

Romanian Meteor Mythology

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METEORIDS

*Out in the void
They wait for
A bright love touch
With the atmosphere...*

METEORS

*Spherical fires
In cosmic baseball!*

METEORITES

*Aerolites - flying sculptures -
Siderolites - acrobatic ores -
Tektites - material meditations...*

MY MIND HIDES A FRIENDLY CRATER!

Andrei Dorian Gheorghe

1 Introduction

The mathematician Ion Ottescu (1859-1932) crowned his own life's work ninety years ago this year, by publishing in the Romanian Academy Annals the unique book "The Romanian Peasants' Beliefs in Stars and Sky" (Ottescu, 1907; Ottescu, 1997, in preparation). This opus, for which he collected information from the whole of Romania, is divided into eight principal chapters: The Constellations (including the Milky Way), The Earth, The Sky (including the stars, and "shooting stars"), The Sun, The Moon, Eclipses, Comets and Atmospheric Phenomena. However, it contains some interesting references to world mythology too, and gives details on the myth-variants found in the Romanian popular mind. It is the Romanian aspects, which comprise the bulk of his work, that make this text so important, as thanks to the Romanian people (and before them their Dacian forebears) having defended their homeland so successfully down the millenia, the myths thus preserved appear to have remained virtually unaltered, or have undergone only minor changes, since their formation. The Dacians were the descendants of the first people to live in modern Romania's territory, prior to the Roman conquest by Trajan in the early 2nd century CE. Many of these myths can consequently be approximately dated to the 1st-2nd centuries CE, but some parts are undoubtedly much older than this.

Also in 1907, Victor Anestin (1875-1918), the most important early Romanian astronomical popularizer and meteor observing pioneer, founded *Orion*, the first Romanian astronomical magazine. This magazine was revived in 1990, and was instrumental in assisting the renaissance in Romanian amateur astronomy that has occurred since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989. We have prepared a separate paper on the contribution to Romanian meteor work of this magazine for *WGN* (Gheorghe and McBeath, 1998, in press).

As part of the celebrations of these two anniversaries this year, we here present some details of Ottescu's meteor myths, supplemented by our own continuing researches into this field. So far, we have identified six chief meteor themes in Romanian mythology, discussed individually in the following sections. The first two are taken from Ottescu's work, the third comes from Victor Anestin, the fourth was first developed by the young mythologist Dan Mitrut, while the last two items have resulted from the combined efforts of the authors' on-going investigations.

2 Meteors as falling stars

For the Romanian peasants (as also with some other peoples across the world), the saints and angels living in the heavens set alight candles, which are seen as stars. These candles represent individual lives on Earth. Each person has their own star-candle, which is lit at their birth, and when they die, their star falls, and is extinguished.

Support for this is found even in the Romanian national myth-ballad *Miorița* ("The Little Ewe"; cf. (Alecsandri, 1866)), which derives from the ancient Dacian ritual of periodically sacrificing the best young man as a good herald for the supreme god Zamolxe. *Miorița* concerns three shepherds, one each from the three major historical Romanian provinces, which were states in the Middle Ages: Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldavia. The shepherds from the first two provinces decide to sacrifice the Moldavian, because he is the best of them, and the richest. The magical little ewe of the myth's title warns the Moldavian shepherd of his fellows' intention. Nobly, he accepts his fate (this makes sense, as the participant in the Dacian ritual would have been considered especially favoured, his death honoring his god), but asks the little ewe to tell his animals: "I married a proud princess,/ The world's bride,/ And a star fell/ At my wedding party,/ The Sun and Moon carried my coronet/ .../ And the stars were my torches..." In essence, this myth compares death with a cosmic wedding.

If a star is very great and bright, it belongs to an emperor, but if it is small and faint, it belongs to a simple man. In another fundamental Romanian myth-ballad, "Zburătorul - The Flying Being" (cf. (Radulescu, 1872)), we find this belief expressed thus in describing a meteor's flight across the sky: "Is it a star that falls? Is it an emperor who dies?"

3 Meteors as dragons

The Romanian dragon is called a *balaur* (which Dan Mitrut's researches indicate can be translated as meaning *golden serpent* - see (McBeath and Gheorghe, 1997, in press), or *zmeu*, when it appears in its more human form. As demonstrated in, for instance, (McBeath, 1997), dragons have a long association with meteors, and we find evidence for the widespread nature of this belief in Romania too. Here, we present five variants on this theme, the first three taken from the work of Ion Ottescu (Ottescu, 1907), the fourth from Ottescu as modified by Mitrut, and the fifth with contributions from the authors.

