

ORNITHOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS IN THE ROMANIAN MYTHOLOGY AND ETHOS

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ABSTRACT. Invoked and venerated, expelled and persecuted, the birds are omnipresent in the Romanian mythology, in the ritual practices and rural traditional calendar, too; the birds are subjects of fairy tales and legends, but also of many beliefs and superstitions. We try to analyse the symbolism of birds' presence in the Romanian ethos and mythology, but also, to identify the biological component of this presence in the folklore creation, beliefs and ritual practices in the Romanian space. Reading the myths and legends with an ornithologist' eye and mind, but also, through the analyses of the Romanian beliefs and ritual practices where the birds appear as key-characters, we notice the obvious observation spirit of the Romanian peasant bound to his land and old agro-pastoral practices. The legends and some beliefs surprise us through the accuracy of the detailed observation on the birds' behaviour or biology.

Key words: birds, mythology, ethos, symbolism, biological view.

REZUMAT. Repere ornitologice în mitologia și ethos-ul românesc. Invocate și venerate, alungate și persecutate, păsările sunt omniprezente în mitologia, practicile rituale și calendarul tradițional românesc. Totodată, constituie subiect de basm și legendă, fac obiectul a numeroase credințe sau superstiții. Încercăm să analizăm simbolistica prezenței păsărilor în mitologia și ethos-ul românesc, dar și reflectarea elementelor de biologie a păsărilor în creația folclorică, credințele și practicile rituale din spațiul românesc. Citind cu ochii și mintea unui ornitolog miturile și legendele, dar și analizând sfera credințelor, superstițiilor și practicilor rituale românești în care diverse specii de păsări apar ca personaje-cheie, este evident spiritul de observație ce îl caracterizează pe țăranul român legat de glia sa și practicile agro-pastorale străvechi. Legendele și unele superstiții ne surprind prin acuratețea detaliului ce reflectă observarea biologiei și comportamentului unor specii de păsări.

Cuvinte cheie: păsări, mitologie, ethos, simbolism, observație biologică.

INTRODUCTION

Invoked and venerated, expelled and persecuted, the birds are omnipresent in the Romanian mythology, in the ritual practices and rural traditional calendar, too; the birds are subject of fairy tales and legends, but also of many beliefs and superstitions. The birds are endowed with supernatural abilities, including the

power to transform themselves into other beings, including human ones, are messengers between the visible and less perceptible world, between the living and the dead.

We try to analyse the symbolism of birds' presence in the Romanian ethos and mythology, but also, to identify the biological component of this presence in the folklore creation, beliefs and ritual practices in the Romanian space.

Even if today much of these traditions and beliefs are lost gradually, the folklore collectors offer a vast documentary material allowing us to see that, in the rural area, life was in perfect harmony with the biological annual cycle of wildlife surrounding the human community, the birds being key-elements in the traditional calendars. Reading the myths and legends with an ornithologist's eye and mind, but also, through the analyses of the Romanian beliefs and ritual practices where the birds appear like key-characters, we notice the obvious observation spirit of the Romanian peasant bound to his land and old agro-pastoral practices. The legends and some beliefs surprise us through the accuracy of the detailed observation on the birds' behaviour or biology.

DISCUSSIONS

There is very little written information about the myths and religion of our Dacians ancestors (from the Thracians people), coming from the Greeks Herodotus and Strabo. So, the historians and the ethnologists can use just these and the archaeological sources in order to analyse this topic of Romanian ethos (Crişan, 1993).

The discovered cult vessels show different animal ornamentations, including birds. For example, the Great God, **Master of Heaven, Earth and Water**, appears with one eagle by his side or sitting in a chariot drawn through the air by one or eight swans, while the Great Goddess, **Mother of fertile and nourishing land**, appears with two doves, being messengers between the gods and human beings. This last aspect is very interesting if we are thinking that the Holy Spirit's representation in the Christianity tradition appears frequently as a flying dove, too.

The ritual practices and Herodotus' notices suggest an urano-solar culture, with the belief in immortality as the central pillar. The absence of food offerings – seeds or animals – in the ancient Dacian necropolis shows this belief in immortality, too.

