N. 19 (Spring 2022), 87-123 | ISSN 2014-7023

THE ICONOGRAPHIC ORIGINS OF HELL AS A SOUL-DEVOURER IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY

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Received: 11 February 2022 | Reviewed: 12 June 2022 | Accepted: 15 July 2022
| Published: 31 July 2022 | doi: 10.1344/Svmma2022.19.12

Resumen

Entre las creencias escatológicas del cristianismo medieval europeo destaca la imagen del infierno como un monstruo de grandes fauces que engulle las almas de los condenados. En estrecha relación con este tema, en ocasiones los difuntos fueron representados siendo cocinados en grandes calderos como parte de su martirio. Para tratar de explicar el porqué de esta iconografía, algunos autores han comparado estas imágenes con las referencias veterotestamentarias acerca de Leviatán y también del *She'ol* hebreo como ente que se alimenta de los pecadores. Junto a esta propuesta, otra parte de los investigadores ha hecho lo propio tomando como referentes a varios seres híbridos documentados durante la Antigüedad en diferentes tradiciones religiosas mediterráneas y próximo-orientales. En la presente publicación se pone de relieve que tanto las referencias hebreas como las del resto del ámbito mediterráneo son expresiones religiosas de una misma idea ampliamente extendida: la muerte como entidad devoradora de amplias fauces, añadiéndose nuevos ejemplos iconográficos anteriores al cambio de era.

Palabras clave:
iconografía, simbolismo religioso, arqueología mediterránea, cristianismo medieval, seres híbridos, infierno

Abstract

In Medieval Europe, Hell was usually represented as a devouring monster. Also, the souls of the deceased were represented as being cooked in large cauldrons, to be later ingested by the devil and his assistants. In order to explain the origin of this view, some authors have compared these images with the Old Testament references to the Leviathan and the Hebrew *She'ol* as a place that devours dead people. Along with this proposal, other researchers have done the same considering several hybrid beings documented during Antiquity in different Mediterranean and Near Eastern religious traditions that engulfed the deceased. This publication emphasizes that both the Hebrew references and those of the rest of the Mediterranean area are religious expressions of the same idea: death as a devouring entity with vast jaws, including new iconographic elements dated to before the Christian era.

Keywords:
iconography, religious symbolism, Mediterranean archaeology, Medieval Christianism, hybrid beings, hell

1. Introduction

From the Middle Ages to the present day, Christian eschatology has frequently depicted the image of hell as a zoomorphic beast with hybrid features, whose function was to devour the souls of the damned. The first iconographic examples of this theme emerged in Britain following the monastic reformation of the 10th century, although they were initially restricted to the private domain. Due to the chronological proximity of these artistic productions with the turn of the millennium, several authors have proposed that the emergence of the 'mouth of hell' could be due to a Western preoccupation with millenarianism and the apocalyptic consequences associated with this event (Guldan 1969).

Despite this early appearance, it was not until the 13th century, in connection with profound reforms of the European religious mentality, that the image of this devouring hell became more complex. From this time onwards, the vision began to spread throughout the West, entering public spaces for devotional purposes (Schmidt 1995: 13-14, 85-87). For this purpose, a multi-headed underworld was sometimes depicted in which the souls of the deceased were subjected to a variety of punishments and torments, depending on the gravity of the sins for which they had been damned (Schmidt 1995: 13-14; Baschet 1983: 29; Rodríguez Barral 2010: 15; Quírico 2011: 134-135).

Although these new iconographic elements may be related to scenes and images of the underworld that predate the change of era, more presentist proposals have attempted to relate hell as a fiery, smoky place with metal torture tools and constant condemnation of humans to the incipient iron and steel industry of the time, and the negative view that was held of it in more traditionalist circles (Gardiner 1993: 28-29). To these situations must be added the use of its iconography in pagan contexts from the Renaissance period onwards, sometimes with an ironic overtone (Schmidt 1995: 179-187).

Finally, since the end of the 19th century, researchers have been increasingly interested in the iconographic origin of the mouth of hell. In some cases, they have tried to link it to biblical references, while on other occasions they have tried to go beyond these limitations and connect it with the religious imagery of other religious traditions of the same period or even predating the Hebrew tradition itself.

Within the first trend, some of the earliest hypotheses sought to link the devouring figure to passages in the Gospel of Nicodemus (Wildridge 1899) and to the serpent in the Apocalypse of John (Wall 1904), while more recent proposals have attempted to do the same by drawing on Old Testament references to the Hebrew *She'ol* as the place that engulfs the deceased, together with other devouring beasts mentioned in biblical passages, such as the Leviathan, the lion, and the Great Fish of Jonah (*vid.* Schmidt 1995: 32-39; Gómez 2016: 407).

Alongside these ideas, attention has been drawn to a wide range of hybrid creatures known from the Near East to the western Mediterranean that played the role

of devourers of the dead. Among the most frequently cited are the Egyptian beast Ammit, the Canaanite god of the underworld Mot, the Greek gorgoneion, and various beasts in Islamic literature. (*vid.* Le Goff 1981: 33; Baltrušaitis 1994: 45-46; Link 1995: 91; Gómez 2016: 55; García Arranz 2019: 53).

In view of the different hypotheses put forward in the historiographical debate regarding the iconographic origin of the mouth of hell, the path taken by pre-Christian archaeology can clarify some ideas and provide new data concerning its beginnings. To this end, in the following sections, a comparison will be made between the details represented in medieval scenes and those of the near-eastern and Mediterranean worlds in pre-Christian times, from Mesopotamia to the Iberian Peninsula.

2. The image of devouring hell in medieval christianity and its associated elements

The variety of representations of hell in medieval times has been analysed on several occasions in recent decades (*vid.* Schmidt 1995; Gómez 2009; García Arranz 2019; Barratt, Soltes, Tchitcherine, Zakula, Ziolkowski 2022). From a historiographical point of view, Schmidt's (1995) study is noteworthy for its clarification of its iconographic evolution. It is clear from their analysis that the image of hell gained in complexity and nuances since its textual origin as a pit through the acquisition of zoomorphic features, its assimilation with Satan as a devouring being and its association with a cauldron, all the way to its visualisation as a multi-headed devouring entity. For the purposes of this section, it is not only the appearance of Hell as a monster with an insatiable appetite that will be relevant, but also the details of its anatomy and the elements that accompany its figure, as many of these were already common in the representations of the infernal monsters that devour the souls of the deceased in various parts of the Mediterranean in pre-Christian times.

As has just been pointed out, due to the voracious character attributed to the underworld in this period, its image was assimilated with that of a beast with zoomorphic features typical of real or imaginary creatures with a great capacity to devour, such as lions, serpents and dragons (*vid.* Durliat 1984: 75; Schmidt 1995: 32-39; Gómez 2009: 274; 2016: 407; Di Sciacca 2019: 56). There is evidence of this both in the iconographic and extra-biblical textual parallels, analysed in the following section, and in several biblical passages to which we will return later. This is the case of the Psalms (21,13-14) and the first Epistle of St. Peter (5,8) (Durliat 1984: 75). It is also found with numerous heads (Le Don 1979: 363; Baschet 1983: 16; Schmidt 1995: 79). On the other hand, it is possible to observe the devourer of souls both horizontally, with the damned heading towards it on foot, and vertically, with the deceased on this occasion falling into its maw (Schmidt 1995: 127-130; Gómez 2009: 275; García Arranz 2019: 55).

