. More of this matter will be seen further ahead.

There are other poems in the Poetic Edda in which mythical hounds appear. In the *Voluspá*, a poem in which the god Odin is talking to a dead witch’s head in order to know about the future, a hound named Garmr is mentioned as below:

³⁰ In Old Norse, *gautr* means someone that came from Gautland, a region in Sweden.

³¹ The horse of the god Óðinn.

³² “Niflhel” means literally “lower cave”. In this context, it could be a mixture between the mythical worlds of Niflheim and Hel.

³³ “Hel” is the Norse underworld and its ruler goddess.

³⁴ *Baldrs draumar*, 2 and 3.

Garmr howls loudly before Gnipahellir, / the fetter will break and the ravener run free; / she knows much lore, I see further ahead, / about the great doom of the powers, of the victory-gods.³⁵

This stanza is repeated almost identically in the stanzas 47 and 56, which emphasizes this event in Norse lore. Although these stanzas use the specific term *garmr*, Crawford translates it as “Fenrir”, another character in Norse lore. This character is a wolf mentioned in another poem, the *Lokasenna* (“Loki’s Flyting”), in which the god Loki insults other gods. In this narrative, Loki reminds the god Tyr, one of the Æsir, that Fenrir tore one of his hands apart. Tyr answers Loki by reminding him that Fenrir will be in bonds until the “doom of the gods” or *Ragnarök*.³⁶ Considering that, it is reasonable to say that Garmr and Fenrir could be the same character. But this assumption has a lot of room for discussion, which will be argued later.

In the *Grimnismál* (or “The Sayings of Grimnir”), the god Odin, disguised as an old man called Grimnir, starts to reveal a lot of aspects concerning Norse lore, mentioning that same dog present in the *Voluspá*, but this time with a less detailed description:

The ash of Yggdrasil³⁷, it’s the greatest of trees, / and Skíðblaðnir of ships, / Óðinn of Æsir³⁸, and Sleipnir of steeds, / Bifröst³⁹ of bridges, and Bragi of poets, / Hábrók of hawks, and Garmr of hounds, / and Brimir of swords.⁴⁰

Although this mention to Garmr is not as detailed as others, it emphasizes the weight this character carries in Norse cosmology, since it appears among other very significant elements of Norse myth, like the god Odin, who protagonizes most of the poems in the Poetic Edda. This is why it is not that certain that Fenrir and Garmr would be the same character. Even though they have the same role in some narratives, the polysemy of the words used to refer to them makes it possible that in each appearance the poem could be referring either to a dog called Garmr or a wolf called Fenrir. In the *Grimnismál*, the word used is *hunda*, which refers more specifically to hounds, making it less likely for it to be referring to Fenrir.

What would explain that is the fact that the Poetic Edda was never meant to be a cohesive literary corpus, but rather the recording of poems that used to be passed on orally.

³⁵ *Voluspá*, 43.

³⁶ *Lokasenna*, 38-39.

³⁷ The world-tree in Norse lore, which holds the nine worlds (including our own, called Midgard) together in its branches and roots.

³⁸ One of the “classes” or “clans” of deities in Norse myth, among with the Vanir and Jötnar.

³⁹ A rainbow bridge that unites Midgard, the world of humans, and Asgard, where the Æsir live.

⁴⁰ *Grimnismál*, 44.

Therefore, the fact that most characters have multiple names and sometimes similar narratives is very likely to create some confusion among the readers. It is possible that the word *garmr* in the *Voluspá* is actually referring to the character Fenrir, while in the *Grimnismál*, Garmr would be someone else. The whelp in *Baldrs draumar* could be referring to one of the two characters.

One could argue that this happens due to stylistic choices of the poets, given that the choice of words would necessarily affect the metric of a poem. Another possibility is that the *PIE poetic tradition faced various changes when branching to Germanic poetry. This changes could have happened even later, when Germanic tradition branched into Scandinavian poetry. Since we can affirm that in *PIE there were hellhound myths, we can consider that the Norse poems that refer to dogs are probably older and more strongly connected to *PIE, while the wolf characters might have become wolves later on.

We can also suppose that this turning of hounds into wolves might be later than we suspect, since there was not a full conversion of characters in this matter, creating this confusion over the species of the characters. We might also consider that to Norse peoples there might not have been a clear distinction between dogs and wolves at all, making it totally possible that the poems are related to *PIE, but changed some aspects because of the common comprehension of this specific society over this matter. Furthermore, like in Hesiod's take on Cerberus, it is possible that ancient poets changed some parts of the poems, transforming the mythic dogs into wolves in order to make them more frightening and more coherent with their god-killing and world-ending role in Norse folklore.