Probably, the ancient Dacians' myths and beliefs have been assimilated into the Romanian Christian mythology. The God has a human appearance because the human being was created in His image and likeness, but He can take a dove appearance as a good-messenger while the Devil appeared as a duck with three pairs of wings in his first meeting with God.

In the Romanian cosmology legends, the God is the World's creator, but the birds appear between the God's principal helping hands. Between them, the raven, *Corvus corax* Linnaeus, 1758 and the dragon, *Milvus* sp., appear like

negative ones. Thus, in Vrancea region, it says that the raven had bright white plumage in the beginnings but was damned by God and his feathers darkened as the God's heart when was waiting for him, in vain, to give help in the World's creation. One legend from Muntenia area tells us that God called the birds to help him by digging the rivers and springs' valleys so the man and other animals can drink water to quench their thirst. The dragon did not want to dirty his white legs and beak giving reasons for its refusal that will find always a drop of dew or rain to quench its thirst. Angry, the God decided that she will drink water just from dew or rain, so, during the hot summer days, the dragons are flying high and crying, begging for rain.

The ability of flight fascinated the humanity, probably, from the beginning. From here was just one step to assign the birds as exceptional travellers that present abilities of messengers between the worlds, God and human beings. In Romanian tradition, as in the beliefs of other Christians, the Holy Spirit appears represented as a flying dove towards the Earth; the dove facilitates the „passage of customs” leading the souls of dead persons to the Heaven or Other World. Some birds fly just one way: the lark, *Alauda arvensis* Linnaeus, 1758, brings to God the human beings' prayers, while the cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus* (Linnaeus, 1758), is the messenger of the alive to the dead persons. The swallow, *Hirundo rustica* (Linnaeus, 1758), brought the news of Son's resurrection to the Holy Virgin.

In the Romanian folklore creation, there are numerous legends that identify human beings at the roots of different bird species, people that have been transformed into birds as a punishment for some errors or sins, but also in order to be saved from great danger or persecution (***, 1994; Marian, 1995d; Coman, 1996; Bîrgu Georgescu, 1997).

One legend from the northern Moldavia tells us that the white stork, *Ciconia ciconia* (Linnaeus, 1758), was a man, named Alexa, whom the God has given to take care about one big wooden box where He closed all the useless animals for the people and the mission to throw it in the sea. Alexa started his travel towards the coast of the sea in the early autumn, on the Day of Holy Cross (September 14) and arrived to the final destination in the spring, on the Day of Saint Alexa (March 17). Driven by his curiosity, the man opened the lid of the box before throwing it into the sea and all the captive creatures rushed out, spreading in all directions. Upset and angry, the God turned Alexa into a stork and condemned him and all his relatives and descendants that, until the Final Judgement Day, to seek and gather the animals escaped from the wooden box.

If we are looking for the biological and ecological point of view, we can notice that, first, the data of beginning and ending the travel of Alexa overlaps with the passage time of the storks in the area – the birds are passing towards Africa in late August – beginning of September, respectively, arrives in the spring for a new breeding season. Second one, the period of Alexa's travel overlaps the hibernation time in our country, when the invertebrates and poikilotherm vertebrates hide in different refuge sites for wintering survive. All these animals represent the feeding resources for storks, herons and their allies.

We met a similar legend in other regions of Moldavia: the God asked one woman to bury a sealed huge bag in which He gathered all the insects. Being curious, the woman opened the bag, unwittingly releasing the insects. The God turned her into a woodpecker, doomed to seek and kill, without ceasing, the insects that hide in the bark of trees.

The skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) is the symbol of steadfast and loyal love. One legend tells that she was a very beautiful and generous princess that fell in love with the Sun. One day, she decided to meet him and started towards the heaven palace where he was living. Along the way, through her good deeds and showing sincerity, she managed to win the support that she needs to reach the palace and the two young people meet, the Sun falling in love with the princess, too. In order to defend his son from the young girl's beauty, but also angry because the love made him forget his daily duties, the mother of the Sun turned the princess into one small bird with simple brown plumage, cursing her not to meet the Sun again. So, since then, the Skylark try to reach the Sun and let him through a very beautiful song being able to recognize her – this bird sings very melodious trills during a flight almost vertical into the sky.

