

## Some thoughts on ‘Goddess Medb’ and her typological context\*

### Zusammenfassung

*Thurneysen nahm an, daß es sich bei der literarischen Figur der Königin Medb um eine euhemerisierte Göttin handeln könnte und daß sich dies durch den typologischen Vergleich mit altorientalischem Material weiter plausibel machen läßt. Im folgenden werden zunächst die Hauptargumente für eine Interpretation Medbs als euhemerisierte Göttin zusammengefaßt und wird ein Überblick über die Charakterzeichnung Medbs gegeben. Anhand einer Besprechung altorientalischen, klassisch-mediterranen und nordischen Vergleichsmaterials wird daraufhin ausgeführt, daß der Charakter Medbs in der Tat innerhalb der europäischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte enge Parallelen findet, die noch weit über das von Thurneysen Angeführte hinausgehen und seine Rekonstruktion einer „Göttin Medb“ plausibel machen.*

The first prominent scholar to consider a mythological origin for the literary figure Medb of Connacht and to meet with lasting success was Rudolf Thurneysen in 1930.<sup>1</sup> Since Thurneysen’s note on the question, the idea that there is a mythological background to the literary figure Medb has been widely accepted.<sup>2</sup>

\* A preliminary version of this paper was read at the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 22–25 June 2009, and has profited much from the ensuing lively discussion. Furthermore, I owe special thanks to Thomas Charles-Edwards, Thomas Clancy, John Carey, Christopher Metcalf and the anonymous reviewers for commenting on versions of this article – which has led to many improvements – and to Natalia I. Petrovskaia for advice on Shintoism. For any mistakes that may be found in this article I take, of course, sole responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> THURNEYSEN 1930 in reaction to Ó MÁILLE 1928, who had suggested an allegorical interpretation of Medb as the sovereignty of Ireland: ‘Ó MÁILLE sieht in Medb die Personifikation der Herrschaft (*the sovereignty* [sic] of Ireland). Ich möchte es weniger allegorisch fassen und eher vermuten, daß in einer früheren Zeit bei gewissen Stämmen die Königswürde durch eine mystische Ehe mit der Göttin Medb angetreten und geweiht wurde.’ (Quotation: p. 110; cf. THURNEYSEN 1933.) – Already in the wake of Friedrich Max Müller’s nature mythology, Queen Medb of Connacht had been considered as a reflection of a pre-Christian goddess – more particularly, as a goddess of dawn and dusk (cf. EDEL 2001: 156; SMYTH 1996: 113), an interpretation that has long since fallen from grace and that is now only of interest to the historian of scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for instance MAC CANA 1955–1959: 76–78, 88–90 (in vol. 7 [1955–1956]), 59 f., 63 (in vol. 8 [1958–1959]); DE VRIES 1961: 129; GOETINCK 1964–1967: 356; MEID 1970: 82; BOWEN 1975: 18; NÍ BHROLCHÁIN 1980: 13, 14 f.; MAC CANA 1983: 84; McCONE 1990: 120, 148; MEID 1991: 45; HERBERT 1992: 266, 269; KELLY 1992: 78; ROSS 1993: 286; SESSLE s.a.: 136–138; GREEN 1995: 40, 79; SMYTH 1996: 115; BIRKHAN 1997: 530 f.; ROBBINS DEXTER 1998: 96, 104; BIRKHAN 2005: 364; KOCH 2006a: 1282; MEID 2009: 90. – Dumézil postulates an Indo-European literary – but not divine – background of Medb on the basis of a comparison with the Indian figure Mādhavī (DUMÉZIL 1973: 70–107, 114–117); I remain sceptically agnostic with respect to his (re-?)construction, not least because most of Dumézil’s comparisons between Medb and

The following discussion will focus on the relationship between an interpretation of Medb as a pre-Christian mythological figure and the typology of comparable figures in early European and Near Eastern mythologies, taking up a question that has already been raised by Thurneysen himself in an afterthought to this 1930 article on 'Goddess Medb'.<sup>3</sup> This typological focus in no way denies the necessity to consider also the place of the *literary* figure Medb within the medieval literature of Ireland and its medieval context; thus one might mention the much-quoted misogynist tendencies of medieval Irish clerical writing,<sup>4</sup> the frequent use of Biblical templates<sup>5</sup> or the influence of specific contemporary situations or interests.<sup>6</sup> However, an explicit discussion of such issues in connection with the question of 'goddess Medb' would require a monographic treatment and correspondingly cannot find room in the present article; suffice to say that the relationship between these different approaches to Medb seems complementary rather than antagonistic to me.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the most frequently quoted reason for attributing a mythological background to the literary figure Medb is probably the etymology of her name; for etymologically *Medb* seems to derive from *\*Med<sup>h</sup>w-ā*, which would denote something like 'mead-woman'.<sup>8</sup> This would connect her with the Irish association between sovereignty and intoxicating liquor, as it is for instance expressed in the longer version of Cormac's Glossary which fancifully explains 'Sovereignty' as 'good ale': [*F*]laith .i. fo-laith. Laith .i. cuirm. 'Sovereignty, i.e. good ale. Ale, i.e. beer' (*Sanas Cormaic* [ed. Meyer] § 575; the roots of this entry appear to reach back to the late 9<sup>th</sup>/early 10<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>9</sup> This association of Medb's name with the sovereignty theme would tie in with the recurring motif that marriage to Medb bestows kingship upon her husband;

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Mādhavī seem meaningful only if seen against the background of the possible etymological link between the two figures. However, the apparent connection between the names of Medb and Mādhavī is likely to be incidental, as 'Mādhavī' is in one of its meanings the name of a flower (cf. DUMÉZIL 1973: 82 f.), which seems to provide a much simpler explanation for its use as a female personal name than ancient Indo-European heritage. Occasionally a mythological interpretation of Medb is rejected, e.g. by CARNEY 1983: 116; EDEL 1997; EDEL 2001: 153–176; EDEL 2002: 11, 17.

<sup>3</sup> THURNEYSEN 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. ROBBINS DEXTER 1998: 108; GREENWOOD 1994: 54.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. KELLY 1992: 84 f.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. CARNEY 1983: 119–121; EDEL 2002: 11; EDEL 1997: 162–164.

<sup>7</sup> In general (and from widely varying perspectives) on Medb cf. e.g. ZIMMER 1911; Ó MÁILLE 1928; THURNEYSEN 1930; THURNEYSEN 1933; WEISWEILER 1941–1943; DUMÉZIL 1973: 83–107, 114–117; BOWEN 1975; KELLY 1992: 77–85; SESSLE s.a.; EDEL 1997; ROBBINS DEXTER 1998; EDEL 2001: 153–176; DOMINGUEZ 2004; KOCH 2006a; Ó CATHASAIGH 2009.

<sup>8</sup> McCONE 1990: 109. McCone suggests a reconstruction of 'an Indo-European institution, ideology and mythology of sacral kingship ... based on the widely attested notion that the well-being of society and nature flowed from a ritual marriage between a goddess and the new ruler to emerge after appropriate tests. The former might be called *\*Med<sup>h</sup>w-ī* or *\*Med<sup>h</sup>w-ā* after the draught of mead (*\*med<sup>h</sup>u*) involved in the ceremony ...' (McCONE 1990: 107–120, quotation: p. 120.)

<sup>9</sup> Ed. MEYER 1912: 47. Of the two versions of Cormac's Glossary, the shorter one can perhaps be connected with Cormac ua Cuileinnáin himself (who died in 908 AD), whereas the longer version contains later additions: RUSSELL 2006. The section quoted above has been taken from the longer version, as it is in the present case the clearer one of the two; the core of this entry, however, appears to have already been part of the earlier short version (as edited by STOKES 1862: 19): *flaith .i. [fó]laith*.

the most well-known example is of course the Pillow Talk in the second recension of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (12<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>10</sup>

But while Thurneysen also mentioned the curious semantics of Medb's name,<sup>11</sup> they were not actually his main reason for considering a pagan goddess Medb somewhere behind the literary figure Medb. Rather, the mainstay of his argument rests on reported 'venerated trees of Medb': the first recension of the *Táin* tells of the existence of places with a tree called *bile Medba*, 'venerated tree of Medb' (*TBC I ll. 1534 f.*). Thurneysen considered this passage to be a reliable attestation of sacred trees of Medb, which he interpreted as a trace of a pagan cult of a goddess Medb.<sup>12</sup> Against this it has been pointed out by Edel that this passage in the *Táin* derives such names from the horsehip of Medb: wherever in Cuib Medb planted her horsehip into the ground, the place is said to have been named *bile Medba*, 'Medb's venerated tree' (*nach airm trá i Cuib in ro sáidi Medb echfleisc, is Bile Medba a ainm*). The word *bile* primarily designates a large and ancient tree,<sup>13</sup> and to name such a tree from a horsehip is a somewhat grotesque statement which can easily be interpreted as ironical.<sup>14</sup> But the question is whether this at all affects Thurneysen's point (especially since Thurneysen will have been aware of it, even if he did not elaborate). To criticise this argument from this perspective is valid only if one assumes that the whole passage is mere invention, including the place names it mentions. The comical aspect of the passage does not affect Thurneysen's argument, however, if the comical play with the huge tree and the horsehip is based on real place names existing in the Old Irish period. If there were real places with the name *bile Medba*, as Thurneysen assumed, it would not matter whether the passage in the *Táin* which mentions them is meant to have a comical effect or not, and Thurneysen's argument would remain untouched by Edel's criticism.<sup>15</sup>

The later discussion about a possible mythological background of Medb has pointed out several further interesting details;<sup>16</sup> in my opinion, the most curious of them is the combination of the names of Medb's family.<sup>17</sup> O'Brien has observed that the way in which the name of Medb's husband Ailill is abbreviated in the manuscripts of the genealogies supports an etymological connection of his name with the Welsh term *ellyll*, denoting a supernatural being:

The contracted form of *Ailill* gen. *Aillella* in all the manuscripts of the genealogies which I have read ... is always *Aill-*, *Aill-a*. These contractions are quite abnormal.