Meanwhile, when it appears contextualised, Hell as a devouring entity is usually inserted into iconographies of the Last Judgement. This occurs especially in the sculptural programmes depicted in the tympanums of the main European cathedrals throughout the Romanesque period. In this case, the monster is normally placed with its jaws open in the lower part of the ensemble, which is where the damned usually head towards, accompanied by demons who inflict various punishments and tortures on them (Fig. 1) (Gilabert 2009: 327; Gonzalez 2015: 280; García Arranz 2019: 63). Similar redemptive scenes can also be found in religious books and altarpieces. In the first case, the scene in the *Bedford Book of Hours* (ca. 1410-1430), where the souls of the saved, who are ascending, are separated from those of the damned, who are pushed by grotesque beings towards the mouth of hell, located in the lower register of the image, is particularly well known. (Ward and Steeds 2007: 141) (Fig. 2). Another example can be found in the Zaragoza altarpiece of *The Resurrection of the Holy Sepulchre* (14th century), where Christ, accompanied by the angels, can again be seen extending his arm towards the mouth of hell, trying to save various characters from the Old Testament, while several monsters try to close the entrance to the underworld with chains and by applying their own weight onto the upper jaw of the beast (Fig. 3).

The mouth of hell inside the Earth, the farthest place from the celestial spheres, and therefore the most imperfect of all, is also, though less frequently, featured in general cosmographic schemes (Kappler 1986: 33; García Arranz 2019: 74). An example of this can be found in the *Image du Monde* by Gossuin de Metz (13th century), where we can see how the mouth of hell is located in the centre, while the *Maiestas Domini* presides over the image in the upper part of the register (Fig. 4).

On other occasions, the ravenous monster, with its gaping maw, is not meant to represent the entrance to hell, but rather dwells within it, either alone or in the company of other hybrid creatures that help it or feed alongside it. While this has caused some authors to question the identity of the main character as a "devouring hell" (García Arranz 2019: 55-61) (Fig. 5), the data provided in later sections allow us to confirm this identification, since both the Old Testament parallels and those from other peoples of the Mediterranean and the Near East during Antiquity bear clear parallels with the medieval images.

Around the 15th century, the image of the mouth of hell underwent a process of complexification which led to the introduction of Satan (Baschet 1983: 33-36). In some cases, the inclusion of this figure in Christian iconography did not imply the suppression/substitution of the mouth. Instead, Satan acted as another castigator in the underworld alongside the devouring monster (Schmidt 1995: 88-89) (Fig. 6). In other examples, however, it is the satanic figure itself that dominates the scene, devouring the deceased in what appears to be an attribution of the mouth's functions ("eating the damned") and characteristics ("multiple faces") by the demon (Wards y Steeds 2007: 10).

Another element that appears in the medieval period that is related to the mouth of hell is the cauldron, interpreted by some authors as the inclusion of everyday elements in the geography of the afterlife (García Arranz 2019: 56), and which must be understood as the survival of the representation of objects of torture that already appeared in the iconography of the underworld in pre-Christian times. In general, this object is portrayed as being heated by the flames of hell and containing the souls of the damned within it (Fig. 7).

The role of doors, locks and keys should also be highlighted (Le Don 1979: 363; Baschet 1983: 16). These can be seen depicted, among other places, in the Winchester Psalter (13th century), where several kings and ecclesiastics who have been condemned undergo suffering while the archangel Michael attempts to open the gates of hell (Fig. 8).

Finally, in addition to these manifestations, mention should also be made of the Tarasque, a mythological creature who, according to tradition, lived in Tarascon (Provence, France). Its physical appearance consisted of a lion-like head with the ears of a horse, the torso of an ox, a scaly carapace and a tail ending in the shape of a scorpion's sting. Legend has it that it was a devastating creature, which is why the king of Tarascon had tried unsuccessfully to kill it. However, the presence of Saint Martha in the area meant that the animal was finally tamed by her after she cast an incantation on it through her prayers. Despite having tamed the beast, the neighbours did not trust it, so they ended up killing it at night. When Saint Martha heard what had happened, she preached a sermon that prompted many of the inhabitants of the region to convert to Christianity. Beyond this narrative, the Tarasque has enjoyed enormous popularity in the western Mediterranean region, being carried in procession during the Corpus Christi festival from medieval times to the present day. Despite the different forms that this figure has taken, the hybrid aspect has been a constant theme, a characteristic that has often been accompanied by the representation of breasts under her belly, as well as the image of monstrous beings that seem to be assisting her (Fig. 9). Likewise, under her front legs and between her jaws we can see the heads and legs of victims whom she devours as punishment. Finally, to complete the link with the legend of Saint Martha, the figure of this holy woman is sometimes seen on the beast as a sign of domination, although in other cases other characters are depicted on her back.

3. Main hypotheses on the origin of the image of devouring hell

Researchers who have sought pre-Christian antecedents to the iconography of the devouring hell have been divided between those who accept exclusively Old Testament influences and those who do likewise and add to these a wide array of devouring monsters that inhabited the underworld throughout the Mediterranean.

Although it is true that the two proposals are not contradictory, this study has opted to maintain the separation between these two approaches for the sake of clarifying the historiographical review.

3. 1. Biblical References

Attention has traditionally been drawn to a number of devouring beasts mentioned in biblical passages, such as the lion, the dragon, the Great Fish of Jonah, Leviathan and even the personification of *She'ol*. All of these have been proposed as Old Testament references for the shaping of the medieval image of the mouth of hell, although the last two are the most closely connected to the iconographic details visible in medieval times, as will be seen below.

3. 1.1 Lion

The image of the lion was clearly an ambivalent one in the ancient world. Its physical power and fierce character have served both to link it with the protection of the dead, appearing for example as a guardian in tombs and funerary monuments throughout the Mediterranean, and to associate it with the dangers of death. The latter possibility includes the biblical allusions to his harmful and devouring character: "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, like a roaring lion, prowls around seeking whom he may devour". (1 PETER:5,8). For that reason, his figure has been linked to the medieval iconography of the mouth of hell (DURLIAT 1984: 75; SCHMIDT 1995: 32-39; GÓMEZ 2009: 274; 2016: 407; GONZALEZ 2015: 22; DI SCIACCA 2019: 56).

3. 1.2 Dragon

As in the case of the lion, a possible dragon influence has also been noted (SCHMIDT 1995: 41-42, 32; GÓMEZ 2009: 274; 2016: 407; GARCÍA ARRANZ 2019: 51). This relationship is once again based on a number of biblical passages that allude to its evil nature:

> And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her son was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days. And there was a great battle in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth; and his angels were cast out with him.
> (Revelation. 12:5-9).

Similarly, there are other notable non-Old Testament references, such as the Vision of Saint Perpetua (3rd century), which mentions the existence of a dragon under the stairs leading to heaven, which in contrast to the latter could represent hell (Schmidt 1995: 42); and the Homilies of Macarius, in which a dragon that devours souls is mentioned (Di Sciacca 2019: 81).

3.1.3 The great fish of Jonah[1]

On the other hand, the image of the Great Fish in the biblical account of Jonah has been cited as a possible influence on the medieval devouring hell (Jonah. 1-2), associating its belly with hell as damnation (Gilabert 2009: 327; Gómez 2009: 274; 2016: 407). This is supported by the relationship established by ancient authors such as Cyprian and Tertullian between the mouth of a great fish and the gateway to hell (*vid.* Schmidt 1995: 52-53; Gonzalez 2015: 280).[2]

3.1.4 Leviathan

The Leviathan shares a similar appearance and function as other mythological creatures, such as Rahab, Tiamat and Lotan (*vid.* Gutmann 1968: 224; Díez Macho 1984: 132; Chevalier 1986: 642; Uehlinger 1999: 512; Gilabert 2009: 327; Santos Carretero 2014: 123-125; García Arranz 2019: 47-48), all of which are sea creatures with the form of a reptile. It is precisely from the latter that its name and meaning seem to be derived. Hence, while Lotan is first mentioned in an Ugaritic text as *ltn*, meaning "twisted" (Uehlinger 1999: 511), Leviathan is connected with the Hebrew word *liwyatha*, meaning "coiled", and its figure is therefore often associated with the image of a snake (Wikander 2017: 116-117; García Arranz 2019: 48). Regarding the presence of this monster in the Old Testament, there are several passages in which it is mentioned (Job 3:8; Job 41:1-22; Psalm 74:14; Psalm 104:26; Isaiah 27:1):

1. We are grateful to one of the proofreaders for the following clarification, which we expressly collect in this footnote: "While it is true that in the collective imagination the creature that appears in Chapters 1 and 2 of Jonah has been associated with a whale, the Hebrew text never specifically identifies it as this animal, the word for which in modern Hebrew is precisely וְתִיוּוֹל ("leviathan"). The biblical text refers to the creature as גדלודג /dag gadol/ big fish".