The boreal owl, *Aegolius funereus* (Linnaeus, 1758), is the only owl species that has a melodious song. Related with this song, one Romanian legend tells us that she was an amazing beautiful princess that fell in love with one shepherd while her father, the emperor would like to marry her with one prince, son of one of his allies. Because she refused to fulfil her father's wish, he cursed her to become a bird active only during the night, so that she can not meet her beloved shepherd. The nocturnal prolonged calls „pupupupupu” is similar to the Romanian negation “nu” and can be seen like the princess' refuse, but also like her supplication for mercy addressed to her father.

Although rarely present in the Romanian folk poetry, the nightingale (*Luscinia* sp.) appears in numerous legends that try to explain the unique melodious and complex song, respectively, the dull plumage, in brownish colours. One story is about a beautiful and shy bride that was mocked during her wedding party, so, being ashamed and upset, asked the God to transform her into a bird that nobody can see. From then, solitary and hidden, she tells us her sad story through the nocturnal song. Another legend tells that the nightingale was a young girl that could not eat because was born without anus; she had borrowed it from the tick and then it refused to give it back. So, the tick cursed the beautiful girl to become a bird with dull plumage, which could not sleep for fear of losing the stolen “property”. In other legend, the nightingale was a princess who loved a young that was not a nobleman and the Emperor beheaded him in order to end this inappropriate love. The princess transformed into a bird that, every night, is singing for her lost lover.

Another legend tells that the God decided to give beautiful coloured plumage, so, prepared paint of different colours in many vessels and ask the birds to visit Him. The nightingale arrived when all the colours had been used, but impressed by the shyness and wisdom of this small bird, the God endowed her with a very beautiful voice to compensate the dull plumage.

The Romanian peasant remarked the parasite behaviour of cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) and found in it a good reason to tell a legend. The cuckoo female cheated her mate with one male of wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes* (Linnaeus, 1758). Very angry, the cuckoo went to Heaven asking the God for judgement. His decision was to keep the male cuckoo in Heaven, beside Him, while, the two sinners were punished: the cuckoo female was condemned to seek for her husband on the Earth, calling all the time his name “cuckoo” and the wren was punished to be servant of cuckoo, taking care about his brood and offspring (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I). Probably, related to this legend is the belief that if somebody follows the cuckoo’s calls, that person will be alienated, travelling in an unknown and hostile world of suffering (Coman, 1996).

Many birds are given the gift of prophecy, being regarded as oracular beings, but also like natural barometers giving information about the weather’s change, being present in the traditional calendars, too. In Romania, like in the whole Indo-European space, the cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) is one of the most important oracular bird species, his first song during the spring would foreshadow the fate announcing the number of years until marriage, wealth or poverty, fortune or misfortune, loneliness or meeting the one destined partner. In the spring, when you listen to the cuckoo’s song for first time, this is a good auspicious song, bringing you abundance and happiness if the bird is somewhere in front of you or on your right side and you have money in your pocket; the rule is to pay for this, throwing one coin in that direction. The belief is that the cuckoo starts singing on the Annunciation Day (the 25th March) because he eats the first buds or brings the good news from the Heaven’s Gate (Coman, 1996).

Arriving in the same period in our country like the cuckoo, the hoopoe (*Upupa epops* Linnaeus, 1758) is present in antithesis with it in legends, beliefs and superstitions. In the north-eastern Romania, one superstition tells that, in springtime, if you listen to the hoopoe’s song before the cuckoo’s, you’ll be the subject of gossips all over the next year, especially, if you are not very clean in that moment (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I). In some areas, the superstition tells that a person which had not eat before listening the hoopoe’s first song in the spring will be defiled by bird and his mouth will present a bad odour during the whole year (Coman, 1996). In the whole historical Moldavia area, the Hoopoe has a very bad reputation due to the odour emerging from its nest – this species’ brood produces soft faeces and the adult birds cannot clean the nest like in the case of other hole-nest species, but that can be regarded like a defence strategy. In the same area of the country, one belief is about magpie, *Pica pica* (Linnaeus, 1758): when it stops on the fences or gate of your farm, some visitors will arrive soon in your house.

