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Lamia: A Sorceress, a Fairy or a Revenant?

ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the role of a specific fantastic creature in the popular European body of myths. Originally a major figure of ancient Greek mythology, a beautiful Libyan queen transformed into a repulsive child-eating demon, Lamia penetrated the folk traditions of post-ancient world. Widely dispersed in oral literature, as a sort of sorceress or a fairy, she was identified with those women, young and old, ravishing and unsightly, who haunt the night with the rare desire for eating human innards. On the other hand, she could be a revenant, a female vampire that comes back from the dead in order to kill, to suck blood and particularly to mangle children's flesh. In addition, she could easily turn up as a nightmare or a succubus, asking unbearable pressure on her victims' chests or even having sexual intercourse with them. Thus, under a serpentine figure, with horse feet, irresistibly beautiful or irresistibly ugly, Lamia, representing an important piece of the ensemble of European demonic beings, adopted a large number of forms, manifesting different variants.

KEYWORDS

Greek Mythology; Lamia; Monster; Sorceress; Fairy; Revenant.

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Introduction

An unwritten law concerning the study of imaginary beings in folk traditions requires that the brave scholar who would embark on the holy grail's quest for a supernatural being's origin has to face many secondary problems and a principal one: the close affinity between the general categories. In other words, the difficulty of saying definitively whether an imaginary being belongs to a specific group, such as fairies, elves, dwarfs, or revenants. In this pantheon of polygenetic and polyphyletic beings, Lamia is a queen. Our inquiry will try to cast light on her plurality of forms, mainly in medieval texts and glossaries.

Lamia as a beast or as a cetacean

First appearing a long time before the rise of Christianity, the name Lamia (in Greek Λάμια) was frequently used by the theologians of the first centuries. Saint Jerome, in his Vulgate, uses the term twice. The first reference is located in the Book of Jeremiah where is narrated that "lamiae even being cruel, cover their nurslings with their breasts and nourish them."¹

In this fragment, Lamia replaces the Hebrew plural *thannim* whose singular form is *than*, signifying a cetacean, a large fish or



a sea-dragon. It can also be found in the compound *Leviath-thannim* that means *conjunctio draconum*, a combination of dragons. The word is used in plural in the original text and so in the translation, *lamiae*. It is possible however that this plural form was not frequent in ancient literature. It seems that she principally defined a non-anthropomorphic monster, linked to the sea and the water. Greek writers such as Stesichoros² consider her the mother of Scylla, known to us mainly from Homer's *Odyssey* as a beast fatal for sailors. This tradition, which depicts Lamia as a cetacean, seems to have survived until late, as the *Encyclopédie Théologique* of Migne³ informs us. In Nice and Marseille fishermen drew out of the water lamias, in the stomach of which they found human remains; the famous sixteenth-century doctor and naturalist Guillaume Rondelet was a witness. In his commentaries on Isaiah, Albert the Great believes that she is a *monstrum marinum*.

In the same epoch, Thomas Cantimprantensis, in his thirteenth-century bestiary treatise *Liber de natura rerum*, mentions that „lamia is a huge and cruel animal”, which lives in the forest⁴. In this case she is either zoomorphic or a beast, but no more linked with the element of saltwater. In the same spirit, Martin of Braga, an author of the sixth century, transfers Lamia from the marine environment to the forest as he links her with fresh water citing:

In the sea we call them (the demons
who were cast out of heaven), Neptunes,
In the lakes, laniias (lamias),
In the fountains, nymphs,
In the forests, dianas⁵.

The name *lania* or *lamina* is considered as a usual cacography of the original, which must not confuse us.

We have many reasons nevertheless to believe Lamia's assimilation with the

cetacean and the sea-dragon. Greek authors identified her with Delphyne, the serpent dragon and guardian of Delphi that was exterminated by Apollo. A Greek grammarian of the first Christian centuries, Antoninus Liberalis, identifies Lamia with Sybaris, a *δράκαινα*⁶. Drakaina means female dragon. It is a question if this creature had human-like features. As far as Sybaris is concerned, though, we can answer in the affirmative. She was a dragon living in a cave, a beast seizing men, animals and children, and had anthropomorphic features. So did Campe, Ceto, Echidna, Poine and Python, female figures, *drakaines*, depicted either as cetaceans or as human beings with heads and torsos of women, but with lower bodies of a snake. Most of them were linked with Lamia by many authors and for many reasons. They are also frequently linked with rivers or a geographic place in general. For instance, Sybaris, besides being a dragon, was also a river in Italy. More specifically, many were linked with Delphi or the surrounding area. Delphi was the most important Greek sanctuary and oracle, the center of the earth, guarded by a dragon – its genius loci in other words, which should be chased and killed by the hero, bearer of sunlight Apollo, who would render the place sacred and holy.