Norse poems still have some accounts that are useful for this research, even though they do not refer to hellhounds directly, but indeed to mythic hounds that could have the same origin as the hellhounds looked through before. The *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrr* mentions other animals that belong to Odin that could be hellhounds:

Warriors advance to the sword-assembly, / that which they laid down at Logafjöll; /
Fróði's⁴¹ peace was torn apart between enemies, / Viðrir's corpse-eager bitches go
about the island.⁴²

'Viðrir' is another name for the god Odin. The word *grey* from Old Norse can either refer to 'she-wolves' or to 'bitches' (FAULKES & BARNES, 2001, p.85), as in the shown translation. This passage could be referring to Geri and Freki, another two characters that

⁴¹ Another name for the god Freyr, one of the main gods among the Vanir.

⁴² *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrr*, stanza 13.

appear in the *Grimnismál*: “Battle-trained, glorious Herjaföðr⁴³ / feeds Geri and Freki; / but on wine alone weapon-noble / Óðinn always lives.”⁴⁴ The words *geri* and *freki*, even if occurring here as proper names, are frequently used to describe or nickname either dogs or wolves, with their meaning usually surrounding “greedy” or “glutton”.

There is a poem called *Fjølsvinnsmál* (“The Sayings of Fjølsvinnr”) that is not present in medieval accounts like the rest of the poems in the Poetic Edda, but actually in seventeenth century records. Usually, it appears in modern editions along with another poem, the *Gróugaldr* (“Gróa’s Incantation”), and since the narratives are continuous, they both appear under the name of *Svipdagsmál* (“The Lay of Svipdagr”). Its narrative shares some clear elements with that older poetic tradition of the Poetic Edda (PETTIT, 2023, p.831) – like the hellhounds themselves, for example. Lincoln states that follows the same formula as a “*descensus ad inferos*” type of narrative (LINCOLN, 1991, p.97), which is exactly what we are looking for in this research. Here is an interesting extract of that poem:

‘Tell me, Fjølsviðr, that which I will ask you / and which I would know: / what those dogs are called, than which I’ve seen / none fiercer before in lands.

‘One is called Gífr, and the other Geri, / if you want to know it; / eleven women, when they guard, / until the powers are ripped apart.

‘Tell me, Fjølsviðr, that which I will ask you / and which I would know: / whether there is anyone who can come inside, / while the attack-daring ones sleep.’

‘Much-opposed sleep was strictly laid down for them, / after the watch was assigned to them; / one sleeps by night, and the other by day, / and no one comes [past], / if he came then.’

‘Tell me, Fjølsviðr, that which I will ask you / and which I would know: / whether there’s any meat, that which men may bring, / and [then] run in, while they eat.’

‘Two wing-morsels lie in Viðófnir’s limbs, / if you want to know it: / that’s the only meat that men may give them, / and [then] run in, while they eat.’⁴⁵

The word “dogs” in the 13th stanza is a translation of the Old Norse word *garmar*, which is the plural of *garmr*. We can also see that Geri, a character mentioned in older sources appears here. The common wachtdog role of the hellhound appears in this poem as well, and we have some interesting features – like their sleeping schedule – that are unique to this poem so far.

⁴³ Refers to Odin, means “father of the hosts”.

⁴⁴ *Grimnismál*, stanza 19.

⁴⁵ *Fjølsvinnsmál*, 13-18.

Once again, the biggest issue about Norse accounts that could be mentioning hellhounds is that there is a concerning ambiguity whether these records refer to dogs or wolves. The Norse terms *garmr*, *grey*, and *freki* could be referring to both. But this does not mean that Norse accounts are any more confusing than clarifying when studying the *PIE correlations of the hellhound myth, since we could see that both *Baldrs draumar* and *Voluspá* can have their narratives connected to the *PIE hellhound myth. And as said before, the usage of such terms might have been a poetic resource to make the stories more appealing and the characters more convincing.

It is common in the Norse tradition for the hellhounds to appear in pairs. Although the names seem different, it is very likely for them to be referring to the same characters in Norse folklore. As seen before, the variety of names for the same character is a common issue in the Eddas, and even if the differences are not intentional, stating that the Poetic Edda is a collection of poems that came from Norse oral tradition makes it possible to understand that such divergences come from the very fluid nature of those stories that eventually became a written tradition. That means that Cerberus being related to Orthus in Hesiod's *Theogony* and the plural number of dogs present in the *Vendîdâd* are also indicators that the myths mentioned are related.