<sup>10</sup> For the date cf. Ó HUIGINN 2006: 1646.

<sup>11</sup> THURNEYSEN 1930: 110. He interprets it as meaning 'eher "die Trunkene" als "die Berauschnende"' (*ibidem*).

<sup>12</sup> THURNEYSEN 1930: 108; cf. SJOESTEDT 1949: 36 f.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *DIL* s.v. 'bile'.

<sup>14</sup> EDEL 1997: 158 with note 61.

<sup>15</sup> The decision about this question hinges entirely on Thurneysen's assessment of the reliability of this passage of the *Táin*, as the existence of a place name *bile Medba* does not appear to be corroborated by other attestations, cf. HOGAN 1910: 115. That *bile Medba* was a historically existing place name is accepted by ROSS 1993: 61, 286.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. ROSS 1993: 286.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MEID 2009: 89 f.; MEID 1970: 82.

*Ailill* is without doubt cognate with Welsh *ellyll* “ghost, elf, etc.” and this suggests that the older form of the name was *Aillill* which became *Ailill* with the same kind of dissimilation we find in *cenand* < *cenn-fînd* and *menand* < *menn-fînd*. [Note 2: *Mennand* Wb. 9 c 34 may be a pre-dissimilation form.]

*Aill-*, *Aill-a* would be perfectly normal contracted forms of *Aillill*, *Aillella* and probably go back to a time when these were the current forms.<sup>18</sup>

If this is correct, Medb’s husband would be called something like ‘the spectre’. Likewise, the name of her daughter Findabair seems to be a compound of *finn* ‘white’ and *siabair* ‘phantom’; so the daughter of the hypothetical goddess Medb and her husband ‘spectre’ would be ‘white phantom’ (corresponding to Arthur’s wife *Gwenhwyvar*).<sup>19</sup> Thus both the names of Medb’s husband and of her daughter might show strong otherworldly associations – which in *Ailill*’s case would not have been recognisable for a speaker of Old Irish. This supernatural character of her family would fit perfectly into a picture which sees the mortal queen Medb as a literary recasting of an earlier supernatural figure.

These old observations do not constitute conclusive proof of a pre-Christian background of Medb. Yet they highlight Medb’s strong otherworldly associations. This suggests that a pre-Christian background has at least some likelihood and makes it seem worthwhile to have a fresh look at some of the material about Medb; for if there are such pre-Christian roots of Medb it would be necessary to ask how much of this pre-Christian stratum might have survived in our extant literary sources. To assume that our tales as they stand are a direct recording of pagan myth would of course be somewhat naïve; rather it is necessary to ask which traits of them could really be fragmented reflections of some pre-Christian tradition. Continuity cannot just be assumed; it has to be made plausible for every single trait anew. In the following, therefore, I want to take up one single argument which Thurneysen had proposed in favour of a ‘goddess Medb’: in 1933, he drew attention to certain parallels between his reconstructed goddess Medb and beliefs attested in ancient Mesopotamia. Medb is repeatedly described as bestowing kingship upon the man who marries her, and the same idea is found in the Ancient Near East. Thurneysen correspondingly interpreted the idea of the mating of oriental kings with goddesses as a typological parallel to his theory of a goddess Medb mating with early Irish kings. He did not, of course, postulate that there exists any historical connection between the Irish and the Mesopotamian goddesses. His idea rather was that the concept of a goddess Medb became more plausible as he was able to show that the characteristic motif of the marriage between goddess and king is not restricted to a hypothetical Irish belief, but is also well attested elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> It is this argument which I want to pursue further in order to contribute to an assessment of the possible extent of continuity between pagan ideas and Christian written sources about Medb. For this purpose, I will first present a very short sketch of the character of Medb as we meet her in the Ulster Cycle. After this, I will return to the comparative material first proposed by Thurneysen. I will try

<sup>18</sup> O’BRIEN 1956; cf. MEID 2009: 90.

<sup>19</sup> MEID 2009: 89; MEID 1970: 81 f.; cf. GOETINCK 1964–1967: 351, 359 f.

<sup>20</sup> THURNEYSEN 1933.

to show that the similarities between Medb and this material go much further than had been known in Thurneysen's day, and that there are many more figures which show corresponding traits than those which Thurneysen had pointed out. The article will conclude with a discussion of possible consequences that can be drawn from this observation.

### *The Irish evidence: Medb of Connacht*

Possibly the earliest reference to Queen Medb is the poem *Conailla Medb míchuru*, which has been ascribed to the seventh century. It refers enigmatically to some of the events and personages that are later to reappear in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, though the course of the events described may have differed considerably from the plot of the extant version of the tale. What seems clear is that the relationship between Fergus and Medb played a central role in this text (even though the sexual nature of this relationship is not made explicit in the verse, but only in the prose introduction) and that Medb is responsible for the *Táin*.<sup>21</sup>

In the early eighth century Medb appears in *Táin Bó Froích* where against the earlier and all later tradition Ailill is the partner who has the dominant role in the relationship.<sup>22</sup> Once, Medb forgets the time over a three day long game of *fidchell* with Fróech (*Táin Bó Froích* §§ 8–11). This might refer less to the fascination of *fidchell* than to an erotic tension between Medb and Fróech which is not referred to further in the tale but which is the central element of the sixteenth-century Scottish ballad version *Osnadh caradh i gClúain Fraoich* in which Fróech rejects Medb's advances and where she consequently sets the stage for his death by a water monster.<sup>23</sup> Her attempt to bring about Fróech's death is successful, whereas that of Ailill in the early tale, where he likewise makes use of a water monster, is not. As Meek and Meid have argued, the later Scottish version presumably reflects an earlier plot which was changed in the literary version of the eighth century to create a *remscél* for *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.<sup>24</sup>

The relevant parts of *Fled Bricreann* have been dated by Thurneysen to the late eighth century.<sup>25</sup> Here, Medb is undisputedly the superior partner. When the three main Ulster heroes come to the court of Ailill and Medb to receive a judgement on the question who among them is the superior warrior, Ailill despairs for fear of the revenge of the two he would rank lower. Medb takes over and gives a judgement by bestowing what Bricriu had called *ríge lách n-Erend*, 'the sovereignty of the warriors of Ireland' (*Fled Bricreann* § 8),<sup>26</sup> in the form of cups of metals of different

<sup>21</sup> HENRY 1997; OLMSTED 1992a: 5 f.; OLMSTED 1992b; CARNEY 1983: 122–125; CARNEY 1971: 77–80.

<sup>22</sup> Dating: MEID 1967: xxiv f.; cf. BREATNACH 1977: 102.

<sup>23</sup> Dating: MEID 2009: 17; MEID 1970: 15.

<sup>24</sup> For the detailed reasoning cf. MEEK 1984; MEID 2009: 16–21; MEID 1970: 14–18.

<sup>25</sup> THURNEYSEN 1921: 449, 456. Cf. the more recent general assessment of KOCH 2006b: 753: 'Linguistically, the extant text is in the main Early Middle Irish, probably 10<sup>th</sup>-century, though there are several throwbacks to Old Irish usage which imply an earlier written version.' (Similarly: KOCH 2000: 22.) Since Thurneysen, no detailed study of the linguistic stratification of *Fled Bricreann* has been undertaken that would confirm or update his dating of the earliest stratum of the text to the late eighth century. While its ascription to the Old Irish period (and thus to the ninth century at the latest) seems generally accepted, the relative chronology of *Fled Bricreann* vis-à-vis *Táin Bó Cúailnge* still remains an open question.

<sup>26</sup> Ed. HENDERSON 1899; cf. LU 8113.

values filled with wine and with the figure of a bird at the bottom, but to every single warrior in secret so that each warrior believes that he has received the highest rank (*Fled Bricrenn* §§ 58–62). Only later do two of them have to realise that they have been deceived, and they do not acknowledge the judgement (*Fled Bricrenn* §§ 73 f.). It is presumably no accident that Medb is here seen bestowing the ‘sovereignty of warriors’ in the established imagery of the bestowal of kingship by a ‘sovereignty goddess’ by means of a drink of (intoxicating) liquor;<sup>27</sup> and that this awarding of ‘sovereignty’ by her is here transferred to the sphere of martial prowess may likewise not be coincidence.

In Recension I of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*,<sup>28</sup> in the relevant parts compiled from ninth- or more probably even eighth-century texts,<sup>29</sup> Medb’s warlike aspects, already attested in *Conailla Medb míchuru*, come to the fore again. It is she who musters the troops for the *Táin* (*TBC I* ll. 25 f.), and she also fights in person. Medb is the first warrior to wound Cethern mac Fintain, and he finds the wound inflicted by her especially painful, yet praises her beauty with her two golden birds on her shoulder (*TBC I* ll. 3202–3211).<sup>30</sup> And in the final slaughter she rushes into battle and is thrice victorious so that the Ulster hosts turn to flight in front of her (*TBC I* ll. 4037–4039).<sup>31</sup> Most strikingly, she is able to quell the panic which the war-goddess *Némain* had caused in her army, which presents Medb as the peer of a goddess (or demon) of war (*TBC I* ll. 210–213). Furthermore her sexual relationship with Fergus bears witness to her marked sexuality (*TBC I* ll. 1040–1046),<sup>32</sup> a trait which may also surface when she offers Fer Diad among many other gifts – and lies – also the ‘friendship of her thigh’ (*comaid dom sliasaid-sea*) as a reward if he faces Cú Chulainn in combat (*TBC I* ll. 2600 f.). And it might perhaps be of interest that Fer Diad dies as a consequence of accepting Medb’s offer (*TBC I* ll. 2567–3146; it should be noted, however, that the Fer Diad-episode is later than the other episodes mentioned here and has been dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>33</sup> Also Medb’s most prominent lover Fergus did not fare much better than Fer

<sup>27</sup> Cf. KOCH 2000: 33; ENRIGHT 1996: 270–275; MCCONE 1990: 109; GOETINCK 1964–1967: 355 f.; MAC CANA 1955–1959: 76–78; O’RAHILLY 1946: 14–17. This is frequently coupled with a sexual union of the chosen sovereign and the sovereignty-figure (as in the tradition about Níall Noígíallach, cf. BREATHNACH 1953: 323 f., 330–335; cf. O’RAHILLY 1946: 17–21; mainly for a Munster tradition cf. MAC CANA 1955–1959); § 63 of *Fled Bricrenn* can be taken to suggest sexual encounters between Medb and Cú Chulainn, but the passage is an interpolation of the eleventh century: THURNEYSEN 1921: 462, 464.