All the owl species, but especially the little owl, *Athene noctua* (Scopoli, 1769) and the eagle-owl, *Bubo bubo* (Linnaeus, 1758), announce through their calls the death and other great misfortunes. In Bukovina area, exists one of very rare positive beliefs related to this group: if one little owl stops and calls in front of the windows it is the sign that a baby will be born next year in that house or one young lady will marry soon there (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I).

Some bird species are regarded as natural barometers. Thus, in the Carpathians area, the people believe that one Eagle-owl singing from the east is sign of good weather, while singing from the west, is a sign that the weather will be bad, while in Oltenia region, its calls announce flooding times. The Ural owl, *Strix uralensis* Pallas, 1771, announces the rainfalls when it is calling in the border of the forest, respectively, a very strong and cold winter when it appears inside the villages during the late autumn (Băcescu, 1961). This owl species is strictly related to the mountain wooden area in Romania, so, the unusual presence in the vicinity of villages can be related to the preys' abundance in the rural area.

In the northern Moldavia, during the winter, the snow's falls are announced by the gathering of crows croaking, while, in the summer time, the cocks singing in the nightfall predicts the change of weather into rainfalls. Also, the swallows announce the rainfalls when are flying among the cattle – in fact, the flying insects representing their feeding are going down in the herbs, so, the cattle's moving forces the insect to take off from the ground (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, II). In winter, when groups of crested larks, *Galerida cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758), appear inside the villages, the weather will go to a very strong frosty time – probably, the birds take advantage from the milder microclimate created inside the localities.

Also in the northern Moldavia and in the southern Muntenia there is a belief about the bee-eaters, *Merops apiaster* Linnaeus, 1758, and plovers, *Pluvialis* sp., can bring the rainfalls, while the great tit, *Parus major* Linnaeus, 1758, is surnamed feeling-the-summer being the first bird that starts singing in the early spring (Băcescu, 1961).

In the Romanian traditional calendar, during the springtime, there are birds feasts, the rural communities organising the lands' cultivation and livestock activities looking for the migratory birds appearance in their area. Thus, between the 4th and 6th March are the storks' days when, usually, the peasants expect snow, while, from 7 to 9th March are the cranes' days, announcing the springtime beginning. From this moment, it began the ploughing and sowing time, but also, the sheep and goats can go out-side, grazing on the meadows. The lark (*Alauda arvensis*) is surnamed the bird of ploughman - when the larks begin singing, it is sign that the sowing of barley & corn can begin (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, II). The Dragobete day is celebrated on the 24th February, when the birds are beginning their mating season. In the Annunciation Day (25th March), the birds start singing, but also, the insects come to life and the weeds start growing up. Finally, Builor Day is on the 21st May, when the juveniles of passerines are flying leaving the nests.

Also related to a specific period in the calendar, is one belief that has a very large covering area - for example, in the all plain regions of Romania, appear one belief telling us that the cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) eats cherries on the 20th July (in some areas, June 24), losing his voice and becoming sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus* (Linnaeus, 1758). In the later June - July, the cuckoo stops singing and leaves our country, going to Africa for wintering, while the sparrowhawk

becomes more visible in the surrounding landscape as a result of leaving from the higher hills breeding areas and flying to lower altitudes searching for new feeding territories. In some areas, there is belief that the cuckoo stole the cattle of Saint Peter (celebrated on the 29th June) and stopped singing in order to avoid to be found. In fact, in the late June, the cuckoo has finished the breeding season and does not sing before it flies towards Africa for wintering, in the late July – early August.

The goldcrest, *Regulus regulus* (Linnaeus, 1758), despite being the smallest bird from Romania, has great powers and abilities in the folk stories, being surnamed king of birds and it is considered the protector of humanity (Coman, 1996). An ancient Romanian belief is related to the serpents: if nobody sees one serpent for seven years, the reptile transforms itself in one big flying dragon that can reach the clouds giving torrential rains, destroying the fields and villages. But the small goldcrest can cross shrubs, bushes and thickets, so, no serpent can escape from the birds' view and become a dragon. One legend tells us that this small bird obtained through one guile the recognition as the king of birds; one day, the birds decided to choose their king using the flying ability, declaring king the bird that will reach the highest point in the sky. The goldcrest was hidden between the fears from the back of eagle and when the last one was tired, the small goldcrest took off, gushing over.