1.4. The Indic *Rigveda*

In the earliest poem in Indian Vedic tradition, the *Rigveda*, another pair of dogs is mentioned. What is most interesting about this source is that it is the oldest we have available. The *Rigveda* mentions many kinds of metals, but does not mention iron at all. That means that it was probably composed in the Bronze Age; which, in a South Asian context, is around 1200-1000 BCE (BRERETON & JAMISON, p.2020, p.14). This means that it has way deeper roots in *PIE than the other texts we analyzed here, and is probably one of the most useful sources to the subject. Even if the content concerning hellhounds is not the most extensive, it is probably the closest we can get to Indo-European poetry directly through a written source. The dogs mentioned are the hounds of the death god Yama, and their description is quite interesting:

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, 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.⁴⁶

Again, the hellhounds belong to the divine ruler of the dead in Indic tradition. They have the same role of Cerberus and Garmr as watchdogs. They also have an ambiguous description: as much as they seem to be guides to a new life after death, they also seem to be the ones who takes people from their previous life in the first place. However, one thing really stands out, which is their physical features. The “four-eyed” dogs are as close to Cerberus as we can get, since we can assume that having multiple heads also implies a higher number of eyes or the ability to look at multiple directions. This description can be interpreted as the hellhounds being able to watch better, since an extra pair of eyes would definitely help in this task. Another way to interpret it is to assume the poets wanted to emphasize the grotesque character of the hellhound, which is certainly applicable to Cerberus’ case and might also be in Norse accounts. This feature could also be just something that would qualify the dogs as divine or spiritual, since multiple limbs or organs are common in Indic tradition when it comes to this type of character.⁴⁷

The hellhounds’ narrative in the *Rigveda* shows us a lot, specially after looking through the other sources related to *PIE. Because of its age, this text reveals that some aspects of the hellhound myth that were being discovered in the reading of later sources might actually be closely related to Indo-European poetry. The fact that it presents a pair of dogs, their monstrous physique and humor, their relationship with death and the ruler of the underworld and their role of guardians match most of the traits that we could trace to *PIE in the other sources analyzed here.

2. The names of the hellhounds

As said in the introduction, the linguistic aspect of this matter will not be put aside. Although not all hellhounds covered in this monography have a recorded proper name, a lot can be thought through the analyzed narratives. West suggests that the origin of that name comes from the Sanskrit adjective used to describe Yama’s hounds, *sábara*, which would mean

⁴⁶ *Rigveda* (X.14.10-12).

⁴⁷ This can be seen in many pieces of hindu iconography, as well as in the *Rigveda* itself in characters like Vetasu (VI.21.8)

“brindled” or “spotted”, as seen in Jamison’s and Brereton’s translation of the *Rigveda* before (WEST, 2008, p.392). However, Lincoln argues that although this term would be phonetically compatible with *Kérberos*, it gets semantically lost in the *PIE context. Other words similar in sound in this context, especially in Slavic and Old Irish, have very divergent meanings. According to him, these semantic distinctions are “most notably Slavic *sobol*, “sable”, and Old Irish *corbaim* “soiled, stained”. Furthermore, Lincoln states that the word *sábala* and its related words in Sanskrit language do not necessarily mean “spotted”, but rather accentuates that each one of Yama’s hounds has a different color from the other. This is supported by Armenian evidence concerning the mythic dogs Spítak “the white” and Siaw “the black”, the hounds of life and death respectively (LINCOLN, 1991, pp.96-97).

According to Lincoln, the name Cerberus would have developed from the same roots as the Germanic mythical hounds Garmr and Geri. The word *garmr* descends from the *PIE root **gher*, which was used to describe animal noises. Such germanic hound names, alongside with Freki and Gífr, are closely related to each other, mostly meaning “greedy”. These terms are all related to that same **gher* root. Even though no specific meaning can be elaborated from it, this root is probably related to the *PIE roots **ger* and **ker*, which were used in many cases to describe animal noises in an onomatopaic way (LINCOLN, 1991, pp.97-99).

Along with that, the fact that these *PIE roots have developed over time mixed up with the effort of poets to maintain the oral tradition through their words. This was very valuable in Indo-European culture. The urge to keep the use of the roots **ker* and **gher* in sacred poetry while the common tongue developed new words to refer to dogs, such as Old Norse *hund* (which survived in modern Germanic languages) and Greek *kyon*, probably was the recipe for the birth of the proper names for the hellhounds in both traditions.