<sup>28</sup> For Medb’s significance within the *Táin* as a medieval tale in its medieval context cf. e.g. KELLY 1992 (esp. 77–84); SESSLE s.a.; EDEL 2001: 161–171.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. THURNEYSEN 1921: 109–112, 124, 142 f., 149, 190 f., 213 with the correction of his dating by BREATHNACH 1977: 101–103, 107.

<sup>30</sup> In ll. 922–927 Cú Chulainn kills a marten on Medb’s and a bird on Ailill’s shoulder, or both animals were on Medb’s shoulder: the recension reports two versions.

<sup>31</sup> O’RAHILLY’s (1976) translation of *conad ed rosoí in cúal gáí fora cúlu* as ‘until a phalanx of spears turned her back’ is wrong; it is not she who turns to flight, but the members of the phalanx (*recte* THURNEYSEN 1921: 213). Only for this reason has Conchobar to make his way to this part of the battlefield in person, as he does in ll. 4040–4042: his people are routed; if they could cope with the problem Medb on their own, his personal presence would not be required.

<sup>32</sup> Fergus blames Medb: ll. 1069–1073.

<sup>33</sup> THURNEYSEN 1921: 102, 219.

Diad: *Aided Fergusa*, which Thurneysen dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>34</sup> tells that Fergus was slain on the instigation of Ailill after Medb had intercourse with him not only in public, but even under the very eyes of her husband.

TBC Recension II, a twelfth-century text,<sup>35</sup> presents Medb in a way that differs from her portrayal in *TBC I* in a number of details (being, in particular, more negative), and generally adds new material.<sup>36</sup> In terms of the general character traits that are discussed in the present survey, however, it adds little that had not in one way or another already been prefigured by the earlier texts – which is little surprising, given that *TBC II* is essentially a re-working of *TBC I*. Arguably the most important addition in *TBC II* is its introduction, the Pillow Talk (*TBC II* ll. 1–278): here for the first time is told that the motif of the bestowing of sovereignty by Medb, which in a way already appeared in *Fled Bricrenn*, is also connected with Ailill. In the Pillow Talk Medb claims that only she made him king and that he had had no kingdom of his own, telling him that he is a man who is supported by his wife (*dáig fer ar tincur mná atatchomnaic*: *TBC II* l. 44). Furthermore, her excellence in combat is stressed in her claim that she needs a courageous husband in order that he be her equal, *úair brissim-sea catha 7 cumleñga 7 congala m'öenur*, 'for I put battles and contests and fights to rout all by myself' (*TBC II* ll. 33 f.). And here also appears her statement that she was never 'without a man in the shadow of another' (*can fêr ar scáth araile*: *TBC II* l. 37), the *locus classicus* of her insatiable sexuality.

The earliest texts mentioned above – *Conailla Medb míchuru*, *Táin Bó Froích*, *Fled Bricrenn*, and *TBC I* – have narrative foci which are so different from each other and treat their respective subjects in ways so diverging that a simple direct literary relationship between them has little probability, at least without a considerable external input.<sup>37</sup> *TBC II* forms a strong contrast to this and thus highlights an important methodological problem. This text is essentially an expanded, systematically revised retelling of *TBC I*. These two texts are not independent records of 'traditional' narratives: rather, the relationship between them is first and foremost a literary one. Such a literary reception of 'traditional' motifs, however, is not specific to the relationship between *TBC I* and *TBC II*. At the latest from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when all basic characteristics of Medb's literary character have been mentioned in the literature (her marked sexuality, her association with kingship and her marriage to the king, her warlike character, and the dangers involved in becoming her lover), it is at least difficult to preclude the possibility that later texts treating the same themes do so on the basis of a literary familiarity with such earlier texts, rather than as independent testimonies of a (non-textual?) narrative tradition. Direct literary relationships, however, are hard (and normally impossible) to verify in any text whose writer has not

<sup>34</sup> THURNEYSEN 1921: 667.

<sup>35</sup> Ó HÚGINN 2006: 1646; THURNEYSEN 1921: 114 f. dates this recension of the *Táin* to the first third of the 12<sup>th</sup> century: in his opinion, the name of Arthur's sword *Caliburnus* in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* originates (via Wales) from the name of Fergus' sword *Caladbolg* (*Historia* IX.147, ed. REEVE & WRIGHT 2007; *TBC II* l. 4720); thus the *Historia* (c. 1136/1138) could constitute a *terminus ante quem* for *TBC II*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. GREENWOOD 1994, esp. 47 f., 53 f.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. e.g. THURNEYSEN 1921: 449 on *Fled Bricrenn*: 'Der von den Interpolationen gesäuberte Text ist eine der besten irischen Erzählungen, die wir besitzen, flott geschrieben, und auch wo sie an Altüberliefertes wie die *Táin bó Cuailnge* und die *CúRoi-Sage* anknüpft, selbständig.'

slavishly followed his source; and as this is generally not the case in the tales of the Ulster Cycle, the question of direct literary borrowings has to be explicitly acknowledged as a very real methodological problem, but ultimately it cannot be resolved (or at least, not in the current state of research). In addition, it can never be excluded that individual elements of a tale might be due to purely literary embellishments – a possibility whose likelihood cumulatively increases with the distance from the pagan period, as one poet's (perhaps rather small) embellishment might be perceived as a traditional element by a later poet, who himself adds small embellishments of his own, etc. The main consequence of this problem is that the main weight of any argument concerning early Irish mythology has to be born by the oldest available sources in order to minimise the risk of treating literary texts as mythological sources whose 'mythological' traits are merely based on literary interdependence and perhaps primarily literary developments.<sup>38</sup> That, however, also texts that post-date the Old Irish period *can* still be relevant for the reconstruction of pre-Christian mythology might be indicated by the motif of Medb's marriage to the king:<sup>39</sup> the first explicit statement that it is the marriage to Medb which is the source of Ailill's sovereignty as king of Connacht is found in the Pillow Talk – and thus only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Before this time, Medb's association with sovereignty may already be alluded to in *Fled Bricrenn* (and the etymology of her name), but this 'sovereignty' is not bestowed by marriage. Yet in general the motif that the king's inauguration is a kind of marriage is already attested by the very word for 'royal inauguration': the inauguration of the king is a *banais*, i.e. *ban-feis*, 'the spending of the night with a woman'.<sup>40</sup> This might both support the widely held assumption that this trait of the hypothetical goddess Medb is old (in spite of its first appearance only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century) and might offer a tentative explanation why this trait is only mentioned in the literary testimonies from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards: the meaning of *banais* would have been readily understandable for a speaker of Old Irish and would have kept the association of royal inauguration and marriage (to a goddess?) alive at least on a linguistic level. For a Christian writer of the early period, this might have given the notion of a goddess associated with sovereignty just a bit too much potential contemporary relevance to be comfortable with; perhaps only the 12<sup>th</sup> century was far enough removed from the mythological roots of both Medb and the term *banais* to treat Medb's marriages to kings with the same detached antiquarian literary curiosity as any other motif. This illustrates the full ambivalence of Middle Irish material: it may be a mere literary reworking and literary embellishment of Old Irish texts – but it may at the same time also be more open for including old mythological motifs in a perhaps more securely antiquarian perspective. There is no simple way of distinguishing the one from the other and resolving the question. Within the scope of the present article, these problems can merely be acknowledged and may, in a general way, serve as a warning against rashly overestimating the value of any individual testimony as a source for pre-Christian Irish mythology.

<sup>38</sup> For a criticism of the occasional use of the very latest texts for the delineation of the character of Medb as a mythological figure cf. EDEL 1997.

<sup>39</sup> On this methodological point cf. also MAIER 1999, esp. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *DIL* s.v. 'feis(s), fess' and s.v. 'banais'; O'RAHILLY 1946: 14 f.



This being said, some prominent later texts may still be mentioned, if mainly in an illustrative fashion to reinforce the impression already gained from the textual evidence up to *TBC II*. These later texts elaborate very much the same general motifs as the earlier testimonies, even though they indulge in these themes in increasingly bright colours. In the death tale of Medb's husband Ailill, in its extant form a text not older than the twelfth century,<sup>41</sup> it is stated: *tricha fer cach lai do claemclodh di nó tagall Fergus[a] aonfecht* – 'she used to change thirty men every day, or go with Fergus once'.<sup>42</sup> But when Ailill had intercourse with other women and neglected Medb, she had him killed.<sup>43</sup> And the 13<sup>th</sup> century tale *Cath Boinde* relates that when Fidech mac Féicc asked Medb of her father in marriage, he was killed by Tinne mac Connacht; the latter then had a relationship with Medb in Crúachu and by her side he apparently gained something like the *de facto* kingship of Ireland.<sup>44</sup> Later, Medb is raped by Conchobar, and Tinne is slain. Eochaid Dála, however, manages to rescue Medb and becomes her husband and king; yet she drops even him in the end, in favour of Ailill, by whom Eochaid is killed – and Ailill is described as the grandchild of one of Medb's sisters.<sup>45</sup> The range of the husbands she makes into kings by her side and drops in the end encompasses generations, and this once more seems to underline that the dire fate of Medb's lovers and husbands might be just as characteristic of the tales surrounding her as the association of the marriage to Medb with sovereignty.