We are not sure if an etymological relationship really exists between *Λάμια* and *Λαμία*, a Greek city around Delphi, but it is possible. In any case, going back to the Vulgate, we can undoubtedly say that Saint Jerome had many reasons to choose this translation for the Hebrew *than*.



Lamia as hybrid and as a vampire

Lamia was foremost a beast, and when she was not described as cetacean, she was a kind of Echidna, a hybrid with human-like features, usually seductive. In the commentary of Isaiah, except for being a *monstrum marinum*, lamia is represented as a beautiful woman with a tempting voice but she loses any serpent's characteristic, as she is used as a synonym for Sirenae. These in their principal form were birds with the torso and the head of a woman. It is not rare to see Lamia related to a bird, mostly a screech owl, and the *strix*, a vampire-sorceress with a vague relationship to this species of bird. Another common description of lamia during the Middle Ages, evoked by authors such as Vincent of Beauvais and Bartholomew Anglicus, is that of a hybrid woman with a horse's body. This is either due to an assimilation of Lamia to *hippopodes*⁷, a hybrid beast known to ancient authors as having horse hoofs, which passed to the medieval texts through the *Roman of Alexander*⁸, or due to an assimilation of Lamia to *Empusa*. The latter was a beast or a vampire-woman with donkey's feet; an *onoskelis*.

We notice that in all these cases, lamia is not an animal, but a monstrous hybrid which bears either feathers and hooves, or a snake's tail and scales. It was this form that was later inherited by the Middle Ages. The archetypal narrative is well-known and tells the story of a beautiful queen of Libya, loved by Zeus. The jealous Hera transformed her into her hideous appearance and killed her children or cursed her to bear dead sons and daughters. In addition she became an insomniac, found refuge in a cave – as all the females in the Echidna category – and finally became a vampire, killing human beings, seizing children and eating their flesh.

This type of Lamia, clearly more human, became quite popular in Ancient Greece. Authors such as Aristophanes, Pausanias, Aristotle, make reference to her, sometimes in a mocking spirit: Lamia had already been reduced to a simple warning, along with other Greek female demons (Mormo, Karko, Gello); she had become a bogey. In this reduced form she arrived in Roman drama and literature and became such a common *topos*, that two hills of the ancient Sicilian site of Acrae, were named *Λαμίας μαστοί*, that is to say, Lamia's breast. In addition, a fragment of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* presents her as a vampiric seductress. Robert Burton adopted this version in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, and John Keats was based on Burton's reproduction for his famous poem *Lamia*.

All these documents cast light on this lamia's type as a female vampire, a succubus and a *strix*, but they cannot answer the question of her origin. Going back to the Vulgate, we find as we have already indicated, a second reference, this time in the book of Isaiah, where we learn that lamia will lie down there (at the land of Edom) and will repose⁹. Here the word lamia translates the word *lilith*, the first woman of Adam, transformed into a furious demon of the night, a vampire seizing and devouring children, as documented in the Talmud, the Zohar and the alphabet of Ben-Sira.

It is thus possible that the myth of Lamia has an oriental origin. The etymology of the name is not helpful, as it remains unknown. Excluding, first of all, the hypothesis of Isidore of Seville, according to which *lamia* or *lannia* derives from the latin verb *lanio*, "tear to pieces", it is possible that the name is Greek. It could derive, as the dictionary of Souida rather paronymologically indicates, from *λαϊμός*, which means neck. Its etymological connection with the king of Laestrygonians *Λάμοσ*, who was also



carnivorous, and the fact that she is referred in some cases as a queen of this tribe of giant carnivals, makes the existence of a common root signifying carnivorous, sounding more plausible. However it would sound reasonable to suppose that the name is from a Babylonian-Assyrian origin, linked with the god Lamastu; a demon of sterility that seizes children and attacks pregnant women.