The fact that Cerberus’ name is omitted in parts from both Homer’s and Hesiod’s works could be interpreted simply as an stylistic or poetic choice from the authors. However, although this is not as visible in the *Vendîdâd* or the *Bundahišn*, since a name for the hellhound has never been mentioned in persian texts, this also seems to happen in *Baldrs draumar*. Apparently, in both Greek and Norse cultures the hellhound had a name that was sometimes omitted. Such stylistic choice in the poems could have come from the Indo-European oral tradition, or perhaps this sustains the argument that the name *Kérberos* simply meant “dog” in the past and lost its meaning with the development of the Greek language, becoming a proper name.

3. Typology of hellhound myths

Looking through the passages reunited in this work, it is wise to recognize the ties that the hellhound myths in different cultures have with each other. In order to make the similarities of the myths clearer, organizing them in types can be very rewarding. The following typology will identify each passage to one or more categories of hellhound myths, since the categories will be based on the character's role, description and the narrative of the text as a whole. Each category will cover at least two different traditions and is based on core elements of the myths. The point of this section is also to put into dialogue how these specific elements can diagnose a *PIE background to the sources.

However, this typology does not intend to follow structuralist based formulae⁴⁸, but rather illustrate in which points the narratives converge. Since the nature of myth itself is very fluid, this work does not find that kind of thought the most fitting to a contemporary approach to the study of this matter, even though it has its strong points and developed a lot of the thought put on this field of research. An also fluid take on this subject seems to be more useful to its understanding than a strict system of the disposal of narrative elements.

3.1. Escathological accounts

The first element noticeable of the hellhound myth does not concern the legendary character directly, but rather the nature of the texts in which this myth appears. Most of them are poems that focuses in describing either the *post mortem* spiritual process or the end of times. In the *Theogony*, Cerberus appears in a section in which Hesiod describes essentially the underworld and its creatures. Aristophanes, even though he wrote comedies, created stories that took place in the realm of Hades. In Norse tradition, Garmr appears in the *Voluspá*, a text that describes how gods will die and the current era will end. The hound is also mentioned in the *Grimnismál*, where the god Odin describes the realm where one can go once they die, like Hel itself or *Valhøll*.⁴⁹ In *Baldurs draumar*, Odin goes specifically to underworldly realm of Hel, where he meets the hellhound. In Iranian tradition, the extracts taken from the *Vendîdâd* and the *Bundahišn* are also themed on death and afterlife. The tenth book of the *Rigveda* is also focused in such escathological accounts, and that is where Yama's dogs are mentioned, as already seen.

⁴⁸ 'Structuralist' here refers to works related to authors like Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss. Structuralism is based on the idea that humanity has a natural tendency to elaborate myths in certain ways. This would enable to reduce every myth to a particular formula and match different narratives to the same formula.

⁴⁹ *Grimnismál*, stanza 8-10. *Valhøll* is the afterlife for honored warriors that died in battle in Norse cosmology.

Escathology seems to be one of the core elements of most religions. It is not surprising that these accounts share this element in common. Since it is a feature that is not based in current events or in past events either, it is hard to think of reasons that might have been catalysts of change in this aspect of religious thought. Of course, such changes can be observed, but they are less likely to happen to this genre of text and discourse than to others, since poets probably did not feel as comfortable making changes to this type of cosmologic knowledge. Therefore, the very fact that all these accounts share this escathological theme makes it more likely for them to have come from *PIE and that would also explain why they have so many elements in common.

3.2. Watchdog role

This is clearly the most common category in which the analyzed texts fall into. This typology contemplates pretty much every hellhound account explored here. We have seen that Cerberus' main characteristic is its duty as a guard dog. This can be inferred in Homer's works and is directly mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*, as seen before. The whelp in *Baldrs draumar* also plays this role, as much as the dogs in the *Rigveda* – which, given its age, is probably the closest text to *PIE we have in our scope.

This duty usually takes place in the passage to the realm of the dead. In the *Theogony*, Cerberus specifically attacks those who are caught trying to leave Hades. In *Baldrs draumar*, although no gates are mentioned, we can imply that the hellhound is guarding the passage to Hel, since Odin arrives there right after passing through this obstacle. In the *Bundahišn*, the “spiritual dog” stays on the *Činwad* bridge to guard the good afterlife.