2. We would once again like to refer to the information provided by another of the evaluators on the medieval resonance that the Great Fish, this time in the form of a whale, had as a symbol of soul-devouring hell: "For consideration, the moral interpretation of the whale/cetus in the *Physiologus* and bestiaries might be of interest. There, its open mouth attracts fishes/sinners to it through a desirable sweet smell; while it is a different scene and context altogether, some texts do contain a comparison to the Devil's mouth and jaw of hell: the poem *The Whale* in the 10th cent. Exeter Book, a fragment of an Old English *Physiologus*: "Then he [the Devil] attacks those who have listened to him in life / And taken his teachings eagerly to heart. / After the life- slaughter, he snaps shut/ His grim jaws, the gates of hell. / No one inside can ever escape— / No exit, no return. Just like small fish, / Such seafarers cannot escape from the whale's maw." (*The Whale,* vv. 82-88 in Craig Williamson transl., *The Complete Old English Poems,* 2017: 511)".

> Will you draw out the leviathan with a hook, or with a rope will you hold his tongue? Who will strip him of the outside of his garment? Who will penetrate his double armour? Who will open the doors of his jaws? The rows of his teeth are frightening. The glory of his clothing is rows of strong shields, closely sealed. One is joined to the other, so that the wind cannot enter between them. Glued one to the other; they are locked together and cannot be separated. Their sneezes give flashes of light, and their eyes are like the eyelids of dawn. Out of their mouths come flames; sparks of fire leap forth. From their nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot or cauldron. His breath kindles the coals, and out of his mouth go forth flames. In his neck is strength, and despondency is before him.
> (Job 41:1-22).

Taken together, these biblical passages depict Leviathan as a sea monster with enormous jaws that embodies the dangers of hell by spewing fire from its cauldron-like mouth. Based on the details described in these passages, many researchers have suggested that the origin of the medieval Mouth of Hell may lie in the figure of Leviathan (*vid.* Sheingorn 1985: 28; Schmidt 1995: 32; Barral 2003: 202; Ward y Steeds 2007: 91; Gilabert 2009: 327; Ruíz Gallegos 2010: 218; García García 2011: 7; Quírico 2011: 5; García Arranz 2019: 51). This hypothesis is also supported in part by the parallels established in medieval times by authors such as St. Jerome and St. Gregory the Great, who assimilated this mythological being with the figure of the devil and by analogy with hell (Sheingorn 1992: 6; García Arranz 2019: 46-50).

3.1.5 She'ol

Finally, several authors have proposed a link between the mouth of hell and the Old Testament underworld (Le Goff 1981: 40; Bernstein 1993: 140-145; Schmidt 1995: 32; Gilabert 2009: 327; Gómez 2016: 54). The expression most commonly used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to him is *She'ol*, šĕ ʾôl, a term for which there is no consensus concerning its translation (*vid.* Tromp 1969: 22; Podella 1991: 145; Johnston 2002: 73-79). This is a proper noun of feminine gender that is mentioned sixty-six times in the Old Testament and was even used as a linguistic borrowing in other Semitic languages such as Syriac and Ethiopian (Barstad 1999: 768). Although it is frequently used in the Bible, its use is restricted to the description of particular eschatological beliefs, and consequently it does not appear in legal texts of an institutional character (Johnston 2002: 71-72).

Its meaning possesses a broad semantic range. Among the many references to its character, *She'ol* is described on numerous occasions as a chthonic devouring entity (Ex 15:12; Numbers 16:30-33; Numbers 26:10; Deut 11:6; Isaiah 5:14; Isaiah, 28:15; Hab 2:5; Psalm 106:17; Psalm 141:7; Prov 1:12), but also as the region where the corpses of the deceased are found (Gen 37:35; Prov 5:5), as a refuge or resting place (Job 3:17-18; Job 14:13), as a place of transition at times connected to primordial

waters (Gen 1:6; Amos 9:2; Jon 2:2-3; I Sam 2:6; II Sam, 22:5-6; Psalm 139:8) and as a place of exclusion from which God cannot be praised (Psalm 6:5; Isa 38:18) (*vid.* Tromp 1969; Spronk 1986; Podella 1991: 148-150; Johnston 2002: 69-124; Gómez 2016: 54-57).

3.2. Extra-biblical references

In parallel to the hypotheses concerning the biblical influences on the iconography of the medieval Mouth of Hell, there are also numerous authors who have associated its figure with that of a group of devouring monsters with enormous jaws that inhabit the underworld and that exist in various cultures contemporaneous to the Hebraic tradition. A review of their physical and contextual characteristics shows that the features associated with Leviathan and She'ol, among others, are by no means exclusive to the Old Testament tradition, but are the result of a set of beliefs that were present for centuries in the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean (*vid.* Gómez Peña, Bermúdez Cordero 2022).[3] Due to the close relationships that are visible between all these figures of "devouring death", it is not presumptuous to suggest that we are dealing with homologous manifestations (branches) of the same eschatology (common trunk) that probably has its origins (roots) at least in the recent prehistory of the Mediterranean.

3.2.1. Devouring death in Ancient Egypt

Of all the traditions, the most extensively analysed by certain medievalists has been the Egyptian (García Arranz 2019: 53; Link 1995: 90; Gómez 2009: 274; 2016: 55; Le Goff 1981: 33; Gonzalez 2015: 36-37). This interest is probably largely due to the importance and renown of Ancient Egypt outside academic Egyptological circles, as well as the large number of iconographic references to its eschatological beliefs. Although on some occasions attempts have been made to highlight the links between the devouring inferno and the figures of Apophis and Sekhmet (*vid.* Gómez 2016: 182), the closest link can be made with the figure of Ammit, *'m-mwt*, "the devourer of the dead". This is a hybrid monster commonly depicted throughout the first centuries with the head of a crocodile, the body of a feline and the hindquarters of a hippopotamus, whose function was to devour the souls of the departed who had not been righteous in thought and demeanour during their lifetime.

3. In addition to the extra-biblical references analysed here, some authors have drawn attention to possible influences on this theme in the diffusion through Alexandria to the West of the Chinese *T'ao-t'ieh* masks and in the Indian sculptures of *Kirttimukha* (Link 1995: 91), in Norse mythology through the monstrous figure with enormous jaws that the wolf Fenrir sometimes presents after the Christian invasions of Anglo-Saxon territories in the 10th century (Sheingorn 1992: 7; Quírico 2011: 5; García Arranz 2019: 53) and in the Muslim literature in circulation in this same century (Gómez 2009: 407; Rodríguez Barral 2010: 8).