A parallel to this story about the husbands of Medb of Connacht can be found in the traditions about Medb Lethderg ('red-side' or 'half-red') in Leinster. Again a relationship with her is dangerous: Medb Lethderg's first husband is killed in battle by her second one. But again, there is a prize for the risk: kingship – and on the other hand *isi na leigedh ri a Temair gan a beth fein aigi na mnái*, 'she it was who would not allow a king in Tara without his having herself as a wife'. Thus, she marries five generations of kings, and they are not kings until they mate with her (or so it is told by an undated text in an Early Modern manuscript).<sup>46</sup>

Medb Lethderg is, as Koch points out, clearly differentiated from Medb of Connacht – at least in as far as our extant textual sources are concerned. But given that both name and characters of these two Medbs correspond to the point of being

<sup>41</sup> THURNEYSSEN 1921: 579. This tale may be mentioned already in the oldest stratum of the tale-lists (*ibidem* and cf. TONER 2000: 105, 116 [no. 64]); this does not necessarily imply, however, that also the abovementioned motifs were already part of this possible early form of the narrative – especially as the text appears in tale-list A only under the title *Aided Conaill*: TONER 2000: 116 [no. 64]. The extant text appears to contain a quotation from the Pillow Talk and thus probably post-dates *TBC II* (*Aided Ailella*: 104 l. 6; *TBC II* l. 28; cf. MEYER 1897: 110 note 12). Meyer ascribed the extant version, with some doubt, to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when he thought it was re-written from older material (MEYER 1897: 102).

<sup>42</sup> *Aided Ailella*: 104 ll. 4–5 (text); p. 107 (translation).

<sup>43</sup> *Aided Ailella*: 104 ll. 17–23 (text); p. 108 (translation).

<sup>44</sup> Ó MÁILLE 1928: 131–133; *Cath Boinde*: 178 f. Dating: THURNEYSSEN 1921: 531, 528.

<sup>45</sup> Ó MÁILLE 1928: 133–135; *Cath Boinde*: 178–183.

<sup>46</sup> Ó MÁILLE 1928: 136–139, 142. Ó Máille relies mainly on a text from the Book of Leinster (whence also the quotation): LL 380<sup>a</sup> 53 – 380<sup>b</sup> 23. This part of the Book of Leinster, however, is a much later – 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century – addition to the manuscript: EDEL 2001: 174 with note 94. Edel dismisses the text as a 'late *Machwerk*' (EDEL 2001: 174). Medb Lethderg, warfare, Tara, and the marriage to Medb as precondition for kingship are furthermore associated in the poem *Cnucha cnoc os cionn Life* (stanzas 26–30), which has, however, equally not yet been dated linguistically.

identical, he also (and rightly) concludes that they might either be identical in origin or were identified in the course of their respective literary developments.<sup>47</sup> In either case Medb Lethderg is not ultimately independent from the traditions about Medb of Connacht. But it may nevertheless be of relevance that the figure of Medb Lethderg attests an association of 'Medb' with a second central seat of kingship (Medb Lethderg is associated with Tara, just as Medb of Connacht is associated with Crúachu) and that Medb Lethderg and her association with the kingship of Tara is attested (though with little detail) as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>48</sup> the question should be asked – though it cannot yet be answered – if and how this relates to the situation in *Conailla Medb míchuru*, where Medb likewise seems to have her seat at Tara.<sup>49</sup> In any case Medb Lethderg emphasises this association of Medb with kingship also outside of Connacht, and she does so from comparatively early on in the literary tradition. This might be chance or a play on literary motifs, but it might perhaps also be another argument in favour of a wider, (formerly) mythological significance of this figure.<sup>50</sup>

The picture of Medb that arises from these texts is that of a both markedly sexual and warlike figure which is deeply connected with the symbolism of sovereignty and whose many lovers tend to come to a dire end. Whether also the birds she is occasionally associated with are of any significance, must – at best – remain an open question. Ross assumes that the animals she is described as carrying on her shoulders are so strongly reminiscent of the iconography of Gaulish goddesses that they are a point in favour of a 'goddess Medb'.<sup>51</sup> This seems doubtful, however: even though these animals appear in comparatively early sources, they are overall of rare occurrence and – even more importantly – they also find close parallels in texts without direct connection to Medb, which could indicate that this feature might be trivial.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to this, the four traits of her associations with sexuality, war, sovereignty and the death of her lovers appear both from very early on in the tradition and very frequently. Already in the possibly oldest source about Medb – the poem *Conailla Medb míchuru* – her marked sexuality may be alluded to in the probable appearance of her relationship with Fergus, and in the same text her warlike aspect may find its expression in her responsibility for *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Even apart from the etymology of her very name – and this etymology is a central point in its own right – her connection with the sovereignty-theme may become visible in her bestowal of the 'sovereignty of the warriors of Ireland' in passages of *Fled Bricrenn* which Thurneysen dated as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century. And the tendency of her lovers to find an early and gory end may already stand behind the attempt on Fróech's life in the early eighth-century text *Táin Bó Froích* and might be alluded to in the inclusion of

<sup>47</sup> KOCH 2006a: 1282.

<sup>48</sup> In the tenth-century tale *Esnada Tige Buchet* (§7 ed. STOKES 1904; ll. 555–558 ed. GREENE 1955) Medb Lethderg is mentioned as holding the kingship of Tara after the death of her husband Art, and not allowing Cormac to take up the royal office he should have inherited from his father, cf. Ó MÁILLE 1928: 139. Dating: STOKES 1904: 19.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. HENRY 1997: 53, 61f.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. KOCH 2006a: 1282.

<sup>51</sup> ROSS 1993: 286.

<sup>52</sup> In *Fled Bricrenn*, the decoration of the cups with birds is repeatedly emphasised (§§ 59, 60, 62, 73, 74); however, also the vessel in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* §1 is decorated with birds. And for a parallel to the birds on Medb's shoulders cf. the birds which Cú Chulainn catches for the Ulster women in *Serglige Con Culainn* §§ 4–6.

the offer of the 'friendship of Medb's thighs' in the bribes and lies which Medb uses to send Fer Diad into the combat in which he meets his death.

Thus, from the earliest stratum of the material onwards the four traits of a connection with sovereignty, an association with a marked sexuality, a warlike character and the death of her lovers remain ever-present characteristics of Medb which reoccur throughout the later literature; these aspects seem to have been considered fundamental defining features of the figure Medb. This constant reappearance of these traits from a very early stratum of the literary tradition onwards makes it seem likely that these traits might have been part of the oldest character of Medb that can be reconstructed from our extant sources.

### *A Mesopotamian parallel: Inanna-Ištar*

Already Thurneysen<sup>53</sup> was aware of Sumerian inscriptions from the third millennium onwards in which kings call themselves consorts of certain goddesses, such as around 2170 BC: 'Ur-Ninurta, ..., king of Sumer and Akkad, destined consort of Inanna.'<sup>54</sup> He interpreted this frequent idea of the mating of Ancient Near Eastern kings with goddesses as a typological parallel to his theory of a goddess Medb mating with early Irish kings and thereby bestowing sovereignty upon them. The most important example of a goddess mating with the king and thereby legitimising his rule is at the same time also one of the most important deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon – the warrior-goddess Inanna-Ištar, who combines an important place in the ideology of kingship both with strong associations with sexuality and with an emphasised warlike aspect.

All the more detailed source texts concerning this deity stem from a time – from the late third millennium BC onwards – when the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ištar had already influenced each other to such an extent that their characters hardly, if at all, differed.<sup>55</sup> At this time of the earliest detailed sources, Inanna-Ištar was already a highly complex goddess who combined various aspects<sup>56</sup> – she was a deity of sexual love, war and a patroness of the palace –, with emphasis on the various aspects changing from place to place. Thus in her cult in Kiš, her aspect as a war-goddess was particularly emphasised, whereas in Uruk she was predominantly worshipped as a goddess of love.<sup>57</sup> Her epithet 'Mistress of the Palace' is attested already in the earliest Sumerian sources in the middle of the third millennium, and her cult was common in the whole of Mesopotamia by the beginning of the second millennium at the latest.<sup>58</sup> From the late third millennium onwards she is well attested as associated with the planet Venus in its appearances both as morning star and as evening star. Of these two appearances, the former – Ištar as the morning star – was associated with her warlike aspect, while the latter – Ištar as the evening star –

<sup>53</sup> THURNEYSEN 1933: 352.

<sup>54</sup> THUREAU-DANGIN 1907: 204 f. B1; cf. THURNEYSEN 1933: 352. (The readings of the above names have been modernised.) For the sake of consistency I have, in as far as necessary, translated all quotations from Near Eastern texts into English from the quoted translations.

<sup>55</sup> WEGNER 1981: 2; HAAS 1994: 340; cf. COLBOW 1991: 490–492.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. GRONEBERG 2004: 157.

<sup>57</sup> LEEMANS 1952: 23.

<sup>58</sup> HAAS 1994: 339.

was connected with her aggressively sexual aspect.<sup>59</sup> The same bipolarity can also be observed in her iconography, where an armed depiction – reflecting her aspect as a warrior goddess – contrasts with a nude depiction connected with her sexual aspect.<sup>60</sup> In both forms her iconographic representation can be winged, though this is rarely the case with her depiction as an armed and clothed goddess and much more frequent for the nude depiction.<sup>61</sup>

The parallelism between Medb's marriage with kings in Ireland and the sacred marriage between the king and Inanna-Ištar in Mesopotamia goes well beyond the similarities that were visible in the texts accessible to Thurneysen. For the Mesopotamian sacred marriage can be described in an imagery just as strikingly sexual as the character of Medb in early Irish literature. A Sumerian text describes Inanna's ritual marriage with king Iddin-Dagan of Isin (twentieth century BC):<sup>62</sup>

In order to find sweetness in the bed on the joyous coverlet, my lady bathes her holy thighs. She bathes them for the thighs of the king; she bathes them for<sup>a</sup> the thighs of Iddin-Dagan. Holy Inana rubs herself with soap; she sprinkles oil and cedar essence on the ground.

The king goes to her holy thighs with head held high,<sup>b</sup> he goes to the thighs of Inana with head held high. Ama-ušumgal-ana lies down beside her and caresses her holy thighs<sup>c</sup>. After the lady has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, after holy Inana has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, she relaxes (?) with him on her bed: "Iddin-Dagan, you are indeed my beloved!"