In any case, we cannot be absolutely sure of the affinity between Lamia and Lilith, even if both are characterized by many common traits such as the vampirism, the desire for children's blood and flesh, the long hair, remarkable breasts, and a connection with birds of prey, mainly the owl. This connection was not unknown to the Medieval West. Thomas Cantipratensis mentions that "Lamia is this animal called lidit, and which according to Jewish people are furies, named Parcae".¹⁰

In this significant passage, three points concern us. First of all, the name *lidit* confirms the link between lamia and Lilith or here lidit, even if in this text it is an animal. Second, it is the point of fury, an impetus which is essential to this form of lamia and which determines a basic category of mythical women: a beautiful young lady or an ugly hag of a non-human nature, with a furious and demonic character, who causes death, pain, sterility, infertility: the *striges*, the *furies* or *erinyes* – *eumenides*, the *graeae*, the *paciae*, the *fatae* and so on. These malevolent traits can usually be accompanied by the manifestation of a benevolent behavior through which the deity or the supernatural woman brings prosperity to a field, a house or its inhabitants. The dualistic character it is quite common in these female entities, which seem to have their basis in the worship of the Great Mother. During the Middle Ages, they were called *dominae nocturnae*, night-women,

shining mothers, *bonnes-dames* and were not irrelevant to lamia, as Hincmar of

Reims, a ninth-century author, indicates: "lamiae sive geniciales foeminae"¹¹. For Jacob Grimm, who evidently remarks the dualistic character, they were "originally daemonic elvish beings, who appeared in woman's shape and did men kindnesses". More specifically *geniciales feminae* is a name used for a category of female beings linked to birth, a usual motif in fairy-related narratives, and the fertility deity Geniscus. A seventh-century sermon however informs us:

There are some country people (*rustici homines*) who have a belief in certain women, because it is commonly said that they must be striges and able to harm infants and cattle, and the Dusiolus or Aquatiquus or Geniscus must too¹².

Thus, Geniscus followed by *striges*, which means witches, and this escort can be found in medieval texts concerning Berchta, Holda, Satia, Dame Abonde, Herodiada, Diana and Befana. Moreover, they are malevolent, underlining this way the opposite principle; the malignant one.

Over time, these feminine figures lost their supernatural aspect, their original one – since they were mostly deities, and mutated into human beings. Thus, the terms *fury*, *lamia*, hag, *strix*, which essentially signified a deity or at least a demon, were used since the last centuries of the middle ages as synonyms for witch. This evolution explains the titles of treatises such as Molitor's *de Lamiis*, Wier's *de Lamiis liber*, and Meiger's *Panurgia Lamiarum*, all of them basic manuals for the inquisitors, in where lamiae were judged and punished and had no divine nature.

Going back to the third essential point of Thomas Cantipratensis' text, we see that



lamiae are called *parcae*. The term is used here to signify a female figure between the Roman *parcae* or *fatae*, and the later fairies. This practice was common for the medieval writers, mainly ecclesiastics, who preferred the Latin form to the vulgar ones. Through this third point, however, lamia is linked with two elements: firstly, destiny and then the forest.

The *Vocabularius ex quo*, a fourteenth-century Latin glossary, informs us that Lamia is a *genus monstrosus*¹³ which seizes and devours children and which is also a man of the woods (*holcz* man). Albert the Great calls her *pilosus*, that is to say hairy, an adjective which grosso modo defines two categories of supernatural beings: firstly the Faunus, and his relatives *silenus*, *satyrus*, *silvanus*, *pan*. Then, the wild man or woman, a hybrid between human and *genius loci*; a guardian of the forests. On this relationship between lamia and the forest man, the German glossaries of the middle ages are illuminating.

Lamia in the glossaries: a *genius loci*

As Jacob Grimm points out, in a twelfth-century glossary¹⁴, *wildaz wip* stands for lamia, and in the same one, *wildiu wip* stands for *ululae*, funeral birds or owls, death-boding wives, in other words the *klagefrauen*, the *klagenmütter*, the *winselmütter*, all linked to Berchta. Another synonym for lamia is *holzmuoja*, *holzfrowe* or *holzruna*. In the thirteenth-century *wildez wip* is used as a synonym for *merwip*, *merfraw* or *mermine*, where *menni* or *minni* is rather linked to the ON, *man*, that is to say *virgo*. Merminne signifies the fairy and as *mer* reveals, frequently the ondine, undine. A fourteenth-century middle Dutch poem cites: *Maren, heten wise hier Minne*¹⁵, connecting this way mare to *minne*. The plural

merimanniu translates *sirena* or *Scylla*, and *waltminne* is equivalent to lamia¹⁶. This virgin and maiden of the forest, as *walt* means, is a kind of *genius loci* of feminine form, a *matrona*, a *parca* or *fata*, a nymph. Grimm moreover places these women of a higher, superhuman nature, *wildaz wip* or *menni*, *minni*, alongside the Scandinavian *norn* and *valkyr*, deities of destiny and the forest.