3.1 Dragons as enemies of men

The flying balauri may attack a man alone in the night, killing him or disfiguring him. Clearly, being struck by a meteorite would not be pleasant for anyone, although in modern times, only property has been recorded as being damaged by meteorite falls, and one dog reported as being killed by the fall of the Nakhla meteorite in Egypt in 1911 (cf. (McSween Jr., 1987, p.16)). This may be similar to the idea of deities flinging thunderbolts (which may be either lightning strikes or meteorite falls) at humans, which in turn may be a relic memory of actual impact damage to humans.

3.2 Dragons as celestial fighters of one another

Zmei in particular are commented upon as aerial battlers, butting at each other with their heads, until their blood flows. This blood then falls to the Earth, becoming coagulated and blackened along the way, and is burnt as a charm by the peasants to drive away children's fears.

Numerous substances of various consistencies and appearances have long been suggested as falling from the heavens, but few have these blood-like and coagulated aspects to them. The obvious substance to explain this zmeu-blood is perhaps coal, although this is not very satisfactory, and it is more likely, as Ottescu himself suggests (Ottescu, 1907, Chapter 3), that this is actually the mineral wax, a type of paraffin, from Moldavia called ozokerite. There remains the possibility that a heavy fall of meteoric dust, perhaps in association with a meteorite fall, might be responsible for this association, however.

It is tempting to think of the tektites here too, thought to be solidified meteoritic glass droplets following a major impact, some of which do resemble coagulated blood. The main European tektites are the moldavites, but confusingly, they are named from the Moldau River valley in the Czech Republic, not Moldavia in Romania. The moldavites are often of a gem-quality, with a beautiful translucent green colour to them, appropriate only if zmeu-blood is green, and if so, perhaps tales or specimens of these stones reaching Romania might have sparked the legends we find here.

3.3 Dragons as erotic wizards

Here, the balauri enter houses by way of chimneys overnight, to disturb the sleep of maidens. Two main myths illustrate this aspect. The first is the same ballad mentioned above, "Zburătorul", in which a girl from a Wallachian village is visited in the night by a zmeu in the fashion described. He appears to her in her dreams, which become very erotic, as a handsome young man, and torments her thus, to the horror of the local old women.

In the second myth, which is called "The Dragon-Man" (Plopsor, 1921), a balaur able to transform himself into a man, enters a house and abducts a young maiden using the chimney route as before, but he is finally tracked down and defeated by the brave hero Novac, who rescues the maiden.

Night terrors and erotic dreams have long been put down to supernatural interference in human affairs, and events in the night sky, such as moonlight shining on a sleeping person,

or being exposed to the light of "shooting stars", are just two of the ways in which this link can be accomplished in myth and legend. The fact that meteors can be said to sneak silently over houses during the hours of darkness, will clearly add a further element to the mystery here. There is another connection with meteors and young lovers, as we will see in the next section.

3.4 Dragons as instruments of love

Sometimes, these draconic "travelling stars" (another alternative name for meteors in Romania) can be bewitched by a magician's words into changing their direction while in flight. This direction change indicates to a young girl who is watching the place of her future lover. The fireball-balaur can become an instrument of seduction too, as anyone who is hit by the dragon's tail becomes the prisoner of an unknown love (Mitrut, 1997).

Quite how such events can be reconciled with actual meteor activity remains unknown. Occasional meteors have been reported as following non-rectilinear paths, and such paths are theoretically possible, but the direction change would be quite slight for most meteors (Beech, 1989). A sudden change of direction is also possible if a severe fragmentation event occurs during a meteor's flight, but this is exceptionally rare, and again the alteration in flight direction might not be large enough to be noticeable. It is probably more likely that this aspect of Romanian meteor myth recalls, in a variant form, the ancient omen lore associated with various signs in the heavens, among which were featured meteors. The earliest such details are found in Mesopotamian clay tablets dating to at least c.1900 BCE (Bjorkman, 1973).

3.5 Dragons fighting heroes

Aerial combats are popular in most mythologies. Deities, major monsters and great heroes are often credited with powers of flight, either intrinsic or (especially in the case of heroes) borrowed from elsewhere for the event. Heroes fighting dragons or other monsters are commoner still in myths, but one main Romanian tale combines both, "Praslea the Brave and the Golden Apples" (Ispirescu, 1882). In this myth the hero Praslea and a zmeu fight in the sky all day until nightfall. At one stage, they transform themselves into fire-wheels, and strike at each other thus. Eventually, the zmeu throws Praslea into the Earth up to his chest, but Praslea casts the zmeu into the Earth up to its neck, and then beheads it.