The birds are very important in ritual and magic practices, some bird species being used equally in the ritual practices related to birth & death, too. The rooster (male chicken) has supernatural powers: can hear the bell board tapping into the Heaven at midnight and begins its calls that drives away the devil and all bad spirits, but also, breaks the spells, protecting the houses and farms. The feathers of the rooster are placed in the pool of infants for the first bath after baptism to protect the child life from the bad spirits and to bring an easy life like the feather (Marian, 1993a).

In the burial, the gravedigger receives a rooster that will lead the soul to Heaven, protecting him from evil spirits, but also a hen thrown over the open tomb – it will drive away the devils and will make path for the soul (Marian, 1995c; Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I). In Moldavia there is one belief that this rooster became a candle in Heaven and woke up the soul, especially of that person who has died without a lit candle near him, while in Bukovina, it is believed that if you give twelve roosters like alms for poor people, your sins are forgiven and you get a bell in Heaven (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I).

Also, at the wedding party, the bride prepares one cooked hen nicely arranged between flowers and ears of wheat on a tray and gives it to her groom that shares the bird with the wedding guests, except the bride because “if she eats from this chicken, their couple life will not be happy”; this hen will protect their home and bring abundance and wealth for the young couple (Marian, 1995b).

In the south-western part of Romania (Banat area), the tradition tells that we can change the fate of one family inside which the babies died very soon after their birth, if we make a sacrifice following the next child's birth: one rooster if the

baby is a boy or one hen if girl. The bird is buried after it is wrapped in the first diaper that we used for this child after his birth (Marian, 1995a).

The practices related to different species of birds are really numerous and various in Romania's regions. In some areas, the peasants are playing "răscucitul" – when they hear the bird's disyllabic song, they replay it to bring good fortune for their cattle and their cows will have good milk during the next year. In the early spring or late February, on the shrove Tuesday for Lent, the peasants organise the cuckoos' dance: they disguise themselves in cuckoos organising a ritual wedding party and fight; in the end, they destroy the used masks to chase away the evil spirits and diseases, so, bringing health, wealth and good harmony inside the village's community (Coman, 1996).

In the northern Moldavia, during the spring, when the peasants see the first flying swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), they take few lumps of earth in their hand and spread across the house-yard to protect their poultry from the natural predators uttering the spell "when I will gather this clay, only then the hawk and fox can eat my birds" (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I).

The turtle dove, *Streptopelia turtur* (Linnaeus, 1758), is a monogamous bird species, forming strong couple bonds for life. For this reason they represent the symbol of perfect conjugal fidelity, appearing in different beliefs: the tears of turtle dove have healing properties. If a couple eats eggs of turtle dove it will live longer. A couple will live a long and good life together if the bride and the groom eat the heart and lungs of a turtle dove on the wedding party (Coman, 1996).

The birds appear in the good spell practices: for example, the fears of blue peafowl (*Pavo cristatus* Linnaeus, 1758) or of bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) are used for the love spells giving beauty and attractiveness to the young girls; the tail's fears of swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) present very special and strong powers cancelling the bad spells and unravelling the intricate events, while the bones of tawny owl, *Strix aluco* Linnaeus, 1758, are used for hatred spells.