The lexicographers do not stop here. They use as a synonym for lamia, *belewitte*¹⁷, which means *bilwit* – a *genius loci* or *genius domesticus* identical to *pilwiz* or *bilwis*¹⁸, a German spirit of the forest with big toes, related to the mare or nightmare and to the German *Trude*, which equally was a witch with big toes. The latter, along with the gloss *alb*, which means elf and nightmare, are similarly considered as synonyms for lamia. Finally, for another glossary, lamia stands for *nahtvró*, which can be translated as women of the night.

As we have already pointed out these kind of nocturnal female entities, well known across Europe, are also named *shining mothers*, *dominae nocturnae*, *bonnes dames* and in Hincmar of Reims *lamiae sive geniciales foeminae*, female figures assisting births, anonymous or having a name such as *frau Perchta* – which means shining, *frau Holda*, *Satia*, *Abonde*, and so on. They are all supernatural women of ambivalent character; benevolent and malevolent. It seems that lamia was gradually integrated into a similar cult. First of all we meet a type of benevolent fairy or mermaid in the oral traditions of southern France and northern Spain. Most importantly, an epigraph was discovered in a temple of Northumberland, dedicated to *Lamiis tribus*¹⁹, the three lamias.

The Irish glossaries provide us with a clearer image of this integration. We have already examined the case where the term lamia is used to translate Lilith, in the



passage of Isaiah. A ninth-century codex glosses this lamia as:

monster in female form, that is, a mor-rigan²⁰.

Another glossary of the tenth century, refers to *Gúdemain .i. úatha 7 morrignæ*²¹. *Uatha* means horror, *morrignæ* stands evidently for morrigan, *Gudemain* however rests obscure. We have to consult another glossary of the same period if we want to cast light on this term, as it cites:

Gudomain, i.e. hooded crows, or *bansigaidhe* – women from the *sid*; lying wolves, that is, the false demons, the *morrigna*. Or “falsehood,” so that they (the *bansigaidhe* and the hooded crows) are not demons; “falsehood,” so that they are not demons of hell but demons of the air. They double the cries of the foxes, and they double the voices of the hooded crow²².

It is possible that *gu* means false and *main* has to do with *man* that we have already met in *mine* and *minni*. *Gudomain*, this synonym for *morrigan* and consequently for lamia, seems to be a fairy. That is confirmed by *bansigaidhe*, which can be translated either as “the woman of *sid* and *siddhe*”, a type of Celtic fairy, or as banshee. This latter, is another spirit of Celtic origin, which is called also woman of the hill and woman of the mound. It is *sid*, a fairy and a *genius loci* linked with nature, and finally a *fata* or *norn* of the Celtic folklore, a deity of destiny.

The description of *gudomain* as a wolf or crow is due to *morrigan*. Both animals represent two sacral beasts and are principal forms of her. Morrigan was actually a major war deity in the Celtic cult, the queen of Tuatha de Dannan, before being reduced to the form of a fairy. Morgan le Fay, that is

Morgan the fairy, is a possible consequence of this transformation, integrated in the Arthurian cycle. Moreover, the Morgans were water spirits, fairies and generally *genii loci* of Wales, as was Mari Morgan in Brittany. As far as the etymology of morrigan is concerned, the specialists, more or less, agree: *Rigan* is the simple etymon and means queen. *Mor*, derives from a root which in Celtic texts can be found mainly in *morrigan* and *fomoire* and which derives, according to Pokorny and Stokes, from the same root as the English mare of nightmare, Norse *mahr* and *mara*, French mare of *chauchemar* and the Slavic *mora*, which are used as synonyms for lamia. Two well-known examples of this identification can be found in *Otia Imperialia* of Gervais of Tilbury. There the author makes two references to lamia. In the first case she is linked with the human-like dragon and the nightmare²³, in the second with the nightmare and the ladies of nights²⁴. In the *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* of Du Cange we read: “*Lamia*, genus monstri, Gall. Mare, vel animal”²⁵. In addition to this, the old French dictionary of Godefroy underlines that: “*Lamia*, is a genus monstri gall – gallice that is commonly mare”²⁶.