To pour libations, to carry out purification rites, to heap up incense offerings, to burn juniper, to set out food offerings, to set out offering-bowls, he goes into her Egal-maḥ. She embraces her beloved spouse, holy Inana embraces him. She shines like daylight on the great throne dais<sup>d</sup> and makes the king position himself next (?) to her like the sun.<sup>63</sup>

The sexual imagery in which the marriage between the king and Inanna-Ištar is depicted in this text corresponds to a prominent character trait of this goddess. In hymnal poetry, Inanna-Ištar appears as a beautiful goddess of love, as in a hymn from the first half of the second millennium:

(The goddess) of joy is clothed in love,  
she is full of seduction, of Venus-character and of voluptuousness.

<sup>59</sup> HAAS 1994: 340.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> BARRELET 1955: 225 f., 237, 247; HAAS 2002: 105 f.

<sup>62</sup> EDZARD 1976–1980: 30; cf. GRONEBERG 2004: 128 f.

<sup>63</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.2.5.3.1 ll. 181–202 (the presentation of the ms. variants has been adapted); cf. FALKENSTEIN & VON SODEN 1953: 97 f.; JESTIN 1950: 68–70.

<sup>a</sup> **she bathes them for**] *some mss. have:* with head held high she goes to

<sup>b</sup> *some mss. add:* she goes to the thighs of Iddin-Dagan.

<sup>c</sup> **caresses her holy thighs**] *some mss. have:* (says:) "O my holy thighs! O my holy Inana!"

<sup>d</sup> **the great throne dais**] *1 ms. has:* the throne at one side (?)

Ištar-of-the-joy is clothed in love,  
she is full of seduction, of Venus-character and of voluptuousness.<sup>64</sup>

This sexual aspect of Inanna-Ištar is emphasised in many compositions. Even prostitution played a role in her character when she is described as a divine prostitute, as in a Sumerian hymn where she says about herself: 'When I sit by the gate of the tavern, I am a prostitute familiar with the penis; the friend of a man, the girlfriend of a woman.'<sup>65</sup> And only a few lines prior to Inanna's self-description as a prostitute this incantation furthermore describes her warlike aspect and her appearance in battle; thus she says about herself: 'When I stand in the thick of the battle, I am indeed also the very guts of battle, the heroic strength.'<sup>66</sup>

Her love affairs were notorious, and even if kings who were well established on the throne describe their relationship with her as a happy one, it is not always like this. The same text in which Inanna describes herself as a 'prostitute familiar with the penis' and as 'the very guts of battle' also mentions her unlucky lover Dumuzi.<sup>67</sup> Inanna-Ištar's relationship to Dumuzi-Tammuz is the object of a large number of texts; there, Inanna and Dumuzi appear as young lovers who are separated by the early death of Dumuzi as he is seized and dragged to the netherworld by infernal demons.<sup>68</sup> The *locus classicus* of the dire consequences of Ištar's attentions may be an episode in the sixth tablet of the Babylonian epic of Gilgameš in which it is told how Ištar fell in love with the hero Gilgameš. She asked him to become her lover and offered him herself and great gifts; yet he rejects her forcefully, pointing out the dire fate of her numerous previous lovers, asking:

What bridegroom of yours endured for ever?  
What brave warrior of yours is there [who] went up [to heaven?]  
Come, let me count [the numbers] of your lovers.  
As for him of . . . . . [ . . . ] his arm.  
To Dumuzi, the husband of your youth,  
to him you have allotted perpetual weeping, year on year.  
You loved the speckled *allallu*-bird,  
you struck him and broke his wing,  
(now) he stands in the woods crying, "My wing!"<sup>69</sup>

Then Gilgameš continues with a lengthy catalogue of Ištar's unlucky lovers. She is furious and goes to her father, Anu, in heaven, where she demands the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgameš. First, Anu disapproves strictly, but in the end she gets what she wants and directs the Bull of Heaven against Gilgameš and his friend Enkidu – and the two kill it. Yet as a punishment for their killing of the Bull, the gods decide that one of them has to die, and the choice falls on Enkidu.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> THUREAU-DANGIN 1925: 174.

<sup>65</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.9 segment A ll. 20–22; cf. COHEN 1975: 606 ll. 20–22.

<sup>66</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.9 segment A ll. 10 f.; cf. COHEN 1975: 606 ll. 10 f.

<sup>67</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.9 segment A l. 24; COHEN 1975: 606 l. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. MARCOVICH 1996: 49; ALSTER 1999; GRONEBERG 2004: 176–181; MANDER 2005.

<sup>69</sup> GEORGE 2003 vol. 1: 621.

<sup>70</sup> GEORGE 2003 vol. 1: 618–631, 478.

Among the earliest extensive poetic descriptions of Inanna are the poems attributed to the high priestess Enheduanna (around 2300 BC),<sup>71</sup> where not only her seductive and warlike character,<sup>72</sup> but also a bird-aspect can be articulated. The winged iconography of the goddess on Sumerian seals is there paralleled by the use of bird-metaphors: ‘The mistress, an eagle that lets no one escape, ....., Inana, a falcon preying on the gods’.<sup>73</sup> In the poem from which these two lines have been taken, this bird-affinity is – in contrast to the iconographic evidence – directly juxtaposed to her warlike character, which is graphically described in this text:

It is her game to speed conflict and battle, untiring, strapping on her sandals. Clothed (?) in a furious storm, a whirlwind, she ..... the garment of ladyship. When she touches ..... there is despair, a south wind which has covered ..... Inana sits on harnessed (?) lions, she cuts to pieces him who shows no respect.<sup>74</sup>

And:

In her joyful heart she performs the song of death on the plain. She performs the song of her heart. She washes their weapons with blood and gore, ..... Axes smash heads, spears penetrate and maces are covered in blood.<sup>75</sup>

Not content to merely fight, Inanna also causes strife:

On the wide and silent plain, darkening the bright daylight, she turns midday into darkness. People look upon each other in anger, they look for combat.<sup>76</sup>

In battle she not only rejoices in violence, but she also supports the king, as in an inscription of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Urta I (c. 1250 BC):

Trusting in Assur, Enlil (Bêl) and Shamash, the great gods, my lords, (and) with the help of Ishtar, queen of heaven and earth, who went at the head of my army, I forced Kashtilash, king of Karduniash (Babylonia), to give battle [...]’<sup>77</sup>

In another inscription (c. 1100 BC) she is addressed as ‘Ishtar, first among the gods, the lady of confusion, who makes battle terrible.’<sup>78</sup> Ištar stayed warlike tutelary deity of the kings up to the latest times.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, the parallels between the Ancient Near Eastern goddess Inanna-Ištar and Medb go far beyond Thurneysen’s observation that in both cases the sacred marriage between a goddess and the king can be found. Both Medb and Inanna-Ištar are em-

<sup>71</sup> GRONEBERG 2004: 173 f.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. GRONEBERG 2004: 173–176.

<sup>73</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.3 ll. 31 f.; cf. SJÖBERG 1975: 181 ll. 31 f.

<sup>74</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.3 ll. 20–23; cf. SJÖBERG 1975: 181 ll. 20–23.

<sup>75</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.3 ll. 43–46; cf. SJÖBERG 1975: 183 ll. 43–46.

<sup>76</sup> BLACK *et al.* 1998–2006 t.4.07.3 ll. 49 f.; cf. SJÖBERG 1975: 183 ll. 49 f.

<sup>77</sup> LUCKENBILL 1926/27 vol. 1 no. 145.

<sup>78</sup> LUCKENBILL 1926/27 vol. 1 no. 217.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. e.g. LUCKENBILL 1926/27 vol. 2 no. 861, a record about Ištar and king Assurbanipal dated 648 BC.

phatically sexual figures, and the connection between king and goddess is perceived as explicitly sexual. Both do not merely marry the king but are sexually insatiable: both have multitudes of lovers; their lovers, however, are short-lived and in both cases look forward to a dire fate. In both cases not only kingship and sexuality, but also war forms a central part of the character of the figure. And if Ross is right in her assumption that the occasional birds on the shoulders of 'goddess Medb' were already a part of her pre-Christian persona, then also this trait would find a Mesopotamian parallel in the winged iconography of Inanna-Ištar.

### Greece: Aphrodite

Not far from the coast of the Levant, and thus well within the reach of Near Eastern cultural influences, lies the island of Cyprus. The main goddess of Cyprus has from the earliest time been Aphrodite; in classical antiquity, the name of the island became near synonymous to the name of the goddess, who could simply be called *Κυπρία* or *Κύπρις*, 'the one from Cyprus':<sup>80</sup> Aphrodite and some Near Eastern goddesses – such as especially Inanna-Ištar – share a number of traits both in general character and in specific detail. These parallels are so far-reaching that the origin of Aphrodite has frequently been sought in the Ancient Near East, as by Nilsson and Burkert.<sup>81</sup> Thus, Aphrodite bears the epithet 'Heavenly', *Ὀὐρανία*, which in Greek religion appears only here, just as Ištar is called 'Queen of Heaven'.<sup>82</sup>

Aphrodite's most prominent sacred animal was the dove,<sup>83</sup> and Sappho describes her as travelling in a chariot drawn by sparrows (Sappho fragment I.8–12).<sup>84</sup> Sappho invokes her in matters of love, and indeed Aphrodite's association with sexuality is by far her most dominating trait: her sexual activity is as notorious as that of Ištar – one may just think of her adultery with Ares, when she got caught by the craftsmanship of her husband Hephaestus (*Odyssey* VIII.266–366), or one might remember her girdle which arouses male desire and which she lends to Hera when Hera wants to seduce Zeus in order to distract him from the happenings in Troy (*Iliad* XIV.153–360). This association with sexuality is not only fundamental to Aphrodite's mythology, but also to her cult; thus, both Comana and Corinth were famous for their courtesans which were sacred to this goddess (Strabo, *Geography* XII.iii.36), and as *Ἀφροδίτη Ἐταίρα* or *Ἀφροδίτη Πάνδημος* she was the tutelary deity of Greek prostitutes.<sup>85</sup>

But even though Aphrodite is a goddess of sexual activity, her own relationships do not always turn out for the better. That Ares is caught by Hephaestus in bed with Aphrodite only leads to the laughter of the Olympians. Yet another lover of Aphrodite, her beloved Adonis, perishes just like Ištar's companion Dumuzi (Apollodorus III.xiv.4).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> E.g. Homer, *Iliad* V.330; Pindar, *Olympian* I.75. In general on Aphrodite cf. BUDIN 2003; BURKERT 1985: 152–156; DELIVORRIAS *et al.* 1984.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. BURKERT 1985: 152–155; NILSSON 1967: 519–523.

