

Meteor Beliefs Project: Birth and death superstitions associated with meteors in Romanian and British folklore

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Notes from Romanian and British sources on folk-beliefs are given, linking the appearance of meteors with birth or death.

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1 Introduction

Some short notes and details concerning the link between meteors, and birth and death superstitions, as extracted from references on Romanian and British folklore, are given below. These date back to the 19th century in parts, but must be simply the more recent recorded survivals of longer oral traditions.

2 Romanian beliefs

The meteoric material used here was a small part of the astronomical and atmospheric folklore collected by Ion Ottescu, during a twelve-year programme of research and investigation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was first published by him in 1907. The details he recorded about the peasant beliefs from Romania (excluding the area of Transylvania, which became part of Romania only after the Great War ended in 1918) are both extensive, and largely unparalleled from most other European countries. The following texts and discussion use references to the unpublished English translation ADG and AM prepared in 1998 (Gheorghe & McBeath, 1998b).

In the Romanian peasants' belief, the stars were candles:

...and every man has his own star in the sky. Each man's heavenly candle is set alight at his birth. If that man is an emperor, then his star is great and brilliant, a luceafăr. If the man is a simple one, his star is small and faint. When the man dies, his star falls from the sky, and his candle is extinguished. (Op. cit., Chapter 3, p. 36)

Fireballs in the Romanian conception were often known as fiery, draconic creatures, the flying *balaurii*, or *zmeii* in their human and semi-human shapes. Though not always antipathetic as *zmeii*, in their evil form, they stalked the night, waiting to pounce as meteors on anyone spotted alone outdoors, to disfigure or kill that person. When doing so, they were also called 'lost' or 'travelling' stars, of ill-omen (loc. cit.; see also (Gheorghe & McBeath, 1998a) for more details on the Romanian meteor-dragons).

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3 British traditions

Most of these notes were extracted from the standard text 'A Dictionary of Superstitions' (Opie & Tatem, 1989), page 376, except where stated. The cited sources are as given in that work.

Recorded beliefs in meteors as portents of birth were first dated by Opie & Tatem to 1824, with this comment from Volume II of L. Hawkins' 'Anecdotes', p. 74:

There's a child born when a star shoots: it is supposed to fall over the spot.

Further details were found in Volume VI of the 5th series of 'Notes & Queries' from 1876, p. 506:

In Yorkshire, when folks see shooting stars, they say, 'They are babies' souls coming down from heaven'.

Similar mentions were given from 1923 and 1955, although a variant from Dorset, England in the 1950s suggested the sex of the child was also determined this way:

Children were told that a baby boy was born every time a shooting star fell. (Roud, 2003, p. 407)

On the other side of the coin, beliefs in meteors foretelling death were rather more detailed and extensive. The earliest personal comment from Opie & Tatem, repeated by Roud, was sourced to Addison in the 'Spectator' magazine for March 8, 1711, and though not specifically referring to a death, we wanted to include it for its unintended truism for all meteors watchers:

I have known the shooting of a star spoil a night's rest.

The next comments came from a letter by novelist Elizabeth Gaskell in 1836 (from p. 31 of a compilation of her letters edited by Chapple & Pollard):

A shooting star is unlucky to see. I have a chill in my heart when I see one, as I have often noted them when watching over a sick-bed.

Then in 'Notes & Queries' for 1866 (3rd series, Volume X, p. 25) is the first specific death-portent, where a woman from Huntingdonshire in England described the events leading up to the death of her baby, following a short illness.

I had a warning that it was to go. The night before it was took I was passing your gate, Sir, and a great star fell down from the sky plump before me. It did not go into the ground, but burst about a foot above the road. As soon as I got home I told mother about it, and said it was a warning for someone. She said, 'Perhaps it's for grandfather'. I said, 'May be, mother; but I fear it's for someone nigher'. The next day my poor babe was took. (Roud, loc. cit.; Opie & Tatem, loc. cit., give just the first two sentences.)

Other references of every shooting star predicting a

death were given for 1883, 1907 and 1953. That for 1907 from Nottinghamshire, England, is worth expansion here:

I remember that on one occasion, when a shooting star burst with a report, it was said by one present, 'Ah! we shall hear of some big man's death.'

This is unusual, as it referred to the death-portending meteor making an audible noise, something not found elsewhere.

4 Conclusion

Births and deaths generally are as plentiful as visible meteors, judging by the statistics for both, so such a link is not unreasonable in folklore. The greatest wonder is that the Huntingdonshire woman of 1866 was not the one killed, if the meteor really 'burst about a foot [30cm] above the road' in front of her. An interesting re-use of the familiar 'fireball that landed in the next field' folklore motif, certainly.

References

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