

# Dragons in Slavic and Romanian Cultures

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## Abstract

*Due to its geographical position, the Romanian ethnic territory is at the confluence of various languages, cultures and civilizations and the Romanian culture shares many features with the Slavic cultures because of the linguistic and cultural contact and the similar historical conditions under which they flourished.*

*The issue of Slavic influence on Romanian culture has appealed to many researchers that have sought to explain the mystery of how a Romance culture survived in a territory surrounded by Slavs. Similar customs and folk representations circulated in both directions – from common Romanian to the Slavic languages and cultures and vice versa.*

*Some motifs concerning the demons should demonstrate a broad area of common or similar representations in both types of cultures.*

*This work will thus offer a new approach to the study of the Romanian-Slavic and Romanian-Balkan relationship and we hope a synthetic and unified vision of their common elements, and it will try to give some new ideas about an unresolved, debated, and contentious topic.*

**Keywords:** *dragons, Slavic, Romanian, similarities, mythology, common cultural inheritance.*

## Cultural Context and Goals

### ROMANIAN CULTURE IN BALKAN CONTEXT

Romania's geographical position nowadays, as an "oasis of Latinity in a sea of Slavs"<sup>1</sup> favoured different influences along history on the Romanian culture in all its components (mentalities, customs, habits, linguistics), so that today it can present a different kind of Latinity (*l'altra latinità*),<sup>2</sup> having the appearance of an immense "leopard skin", a palimpsest whose layers are slowly discovered by researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Tapon, *The Hidden Europe* (2011), 485, <http://francistapon.com/Books/The-Hidden-Europe/>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandru Niculescu, *L'altra latinità. Storia linguistica del rumeno tra Oriente e Occidente* (Bologna: La Musa critica, Editori Fiorini, collava diretta da Anna Maria Babbi, 2007), 34.

It is a common knowledge that the traditional Romanian culture particularly has preserved, due to using the Slavonic language as a religious language, a multitude of Slavic elements and that a considerable number researchers have outlined the Slavic influence as “the strongest of the old influences on the Romanian language”.<sup>3</sup>

#### GOALS

The cultural and antropological dimensions of this influence were somewhat neglected, as the extent to which the identity profile of the Romanians was influenced on one side by using the Slavonic language as a religious language longer than the Latin (which turned the Romanian into a Romance language), and on the other side by becoming neighbour to several countries where Slavic languages are spoken, by the circulation of a common framework of beliefs, legends, stories, motives, characters and mythological representations or the usage of similar or identical terms in cultures belonging to different families (Romance and Slavic).

This paper aims at researching a somewhat limited field, namely the one of common mythological characters for the Slavic and Romanian cultures, looking into similarities and identical elements, changes in significance and name, specific connotations for the cultural spaces of contemporary Romania and its surroundings. Special attention was given to the linguistic components of mythology and to the importance of the language as a tool for expressing the culture, civilization, as a bearer of ethnicity, as well as the ethnographic dimension of mythology in its diverse representations.

#### *MYTHological characters, their names and representations in romanian and slavic cultures*

#### ZMEU (DRAGON) FROM THE ZOOMORPHIC TO HUMAIN REPRESENTATIONS OR HOW A DRAGON CAN BECOME A HUMAIN BEING

The first characters which is worth looking into, especially due to the openness which creates the scientific wise is the Dragon. This motive circulates both in the entire Slavic area, and in the Romanian culture, but its meanings,

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<sup>3</sup> Fr. Miklosich, *Die slavischen Elemente in Rumunischen* (Vienna, 1861); Ioan Bogdan, *Însemnătatea studiilor slave pentru români* (The Importance of Slavic Studies for Romanian) (Bucharest: Socec, 1894); G. Mihăilă, *Împrumuturi vechi sud-slave în limba română* (Old South Slavic Borrows in Romanian Language) (Bucharest: Academiei Publishing House, 1960); Thodor Hristea, *Sinteze de limba română* (Synthesis of Romanian Language) (Bucharest: Albatros, 1982); Petru Caraman, *Studii de etnografie și folclor* (Ethnographic and Folklore Studies) (Iași: Junimea, 1997).