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The oldest references attesting to the existence of this devouring beast are found in a series of funerary formulas compiled by Lepsius in 1842 under the title 'The Book of the Dead'. (*vid.* Allen 1974; Hornung 1999; Smith 2009; Taylor 2010). Within this mythological compendium we must highlight the famous Chapter 125, which narrates how in the Hall of the Two Truths the heart of the deceased was weighed on a scale together with a feather from Maat. If the two were in balance, the deceased could continue his journey to the afterlife, but if the feather weighed more than the heart, the deceased would disappear forever and be swallowed up by a hybrid creature.

As mentioned above, this hybrid being was known in Egyptian texts as 'the devourer of the dead', emphasising its voracious and deadly nature, both towards the deceased and towards injustice itself. The latter was especially recurrent from the Greco-Roman period onwards, since Ammit was considered to be able to liberate the deceased from the evil deeds they had committed in life by feeding on the negative aspects of their existence (Seeber 1976: 168-170).

Regarding its iconographic characteristics, the devourer is usually represented as depicted in papyrus BM 9901 or as drawn in TT341 (Dynasty XIX, *ca.* 1295-1186 B.C.) (Seeber 1976: 163-164): with a crocodile head, feline forequarters and hippopotamus hindquarters (Fig. 10). In all instances, these animals were greatly feared in the Nilotic world due to their ability to kill. Over the course of time, from the 21st Dynasty until the Greco-Roman period (*vid.* Seeber 1976; Smith 2009; Venit 2016), the image of the devourer evolved, taking on multiple forms and variants. In most cases, Ammit was depicted as a proto-feline, nearly always with an open jaw and a protruding tongue, painted in golden or yellowish tones, perched on her hindquarters, and with a tail sometimes like that of a lioness and at other times like that of a pachyderm. On the other hand, in order to emphasise her feminine character, she was depicted from the 21st Dynasty onwards with breasts on her belly. With regard to her attributes, she can be seen with feathers or knives in her forelegs, as well as with the heads of the dead in her claws (Seeber 1976: 164-171). Other elements present in medieval Christian iconography can also be seen in the scenes in which Ammit is depicted. This is the case of the scales for weighing the deeds of the dead and, in the Greco-Roman period, keys, which probably allowed the tomb to be secured against evil spirits or to open the gates of heaven for the deceased (Figs. 11-12).

3.2.2 Devouring Death in the Mesopotamian Tradition

A devouring beast similar to the Egyptian Ammit is also found in other literary references from the Near East, such as the so-called *Underworld vision of an Assyrian Prince* (ZA 43) (Von Soden 1936; Livingstone 1989: 71-74). This story tells of the dreamt descent into the underworld of prince Kummay or Kummâ and his introduction to the rulers of the region, Nergal and Namtartu. Of interest is the description in this account of various hybrid beings, most of which have tripartite divisions,

displaying the heads, arms and legs of different animals. Mentions include an evil genie, *alluhappu* (?), a defender of evil, *Humuṭ-tabal* the boatman, a ghost, an evil spirit, Šulak (?), profanity, *Nedu* as the gatekeeper to the underworld, complete evil and *Muhra* (?), among others. The fact that they all inhabit the underworld makes it easy to draw parallels with Egyptian eschatology. These characters are in the company of Death, *mu-ú-ʳtu* (ZA 43 r3), a term that shares the same root as *ʿm-mwt*. Death is described as having a dragon's head and human hands. The shape of its feet is unknown, since no such fragment has been preserved, although it is possible to establish a formal parallel with the amulets of *Hadātu*, which may have displayed scorpions on its lower limbs.

3.2.3 Devouring death in Canaanite eschatology

Canaanite literary tradition, both in the Ugaritic period (Tromp 1969: 6-19; Xella 1991) and in the Phoenician-Punic period (Ribichini 1991), provides us with a relatively in-depth analysis of its religious eschatology. An example of this can be found in the tablets from Ras Shamra (Syria) (*vid.* Olmo Lete 1995: 45-222), on which the god of the underworld, Mot or Mōtu (*vid.* Healey 1999), is mentioned, the root of which is directly related to the Egyptian term for death, *mwt*, to the Akkadian *mu-ú-ʳtu*, and to equivalent terms used in Hebrew and Aramaic. There are also accounts of Mot in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* by Eusebius of Cesarea from *ca.* 314-324 AD, in which the Phoenicians are said to refer to him as Death and Pluto (*PE* 1.10.34). The god Mot, like Baal, was one of the sons of 'Ilu, the 'father of mankind'. As the deity of death and of the barrenness of the earth, he reigned in the underworld.

> So, then, set your faces / towards his city 'Muddy', / (for) a pool is the throne of his seat, / a mire the land of his possession. / And take heed, heralds divine: / do not come (too) close to the divine Mot, / lest he put you like a lamb in his mouth, / like a suckling pig at the opening of his oesophagus for you be shredded. (KTU 1.4 VIII 10-20; based on a translation by Olmo Lete 1998: 91).

This deity is often depicted as having large jaws, a voracious appetite and lips that reach from the earth to the heavens (a detail often associated with devouring death in the Hebrew tradition), from which Anath had to rescue his brother Baal in the Underworld:

> Message from the divine Mot, / Word from His beloved, the Adalid: / - My appetite, yes, is the appetite of the steppe lion, / or, if you like, the shark's (dwelling) desire in the sea; / or (the craving for) the waterhole sought by the wild bulls, / (from) the spring (that craves), yes, the herd of does. / Or, (stated) bluntly, / my appetite devours in droves. / And it is true that with two hands I devour / and that there are seven servings on my plate / and that my glass mixes (wine) in abundance. / So invite

> me, Ba'al, together with my brothers and sisters, / convoke me, Hadad, together with my kinsmen / to eat viands with my brothers / and to drink wine with my kindred. / Have you perhaps forgotten, Baal, / that I am truly going to destroy you, / that I am [going to crush (?)]you? / Though you crushed [Leviathan, the fleeing serpent], / you put an end [to the torturous snake], / the [seven-headed] Tyrant, / (and) shrivelled (and) [loosened the heavens] / [as the girdle of] your [tunic], / [I will devour you by the handful, / in two cubit lengths. / Come, then, descend into the jaws of the divine Mot, / to the mouth of His beloved, the Adalide!] (KTU 1.5 I 13-35; based on the translation by Olmo Lete 1998: 102-103).

> [When Mot shall put one lip to the earth and one to heaven, / [when he shall extend] [his] tongue to the stars, / [Baal] shall enter into his bowels, / into his mouth he shall fall when the olive tree is withered, / the produce of the earth and the fruit of the trees. (KTU 1.5 II 2-6; based on the translation by Olmo Lete 1998: 104).

Closely related to the Canaanite world are the above-mentioned amulets of Hadātu. These are two pieces dated by palaeographic criteria to around the 7th-6th centuries BC (*vid.* López Pardo 2009: 49-51, with associated bibliography) and found in northern Syria, a region conquered by the Assyrians in the 9th century BC. The first (Fig. 13) is an example of a figure with a human body, a dragon's head and scorpion's feet, similar to the character previously described by Kummay. This figure is devouring an individual, of whom only the legs can be seen, and next to whom there is an inscription referring to ocular attributes, which has been interpreted as a possible spell against the evil eye. The second amulet (Fig. 14) is a plaque measuring 8.5 x 7 cm on which two hybrid monsters are depicted, together with inscriptions in Aramaic that are difficult to interpret. In the lower part there is a hybrid being engulfing a figure of whom only the legs are visible, with a dragon's head and a scorpion's tail, the latter being identified by its segments and sting. The upper part of the figure is engraved with a sphinx with outstretched wings. Meanwhile, on the verso, an anthropomorphic figure is depicted with attributes that link it to warrior gods/monarchs.