There are other texts in which the hellhounds are watchdogs of things other than the underworld or the afterlife, like in the Norse poem *Fjolsvinnsmál*, where the dogs Geri and Gífr are actually guarding a fortress of giants. Orthos, Cerberus' brother, guards Geryon's kine – along with Hades'. Although it is expected for dogs to have the watchdog role in myth, since this was also a common use of dogs in pretty much every society, the narratives share too many elements in common apart from this one to state that they did not come from *PIE. Even if this widespread social role of the dog was the inspiration for the elaboration of such myths, the *PIE aspect of the narratives cannot be put aside.

3.3. The hellhound on the surface

This category aligns primarily between Greek and Norse traditions. As seen before, the Greek hellhound is mentioned in many texts as part of Herakles' biggest challenge: kidnapping Hades' dog and bringing it out of the underworld. We could also see in the *Voluspá* that Garmr or Fenrir will release itself from its shackles and play its role in the end of times, known as *Ragnarök* or the "doom of gods". As we saw before, Homer's works are the earliest to fall in this category, when they describe Herakles' mission. We cannot infer that such passages have any relation other than coming from a *PIE background, since the tales of the Poetic Edda and Greek literature have almost nothing in common except for that in terms of origin and possible inspirations for their elaborations. Also, the role that Cerberus and Garmr or Fenrir play are quite different, even though leaving the underworld seems to be one of the core elements of both tales. While Cerberus would leave Hades as a consequence of his defeat by Herakles' hand, the Norse hellhound would leave to fulfill his destiny in the end of times, the *Ragnarök*.

3.4. The pair of hounds

It should be clear at this point that the hellhounds usually appear in pairs. We have accounts of Cerberus and Orthos in Greek tradition, Geri and Freki, Geri and Gífr in Norse tradition, the two hounds of Yama in Indic tradition and perhaps the hounds mentioned in the *Vendîdâd* in Iranian tradition could also be a pair. Given the importance of the *Rigveda* because of its age – and also how frequently pairs of dogs appeared in our sources –, we should take into account that this category is probably strictly related to Indo-European poetry.

We could also see that sometimes the dogs present complementary roles, like in the case of Geri and Gífr, where one stays asleep by night and the other by day. Yama's hounds in the *Rigveda* might also refer to this complementary role, since according to Lincoln their description as *sábala* could actually mean that they have opposite colors. Along with that, we have the two Armenian hounds that could not be properly covered in the discussion, but their names as Spítak "the White" and Siaw "the Black" also contribute to this aspect of the myth.

Seeing that as an *PIE element of the hellhound myth might open possibilities for the study of the myths by themselves. The problem we had in Norse accounts concerning Garmr and Fenrir could be related to that. Since Garmr is etymologically connected to Geri, we could say that at some point these characters could have been the same. Fenrir could have been his complementary hound, like Freki is to Geri. Through the passing of ages, there might have been some misunderstanding of roles of each hound, and while Garmr and Fenrir ended up becoming somehow the same character, Geri and Freki remained separated. This might have

happened because the Eddas might have been recorded by the same time that these changes in the poetic tradition were occurring, leaving us with a few pieces of an older tradition and other pieces of the poetic tradition that it was becoming.

3.5. Ferocity and monstrosity of the hounds

As debated before, a lot of what characterizes the hellhounds in their myths is their monstrous description. Ancient writers seem to have emphasized this part of the myth in order to make it more convincing, maybe to make their public think that they were not talking about any ordinary dog.⁵⁰ Although the descriptions usually do not really match, this element is almost always present. That means that the hellhound myth probably already had this kind of connotation in *PIE, but each description was elaborated later by each poetic tradition. Even if the hounds in *Rigveda* already showed such features, the divergences between the poems makes it quite impossible to reach a more “pure” description of what the hellhound would look like in a *PIE myth.

Cerberus is probably the most prominent in this category, with snakes coming of his body and his uncommon number of heads. Yama’s hounds also fits in quite well, with their four eyes each. Garmr also appears as something supposed to be feared, with his bloody chest and powerful howling – a common feature in hellhound myths. It seems that the common character of the myth actually relies on the hellhound’s ferocity. As developed before, ancient poets probably came up with elements that would reinforce this characteristic, which made each poetic tradition stray away from that of the Indo-Europeans. This is very visible in the case of Cerberus, which holds the largest amount of passages related to it. The Greek hellhound has been described by many different ways in order to describe its ferocity. The Iranian tradition is the only one that does not match this, since the hounds mentioned in the *Vendîdâd* and the *Bundahišn* did not receive the most detailed description.