functions and representations are different. Ethymologically, the term used to occur starting with the old Slavic people, having the significance of dragon or snake. In the Bulgarian culture the dragon (Bg. *zmej*) is a winged being, with human or snake body, which spits fire or sometimes flies. Also, in the popular beliefs of the Bulgarians, these dragons (Bg. *zmejove*) are supernatural beings, which stand out by an extraordinary physical force. In the same space of popular legends the dragon is one-eyed, generally not badly intended with human beings, but rather a protector of a treasure or a flying being, which often falls in love with earthly females, and whose love is destroying as a curse. Paradoxically, in the Bulgarian popular legends, the dragon is married, has children, and a wife, a similar creature (bg. *zmejca*), represented as an extraordinarily beautiful woman.

In the Macedonian culture, the dragon (Mac. *zmej, zmaj*) appears in the popular stories, but its representations are limited to a supernatural creature or an evil human being. For the Slovenes, Serbians or Croatians, the dragon is a fantasy character represented as a snake or dragon, to the Eastern Slavs it appears as a symbol of wisdom, in the Northern Slavic area the meaning *zmij*(snake) is a classical demon, protective of the household, grains, crops. Unlike the Southern area where the character is anthropomorphous, for the Eastern and Northern Slavs the dragon is deemed as obsolete, rather as a home protecting snake and an agrarian demon.

In the Romanian culture, the definitions of the dragon [*zmeu*] are very close to the Bulgarian ones, excepting its marital status. According to the Romanian dictionaries, the dragon [*zmeu*] is the fantasy character from stories, having a human face, a hairy body and a scaled tail, but the anthropomorphous representation is better outlined than the zoomorphous one (rom. *Zgriptor*-griffin or griffon), while the anatomic details of the dragon or devil ancestor (hair, tail, scales) are nearly absent. As a fantasy character, the dragon is the impersonation of evil and the main opponent of the positive character (rom. *Făt-Frumos*, Prince Charming, Handsome Lad). The anthropomorphous dimension of the Romanian dragon is marked by its mundane activities (George Călinescu noticed the habits of a hunting passionate medieval knight) and its love relations with earthly females.

The Romanian dragon has very few of the typical dragon or snake, telling itself apart through its generalized anthropomorphous character and its different attitude towards people: some dragons help humans, while others are solely represented as malefic characters. In spells and curses in particular the dragon appears as an evil creature, sometimes together with its female counterpart ( the she-dragon), not necessarily his wife.

Very strongly and originally represented in the Romanian popular culture, tending to become one of the fundamental myths in the Romanian culture is the sense of Flying being, imaginary character which appears in the dreams of young girls, when they are prone to falling in love, causing them contradictory states of mind.

The depiction of this youngster whose contours are still obvious in the popular literature will have been outlined in the cult model: Ion Heliade Rădulescu – *Zburătorul*,<sup>4</sup> Mihai Eminescu – *Luceafărul*.<sup>5</sup> In this sense the dragon is powerfully humanized and till its playful representations there is only one step.<sup>6</sup>

#### COMMON ROMANIAN AND SLAVIC UNDEAD SUPERNATURAL CREATURES

Undead supernatural creatures (rom. *moroi*) were “human beings”, men or women who come to the world wearing a hood or a cap, with a long spine-shaped tail, covered by hair. During the day they seem to be normal people, but during the night, their souls wander to meet others of their own kind at crossroads, while their body remains deep in sleep.

These creatures have a correspondent, the females-creatures which are very evil, killing children and sucking their blood. When one of these creatures dies its heart must be pierced with a stake, so that its soul be not able to leave the grave. It is also thought they have the ability to turn into animals, such as dogs or wolves. Generally, the ones who can turn into these creatures are children born with a skin on their head, which they afterwards swallow, children resulted from incest. The ghosts get out of the grave six weeks after their death, wander the earth during the night and return in their graves when the morning comes.

The meeting place is a symbolic one in the Romanian culture, namely the border or the crossroad and their game represents a flight in the sky, just like a dance over the church towers, at the night of Saint Andrew. The belief in the ghosts' existence is old in the Romanian culture, being noted in one of Matei Basarab's writings (14-th century).

