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## THE MIGHTY LAST-BORN\* SYNDROME

(...) *I*t must have started with the Romans' withdrawal from Dacia.\*\* We can imagine a small part of the population leaving the territory of its ethnogenesis with the Roman administration. It was most likely a minority consisting of literate individuals having good connections in the administration, intellectual, managerial, entrepreneurial and communicational skills, and considerable personal wealth, inhabiting areas where information about the upcoming events penetrated more easily. We can imagine the hesitations, the efforts to get news, the rumors, the intercessions, the family dramas, the corruption, the ordeal of the retreat, the material losses, the efforts to integrate into the new environment. We can also imagine the strong solidarity bonds that developed between members of the migrant population, as well as their efforts to preserve and affirm their cultural identity, which materialized in inscriptions written in Romanian south of the Danube, in areas inhabited by Aromanians, or Macedo-Romanians. (...)

On the other hand, we can imagine the majority of the population remaining in place, a situation so often described in Romanian tales, with the hero traveling many a day through dangerous woods, from one royal court to another. This population was split into isolated communities, bereft of an all-binding administration that would have taken care of schools, communications, public records, regulations and law enforcement: a former nation demoted to the rank of a populace through the disappearance of the state; a nation that, for almost a thousand years of its existence, until the reemergence of its own state structures and first chroniclers, was bound to read its own history in other peoples' chronicles. (...)

Romanian tales supply us with interesting hints on the outcome of those events. Unlike all contemporary cultures, which indicate the first-born children as both beneficiaries of special favors on the part of destiny and over-represented in a long series of groups and organizations, from governments to parliaments to space explorers, Romanian tales disclose a thoroughly different picture.

The elder brothers are definitely prone to accumulation of wealth through hard work, and shown as repugnant characters without exception. Prâslea, the last-born son, blows his pipe, plays in the cinders, roams the backwoods of his homestead, and does not manifest the slightest practical sense: like Păcală\*\*\*, he is capable of selling his cow to a tree he finds in his way. Work and discipline are not to his liking. Nevertheless, he benefits from a sympathetic and supportive attitude from the part of fate and nature as a whole, and is always successful with support from others, which he obtains with the smallest of efforts.

He comes by a bucket of embers? The glanderous jade he finds in a forgotten corner of the stable will turn into a miraculous stallion who can fly, talk, and give insightful advice, knows the location of life-giving and deathly water springs, and keeps hidden in his ears all kinds of useful gadgets that may be thrown in his pursuers' way and change into forests, lofty mountains, or oceans. He sets loose a fish, or spares the life of an ant? He can count, in the future, on allies who will fulfill three wishes, or sift poppy seeds from grains of sand. He takes up three funny bums as his traveling companions? They will breathe out ice to freeze

*the metallic walls of the chamber under which the vicious emperor has kindled a fire, or they will stretch up to the moon to catch the playful princess who has changed into a bird.*

*As matters stand, we may believe that a few centuries' absence of organized state life is largely accountable for the current predicament: between clenching their teeth, sacrificing, working hard, and having faith in the future, on the one hand, and the alternative of hunting for the marvelous horse of NATO, the wonderful fish of the IMF, or the little wing of the World Bank, on the other, the "rank and file", the politicians, and the rulers are decidedly in favor of the latter.*

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\* The last-born son (*Prâslea*) is a recurrent character in Romanian tales, in which he accomplishes heroic deeds.

\*\* In AD 271-275, under emperor Aurelian.

\*\*\* Hero of many Romanian folktales, whose name is derived from the verb *a păcăli* (cheat/dupe/hoax).

*(Translator's notes, A.S.)*