In Norse tradition, we can see this aspect emphasized in many of the presented characters, as shown before. The very names of the hounds Geri, Freki and Gífr suggest that. Garmr, in the *Voluspá*, is also described as a “ravener”, or *freki* in Old Norse. The forgotten *PIE roots *gher and *ker in the Greek language was probably the reason why Cerberus has a more detailed description, since Greek authors needed other ways to emphasize the hellhound’s

⁵⁰ As we saw before in the *Theogony* (306-315 & 767-774), the *Rigveda* (X.14.10-12), in *Baldrs draumar*, 2 and 3), the *Voluspá* (43) and the *Aeneid* (6.285-288 & 417-425).

monstruosity. However, we should also consider that most descriptions of Cerberus are not as astonishing as Hesiod's, except maybe for Apollodorus' and Virgil's. It seems that this particular author made a conscious effort to make the hellhound's features even scarier than those of a former oral tradition, with details like a "bronze-like voice" and "fifty heads". Even the depiction in the analyzed vase seems to emphasize the hellhound's monstruosity.

3.6. The underworld ruler

One of the most common features of the hellhound myths in our scope is the presence of a death deity or, to be more specific, an underworld ruler. In Greek accounts, that would be Hades, whose house – which can be comprehended as the underworld itself – is guarded by Cerberus. *Baldrs draumar* mentions Hel – which, like Hades, shares the same with the deity that rules the underworld – being guarded by Garmr. Indic accounts present Yama, who is said to be the first dead and, therefore, the first to make his way through such realm, granting him the position of ruler of it.⁵¹ Odin, probably the most important character in the Poetic Edda, is also related to death and afterlife. Even though he does not rule over Hel, he rules over Asgard, where *Valhøll* is located. Odin is also the tutor of two of the hounds seen in the Norse accounts in our scope, Geri and Freki.

3.7. The heroic nemesis

In Greek records, it is clear that Herakles plays a significant role in the myth of the hellhound. As a hero, he often appears overpowering them. This happens not only with the hellhound mentioned in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also with Cerberus in later accounts like Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Orthros is actually killed by him in Apollodorus' narrative of Herakles' tenth work. In *Baldrs draumar*, even if Odin does not engage in a fight with the whelp, it is clear that the hellhound is described as a challenge for the god to overcome before he enters the realm of the underworld ruler, just like Cerberus. The *Rigveda* follows the same narrative of *Baldrs draumar*, but instead of a god having this challenge, every dead person has to outrun Yama's hounds in order to get to the proper afterlife.

⁵¹ *Rigveda* (X.14.2)

Along with the watchdog and monstrosity categories of the hellhound myth, this establishes the hellhound as a challenge to be overcome. Since the *Rigveda* is the earliest account to show this, we can take its narrative as some kind of standard to comprehend the others in terms of *PIE comparative method. Because this earlier account shows that every human has to deal with Yama's hounds when facing death, it puts into perspective whether the heroic nemesis is a *PIE element or not. It is possible that the hellhound myth was part of Indo-European cosmology only as a challenge for the dead. The Iranian accounts also support this, either because of such Indo-European roots or because of the relationship between Iranian and Indic texts and language. However, in order to emphasize the heroes' strengths and superhuman abilities, poets made the hellhound character to be defeated by the hero character. If you see the underworld as a destiny to be feared in ancient societies as much as the Christian hell is or was feared in the Christian world, it just makes sense that overcoming the hellhound was part of the whole frightening process of dying in Indo-European thought.

4. The *PIE hellhound myth and contributions of this study

4.1. Hellhounds and *PIE oral tradition

The nature of most of the accounts where hellhounds can be found is usually one derived from oral tradition. We can observe an example of that in Homer's and Hesiod's accounts in Greek tradition. Norse poetry, specially in the case of the Poetic Edda, is generally related to oral tradition as well. Zoroastrianism, although it is supposed to be a religious code revealed to the prophet Zarathustra, presents a lot of elements that also relate to a tradition previous to that which was written. The *Rigveda* is not different in this matter. The only plausible exception in the sources analyzed here is Roman written tradition, which is frequently inspired by Greek texts.

Overall, this at least means that the hellhounds of each tradition could come from oral tradition, rather than being some kind of new feature of each written tradition. The fact that there is a clear linguistic and narrative connection between the passages presented points to an oral tradition previous to those we can reach from Greek, Norse, Iranian and Indic accounts, as much as the linguistic resemblances point to a previous mother-tongue: *Proto-Indo-European. This means that the hellhound myth was actually a myth present in Indo-European oral tradition, possibly a core element of narratives that had some kind of eschatological theme.