Every belief related to undead supernatural creatures from the Romanian culture is borrowed from the Slavs, especially from the Serbians. These creatures have as a correspondent the vampire or the mora. The sense of the word with a ethimon in old Slavic language was of plague or epidemic, in several Slavic languages is that of an evil spirit, of a semidemonic creature, with a hard to tell

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<sup>4</sup> Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, *Poezii. Proză* (Poems. Prose) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Mihai Eminescu, *Luceafărul. Poezie. Proză* (The Evening Star. Poetry. Prose) (Bucharest: Ion Creangă, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Cărtărescu, *Enciclopedia zmeilor* (Encyclopedia of Dragons) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2010).

appearance, which comes during the night, sits on the human's chests trying to suffocate them; braids the horses' tails and manes; steals or changes children from cradles, or night butterflies who leave their bodies and wander around the world under various appearances.

*werewolves and fairies*

WEREWOLVES

Similar to other undead supernatural creatures and having as a natural enemy the vampires, are the werewolves, fantastic animals with a wolf face, which according to the popular beliefs, come from dead unbaptized children and eat the moon and the sun. The word, present in almost all the Slavic languages and in Romanian (*vârcolac*) seems to be a combination between the word *volk* –*wolf* and *dlaka* – hair colour, fur- suggesting the transformation into a wolf.<sup>7</sup>

A general characteristic of the beliefs regarding werewolves in the entire Slavic area and in the Romanian mythology is that the werewolf is guilty for the sun and moon eclipses.

For the South Slavs, the werewolf is synonymous to the vampire and it is interesting to notice that it is represented like the soul of an evil human being leaving his grave in order to take revenge on the ones alive, to kill or torture them.

It has mixed features, both anthropomorphous and zoomorphous, but still mainly zoomorphous. Among its characteristics, the ones in the Bulgarian folklore are different, presenting it as having the appearance of a cyclope which has an eye as big as an egg on its forehead. Also, in the Bulgarian culture, werewolves can also be female, meaning that every kind of woman can become a werewolf.

For the Romanians, the werewolf has the essential characteristics we encounter at the Slavs, the supposed genesis from a dead, unbaptized child and the responsibility for the moon and sun eclipses, but it does not have the features of a vampire. In the Romanian popular beliefs, the werewolves are thought to transform themselves if a woman stirring a polenta hits the stove with her paddle. Another myth is that if women spin wool at night without candle light, the wool threads will help the werewolves climb to the moon.

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<sup>7</sup> Anca Ionescu-Irimia, *Lingvistică și mitologie-contribuții la studiul terminologiei credințelor populare ale slavilor* (Linguistics and Mythology - Contributions to the Study of Slavic Folk Beliefs Terminology) (Bucharest: Litera, 1978), 125; Mihăilă, *Împrumuturi vechi sud-slave*, 39.

FAIRIES (ROM. ROM. ZÂNELE, IELELE)

The fairies appear as characters in nearly all the cultures in Europe, but the Romanian representations have been influenced by the Slavic beliefs. In a folkloric representation they appear as spirits, young girls which come in groups of 3,5,7,9, or 12, outstandingly beautiful and dressed in white, wearing scales on their chests and bells to their feet, with their hair unbraided and flowered, with magical powers, flying in the sky over the trees and singing, playing the flute, the bagpipe or the violin, feeding themselves by flowers.<sup>8</sup>

They can appear under different names in the Romanian folklore, such as: Mândrele (the proud ones), Frumoasele (the beautiful ones), Zânele (the fairies), Sfintele (the saints), Milostivele (the merciful ones), Vrednicele (the worthy ones), Cinstitele (the honest ones), Împărăteşele (the emperesses), Vântoasele (the windy ones), Maestrele (the masters), Fetele Câmpului (the daughters of the field).