3.2.4 Devouring death in the Celtic world

Given that the iconography of devouring hell in medieval Christian eschatology is concentrated mainly in Europe, research into the origin of this figure has focused on possible Indo-European precedents. The figure known as the tarasque of Noves has been particularly prominent in this regard. This is a sculpture dating from around the 2nd century BC that depicts a beast sitting on its hind legs while devouring a man. For this reason, some specialists have suggested that this mythological hybrid might be the precedent of the large-jawed Avernus that has been depicted in medieval Christian art (Didron 1907: 115; Durliat 1984: 77).

In addition to focusing on this mythological being, protohistorical studies associated with the Celtic tradition have, since the 19th century, drawn attention to a series of texts and items of Indo-European origin in which a devouring monster inhabiting the underworld can be observed. In general, its iconography has tended to be linked to that of a wolf, though other authors have drawn attention to its possible identification with lions, bears and wild boars, whose function is to devour the dead (Reinach 1904: 221-224; MacCulloch 1911: 218; Benoit 1946; 1948a; 1948b: 182-183; 1955; Renard 1949: 257-258; Almagro-Gorbea and Lorrio 2011: 55).

Examples of this androphagous predator can be found in a number of locations on the European regions in which the Celtic tradition was prevalent. Among other items, this figure can be found in the Archaeological Museum of Arlon (France), where the figure of a she-wolf, whose breasts denote a feminine nature and which is devouring the figure of a human, has been preserved in an ashlar (Fig. 15, 1). Parallels can also be drawn with the tarasque of Noves (Fig. 15, 2), a bronze figure in Oxford (England) (Fig. 15, 3), that of Fouqueure (France) (Fig. 15, 4), and one of the plaques on a vase in Gundestrup (Denmark), which depicts a multi-headed mythological creature preparing to devour a human by pouncing on it (Fig. 15, 5).

3.2.5 The devourer in Greek tradition

As in previous examples, the Greek tradition has been proposed as an eschatological precedent for the mouth of hell in medieval Christianity through the case of the Gorgoneion (López de Ocariz y Alzola 1992: 260; Link 1995: 90; Baltrušaitis 1994: 45-46; Gómez 2009: 275; Gonzalez 2015: 293; García Arranz 2019: 53). This is a representation of the head of a Gorgon, a mythological being linked to the infernal world and noted for its fearsome attributes, such as a large mouth and sharp teeth (Aguirre 1998: 22-23). This figure of the Gorgoneion has been associated in particular with images depicting a multi-headed devouring inferno. Baltrušaitis (1994: 45) established its origin in the iconography of a scarab from Tharros (4th century BC), which depicts a large mouth formed by the union of two faces. The iconography of the Greek Gorgoneion may therefore have been familiar to medieval Western culture and may have influenced the creation of the iconography of the Mouth of Hell through Greco-Roman glyptics. This is not the only possibility, however, given that its image may also have been transmitted from inventories such as the one carried out by Matthieu Paris at the abbey of Saint Albans (Baltrušaitis 1994: 45-46; Gómez 2009: 275). Likewise, in the case of the triple-headed devouring hell, authors such as Guldan (1969) and Gómez (2016: 55) agree in drawing parallels with the figure of Cerberus, the dog that guards the entrance to Hell according to Greek mythology and which has three heads; finally, it should be noted that parallels have also been drawn within the classical world to the figure of *Ketos*, a sea monster with the body of a serpent (Di Sciacca 2019: 53), and to the Roman anthropophagus Orcus (Gómez 2009: 274; 2016: 182 and 407).

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Beyond these proposals, the only reference within the Greek sphere that can be equated on the basis of its characteristics with the devouring monster described in the preceding sections is to be found in the depiction provided by Pausanias (2nd century AD) of the representation of Hades created by Polygnotus (5th century BC) in the city of Delphi. In it, the following is said of Eurynomus, *Εὐρύνομο*:

> "*The second painting: Odysseus' descent into Hades. The Paidosos of Catane. Examples of piety towards the gods. The demon Eurynomus.*
>
> In Polygnotus' painting, next to the man who mistreated his father and therefore endures suffering in Hades, there is another man who is being punished for having committed sacrilege. The woman who punishes him knows, among other things, about poisons, much to the misfortune of men.
>
> Men still had an extraordinary interest in the piety of the gods, as the Athenians clearly demonstrated when they seized the sanctuary of Olympian Zeus at Syracuse without removing any of the offerings and leaving the Syracusan priest as their guardian. The Mede Datis also demonstrated it by the words he spoke to the Delians, and by his deeds since, having found an image of Apollo on a Phoenician ship, he returned it to the Tanagra people at Delium. Such was the honour given to deities by all those of that time, and for that reason Polygnotus painted the one who had committed sacrilege.
>
> Above what I have already spoken about, there is Eurynomus. The Delphic guides say that Eurynomus is a demon of Hades and that he eats the flesh of corpses, leaving only their bones. Homer's poem about Odysseus, the so-called *Miniad* and the *Nostos*, while citing Hades and the horrors there, do not mention any demon named Eurynomus. Nevertheless, I will describe what Eurynomus looked like and what figure he was painted as: his skin is between blue and black, like that of flies resting on flesh, he bares his teeth, he is seated and a vulture's skin is spread out beneath him". (Paus. X, 28, 7; translation based on Herrero Ingelmo 2008: 430-431).

The information provided by Pausanias in this fragment is revealing, since the appearance of this demon is completely unknown to him, and he had to turn to the guides at Delphi to explain its function. The strangeness of his figure probably led him to consult other references to Hades in Greek tradition without success. Despite the scant information provided, the characteristics attributed to other previous devourers and their spheres of action make it possible to connect them to Eurynomus. Among other details, Polygnotus depicts the figure in Hades with the punished individuals, and Pausanias describes it as having teeth (a sign that its jaws are open), as being seated (probably on its hindquarters), as being black to blue in colour (perhaps he cannot identify it with any known animal because of its hybrid character) and as feeding on the flesh of the dead until only their bones are left.

On the basis of this description, some specialists on protohistory have tried to relate it to the depiction of the Celtic she-wolf, especially given the colours attributed

to her and the Greco-Roman tradition in which the text of Pausanias is inserted (Almagro-Gorbea, Lorrio 2011: 57).

3.2.6 The devourer in pre-Roman and Roman-Republican Iberia

With regard to the presence of the devourer in the protohistory of the Iberian Peninsula, several publications since the mid-20th century have attempted to relate this figure to various Ibero-Roman sculptures. In all cases, this profile has been linked to the androphagous wolves of the Indo-European tradition mentioned earlier. However, despite this convergence of criteria, there have been nuances regarding the interpretation of the reason for these representations.

These parallels were first posited by French promo-historians such as Renard and Benoit (Renard 1947; Benoit 1948a; 1948b; 1949; 1955), for whom there was a heterogeneous group of sculptures that could be linked to such animals as wolves and lions. These include examples such as the 'bear' of Porcuna (Cordoba), as well as the 'monsters' of Cordoba, Baena (Cordoba), Balazote (Albacete) and Bocairente (Valencia). These are beasts that tend to be female, have hybrid features, and a negative character linked to the afterlife, which is reflected in the eating of the deceased to symbolise their passage to the afterworld. Moreover, since some of these sculptures have human heads clutched in their claws, both researchers linked these sculptural ensembles to the Celtic tradition of the *têtes coupées* (Renard 1947: 312-317; Benoit 1949: 139-145; 1955). More recently, authors such as Blanco Freijeiro (1960: 40-42), Chapa (1986: 181-183), Olmos (2004: 62-64), and Almagro-Gorbea and Lorrio (2011: 55-57) have also established parallels between diverse sculptures from the south of the Iberian Peninsula and the Celtic and Indo-European world by denoting their shared devouring nature.