One could argue that it is quite risky to assume that such resemblances in the hellhound myths exist due to a common origin to which we have no access, specially because those myths would have developed in different ways throughout the ages and that would make such analysis very poor when it comes to fidelity to a Indo-European myth. Indeed, the way such myths diverge in their narratives makes it quite hard to reconstruct a hellhound myth that was narrated in *PIE in the Bronze Age. However, the point of this monography is not to reconstruct an Indo-European myth, but rather trace the hellhound myths' roots back to it.

Furthermore, the way the narratives of the myths diverge actually proves the point: since the narratives have been developed for centuries, it is expected for them to have differences from each other. If they were all identical, it would be much more fair to understand them as copies of each other, or at least one of them as the original and the others as copies from that one — which would probably be Cerberus, since Greek-Roman cultural expansion is the only one that could have left such marks in distant contexts and places like the Germanic tribes and the peoples of Iran. And this affirmation carries many flaws, since the *Rigveda* came much earlier than Greek literary tradition and cultural expansion, which makes the *PIE hypothesis much more plausible.

4.2. Contributions of this study to the research of ancient traditions

Although Indo-European studies face the challenge of not having any record of it at all, its conclusions can be very rewarding when it comes to applying them to the fields of historic knowledge that surround it. From the case of the hellhound myth, we can infer that the passages where it appears are more likely to come from oral tradition and to be older than other passages. An example of this application is in Iranian tradition, where the passages where a hellhound is mentioned might have core elements that came earlier than Zarathustra's revelation. The other elements that surround the hellhound myth could also be indicators that whole stracts in eschatological accounts in the cultures in our scope might be of Indo-European origin.

Another contribution concerns narrative ambiguities that cannot be solved on their own. One case is the hellhound Garmr, whose narrative is easily overlaped with that of the wolf Fenrir, leaving the question of whether Garmr is a hellhound or a wolf and if he and Fenrir are different characters at all. With this study, we can see that Garmr is more likely to be a dog, and its myth probably came earlier than Fenrir's. We can also infer that they actually had complementary roles in Germanic myth, since this is a very common feature in *PIE related records.

By diving specifically on hellhounds, we could also see the development of it in each tradition on its own. For example, the divergences in narrative between the *Vendīdād* and the *Bundahišn* show that some parts of the myth were lost in time, while in Greek tradition Cerberus became a very prominent character and its myth had some elaboration within written tradition, a process that might have started as early as Hesiod's *Theogony*, and kept going at least until Apollodorus' *Library*. This can reveal aspects of the development of each written tradition on its own, like it was elaborated before in the chapters dedicated to each tradition.

4.3. Myth reconstruction

Although a reconstruction of a myth that was originally told in *PIE is not the aim of this monography, such exercise could be interesting to see how much the evidence we got from written tradition can tell us about the now lost Indo-European oral tradition. We can also explore what are the limits of such elaborations. Overall, concerning the hellhound myth, we can use the core elements that frequently appear in the texts to project an image of what the hellhound myth in *PIE could have been.

From the passages exposed, we can affirm that the Indo-European hellhound was the guardian of the world of the dead. We cannot infer if this is necessarily an “underworld”, since it only has this clear connotation in European traditions, while in Asian traditions this is not exactly the case. Even though in Iranian tradition heaven is above and hell is below, this idea could have been born not from Indo-European culture, but rather from the European peoples who inhabited those places before the arrival of *PIE in their lands. However, the hellhound almost always play this role of watchdog.

Since death is usually something very unsettling, features about its appearance and behavior were developed to get this idea across. Norse, Indic and specially Greek tradition emphasize such monstrous description of the hellhound, but there is no common ground in such descriptions, except for the monstrosity itself. By that, we can assume that even if the hellhound myth in *PIE had this scary appearance, what is left in textual evidence was probably developed in each tradition separately – probably because ancient poets used their creativity to make the story more appealing. We can also observe that the hellhound usually serve some kind of death deity in all the traditions in our scope. This is very clear in Greek, Norse and Indic texts, and even though in Iranian accounts the hellhound does not appear with a death deity, it appears accompanied by an ethereal maiden that is the dead's feminine counterpart.

Another feature is the other hellhound that sometimes plays a different role than the watchdog. This can be seen in Cerberus' and Orthus' case. In some traditions, like Indic and Iranian, they have the same role and appear together. It is possible that the hellhounds all had the same role as watchdogs initially, and as each culture developed their own stories, different roles were developed as well. This could explain why they also developed proper names, since a clear distinction of roles probably would make necessary more ways to discern one hound from the other, as it happens in Greek and Norse tradition while they remained nameless and together in Iranian and Indic traditions. However, there is also the possibility that the roles were different in *PIE tradition and, because of the passing of time and separation of cultures from *PIE, some parts of this tradition were lost and the hellhounds started having the same role. The first possibility seems more plausible, since the hellhounds that are not watchdogs do not have clear resemblances in their narratives, apart from being hellhounds after all.

