

REVISITING SOME ROMANIAN CULTURAL SYMBOLS OF (PROBABLY) DACO -THRACIAN ORIGIN

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The inventory of cultural facts of Daco-Thracian origin the Romanian traditional culture inherited and preserved over centuries, even millennia, is quite large, both at the level of the so-called material and spiritual (“immaterial”, “non-material”) culture. Historians and ethnologists as, for instance, B. P. Hasdeu, Nicolae Densusianu, Mircea Eliade, Romulus Vulcănescu devoted important works to this matter, and new points of view (see, e. g., Ion Ghinoiu or Narcisa Ştiucă) have been recently added.

This paper aims to underline the transformations the two well-known animal symbols - **the bear** and **the wolf** – have undergone, in time, from ritual, beliefs and myth, as they were so insightfully commented, among others, by Mircea Eliade in his book *De Zalmoxis à Genghis-Han* (1970; English translation, *The Vanishing God*, 1972) to dances with masks, legends and fairy-tales, pouring then into the contemporary personal narratives, jokes and anecdotes, and even further, into the modern literature of some outstanding Romanian writers such as, among others, Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu, Vasile Voiculescu.

When studying these two symbols, a balance must be kept between the universal and the local, for, as it is known, the bear and the wolf, both as living beasts and as cultural symbols, belong to the huge Indo-European or Euro-Asian area, but they gained special functions and meanings in Romanian traditional culture, seen as a result of the Daco-Roman synthesis.

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It must be stated from the very beginning that the bear and the wolf, both as wild beasts and as cultural symbols, belong to a large Euro-Asian area, extended to the North American Continent, too. Among the oldest beasts of the Northern hemisphere (zoologists assume that the wolf is about 200 000 years old) (Delort 1993, 330), the bear and the wolf populated the deep forests which covered the territory inhabited by the Indo-European tribes of the Thracians, Dacians and Illyres, south and north of Istros (Danube River), east and west of the Carpathian Mountains and the shores of the Black Sea, Pontus Euxinus. Thracians could have known the two beasts even from their homeland, India, where a brand of wolves (*Canis lupus palipes*) lived and is still living, here and there, up to nowadays. The situation is similar with the bear, whose Anglo-Saxon name (Eng. *bear*, Old Eng. *bera*, Old Germ. **berō*) preserves the I.-E. **bher*, meaning “brown, the brown animal”.

It is well known that the man of the old primitive and even newer traditional societies lived in close relation to nature, and the environment put its marks on his cultural constructs. The bear and the wolf attracted, from the early stages of the mankind, the man's attention. Probably, as zoologists say, in remotest times, man and beast didn't have very close contacts, neither in terms of competition, for nature offered enough food/game for all of them, nor in term of cooperation, as the

two animals have never been domesticated in the true sense of the word (the genetic link wolf - dog is questioned by many naturalists, and the bear's training for different spectacular performances or healing activities is different from animals' taming). The history of this relationship (man - wild beast) come to be very complicated in modern times. An organized fight against all predators, but especially against the wolf, led to its disappearance, with a few exceptions (Romania is one of this), in most areas of Europe.

But, for the olden times, there are evidences that both the bear and the wolf were quite present in the spiritual life of our ancestors, the Thraco-Daco-Getes. Attentive to everything that surrounded them, the people in this area learned from nature, and preserved all this knowledge in a very solid cultural system. Archaeological findings prove it. Among the zoomorphic figurines, next to those of *rams, bulls, horses, stags, snakes, birds*, the *bear* and the *wolf* hold an important place (Sanie 1995, 80). This is the case with the clay zoomorphic figurines with magic-religious significance, especially *wolves*, dug out at Cârlomanești, that have been thoroughly analyzed, even if the researchers did not get along in their interpretations (Sanie 1995, 80, 277). Metal plates also preserve the image of wild beasts, among which the bear (7 representations) holds a privileged position, while the wolf's presence is mentioned too, but not to a very large extent (only 1 + 1? images) (Sanie 1995, 144). The bear appears in a fantastic combination with the snake as in a zoomorphic plate found at Agighiol (See Planșa L/6, in Sanie 1995, 143) or on a plate belonging to the Letnița thesaurus (Bulgaria), illustrating a hunting scene in which a bear appears in front of the (Thracian) Knight with a spear, while a wolf stays at the horse's feet (Idem, 147). In spite of the lack of continuity in archaeological evidences, a link between the bear, as a cultural representation, and the name of the Dacians' great God - Zalmoxis/Zamolxis - has been drawn. Historians (Porphyrios of Tyr), anthropologists (Rays Carpenter) and ethnologists (Mircea Eliade) suggest such a homology, mainly based on the bear's peculiarity to hibernate. "Its (the bear's - my note, N. C.) periodical disappearance and reappearance were connected to the seasons' changes. (...) One may suppose that the bear's disappearance and return were close to the Geto-Dacians' beliefs in their main God's occultation and epiphany" (Idem, 148-9). One may speak even of a cult of the bear, "a cult specific especially to the regions of northern Asia and America, but equally known in the olden times to Europe, existing only in those areas where the bear, at least partly, hibernates, is hiding for a while, searching a refuge during the great frost" (Hentze [1938] 2000, 94). The bear's cult was for good reason connected to the tiger's cult, although significant differences separate the two ones. At the same time, the treatment of the bear differs greatly in Siberia and North America as compared to the animal presence in Europe and especially in Romanian traditional culture.