In addition to these sculptures, the 'banquet relief' belonging to a funerary monument at Pozo Moro (Chinchilla de Montearagón, Albacete) (5th century BC) is also worth mentioning. It was discovered by chance in 1971 by a farmer, and the owner of the land informed the National Archaeological Museum of the findings, and it was subsequently excavated in 1973. Since its first reports, Pozo Moro has become one of the most important archaeological sites of the protohistory of the Iberian Peninsula, being interpreted at first by Almagro-Gorbea as the tomb of an Iberian monarch whose *bustum* and funerary offerings were found at the site (Almagro-Gorbea 1976; 1978; 1983).

With regard to its symbolic interpretation, Almagro-Gorbea has proposed from the first interpretations that the tower-like monument represented the *nefesh* of the deceased, who would have continued to be present among the living (Almagro-Gorbea 1983: 189). In relation to this idea, the iconography of the friezes at Pozo Moro might reflect scenes from a cult of sacred kingship. However, the apparent variety and complexity of the reliefs, as well as their fragmented state, made it difficult to clearly relate some scenes to others from a single literary parallel, be it Mediter-

ranean or Near Eastern (Almagro-Gorbea 1978: 267). In line with this hypothetical cult of sacred kingship, Blázquez attempted to discern specific scenes from the myth of Gilgamesh and the Baal cycle in the friezes (Blázquez 1979). Olmos took the same line, considering that Pozo Moro reflected the legitimisation of the ruling dynasty, visible through the cult of an ancestor heroised after his death (Olmos 1996). This hypothesis, among the many that could be mentioned here, was followed by that of López Pardo, who also interpreted the monument from a funerary point of view, but on this occasion in a Canaanite sense (López Pardo 2006).

Concerning the scene of the 'banquet relief' (Fig. 16), its surface depicts several monstrous beings, among which the one on the far left stands out in terms of its size and physical characteristics. The fact that the figure is enthroned, has two heads and a voracious appetite and is about to devour a human being closely connects it to the devouring beings analysed previously, and more specifically with the information provided regarding Mot. In the section dedicated to this Canaanite divinity, it was stated that he reigned in a swamp and his throne stood in a pool of water (KTU 1.4 VIII 10-20; and KTU 1.6 VI 23-32) and devoured its victims with two hands (KTU 1.5 I 13-35). These details are consistent with those shown in Pozo Moro. On the one hand, a double-headed monster is devouring humans and boars with both hands, while on the other he is seated on a throne perched on a floor of aquatic plants, which would denote the marshy nature of the setting. Finally, the appearance of cauldrons over flames to torture the deceased, who, by the way, are considerably smaller than Mot and his servants, is of particular interest due to the subject matter analysed in previous sections.

4. By way of conclusion

The preceding sections have analysed the iconography of hell as a devouring entity in medieval Europe and its possible precedents in the Mediterranean in the pre-Christian period. As regards the first of these two issues, the underworld was depicted as a huge devouring head aided by demons who sometimes trapped the souls of the dead inside and at other times cooked them in large cauldrons. In other cases, Satan was also depicted, although not necessarily as a substitute for these monstrous jaws. As to the second issue, researchers have been debating for decades over whether the iconography of the medieval hellmouth is exclusively biblical or extra-biblical in inspiration. In the case of the former, the most likely figures are those of Leviathan and the Hebrew *She'ol* as the place that devours the dead, or a mixture of both, as found in the Old Testament. In the case of the latter, antecedents should be sought both within and outwith biblical passages, with Egyptian, Near Eastern and even Indo-European devourers being proposed as direct precedents.

With this information in mind, the commonalities that closely connect biblical and extra-biblical monsters have been analysed in depth. This review, based on

Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Hebrew and Greek texts, as well as Nilotic, Assyrian, Celtic and Iberian iconographies, allows us to propose that, in pre-Christian times, an eschatological *koine* existed between the Mediterranean and the Mesopotamian world that held a belief in a devouring hybrid that engulfed the souls of the deceased who had been wicked during their lifetimes. The linguistic root *mt* that some of these monsters share in their names, the fusion of various animals clearly pernicious to humans, the bodies of the damned being swallowed, the proximity of the cauldrons used to torment the dead and the representations of demonic helpers torturing their souls are transversal elements that make up a common iconographic language for the majority of the regions studied here. Most importantly for the present analysis, these characteristics allow us to draw clear parallels with medieval representations of devouring hell.

Bearing in mind both proposals, this paper posits that medieval Christian imagery iconographically adapted many of the details and elements of the She'ol and, especially, the Leviathan. Nevertheless, it is no less true that the Hebrew references in pre-Christian times were based on devouring monsters typical of Mediterranean and near-eastern regions, and more closely on Phoenician-Punic eschatology. In support of this idea, numerous Old Testament passages allude to the express prohibition of the observance of the cults and beliefs of neighbouring populations, especially those of Canaanite origin. This is visible, for example, in the exhortations made by the Hebrew leaders to (1) destroy the Canaanite cults by demolishing their altars, cutting down the *asherim*, tearing down the *maṣebot*, and burning the carvings of their gods (Hosea. 13:1-3; Deut. 7:5; Deut. 16:21-22; 1Kings 14:22-23) (Gómez Peña 2018); (2) to end the practice of public and private lacerations to mourn the death of the deceased, with explicit mention of the Phoenicians among other peoples (Lev. 19:28; 21:5; Deut. 14:1; 1Kings 18:17-40) (Escacena Carrasco, Gómez Peña 2015); and (3) put an end to the custom of performing rituals such as the opening of the mouth to purify cult images, allowing the essence of the deities to be expressed through them (Jer. 10:1-15; Hab. 2:17-20; Psalms. 115:2-9; 135:13-21) (Gómez Peña, Carranza Peco 2020; 2021).

To all these ties with Canaanite religious traditions, we should add the image of a devouring hell that has close parallels with the two monsters *par excellence* in the Phoenician imaginary. On the one hand, Mot, the personification of evil linked to the earth and the abyss and, on the other, Lotan, the embodiment of the dangers of the sea in the form of an underwater beast. Both creatures have clear parallels with the figures of Behemoth (Job 40:15-24) and Leviathan (Job 41: 1-22), beings created by God to demonstrate his omnipotence and his ability to capture them single-handedly, but at the same time for which he seeks a hero who can tame them and thus demonstrate his superhuman status (as Baal precisely attempts to do by seeking to demonstrate that he is a match for the gods in the Baalic mythical cycle by fighting against Lotan and Mot, killing the former while having to flee from the

latter). Much has been written about Leviathan, highlighting the fact that he shares a consonant root and attributions with Lotan. As for Behemoth, his enormous size, his voracious appetite, his relationship with shadow and damp earth, and his physical characteristics place him remarkably close to the Canaanite Mot (*vid.* supra), so much so that on occasions the doubts generated by his identification with a specific animal (*vid.* Day 1985: 75-87) have led some authors to see in him a hybrid being, a quality from which the term 'beast', *bĕhēmot* (plural of *bĕhēmâ*) may well derive, although all of the references to Behemoth in these biblical passages refer to him in the masculine singular given his individual character (*vid.* Batto 1999: 165-169).

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Ilustraciones

Fig. 1 - Scene of the Last Judgement in the tympanum of León Cathedral. Ca. 1260-1280 (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 2 - Glorification of paradise. Bedford Hours. Ca. 1410-1430 (British Library, Add MS 18850, f. 157r) (Source: bl.uk).

Fig. 3 - Christ's Descent into Hell. Convent of the Holy Sepulchre (Zaragoza). Ca. 1361. Work by Jaume Serra (Zaragoza Museum, inv. no. 10005) (Source: museodezaragoza.es).