<sup>82</sup> BURKERT 1985: 152 f., 155. The epithet is applied to one of the Muses as well only in Hellenistic times, whereas, in other instances, several gods frequently share an epithet: NILSSON 1967: 520.

<sup>83</sup> PIRENNE-DELFORGE 1996: col. 842.

<sup>84</sup> MARCOVICH 1996: 53.

<sup>85</sup> MARCOVICH 1996: 49; ROSCHER 1884–1890b: col. 401; BURKERT 1985: 153, 155.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. ROSCHER 1884–1890a; MARCOVICH 1996: 49 f.

Complementing Aphrodite's rule over the realm of love, there also exist a few isolated traditions in which she appears armed. To classical Greece this was alien, and the respective cult images were already in Classical antiquity considered as ancient. Thus Pausanias relates about Kythera (Pausanias III.xxiii.1):<sup>87</sup>

τὸ δὲ ἱερόν τῆς Οὐρανίας ἀγιώτατον καὶ ἱερῶν ὅποσα Ἀφροδίτης παρ' Ἑλληνισίν ἐστιν ἀρχαιότατον· αὐτῇ δὲ ἡ θεὸς ξόανον ὠπλισμένον.

The sanctuary of Heavenly Aphrodite is the most holy and the most ancient of all the sanctuaries of Aphrodite among the Greeks. The goddess herself is an armed image of wood.

The same writer also tells that among the Spartans he had seen an ancient temple with a wooden image of Aphrodite armed (Pausanias III.xv.10). Another armed cult image of Aphrodite is reported for Corinth (Pausanias II.v.1), which has already been mentioned for its both famous and notorious association with prostitution.<sup>88</sup> And even more tantalizingly both warlike and sexual is a tradition about the Locrians in Magna Graecia: about them Justin (*Epitome* XXI.iii.2) reports that when they were hard pressed in war against Leophron, the tyrant of Rhegium, they vowed to prostitute their virgins on the festival day of Aphrodite if they were victorious.

#### *Italy: Venus*

Staying on the Apennine Peninsula, it also seems appropriate to mention the Roman love goddess Venus.<sup>89</sup> Venus is well known as a goddess of love and in this aspect she entirely took over classical Greek iconography, as is usual in Roman religion. But in contrast with Greek Aphrodite in Classical times, the Roman attitude towards Venus seems not to have been exclusively dominated by the aspect of love: while never straightforward in their interpretation, a substantial number of indications might link her to warfare in a much stronger way than this appeared to be the case in Greece. Thus *Venus Victrix*, Venus the Victorious, found special worship by great military commanders, most famously Caesar, Pompey and Sulla. Pompey built a temple to her (Pliny, *Naturalis historia* VIII.vii.20)<sup>90</sup> and Caesar used her name as a password at the battles of Pharsalus and Munda (Appian, *Bell. civ.* II.104; II.76); in the night before the battle of Pharsalus, Caesar vowed to dedicate a temple to her (Appian, *Bell. civ.* II.102). As he was a member of the *gens Iulia*, this might not be due to any warlike aspect, but rather to his relationship to her as the special tutelary goddess of his family (cf. Appian, *Bell. civ.* II.102). The same might be said about the appearance of *Venus Victrix* on coins from Octavian onwards to Emperor Commodus.<sup>91</sup> But also Sulla, who did not belong to the *gens Iulia*, refers to this deity – and again in military contexts: after Sulla's victories over the troops of Mithridates, Sulla had (as the text in its *interpretatio*

<sup>87</sup> FLEMBERG 1991: 29.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. FLEMBERG 1991: 14, 40 f.; BUDIN 2003: 77–80.

<sup>89</sup> For what follows cf. FLEMBERG 1991: 26–28.

<sup>90</sup> WISSOWA 1924–1937: col. 194.

<sup>91</sup> Though the meaning of the motif is interpreted as a double one: Venus as ancestor of the Julians (*Genetrix*) and helper to gain victory (indicated by the name *Victrix*). It cannot be said with certainty if it also alludes to the Greek allegory for peace: the goddess of love taking the arms away from Ares. FLEMBERG 1991: 111 f.



*Graeca* reports) trophies put up for Ares, Nike – and Aphrodite (Plutarch, *Sulla* XIX.5; XXXIV.2). And in reaction to a prophecy promising him wide-ranging power (*κράτος ἀμφιλαφές*) if he did so, Sulla made a dedication to the Aphrodite of Aphrodisias, whom the *interpretatio Romana* equated with Venus; this dedication consisted in a golden wreath and a golden axe, with the following inscription (Appian, *Bell. civ.* I.97):<sup>92</sup>

τόνδε σοι αὐτοκράτωρ Σύλλας ἀνέθηκ', Ἀφροδίτη,  
 ὃ σ' εἶδον κατ' ὄνειρον ἀνά στρατιήν διέπουσαν  
 τεύχεσι τοῖς Ἄρεος μαρναμένην ἔνοπλον.

The dictator Sulla dedicated this [axe] to you, Aphrodite,  
 As I saw myself in a dream how you perambulated my troops,  
 You bore the arms of Ares to battle, entirely armed.

Noteworthy is not only the kind of the dedication (an axe to a 'goddess of love') and the warlike appearance of the goddess in the inscription as a combatant deity bestowing victory in battle, but also the ruling power that was prophesied to Sulla if he should make this dedication.

A connection between Venus and warfare might already surface in the first known dedication of a temple to her in Rome, made 295 BC by Q. Fabius Gurgus (Livy X.xxxi.9). Livy relates that this temple was built with fines paid by some married women who had been convicted of adultery, but does not record the reason for the dedication of this temple. Later tradition relates, however, that this dedication was to *Venus Obsequens* and that the cause for the dedication was that Venus was gracious (*obsequens*) to Fabius in the Samnite war (Servius, *ad Aen.* I.720; there Servius also mentions that Venus was occasionally also called *Militaris Venus*). However, Fabius' dedication of this temple has also been interpreted as an act of *evocatio*,<sup>93</sup> not indicating any connection of the native Italian Venus with warfare.<sup>94</sup> Similarly uncertain in its interpretation but nevertheless suggestive may be another dedication of a temple to Venus which has been thought to constitute evidence for a martial aspect of this goddess:<sup>95</sup> in 217 BC, when Rome was hard pressed by Hannibal, we find the Sibylline books commanding as one of several religious observances to build a temple for Venus, more specifically *Venus Erycina* (Livy XXII.ix), the Venus of Eryx in Sicily. Furthermore, Venus Erycina not only appears in this context of a military emergency, but was also famous for the prostitution which seems to have constituted an acknowledged part of her cult in Sicily (Diodorus Siculus IV.lxxxiii.6; Strabo VI.ii.5), just as the goddess was associated with prostitution in her temple at the Colline Gate in Rome, where she was venerated by the prostitutes of the city (Ovid, *Fasti* IV.863–876).

<sup>92</sup> FLEMBERG 1991: 34 f.

<sup>93</sup> An *evocatio (deorum)* is a Roman military custom which consisted in asking the gods of a besieged enemy city to take up residence in Rome and to abandon the town in which they previously had their temples; cf. WISSOWA 1907.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. FLEMBERG 1991: 26.

<sup>95</sup> FLEMBERG 1991: 26. Or should one interpret this dedication as an attempt to placate the goddess of this strategically important mountain sanctuary after her temple had been plundered by rampaging Roman mercenaries in the First Punic War (cf. KIENAST 1965: 483, 487 f.)?

Venus took over Greek iconography and the mythology of Aphrodite. Like Aphrodite, she has a bird-drawn chariot (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X.708 f., 717 f.), and the story of Aphrodite's love to Adonis and of his death was told about her as well (*ibid.* X.503–739). However, this does not mean that these traits were notably secondary to the mythology of Venus. The myth of the luckless Adonis had already been connected with the Etruscan goddess of love Turan and had thus been present in Italy already before the rise of Latin literature;<sup>96</sup> by the time we meet Venus in Latin texts, this tale has long been naturalised. And that Turan could be depicted as winged or riding on a bird might perhaps indicate that the 'bird-aspect' of the love goddess that may find its expression in the bird-chariot of Venus could also be native to Italian soil.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, the mythology and cult of Venus, too, appears to give testimony to a goddess of complex character. Venus was not only focused on love and sexuality, but may also have shared traits like a warlike aspect and the motif of the dire fate of the lover of the goddess, characterising her as a type of goddess perhaps not too dissimilar from the one that is found in the warlike, aggressively sexual, winged 'sovereignty goddess' Inanna-Ištar in Mesopotamia.<sup>98</sup>

#### *Scandinavia: Freyja*

Having addressed the Ancient Near East, Greece and Italy, there remains only one further area of early Europe for which extensive written sources are extant that shed more than the most superficial of lights on its pre-Christian religious history: ancient Scandinavia.<sup>99</sup> And indeed, similar traits of character as they have repeatedly been encountered in the preceding perusal of the mythological traditions of Ireland, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean may also have been fundamental to a goddess of this region: the Norse goddess Freyja.<sup>100</sup> Her name is related to Old High German *frouwa*, Old Saxon *fria*, Middle Dutch *vrouwe*, and may correspondingly mean 'lady, ruler, queen'.<sup>101</sup> The literary sources of medieval Scandinavia depict her as notoriously sexually active, connected to warfare and perhaps even showing a link to kingship – even though the late date of the most extensive sources makes it problematic to be sure

<sup>96</sup> Cf. DE GRUMMOND 2006: 94–96.

