

The hero cult

A spectacle of world history
that changed civilization

by Harald Haarmann and LaBGC



Harrassowitz

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The hero cult is at the very core of western civilization. Does this characteristic feature originate in the milieu of Greek civilization of antiquity, with an early manifestation in Homer's epic *Iliad*? No. In fact, it dates back at least 7000 years, and the beginnings are associated with the warrior caste of the Proto-Indo-European pastoralists in the Eurasian steppe who started to migrate into the vast region of Old Europe. With them the cult of heroes entered and changed civilization.

With their patriarchal structure and clear hierarchy the Indo-Europeans from the Eurasian steppe took advantage of their warrior caste and won the fusion process with the ancient Europeans. First slowly over generations then rapidly life in Old Europe changed from a peaceful egalitarian system to a patriarchal class system with the important class of warriors. What the newcomers maintained from the Old European order were the goddesses. The veneration of goddesses continued to be a vital part of life and additionally, goddesses were now seen as patrons to the warriors accompanying and protecting them on their way to become heroes. One of these pre-Greek goddesses stands out among all the other daughters of the Goddess of Old Europe, and this is Athena. The interaction of this pre-Greek goddess with the Indo-European heroes will be highlighted in particular.

The contrast between the earliest advanced culture in human history and the ideology of the cult of heroes may stimulate the discussion about our present and it may inspire visions for our future.

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