Therefore, what can be said of the Indo-European hellhound myth is that there were actually two dogs who guarded the entrance to the afterlife. These dogs were loyal to the ruler of such afterlife and had a frightening physical appearance, along with a menacing ferocity. Other features that were covered in the typologies seen before might remain only as speculations so far.

Conclusions

After exploring that many sources and data concerning hellhounds, it finally came to the moment where we gather everything we have acquired so far to make a more concise approach on the subject. Concerning the concepts “origin”, “function” and “subject matter” of the hellhound myth, which are the core questions of the study of myth according to Segal (2004, p.2), we can take some general conclusions from the exploration of the sources presented and dive deeper in the *PIE hellhound myth.

As said before, finding the origin of anything is not the easiest task, and in our case, it might be impossible. However, we can make an analysis that does not seek the starting point of the myth, but rather what circumstances might have been crucial for its rise. Given the nature of the problem, once again, we have to dig as deeper in the past as we can. The first thing we must consider is that dogs were domesticated by humans around 15.000 years ago (LARSON, Greger *et al.* 2012, p.5.). It is expected for humans to create stories and myths concerning dogs ever since, considering that myths usually have some connection to whatever surrounds the people that keep this myth ongoing. Therefore, it is also expected that such tales change over

time and develops itself in different directions in each society that keeps telling them. We have other mythic dogs in cultures that do not take part in the *PIE reconstruction, like the god Anubis in Egyptian religion – whose canine appearance is represented by a jackal or a human with a jackal's or wild dog's head (PINCH, 2002, p.104). Although this myth indeed shares some elements with the Indo-European hellhound myth, stating that they are somehow related would take a way deeper dive into Egyptian religion and culture – which is not part of our scope.

Even though the prehistoric myths and social aspects concerning dogs would be perfect to understand this matter of origin, they are not accessible. However, since we are talking about Indo-European myths, we can investigate which aspects of this society, as obscure as they may be, could have been the fertile soil for this myth to grow. Concerning Indo-European economic dynamics, Fortson states that, in a pastoral society like that, wealth is all about livestock (FORTSON, 2010, p.45). Perhaps the myth of the hellhound guarding the gates of the death realm is related to ancient Indo-European hierarchy, in which wealth related to raising cattle possibly gave birth to the role of kings, since wealth is intimately related to political power, specially in the Ancient world. In this view, an underworld ruler deity like Hades or Hel would have the dead as their subordinates, as much as kings and queens had the living as their own. Therefore, the dog would also be a symbol of this hierarchy, since a person of social prestige among the Indo-Europeans would also have dogs to help them keep their property and, consequently, their power.

When it comes to the myth's "function", as said before, we can think of the hellhound myth as a core element of escathological thought. As said before, the familiarity with the concept of the christian hell can be useful to understand this matter. The hellhound in these cultures is one of the elements that should be feared in the future of humanity, be it in an individual way – like in the accounts of the *Rigveda* or the *Vendîdâd* – or in a more collective way – like in Norse *Ragnarök*. As said before, to make the poems more appealing, ancient poets exaggerated the hellhounds' features to make it more convincing – maybe creating some kind of horror atmosphere in humanity's destiny. Therefore, the hellhound was probably some kind of challenge or punishment that the dead would face in the afterlife.

Concerning the "subject matter", the fact that the accounts of our scope are almost strictly escathological makes it likely that this myth was taken quite literally, since it was a core element of each culture's comprehension of what afterlife might be like. The hellhound could have been an explanation to why people do not return from death, or maybe simply the chance to make something heroic in death – in case someone did not have the chance to make it in life.

Perhaps, the hellhound is just a reflection of how frightening death was to such societies. In any case, the hellhound myth has proven to show a lot concerning what ancient people thought about death, afterlife and destiny. After all, death is one of the most piercing and yet still unanswered questions of humanity.

Therefore, the hellhound is, like other myths, a mirror of humankind. Even though it is likely that it had been triggered by very practical aspects – like the pastoral lifestyle of the ancient Indo-Europeans –, we can say that the development of every myth starts reflecting psychological matters at some point. This was very visible concerning the hellhound, as its narrative is really close to death and to what ancient peoples expected from it. This particular tale somehow kept people entertained by making them confront one of the most common fears: the fear of dying.

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