There can also be met some practices of chasing birds, mostly related to the owl species that are seen like harbingers of death and serious trouble (Coman, 1996). The little owl (*Athene noctua*), living inside the localities, is the principal character in these practices, together with other birds that appears in the vicinity or inside the villages. The peasants used to appease the little owl throwing a piece of bread dipped in salt in the direction from where the display call is coming; if the bird is not going away, they try to banish the bird throwing some ash and ember in that direction. In order to protect their harvest, the peasants gather all the crumbs and table scraps giving it to the house sparrows, *Passer domesticus* (Linnaeus, 1758), in one corner of the house-yard, appeasing them to bypass and not ruin their fields. Starting from the damages produced on the poultry, there are many practices to appease or banish the goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis* (Linnaeus, 1758), from the house-yard vicinity. The simplest ritual is done during the first day when the peasants bring in the yard the chicken and ducklings, placing them inside one hoop. In some areas, the peasants „keep for hawks” - they fast and spread the mouth of furnace to close the bird's beak (Coman 1996); there are three periods when they

play this practice: Philips of Winter (January 25 - February 2), Philips of Autumn (November 13 - 16) and Ovidenii Day (November 21). Other two practices are related to very important Christian days: first begins in the Eve of Christmas (24th December) when the woman puts one small stone on the furnace, in the kitchen; in the night of Christening Day (6th January), the man throws the stone outside in the yard saying the spell „the hawks do not see my poultry as the people are sleeping and nobody sees this stone, remaining hardened and stunned like it” (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I). The second one is related to the Easter’ days: the woman gathers the bones from the hen cooked for the Easter’s lunch and throws it over the house saying „look hawk - this is your part!” (Coman, 1996). In some areas, the people use violence: they catch and kill one hawk, being crucified on the gate of yard to chase other predator birds.

As we mentioned, the cranes, *Grus grus* (Linnaeus, 1758), are seen like messengers of good auspicious in Romania, announcing the spring’s arrival, but also, it is believed that cranes can fly to Heaven and present the people’s prayers to the God. Probably, related to their passenger condition in our country, a special belief and practice exist in Bukovina region. The people believe that if they stick a knife into the ground when the birds appears in their ordered flocks, the birds will stop and flying in circles until the knife is removed from the ground. But also, it is known that this is a very big sin because the cranes will lose their way to the northern breeding areas and the person that had done this gesture or somebody from his family will become insane (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, I). In Moldavia, there is a belief that claims that the cranes cannot be counted when they are flying because they will wander, losing the good direction. We have no more information about another similar belief or ritual magic practices that tries to stop the flight of one bird species that brings good news: arrival of spring and beginning of ploughing time. We can see this practice as an exercise that comprises the desire of peasant to retain and bind this bird to his surroundings, the circle flying being a compromise between departures and staying (Coman, 1996).

The Romanian peasant likes birds & offers his protection for many bird species. For example, the white-stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) is seen like an auspicious bird presence for the house and fate of one family, offering good luck and wealth, cleanliness and safety of house, protecting the household from fires and pests. When a couple of white-stork builds its nest in the yard of a house, the birds will protect the household from thefts, but also the harvest and crops from dryness or torrential rains as their gratitude for the hospitality of human family that accepted the birds’ presence in the house-yard. In some regions of Romania, it exists the belief that the white-stork is a human being in Africa and becomes bird in the spring coming back in our country for breeding, but also that the birds will curse you to lose some dear persons or will bring fire on your house if you destroy their nests, disturb the birds or kill the brood (Băcescu, 1961).

The swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) brings good fortune, happiness and wealth in one household by building a nest there. The peasant nicknamed it “the hen of God”, considering it a holy and clean being. The belief in severe punishments if

somebody destroys the nest or touches the brood is found everywhere: "it will bring fire on your house" or "it will curse you and somebody will die" or "you will have problems with your eyes and your arms" or "your cow will die", so, you will lose the wealth, the cow's presence being essential in the rural household (Coman, 1996).

In Bukovina, one specific belief is related to the raven (*Corvus corax*): the hunters believe that if you shoot one raven, you will be not capable to hunt anything else anymore (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998, II).

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of birds in the Romanian mythology, folklore creation believes and a ritual practice is a really rich one.

The birds appear as God's helpers in the Romanian legends about the world's creation.

Following the birds' arrival and activity during the annual biological rhythm, the Romanian peasants organise their ploughing and harvest time.

The bird species present supernatural powers bringing wealth and protection or misfortunes, giving data on the weather's dynamic.

There are numerous ritual practices involving birds, related to the birth and burial traditions, daily life and special events for people, too.

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