Fig. 4 - The universe according to Goussin de Metz. Ca. 1245 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Fr.14964, fol. 117).

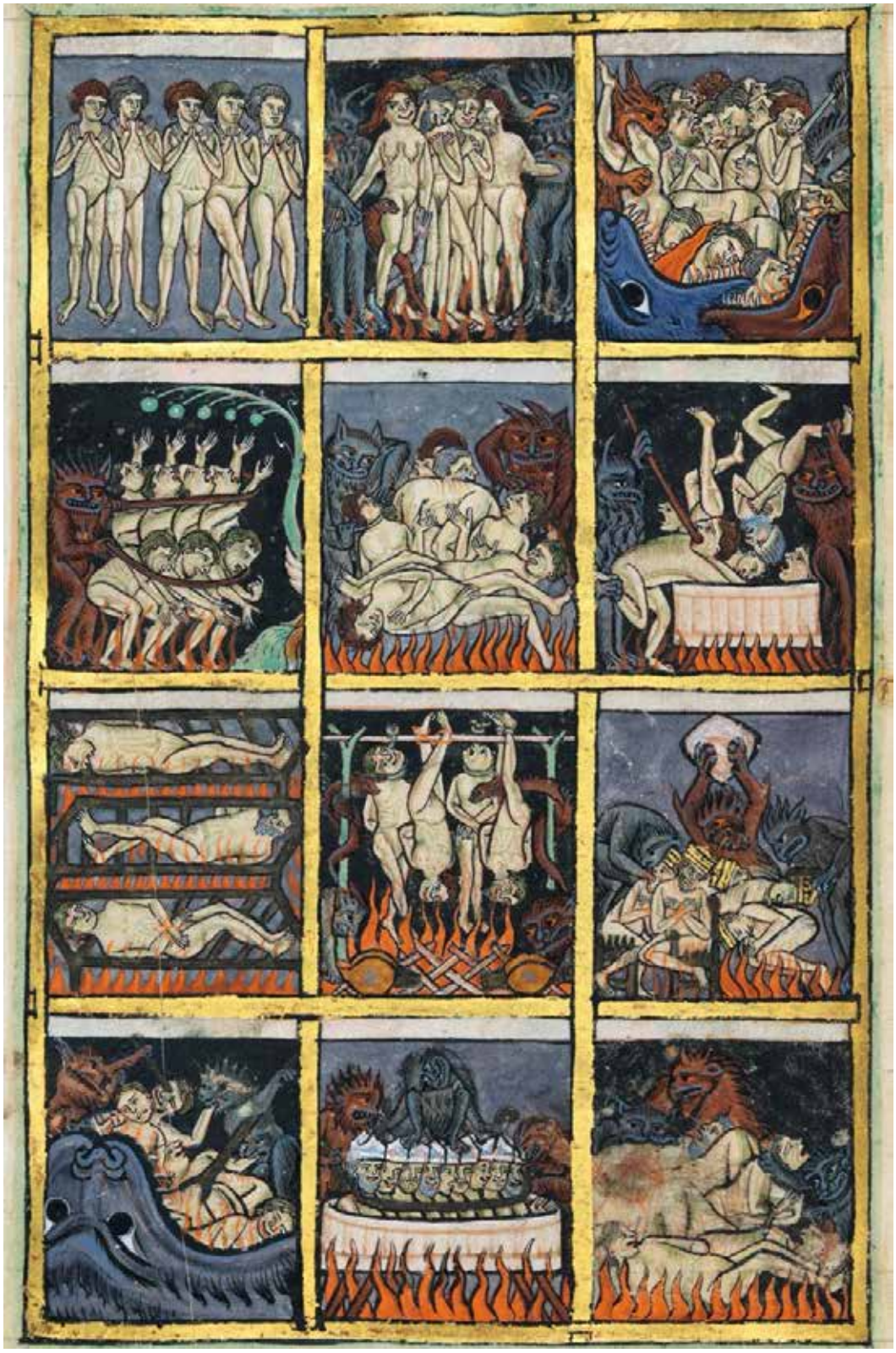

Fig. 5 - Gilded psaltery from Munich. Ca. 1210 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 835, fol. 30v) (Source: daten.digitale-sammlungen.de).

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Fig. 7 - Hell as depicted in the City of God. Ca. 1460. Master of the City Hall of Rouen (France) (National Library of France, Ms Fr. 28, Fol. 249v).

Fig. 8 - Mouth of Hell from the Winchester psaltery. Mid-12th century (British Library, Cotton, Ms. Nero C IV, fol. 39) (Source: bl.uk)..

Fig. 9 - The Tarasque in various representations from the 14th century AD to the present day: 1) Tarasque depicted by Opicinus of Canistris during his stay in Avignon (1320-1359). 2) Saint Martha taming the Tarasque according to Henry VIII's Book of Hours by Jean Poyet. Ca. 1500 (Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MS H.8, fol. 191v) (wikipedia.es). 3) Painting by José and Mateo de Barahona with an image of the Tarasca for the Corpus Christi procession in Madrid (1693) (Biblioteca Digital de la Memoria de Madrid) (memoriademadrid.es). 4) Drawing by Nicolás de León Gordillo of the procession of the Tarasca during the Corpus Christi in Seville in 1747. 5) Bas-relief by Jean-Barnabé (1884) (Museum of Arlaten, no. 2002.0.2068) (museonarlaten.fr).

Fig. 10 - Classical depiction of Ammit in a scene of the weighing of the heart. Ani Papyrus (Dyn. XIX) ca. 1275 BC (British Museum, EA 10470/3) (Taylor 2010: 221).

Fig. 11 - Amulet no. 1 from Arslan Tash (7th-6th century BC) (López Pardo 2009: 52).

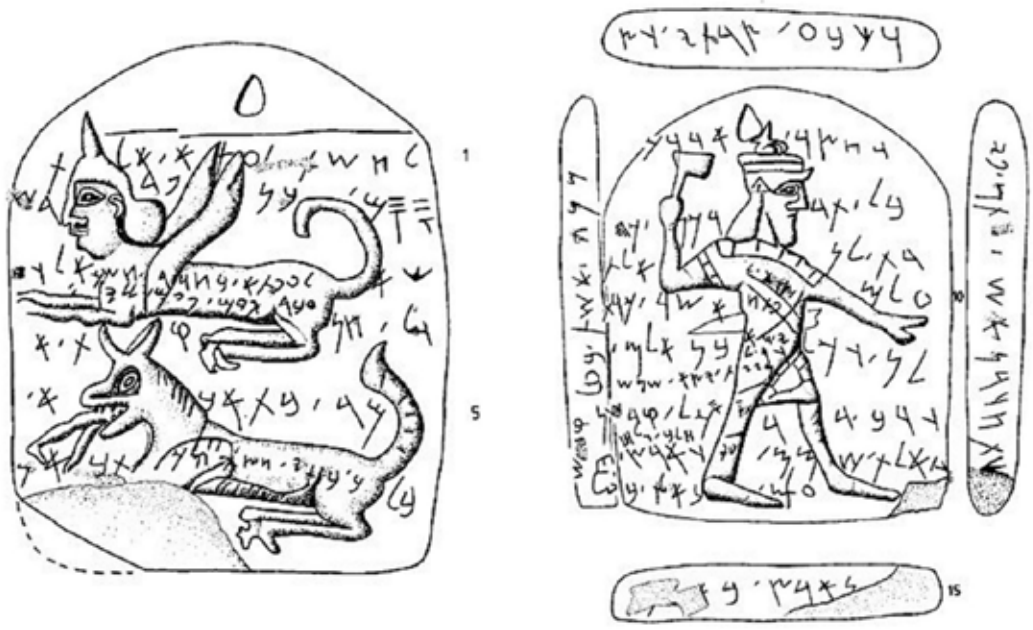

Fig. 12. Amulet no. 2 from Arslan Tash (7th-6th century BC) (López Pardo 2009: 50).