To conclude: Lamia was in her principal forms a beast, a cetacean or a female dragon with human-like features, which acted as a *genius loci*. The middle ages received this image, and eventually assimilated it to the fairies, the striges and the ladies of the night. She was, in a mysterious but apparently logical way connected to the nightmare as well. But the most important conclusion that can be drawn from the Irish and German glossaries is her affinity with the field and a specific place as *genius loci*.

Moreover, O’Mulconry’s glossary, in the thirteenth century, mentions that:



Macha, .i.e. a crow, or one of the three *morrigna*²⁷.

Lamia according to Modern Greek traditions

These three *morrigna*, as other glossaries inform us, are Morrigan, Macha and Badb – three related Celtic deities. What is interesting here is that neither the form of the crow that evokes Morrigan of Tuatha de Dannan, nor the reference to three *morrigan*, which can explain the *lamiis tribus* of the epigraph at Northumberland.

What is important here is the etymology of Macha and the fact that some specialists relate this name to the field and more specifically to the enclosure for milking cows, the enclosure around the house. Another synonym for lamia is hag, a term used to signify a sorceress acting as a nightmare. It constitutes an evolution of the *Ghagazussa*²⁸. Its etymology is linked with the Gallic demon *dusius* or *dusiolus*, the Celtic *sids* and the Teutonic *dis*, maidens of fate and war. Hagazussa means the demon, or rather the genius, of the hedge. It is a spirit that lives in the enclosure field between the hedge and the house.

If such a hypothesis is true, it will be easier to prove the existence of a line connecting lamia to fairies, the three *morigains*, the hags, the nightmare, the ladies of the night and so many other members of a huge multilingual family which has at its core a specific category; the genius loci. This latter seems to be the reason for this affinity and the basis of the majority of the general categories.

It would be interesting now to examine Lamia's evolution in the oriental part of Europe and particularly in this geographic part that is considered, even in an uncertain way, as Lamia's birthplace; Greece. For this purpose, the important collection of Greek traditional narratives of the folklorist Nikolaos Politis will serve as our database. The part concerning Lamia is consisted of seventeen narrated texts – not many compared to those on other supernatural beings as the *vrykolak* or the fairy. Moreover, at a first glance, we may remark that for the agrarian common sense she stayed alive but, *grosso modo*, as a fairy's synonym. The majority of specialists agree with the opinion that Lamia is an evolution of the Libyan queen. The truth, however, is not exactly that. For the culturally and historically isolated Greece of all these centuries, Lamia presents a remarkable sequence with the characteristics presented above, even if it is a country geographically placed on the opposite edge of the Old Continent.

More specifically, according to a multitude of narratives, Lamia is represented alone or in a flock, as a seductive young woman sat on the riverside, combing her long blond hair with a gold or silver comb. The description is akin to these (concerning) of water-friendly fairies, nixies etc. Moreover, the combing motif is widespread. As far as the time of her appearance is concerned, she can be mostly met during evening or night, but quite often during noon as well, a phenomenon which classifies her in the category of the important, for the Greek territory, noontime demons. The fact of her appearance in triads, keeping a stick with which they beat and wash clothes on the riverside, playing common games such as chase, are all motifs that evidently classify



Lamia in the category of the fairies or correspondent supernatural beings. A tradition from Peloponnesse, explicitly informs: “Lamia is the fairy queen. She lives on a mountain, close to the sea of Arcadia”. The same narrative however continues: “She causes a lot of trouble to the ships and all the seamen afraid of her because she provokes tempests and tornados”²⁹. These last elements discard lamia from what is already known, because they constitute a remembrance of the liaison between Lamia-Scylla and in general all these monstrous inhabitants of the sea, malevolent to the seamen.