In the latter one, the bear belongs to the large category of the so-called "biological synchronizers", alongside with other vegetal and climatic phenomena. "Dans les calendriers empiriques, le rôle de synchronisateur astral est le plus fréquemment attribué aux Pléiades. Dans ces calendriers, le cycle annuel est obligatoirement déterminé ou si l'on veut 'surdéterminé' par plusieurs

synchronisateurs biologiques et climatiques. (...) Le brame des cerfs en rut (Russie: début août), le retour des cigognes sur leur lieu de nidification (Espagne, Balkans: équinoxe de printemps) et la mise bas de l'ours (Europe: janvier-février) peuvent servir aussi de synchronisateurs annuels" (Popova 1993, 29).

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that in the old traditional Romanian culture, winter coincides with the period when the bear hibernates, from *Martinii de toamnă* (November 12-14) up to *Martinii de iarnă* (February 1-3), and a lot of legends and stories support the role of the bear as a calendar synchronizer.

On the other hand, we can not let apart the fact that these folk-holidays are placed, in modern calendars, in a close connection to Christian holydays. Thus, *Martinii de iarnă* and *Martinii de toamnă* are situated at an equal distance (40 days) from Christmas, and, even more significant is the fact that on February 2nd the Christian church celebrates, both in the East and West of Europe, an important holiday: Rom. *Întâmpinarea Domnului* or *Stretenie* (from Slavic *Stretenja* = welcoming), Lat. *Purificatio S. Mariae virginis* or *Presentatio Domini*, French *la Chandeleur*, Italian *Candelora* – the day when the child Jesus was taken to the temple in Jerusalem, by his mother, 40 days after his birth. The church history mentions that this holiday was established late, under the Justinian rule, between the years 541-542, “mostly in order to drive away from people’s minds the old, pagan holiday of *Faunalia* or *Lupercalia*, which were celebrated towards the middle of the month of February” (Candrea 2001, 58). We should keep in mind that this type of syncretism between pagan and Christian elements can be encountered in all Christian world. The belief that the bear wakes up on the 2nd of February, gets out of his lair, looks around and, if he sees his shadow, returns to the lair, if not, stays out is common with Romanian, Slavic, French, Italian, Spanish, German folk-beliefs (Candrea 2001, 59-60). There is no doubt that this worldwide spread belief can be based on “an old meteorological observation”, but why it was the bear who was selected to illustrate this is still a thing to think about.

The division winter - summer is marked by holidays consecrated to the wolf too, again in connection to some Christian saints, as, for instance, St. Andrew (30 of November), the day/night when wolves wake up, and St. George (23 of April) when nature returns to life. The bear-holidays (*Mărtinii de toamnă/de iarnă*) are perceived as reminiscences of some “prehistoric deities, saints of the bears” (Ghinoiu 1997, 116), but, in my opinion, the bear itself acts as a deity, controlling the time. The large deposits of bear skulls and bones, some of them engraved, discovered on the territory of prehistoric Dacia, and the clay figurines mentioned before indicate the “perpetuation of the bear sacrality up to the modern times” (Ghinoiu 1997, 116).