<sup>97</sup> DE GRUMMOND 2006: 85.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. FLEMBERG 1991: 27: 'Die Aphrodite- bzw. Venusverehrung der römischen Feldherren erinnert an das Verhältnis der altorientalischen Herrscher zu Ištar ...'.

<sup>99</sup> For Gaul and Central Europe some material can perhaps be interpreted in terms of the type of goddesses currently under discussion, but – lacking written sources – the evidence is problematic and would require a more extensive analysis than can be given here. Cf. e.g. for iconographic evidence on Gaulish coins: DUVAL 1987: 42–46, 49–55; ALLEN 1980: 142 f.; EGELER (*forthcoming*). Particularly relevant could be the Strettweg wagon: the bronze model cult-wagon from Strettweg in Austria (seventh century BC, from a rich armed male burial) shows an anthropomorphic female figure surrounded by several much smaller warriors/hunters and females holding stags. The scene may illustrate the dominance of a goddess in the area of the hunt and of war. Even the sexual aspect seems present, as the female figure is – apart from a belt (cf. the girdle of Aphrodite?) – naked and as the wagon also shows a man with erect phallus wielding an axe: cf. BIRKHAN 1997: 548 f.; GREEN 1995: 33, 161–163. And also Etruscan religion shows in Turan a goddess of love that also seems to appear in arms: cf. above and FLEMBERG 1991: 26, 114; JANNOT 1998: 158–160.

<sup>100</sup> For the following: MOTZ 1993: 93–101 and MOTZ 1982: 196–203.

<sup>101</sup> MOTZ 1993: 94, cf. HEIZMANN 2001: 275.

that her character as represented by the extant literary texts is a close reflection of her pre-Christian persona.

Freyja is the only goddess that is the main figure of an Eddic poem, the *Hyndlolióð* (probably 13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>102</sup> There, she comes – together with a special devotee of hers, Óttarr – to the giantess Hyndla to obtain from her genealogical lore which is needed by Óttarr to gain kingship. Unwillingly, Hyndla reveals the lore. Viewed with Medb in mind, it might be particularly interesting that Freyja not only helps Óttarr to gain kingship but that Hyndla also claims that Óttarr is Freyja's lover; however, one should bear in mind that Freyja denies this imputation, that the remark is intended to needle Freyja and that the *Hyndlolióð* is a rather late source.

Freyja has a marital relationship with Óðr (*Vǫlospá* 25, probably 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>103</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* 20, 37, 49 and *Gylfaginning* 35, 42, both around 1220 AD).<sup>104</sup> Snorri relates about this marriage that Óðr went on long travels, whereupon Freyja wept golden tears and went searching for her husband among strange peoples (*Gylfaginning* 35; cf. *Skáldskaparmál* 20, 37, 49, 75); this may recall the loss of their lovers by the other goddesses mentioned above, even though Óðr is away travelling rather than dead.

In spite of Freyja's marriage to Óðr the giantess Hyndla taunts Freyja with her relationship with Óttarr (which Freyja denies), with the multitude of her lovers and with the strength of her sexual desire (*Hyndlolióð* 6 f., 46 f.), and Loki even claims during a feast that Freyja has slept with every god and every elf in the hall (*Locasenna* 30, 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>105</sup> A late, euhemerising text tells that she bought her necklace, *Brisingamen*, from its four makers by having intercourse with them, that she was the mistress of Odin and the fairest woman of her time (*Sǫrla þáttr* ch. 228, late 14<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>106</sup> However, the *Sǫrla þáttr* is a very late text; and the context of the corresponding remarks in the likewise late poems *Hyndlolióð* and *Locasenna* is furthermore explicitly an insulting one, which suggests that they could easily be seen as slander. Therefore much more weight than these testimonies has Snorri's report that love-songs please Freyja well and that it is good to pray to her in matters of love (*Gylfaginning* 24).

In contrast to this, her habitation is named *Fólkvangr*, 'battlefield', and every day she chooses half of the men that are slain in battle (*Grímnismál* 14, undatable;<sup>107</sup> *Gylfaginning* 24; cf. *Skáldskaparmál* 20). When her necklace is stolen from her by

<sup>102</sup> SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 201. VON SEE *et al.* 2000: 689 have dated this poem to the time between the composition of the *Vǫlospá* (as it is transmitted in the *Hauksbók*; cf. the next note) as *terminus post quem* and a *terminus ante quem* of c. 1225 (defined by Snorri's Edda). In general on the *Hyndlolióð* cf. ZERNACK 2000; VON SEE *et al.* 2000: 667–836.

<sup>103</sup> The *Vǫlospá* is usually ascribed to the tenth or eleventh century, cf. e.g. SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 430. A different approach is propagated by GÍSLI SIGURDSSON 2007: 527 f., 530–532 who argues in favour of a study of the extant manuscript versions of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries instead of attempts to reconstruct their archetype.

<sup>104</sup> SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 352. In general on the *Gylfaginning* cf. LORENZ 1984.

<sup>105</sup> VON SEE *et al.* 1997: 384, cf. similarly SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 253.

<sup>106</sup> LANDOLT 1999: 561.

<sup>107</sup> The *Grímnismál* are ascribed to the late pagan time by DE VRIES 1964–1967 vol. 1: § 24. SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 128 assume that a 'Wissensdichtung' like the *Grímnismál* 'kann sowohl in der spätheidn. Zeit (spätes 10. Jh.) als auch zur Zeit der gelehrten Renaissance in Island im 12./13. Jh. entstanden sein'.

an order of Odin, she has, as Odin's condition for its return to her, to instigate an unceasing battle which never ends because the dead would be reawakened to new carnage (*Sǫrla þáttur* ch. 229 ff.).<sup>108</sup>

And furthermore it might be noted that Freyja owns a *fiáðrhamr* 'feather-garment' (*Þrymsqviða* 3, 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>109</sup> or a *valshamr* 'falcon's garment' (*Skáldskaparmál* G56) which allows her to fly (though she is herself never actually described as using it; rather, the extant texts only mention Freyja's feather-garment when she lends it to someone else).

Thus, a wide range of Scandinavian texts appears to reflect a very similar range of motifs as they are elaborated by the Irish literary tradition (as well as the other cultures mentioned above). In contrast to the three preceding sections, it has (as it is the case in Ireland) again to be emphasised that this material may claim to represent pre-Christian mythology, but of the abovementioned texts only the *Vǫluspá* and perhaps the *Grímnismál* may actually date to the (late-)pagan period; all other texts are high and even late medieval and have been created in a thoroughly Christian environment. Correspondingly it cannot be taken for granted that they reflect direct knowledge of pagan motifs rather than literary invention or literary reworkings of motifs taken from older texts; especially a text as young as the *Sǫrla þáttur* could very well be a purely literary reworking of other extant texts without any noteworthy independent access to pre-Christian traditions. In the present context such considerations are particularly relevant for the *Hyndlolióð*, as this text is both late and the only testimony for a connection between Freyja and the inauguration of a king (whereas all other traits which have been addressed above are at least attested in the – comparatively speaking – more reliable works of Snorri Sturluson). It would be beyond the scope of the present article to offer a full discussion of such problems; but it has to be emphasised that these problems exist and have to be taken into consideration as a *caveat* in the interpretation of medieval Norse literary mythology.<sup>110</sup>

### Summary table

	War	Marked Sexuality	Kingship	Death of Lovers	Birds
<b>Medb</b>	warrior; leader of military campaign	multitude of lovers; 'friendship of her thighs'	kingship depending on marriage to Medb	Fergus; Ailill; Fróech; etc.	?cf. golden birds on her shoulder
<b>Inanna-lístar</b>	'the very guts of battle'	multitude of lovers; divine prostitute; divinely seductive	sacred marriage with the king	Dumuzi; list of her unfortunate lovers in <i>Gilgameš</i>	winged depiction
<b>Aphrodite</b>	armed cult images	love-belt; Ἀφροδίτη Ἐταίρα; worshipped by prostitutes	—	Adonis	doves; bird-drawn chariot
<b>Venus</b>	special devotion by military commanders	goddess of love; worshipped by prostitutes	?cf. promise of power for the dictator Sulla	Adonis	bird-drawn chariot
<b>Freyja</b>	owns half the men slain in battle; <i>Fólkvangr</i>	answers prayers concerning affairs of love	helps her lover(?) gain kingship	weeping golden tears for Óðr	feather-garment

<sup>108</sup> Cf. the West Kerry folktale of the 'Everlasting Fight at Ventry', in which the warriors of the enemy army are resuscitated during the night by a magic hag: MURPHY 1953: XXXIII f.

<sup>109</sup> VON SEE *et al.* 1997: 526; SIMEK & HERMANN PÁLSSON 2007: 399.

<sup>110</sup> For some general remarks on the methodological problems posed by the extant sources of Norse mythology cf. e.g. MAIER 2003: 41–52 *et passim*; EGELER 2011: 8–16 *et passim*.

### Concluding analysis

The present paper has taken as its starting point Thurneysen's suggestion that the literary figure Medb could be a reflection of a pre-Christian goddess. If one accepts that such an assumption has some plausibility, this raises the necessary follow-up question about how much Medb's character, as it is depicted in the extant sources, actually owes to its supposed pagan past. How much of her personality is derived from pre-Christian myth, and how much is mere literary invention? In order to approach this question, I have developed one part of Thurneysen's argument: he had suggested that a central part of Medb's depiction in Irish literature, namely the inauguration of the king by the marriage to her, has close counterparts in the Ancient Near East. In Thurneysen's opinion this gave typological plausibility to his reconstruction of the character of the pre-Christian Medb.