This type of aquatic being which is of course not unknown in the Western European region (*nix*, siren, mermaid), has an Irish and Scottish equivalent which forms however a rather complicated case. It is called Merrow³⁰, which derives from the Gaelic *murúch*, or *murrough*, which is its Galloway synonym. *Muir* means sea and *ogh* means virgin. The form however which seems problematic is the Irish *Moruadh* or *Moruach* as *mor* is not identical to *mer*. The most possible is that the archetypal name, meaning the sea-maiden, was confused to deities’ names as Morrigan, which are composed of *mor*, closely connected to mare and nightmare. Merrow is an entity of water, mainly seawater, and music, as the Greek Siren. In Irish traditions, she finally transformed into a harp, which is the national instrument. She is mainly documented as a seductive woman who attracts human lovers and kills them under the surface of the water, violently pulling naughty children and woman who stand on the riverside doing their laundry. This last one reminds us of the medieval description of Gervais of Tilbury on the *drac*, by the common *nix* motif. Last but not least, Merrow can be described as a monster of huge dimensions, a description opposed to that of the beautiful, sweet-voiced hybrid, which is a siren’s equivalent. Thomas Moore reproduces po-

pular knowledge in an artistic way, in a poem of his *Irish Melodies*, published in 1820:

‘Tis believ’d that this Harp, which I
wake now for thee,
Was a Siren of old, who sung under
sea;
And who often, at eve, through the
bright billow rov’d,
To meet, on the green shore, a youth
whom she lov’d³¹.

Thus, Lamia – whether as a remembrance of the archaic cetaceans or not – is a genius loci which lives between mountain and sea, being a part of the natural elements. We cannot be definitely sure as about the extent of this revoking of archaic affinities, although it is quite possible that this is the case. A narrative from Zakynthos makes reference to Lamia’s breasts:

She wanted to go hunting, however on the route a hunter shoots her and blesses her, preventing her so from her purpose. She made an oven, which could hold more than fifty people and after her full recovery, she went hunting. She captured a human crowd (choosing the fattest), she killed them hitting them with her breasts, and then baked them. This, as revenge to the hunter’s act³².

The motif of baked or roasted victims can also be found in a fragment of *De Universo*, where William of Auvergne mentions that lamias and *striges* get into houses at night and seize children, ripping them apart or roasting them³³.

Another narrative cites that long time ago a Lamia who lived in Doubri, in Arachova and each time that the Arachovians had a festival, they had to offer her a



villager. After eating this person, she would not touch the participants of the festival³⁴. These ransoms, a frequently used European motif, mainly linked to monstrous beings such as dragons, link Lamia to the Ancient Greek hybrids of the Echidna category. Neither the sea motif nor the one of the fatal breasts and the demand for annual ransoms, are motives related to the fairies' category. They attribute to Lamia a relative independence, more distinguishable in the narrative below³⁵. This one mentions that lamias of the sea dance and sing and jump on the waves, fly high in the air and then from the air fell into the sea. Most of all, they like tempest, and they get really pleased by charming traveling ships. Either with their songs, or their voices, they bring the ignorant seamen to reefs from where they cannot be saved.

There is no doubt on the correlation here between lamia – a siren, a goddess who was almost unknown during the neo-Hellenic period and whose heritage relates her to the characteristics of the mermaid, which in Greek is called *γοργόνα*. A tradition from the same region proves the reliability of such a connection. Lamia is described as a woman, with a nice body but with a very ugly part; her legs are not human, there are three or even more, and of many types: a copper, an asinine, legs of cattle or of a goat or human or everything else³⁶. All these make reference to Empusa and this form of Lamia that has already been commented on above. Another point that surprises us is the usual appellation of Lamia as Lamna, which links the name to the ancient Greek *λάμνα*, meaning shark. This *v* in the word also reminds us the medieval cacography *lania* and *lamnia*.

In any case, Lamia either as a remembrance of the archaic cetaceans or not, she is genius loci which lives between mountain and sea, being a part of natural elements.

Like the ancient Greek lamia, she causes abstract diseases and strikes the domestic animals and herds.

Three important traditions from Lamía, the territory usually regarded as Lamia's birthplace, inform us that somebody saw in a cave a bunch of lamias, combing their pretty hair, that in a place called Lamia's garden nobody dares to cut a branch of a tree or bring his herd inside, because the Lamias will get angry, and that finally in Gardiki – a village close to Phtiotis, there is a big tree where a lot of people, at night-time, have seen a tall woman with long hair sitting inside the tree cavity; it was the lamia³⁷. These three narratives combine the motif of combing with the category of *genius loci* as Lamia lives in a cave or more significantly in a tree. Her great size, a motif repeatedly used, evokes an archaic giant and, particularly, one of the Lestrigones and the Lamos family, with whom an etymological connection is possible. However the cycle of motives is similar to the one of western European traditions. The alternative elements, the variants, variegated, but the base seems for us stable and is located on the *genius loci* figure. A narrative from Peloponnese still mentions that the wife of a mule driver had lost four of children when they were three years old. They were strangled – crushed by Lamia while sleeping. In this text, which cannot be cited here because of its length, the supernatural demonic being is described as a very tall woman wearing a white dress, which means a *domina nocturna* acting like a nightmare³⁸.