The Romanian fairies are “twin sisters” of Serbian *vila* and *samovila*. The term comes from the old Russian and the belief in *vila* and *samovila* was common especially in Bulgaria, being imagined as an aquatic or sylvestre divinity, a female demon soul resulted from the souls of murdered unburied girls, passionate about dance. Where they dance the grass stops growing. The places where they meet to dance are especially near springs, at crossroads, in meadows, where they attract young men just like mermaids. If someone passes the place where they dance, they shall become ugly; if one lays in their hearth, their body shall be full of sores; if one hears their songs, they shall become deaf; if one answers their calls, they shall become mute. When they want to punish someone, the fairies carress them and sing to them, lure them with pleasant dreams, dance with them and spin them thrice, and then start cursing, tying their tongue, making them lose their minds.

This name is associated to some areas in Bulgaria and to the powerful wind, the storm, strengthening the belief that fairies’ dance can cause vortices.

The fairies or vilas have different representations for the Slav peoples (beneficial demon for the Serbians, some sort of nymph for the Slovene). Especially in Western Romania, the term *vila* was adopted, being considered as a female wind divinity similar to the fairies or windies, being used in imprecations addressed to children.

PENTECOSTS

The Pentecosts are other supernatural creatures which are thought to bring disease in people’s souls. As a function, in many regions of Romania they are

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<sup>8</sup> Mihăilă, *Împrumuturi vechi sud-slave*, 183; Ionescu-Irimia, *Lingvistică și mitologie*, 39.

identified as fairies, the only difference being that they are pictured as ugly old ladies who wander around the Pentecost, only on Wednesday, 24 days before Pentecost. Just like the fairies, they fly in the sky, singing and dancing around springs and fountains, around crosses, at crossroads or in meadows, but only in the days marked as their own. In these days, no one has to work, because these creatures are vindictive, they can cripple, take someone's eyes out or drive crazy those who fail to respect this interdiction. As a punishment they can also lift someone up in the air and drop them down to break their bones. They always come in groups of three.

As regards their origin, these girls are said to be originated in Alexandru Macedon's time, they might even be the daughters of Emperor of Ruslim, the enemy of the Christians.<sup>9</sup> The name of Pentecost holiday, which was also given to these supernatural creatures which take on evil activities around this holiday, is borrowed from the Slavs (v.sl. *rusalija*, scr. *rusalja*, bg. *rusalija*, slov. ceh. rus. *rusalka.*), but it has an correspondent in Latin [ Rosalia ]

The circulation of the imaginative representation means for the Pentecosts is not certain. For the Bulgarians the habits performed in the Pentecost week are identical to the Romanian ones, but dancing is considered as a way to cure certain diseases, dances such as *călușari* (horsemen) or *floricica* (little flower) having a magic-ritual's functions in the Southern part of the country and it was artistically represented in literature.<sup>10</sup>

#### OTHER CHARACTERS

Another evil spirit is *samca*, also called *Avesta* or devil's wing. This is the representation of a cruel being, maybe the worst of all bad spirits, which shows itself to pregnant girls, whom it tortures and scares, before they give birth, leaving them distorted. If they don't die, them, together with the born children, get a disease called *samca*, which manifests itself with shivers, nightmares and continuous weakness. *Samca*'s representations are very diverse. She shows herself to pregnant women and babies during the day or by night, taking the form of a cat, dog, pig, hen, crow, frog or fly. As a protection against this demon the new mom or the babies must wear some amulets around their necks, write the name of the *Samca* on the house walls or use spells. The origin of the name is Bulgarian

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<sup>9</sup> Antoneta Olteanu, *Dicționar de mitologie. Demoni, duhuri, spirite* (Dictionary of Mythology. Demons, Specters, Spirits) (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2010), 261; Ionescu-Irimia, *Lingvistică și mitologie*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Marin Preda, *Moromeții, I-II* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1992), 214-217.

(*senka*) and this character can be seen by wizards born on Saturdays who are also able to kill her.

The second name, *Avesta*, also existed in the Old Slavonic language and it is still preserved in the Serbian and Bulgarian languages (*veštica* - witch).

### *Conclusions*

The Romanian culture shares with Slavic cultures a lot of features and those could be noticed at linguistic and cultural levels. We suppose that Slavic cultures left deep traces in the cultural identity of Romanian people and there are many issues to be discovered.

In Romanian and some Balkan cultures we can find evidences of common representation of dragons and their symbolism should not be analysed in isolation, but in connection with other cultures, which in different times and from various sources became parts of European and of Balkan traditions.

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