In the decades since the appearance of Thurneysen's article, the understanding of the languages of the Ancient Near East has made tremendous progress, and we now know much more about the deities of ancient Mesopotamia than had been known in Thurneysen's day. Medb and Inanna-Ištar not only share the sacred marriage to the king which legitimises his rule and which already Thurneysen had pointed out as a parallel. Rather, they both also show a warlike character and a strongly marked sexuality. Both have an abundant number of lovers, and curiously the lovers of both look forward to a dire fate. To some extent, these motifs are interlinked in the Irish tales: the man whom Medb marries and thus makes king, on whose side she fights, with whom she has sex and whom she finally has murdered may be one and the same person (thinking of the 'biography' of Ailill). Thus one could ask how significant such a fourfold thematic correspondence between Medb and Inanna-Ištar really is, and whether the four individual motifs are not really just four aspects of one and the same theme: a function as a goddess of kingship. Against such a reduction of the multifaceted character of these figures to a single theme it has to be pointed out that already the combination of a sovereignty-aspect and the marriage between king and goddess is not trivial, but just one of many possible ways in which the sovereignty-aspect could be realised. The relationship between the Japanese goddess Amaterasu ōmikami and the Emperor of Japan is a case in point: the Emperor is a descendant of Amaterasu – not her husband.<sup>111</sup> This illustrates that the legitimisation of royal power by reference to a goddess is one thing, but a 'sacred marriage' between king and goddess is another: it constitutes a specification that is not trivial. Similar is the case of the marked sexuality of Medb and Inanna-Ištar: while a sexual union is to some degree implied in the idea of a marriage (sacred or otherwise), the sexuality of Medb and Inanna-Ištar goes well beyond what is implied by the marriage-theme: Medb's sexuality is 'marked' not because of her intercourse with her royal husbands, but because of the importance of her lovers and extra-marital affairs in the tales about her (and only a comparatively small part of her lovers are actually aspirants to kingship); and likewise Inanna has not only intercourse with the king, but is also 'a prostitute familiar with the penis'. The frequent death of the lovers of Medb could at first glance be connected with struggles over the possession

<sup>111</sup> Cf. NAUMANN 1988: 65–69, 72 f., 76 f., 81–85, 87 f., 92–102, 138 *et passim*; KAKUBAYASHI 1987; UNDERWOOD 1934: 19 f., 26–30, 34 f. *et passim*.

of kingship;<sup>112</sup> but while this certainly plays a role in a number of the tales about Medb, it is neither applicable to the examples of Fróech, Fer Diad or Fergus, nor to Inanna-Ištar's lover Dumuzi. Also this motif seems to be ultimately independent of the kingship-theme. And the same probably holds true yet again for the warlike aspect of Medb and Inanna-Ištar: while this aspect certainly combines well with the goddesses' association with the (by implication strongly military) office of the king, the Japanese example of Amaterasu once more illustrates that there is no compulsory close connection between a goddess associated with the reigning sovereign and the martial sphere.<sup>113</sup> In sum, the motifs of kingship, a marked sexuality, the death of the lovers of the goddess, and of a close association with war appear to be largely independent themes whose recurrence in the characters of Medb and Inanna-Ištar indicates that the parallels between these two goddesses go much farther than it had been possible to see in 1933, when Thurneysen wrote his article on Mesopotamian parallels to Medb.

At the same time, it is now also possible to expand the typological comparison to a considerable number of other goddesses. A surprising number of deities – Inanna-Ištar, Aphrodite, Venus, Freyja – share at a closer look a significant number of traits with Queen Medb as she is presented by the Irish literary texts: Aphrodite, Venus and Freyja are goddesses of love (or rather: sexuality), whose own behaviour is strongly and even aggressively sexual; each of them has to mourn the death (Adonis) or absence (Óðr) of her companions; each of them appears to have links not only to sexuality, but also to war (here belong the armed cult images of Aphrodite as well as the worship of Venus in military contexts and Freyja's claim to half the men slain in battle); and at least Freyja might also have a connection to kingship that distantly parallels Medb's marriage to the king and the sacred marriage of oriental kings with Inanna-Ištar, while a prophecy promised Sulla that he would gain political power in exchange for dedicating a golden axe to Venus-Aphrodite. Thus, surprisingly much of Medb's character finds its direct counterparts in other goddesses of early Europe and the Ancient Near East. Even the birds on Medb's shoulder, which are marginal in the Irish sources but had nevertheless been highlighted as important indicators of Medb's divinity by Ross,<sup>114</sup> could find parallels in the winged depiction of Inanna-Ištar, the birds of Aphrodite and Venus, and the feather-garment of Freyja.

Reviewing Thurneysen's typological argument for a goddess Medb in this way, one can conclude that the typological support for reconstructing a 'goddess Medb' is considerably better than Thurneysen in his day was able to assume. It is particularly striking how much of Medb's character finds its direct counterpart in other early goddesses, and especially also in the same combination of character traits. The typological comparison suggests that there is little in the character of Medb that would be surprising to find in a goddess; indeed, everything that is fundamental to Medb's personality finds good parallels in other mythologies. This suggests that if we assume a mythological background for Medb, it is possible – at least from a typological

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Ó MÁILLE 1928: 140–143.

<sup>113</sup> One of the three imperial insignia with which the first Emperor of Japan was invested by Amaterasu is a sword (UNDERWOOD 1934: 30); thus a symbolical connection to warfare is not completely lacking, but it is so little pronounced (cf. NAUMANN 1988: 92, 96 f.) that it is hardly comparable with the strongly martial characters of Medb and Inanna-Ištar.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. above p. 76.

perspective – that her character as depicted in the Christian sources *could* actually be a rather truthful representation of the original goddess and that a considerable part of the character of the literary figure Medb *could* be a direct reflection of the character of the hypothetical pagan goddess Medb. At least, Medb does not seem to show any traits – apart from being depicted as human – which would give her away as an implausible late and perhaps polemic or misogynist concoction. (This being said, it should be emphasised that such a conclusion is valid only for Medb's *overall character*; her depiction in individual passages of specific narratives may of course be a different matter entirely.<sup>115</sup>)

So the conclusion of this article is as follows: the typological support for Thurneysen's 'goddess Medb' is considerably stronger than Thurneysen had assumed (and given the state of research in his day, than he had been able to assume). Goddesses showing very similar features as the literary figure Medb can be found in the Ancient Near East as well as in early Greece, Italy and Scandinavia; this might indicate that from a typological perspective, there is nothing to suggest that the literary figure Medb could not be a surprisingly close reflection of the hypothetical former goddess Medb.

Whether one wants to go any further, however, I hardly dare ask in the current state of research. Ever since the Near Eastern material has become more accessible, the similarities between Inanna-Ištar and other early European goddesses have prompted the question whether there are historical links between the Mesopotamian figure and her (seeming?) counterparts in the west. Much of classical scholarship has proposed Mesopotamian roots for the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite – thus, Aphrodite has been seen as a goddess of Near Eastern origin or at least Near Eastern inspiration by Nilsson, Burkert and Budin,<sup>116</sup> to name but a few. Flemberg in his analysis of the relationship between Venus and Roman military commanders felt similarly reminded of the Mesopotamian type.<sup>117</sup> And even for the Norse love goddess Freyja a direct connection – in the form of cultural influence – with oriental goddesses like Inanna-Ištar has been postulated by Motz and Vennemann.<sup>118</sup> Should a similar possibility also be considered for the hypothetical Irish goddess Medb?<sup>119</sup> In the current state of research, it would seem unwise to make such a suggestion; to begin with, too much work still has to be done to establish the details of Medb's treatment in the Irish sources to consider such far-reaching hypotheses. How, for instance, does the Medb of the genealogies relate to the Medb of the heroic texts? (However, could the juxtaposition with *Venus Victrix* and *Venus Genetrix* in Italy be of any help in understanding this relationship?) What is the significance of alternative models for the behaviour of the literary figure Medb that post-date any possible mythological roots, like Biblical templates, clerical preconceptions or the queen Semiramis of medi-

<sup>115</sup> Cf. McCONE 1990: 148; KELLY 1992: 78 *et passim*; Ó CATHASAIGH 1993: 129 f.

<sup>116</sup> NILSSON 1967: 519–523; BURKERT 1985: 152–155; BUDIN 2003; BUDIN 2004: 109–111 *et passim*; cf. FLEMBERG 1991: 12–23, 114; MARCOVICH 1996.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. above note 98; also cf. Flemberg's remarks on the Etruscan love goddess Turan: FLEMBERG 1991: 26, 114.

<sup>118</sup> MOTZ 1982; MOTZ 1993: 101–111; VENNEMANN 1997: 462 f.; VENNEMANN 1998: 49. Cf. HEIZMANN 2001: 279, 281, 283, 289 f., 303–305.

<sup>119</sup> Thus VENNEMANN 1997: 462 f.; VENNEMANN 1998: 49.

eval literature (who can have both military and erotic character traits),<sup>120</sup> and what is the relationship between such alternative models and a mythological interpretation of the depiction of Medb in the literature of early Ireland? What is the relationship between the complex of motifs associated with Medb and possibly comparable motif combinations associated with other figures of medieval Irish literary mythology?<sup>121</sup> To which extent might the geographical origin of individual medieval tales have affected the treatment of Medb as a literary figure? Further research will have to take such questions into account before any far-reaching conclusions about the possibility (or lack thereof) of wider historical connections of the hypothetical pre-Christian goddess Medb can be considered. In the meantime, the typological contextualisation of Medb among figures like Inanna-Ištar and Aphrodite presented here at least hopes to have added one (however tentative and preliminary) piece to the mosaic of Medb's character and position in early Ireland – a piece of the mosaic which highlights that a multitude of different perspectives on this figure will be necessary to approximate an adequate understanding of the history, prehistory and significance of this queen of Crúachu.

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<sup>120</sup> I owe thanks to John Carey for bringing this figure to my attention; on Semiramis in general cf. RÖLLIG 2007.

<sup>121</sup> For instance, an association with both war and sexuality is also very prominent in the 'war goddesses' of Irish literature, cf. e.g. CAREY 1982/83; EGELER 2011: 153–163.



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