The two fire-wheels in the sky may plausibly be the Sun, as Praslea, in common with many dragon-fighting heroes, such as the Greek Heracles, is a solar hero; and a brilliant meteor which was brighter than the Sun briefly, or at the very least was clearly visible in daylight. The climax of the battle would be the Sun's "throwing" the zmeu-fireball to the Earth as a meteorite. The nightfall after the defeat of the zmeu may have been due to a cloud of dust left by the bolide's passage through the atmosphere, rather than the actual sunset too.

4 Meteors as divine heralds

Old Romanian beliefs say that sometimes the sky is opened for all the good people to receive wonderful divine messages from God. Victor Anestin (Anestin, 1913) describes these times as follows: "At the beginning of January and the end of November, very great, luminous fireballs have been seen from our country, which obviously gave birth to the superstition of the 'sky's opening', since the dates for such events coincide with the Boboteaza holiday - January 6 - and St. Andrei's Night - November 30." As Romania adopted the Gregorian Calendar only in 1924, these dates refer to the old-style calendar, thus the dates by the modern calendar would be around December 24 and November 15. The latter date ties in well with the Leonids, while the former might refer to the Geminids, or more likely the Ursids. Of course, since the dates need not be exactly coincidental, the possibility that other showers, such as the Taurids, Andromedids and Quadrantids could also be involved, cannot be ignored. It should be noted too that both dates have a long association with the old fire festivals, however. These festivals marked various notable times during the year, including the solstices and equinoxes, which could well preclude any form of meteoric input into their importance. Any meteoric link with the showers noted is likely to be quite recent, probably 18th or 19th century in origin.

5 Meteors as angels

This idea devolves to one of the Romanian glow-worm myths (Bogdan, 1902): "One day, God came down to Earth with a group of angels. One of them fell in love with a shepherd girl, who had blonde hair and blue eyes, and who guarded her flock on a bright green field. When they returned to the sky, God transformed the angels into stars, since he was concerned they would tell what they had seen on Earth to the other angels. The shepherdess' lover requested that God should cast him back to Earth instead, so he could be near his love. God did so, and a trail of sparks fell from him as he descended once more to Earth, from which sparks the glow-worms were born."

The Christian dressing to this myth cannot disguise entirely its greater antiquity. Biblical angels do not fall in love with shepherdesses, for one thing. The group of stars the angels were transformed into is likely to be a constellation, and the re-descending angel's image is a clear representation of a fireball leaving a fragmenting wake behind it (Mitrut, 1997).

6 Meteors as imps

Another variant glow-worm creation myth (Bogdan, 1903) has God and the Devil deciding to separate their subjects as angels and imps respectively. However, one cunning imp tried to smuggle himself into Heaven in the midst of God's army, but Saint Peter recognized him, and threw him back to the Earth. From the place where he fell, the first glow-worms appeared.

Again, the streak of light produced by a meteor's descent, creating sparks that resembled glow-worms to the people who saw it, resulted in the construction of the myth to account for the facts. As we see, there is cause and effect here, but the links we would normally expect when we study cause and effect today are absent.

7 Meteors as the staff of God

One final, similar, glow-worm myth, also from (Bogdan, 1903), confirms the fact that for the Romanian people, glow-worms were indeed the terrestrial projections of meteors. Thousands of years ago, God was offended by an ugly, giant race, each having only one eye (which appears to be a reminiscence of the legendary Greek cyclops' race), and decided to punish them. He hurled down his staff of gold and diamonds towards this people so hard that it became fiery and threw off sparks, and when it struck, it transformed the entire race into glow-worms.

As we find also with other mythologies across the world, this legend underlines the fact that fireballs are frequently confused with other, lower atmosphere phenomena, like thunder and lightning. It is this image which is most readily conjured up by a deity dispensing justice by a bolt from Heaven.

8 Conclusion

There are still aspects of meteor myths we have not touched upon yet, even from Romania and Great Britain, but we would welcome correspondence from interested parties elsewhere willing to share the meteor myths of their own lands with us and a wider audience.

Notes

We dedicate this work to the memory of Ion Ottescu. All the English language translations from Romanian texts used here were specially prepared by the authors.

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Felix Bettonvil - one of the organizers - just after the IMC'97.