This tradition which links lamia to the nightmare is not the only one, as an Athenian narrative recites:

The Mora (the Nightmare) is a lamna, rich and very strong. She walks around only during the night, and when she meets people sleeping, she sits on their



chests and crashes them. And she is so heavy, that the victim moans as cattle. But if the person has not fallen deeply asleep, and seizes her bonnet, he can ask for whatever (in the world) he wants. She only needs her bonnet back.³⁹

The latter is a text of great significance and one of the most important Greek narratives on nightmare. In here, Lamia is no longer a daytime demon; she is a nocturnal entity which walks and wanders, activities that apparently are neutral but which simultaneously evoke many malevolent beings, mostly the revenant and the east-European *vrykolak*. She is rich and powerful – as a deity and prosperity factor. She is as heavy as a nightmare. And most importantly, she wears a bonnet.

It would be impossible to extensively analyze here this bonnet's significance, which is an element of great importance which can be found in many popular narratives in France, where the bonnet is worn by a sorceress who acts as a nightmare and, of course, in Greece, where the nightmare is a kid with a gold or red bonnet. We can simply claim that it is very possible that it stands for a sorceress' caul, this atavistic characteristic, which gives the ability of astral projections. The sorceress' soul leaves her body and travels, visits some victims' houses, acting as a nightmare or participating in the Sabbaths. Thus, through this point, we may have a connotation of the affinity between lamia, the nightmare and the sorceress. Moreover, this prosperity and richness motif, which derives from the captivity of a supernatural being's personal object, mostly an item of clothing or a wing, is commonly encountered in oral literature and it undoubtedly has a deeper meaning, linked to pagan religious practices and costumes aiming to richness.

The origin of this object may be found in another supernatural being whose worship

was widespread in the Celtic religion; the genius *cucullatus*. It was a hooded guardian spirit, a home-sprite and *genius domesticus* or a *genius loci* which protected a specific place. Its phallic shape underlines its abilities to bring prosperity; it accompanies deities such as Mercury or Rosmerta – *phalli* or even female breasts frequently appearing through their hoods. Its cap maybe an archetype of the red, green and black dwarves' or elves' hats as their common basis; its spirit was linked to the territory and the natural elements, moreover to prosperity; the *genius loci*. Depicted as a child or a short-bearded man, it evokes the wood-folk and, of course, the childish appearance of the nightmare in another Athenian narrative, where it is depicted as a hooded child. In Greece, the nightmare – according to the oral documents – is mostly a Lamia, who is generally described as a tall young woman, and a child. The narrative there constitutes an overlapping of different traditions.

Seven to eight centuries later, in totally different areas, the tradition was still alive. The relationship between lamia and the nightmare, which was not unusual during the Middle Ages, according to Gervais of Tilbury, had a similar function in the Modern Greek territory. The Greek variations of the already examined West-European traditions, concerning Lamia and her position in an ensemble which gathers multiple and various manifestations, confirm the significant spatial and temporal continuity of Lamia's historical evolution through European popular and agrarian myths. The nexus seems identical and not hazardous.

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Notes

¹ "Sed et Lamiae nudaverunt mammam, lactaverunt catulos suos" (Book of Jeremiah, 43 sq).

² Stesichorus Frag 220.

³ Abbé Migne, *Encyclopédie théologique*, Paris, J.-P. Migne, 1846, Vol. III, p. 43-45.

⁴ Thomas Cantipratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, IV, 56, 1-7: "Lamia, ut dicit liber rerum, animal est magnum et crudelissimum. Nocte silvas exit et intrat hortos et frangit arbores et ramos eius dissipat, et hoc per brachia forta nimis habilata ad omnem actum. At ubi homines supervenerint ad prohibendum, pugnat cum eis et mordet eos. Hoc autem est in morsu eius supra modum mirabile, sicut Aristoteles refert: homo

sauciatus lamie dentibus non sanatur a morsu, donec rugientis bestie vocem audierit."

⁵ "Et in mari quidem Neptunum appellant, in fluminibus Lamias, in fontibus Nymphas, in silvis Dianas, quae omnia maligni daemones et spiritus nequam sunt". cf. J. Stoll, "Lamia," Roseher, *Lexikon*, II. 1821.