Besides these two holidays, the bear is also celebrated on July 31st, “Macaveiul ursului” or on August 1st, “Macoveiul ursului”, “Împuiatul urșilor”, “Ziua Ursului”. In order to prevent the damage the bear could bring to man, this day is strictly observed; people refrain from working, for – it is said – “a family didn't keep the Macaveiul ursului and until autumn the bear killed a cow of the heard. In order to be protected of wolves and bears, special food (honeycomb) is eaten on this occasion. An offering (flash) is given, saying “Take it, bear” (Olteanu 2001, 352-3).

Besides its periodical appearance-disappearance, the bear drew the old people's attention because of its anatomic resemblance to man: "No other animal is more similar to man than the bear" (Taloş 2001, 179; Cf. also Hentze [1938] 2000, 105, note 1: "The close resemblance of a skinned bear to the human body produces a strong impression upon the hunter. Katchin Tartars compare the dead bear to a dead man. Yakutes compare the dead bear to a woman. This resemblance is the source of several legends of many tribes, legends which asserts the origins of man in a bear [author's emphasis]"). Quite differently, in Romanian legends the bear was a man, the animal originated in man; he is the son and the daughter of a priest, whose body was covered with bear's fur and aimed to frighten God, or a miller who, sometimes advised or better say pushed by the Devil, wore his sheepskin coat inside out, stayed under a bridge and grumbled frightening Good God and St. Peter who walked near by. The Almighty curses him to remain as it was, and hence we have bears on the Earth.

While most Indo-European mythologies – Romanian included – sustain the human origin of the bear, the non-Indo-European ones, like those of some groups of Siberia, of Ugro-Finic people, or of North American Indians admit the bear to have been the forefather of man, of the people of a certain group, not necessarily in terms of totemic relationship.

The two types of myths or legends draw a separation line between two types of culture and, on the other hand, underline the solidity and the unity of the old Indo-European culture the Thraco-Daco=Getae one essentially belongs to.

Not less important for our discussion is another link the historians and the ethnologists long before pointed out, that between the bear and the Dacian God, Zalmoxes, whose name contains the Thracian word "zalmos", meaning "hide, fur". Moreover, according to a historical anecdote, at his birth, the child Zalmoxis was wrapped in a bear hide that made some researchers as, for instance, Rhys Carpenter, to identify him with a "Bärengott", "the bear-god", setting him among other "sleeping bears" (Cf. Eliade [1970] 1980, 59).

One can assume that, from this mythical scenario, the bear hide symbol moved into the folklore text as a literary motif, the best known being that of the father who tests his sons, hiding under a bridge, wrapped in a bear hide. Following the fairy-tale pattern, the two first sons fail, while the third, the youngest one, passes the test. In the literary work of Ion Creanga, *Povestea lui Harap-Alb* (The Story of Harap-Alb/White-Moor), the father exposes himself and gives the bear hide to his youngest son, for, he says, "it will sometimes be useful to you". The old prince, who, perhaps, passed through such an initiatory rite in his youth, anticipates the role the bear hide will play in his son's trial, when he has to confront the bear which appears as the owner of the field cultivated with lettuces. Advised by an old woman he comforted at the beginning of his adventure, the brave man wears the bear hide given by his father and, when the bear awakes (again sleeping and awakening), he throws the bear skin on the beast and runs away. Not less important is the fact that in this story the bear appears as a cultivator, a quality which is present in other types of folklore texts, in anecdotes and jokes; but usually the animal is cheated by man who always takes the better part of the crop. More than this, in some

Romanian legends the bear is presented as “the donor of wheat”, winning in his confrontation with the Devil (Coman 1986, 77; Constantinescu 1988, 99-100).

Another fairy-tale motif is based on this close anatomic resemblance “bear-man”. The human hero, confronting the Devil, resorts to the physical strength of his “grandfather”, “an old man who is 999 years and 52 weeks old, namely the bear, who overcomes his opponent. The Devil enters the bear’s lair, wakes him up, and the Old Uncle Ursula “takes the Devil under his arm and presses him to death, frightening the Devil who dares not fight the hero anylonger (Ion Creanga, *Danila Prepeleac*).

Here are just a few (extremely few, much more could be added) hypostases of the bear in the Romanian folk- and high culture. This could enable us to infer the important role the animal plays, in our culture, at the symbolic level, and could further lead to a possible, even visible link between these actual representations of the bear and old Thracio-Dacian roots.

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