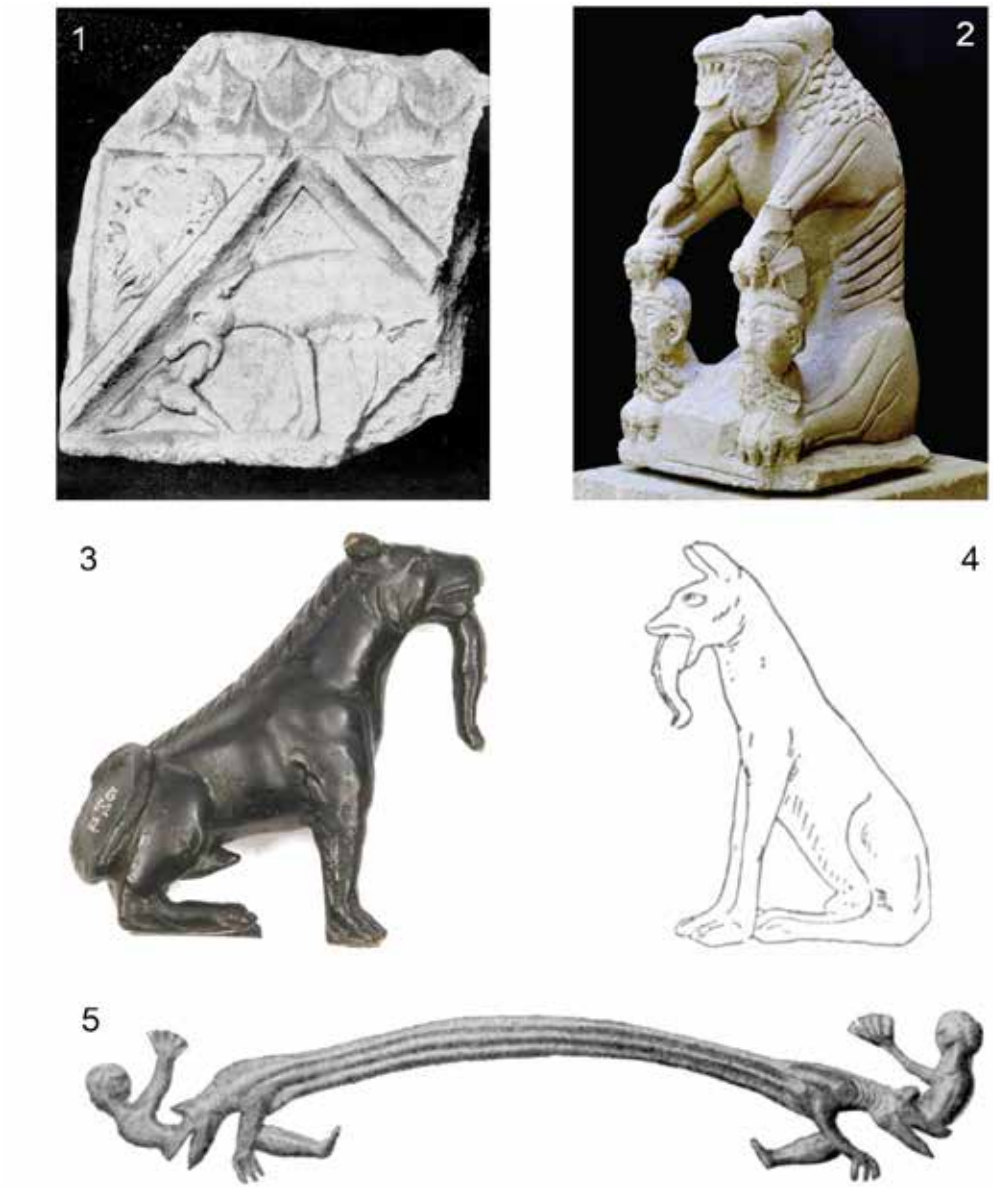

Fig. 13. Images of devouring androphages in Celtic protohistory: 1) Androphagous she-wolf of Arlon (4th century BC) (Renard 1949: plate VI, Fig. 1). 2) Tarasca of Noves (Bouches du Rhodan, France) (2nd-1st century BC) (Calvet Foundation, inv. no. N51) (Source: musee-lapidaire.org) 3) Androphagous wolf from Woodeaton (Oxford, UK) (undetermined Gallo-Roman period) (Durham 2014: Fig. 11a). 4) Bronze from Fouqueure (France) (undetermined Gallo-Roman period) (from Reinach 1904: Fig. 3). 5) Bas-relief from the Gundestrup cauldron (Himmerland, Denmark) (2nd century BC) (from Reinach 1904: Fig. 4).

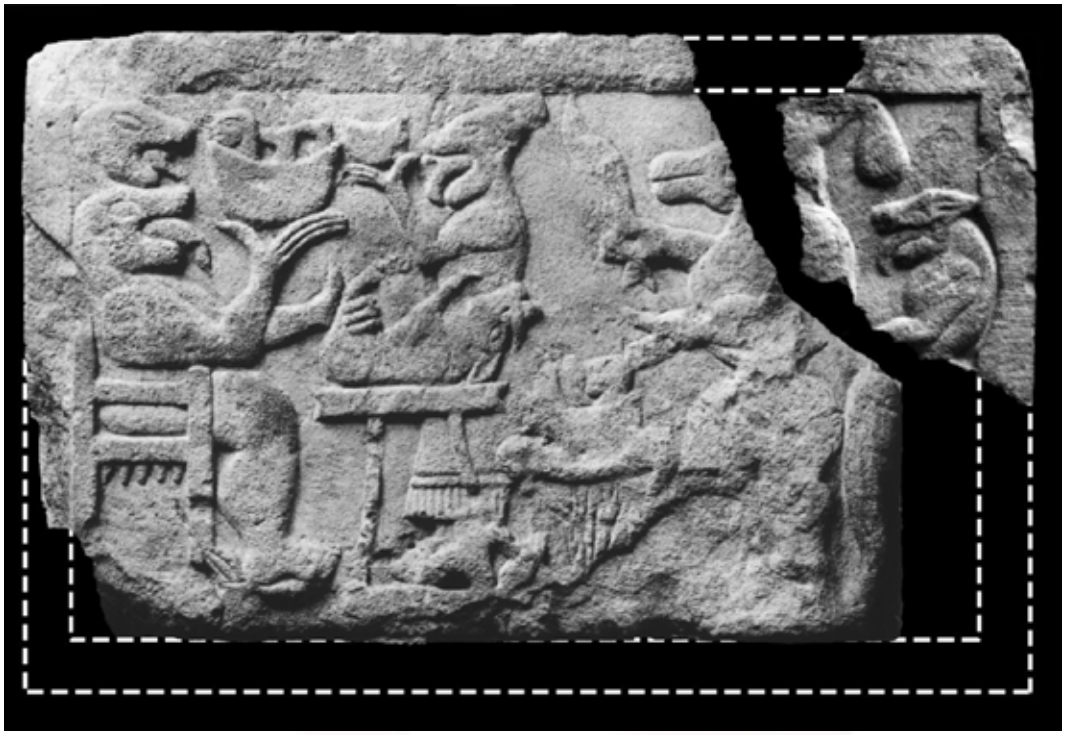

Fig. 14. Fragments of the Pozo Moro ashlar with what is known as the banquet scene (own elaboration based on López Pardo 2009: 32, Fig. 1 and 46, Fig. 13).