⁶ Antoninus Liberalis, *Métamorphoses*, VIII.

⁷ It is rather this figure that inspired Edward's Topsell famous Lamia's illustration in his 17th century *History of Four-footed beasts*.

⁸ According to Claude Lecouteux the myth of Hippopodes was diffused by: Isidore of Sevilla (*Etymologiae* XI, 3, 25), Rabanus Maurus (*De universo* VII, 7), Ratramnus (*Epistola de Cynocephalis*), the Pseudo-Ovidius (*De mirabilibus mundi*, no 25), Lambert of Saint-Omer (*Liber floridus*, manuscript of Gand, fol. 53 ro), Bartholomeus Anglicus (*De proprietatibus rerum* XVIII, 46), Herbort von Fritzlar (Liet von Troye, v.14260) Cf. Claude Lecouteux, "Lamia ou les métamorphoses d'un croquemitaine féminin au Moyen Âge", in: *Kaniskion Philiis, Mélanges Michel Saunier*, éd. E. Moser-Karagiannis, Athènes, 2003, p. 57. 38.

⁹ "Ibi cubavit Lamia et invenit sibirequiem" (Book of Isaiah 34, 14).

¹⁰ "Hoc animal Hebraice vocatur lidit, et suspicantur Iudei unam fuisse de furiis, que Parce dicuntur, eo quod nulli parcant".

¹¹ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, New York, Dover Phoenix Editions, 2004, Vol. III, p.1056.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 1056.

¹³ K. Grubmüller, B. Schnell, H.-J. Stahl, E. Auer, R. Pawis (eds.) "Vocabularius Ex quo". *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Ausgabe*, 5 vol., Tübingen, 1988-89.

¹⁴ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, New York, Dover Phoenix Editions, 2004, Vol. III, p. 1056.

¹⁵ Claude Lecouteux, *Au-delà du merveilleux: Essai sur les mentalités du Moyen Âge*,



Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris- Sorbonne, 1998, p. 103.

¹⁶ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, New York, Dover Phoenix Editions, 2004, Vol. IV, p. 1406.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, Vol. II, p. 473.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, Vol. II, p. 474.

¹⁹ *RIB* 1331; *CIL* VII.507.

²⁰ *Monstrum in femine figura .i. morigain*. Cf. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, Ed., trans. *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*. 2 volumes. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advance Studies, 1901.

²¹ Ed. *Sanas Cormaic: An Old-Irish Glossary*. Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts 4. Halle: Max Niemeyer, Dublin, Hodges, Figgis, and Co., Ltd, 1912.

²² “Gudomain, .i. fennóga no bansigaidhe. ut est glaidhomuin góa, .i. na demuín goacha, na morrigna; no go conach demain iat na bansigaide go connach demain iffrunn iat acht demain aeoir na fendoga. no eamnait anglaedha na sinnaigh, ocus eamnait a ngotha na fendoga” (Angelique Gulermovich Epstein, *War Goddess: The Morrigan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts*, Unpublished Thesis, University of California, 1998, p. 47).

²³ Gervais de Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2004, p.92-93.

²⁴ Gervais de Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2004, p.94-95.

²⁵ Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* [online], available:

<http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/LAMA2>

²⁶ Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX^e au XV^e siècle* [online], available:

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²⁷ Whitley Stokes, Ed. “O'Mulconry's Glossary.” *Archiv für Celtische Lexikographie*, 1899. 1: 232-323, 473-481

²⁸ For an important study on hagazussa, cf. Claude Lecouteux, *Au-delà du merveilleux: Essai sur les mentalités du Moyen Age*, Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris- Sorbonne, 1998, p. 69-85.

²⁹ Nikolaos Politis, *Traditions*, Athens, Grammata, 1994, Vol. I, p.368.

³⁰ Carol K. Mack and Dinah Mack, *A Field Guide to Demons*, New York, Owl Books, 1998, p. 45-46.

³¹ Thomas Moore, *Irish Melodies*, New York, Bixby & Co., 1843, p. 73.

³² Nikolaos Politis, *Traditions*, Athens, Grammata, 1994, Vol. I, p. 368.

³³ *De universo* II, 3, 24, Paris, 1674, t. 2, p. 1066 sqq.

³⁴ Nikolaos Politis, *Traditions*, Athens, Grammata, 1994, Vol. I, p. 367.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.368-369.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 366.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p.366-367.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 406.