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Romanian Folklore – Between Lions and Vampires

(Abstract)

Some Romanians may complain about the not so well developed urban civilization in their country. There is, however, a “benefit of ill” in that situation: due to centuries of illiteracy and to a still strong rural way of life, a remarkable amount of archaic (even prehistoric) beliefs could survive in Romania better than in other parts of Europe. On the one hand, Romanian traditional culture contains features that have evident counterparts in other Southeast European countries; but, on the other hand, there also are many elements of ritual folklore that are to be found in Romania alone. Some of those elements can be referred to mythical-religious motifs of the ancient Orient and of the Aegean world. An example in point is a cycle of ritual songs (now used as “Christmas carols” in Transylvania) in which the central motif is a fight between a brave young man and a (talking, and even dancing) lion. Although the original ritual functions are no longer clear, the “inertial force” of peasant culture has ensured the transmission of such songs (from generation to generation, by word of mouth), so that they still are part of the Romanian winter-solstice celebrations. In other instances, relics of archaic cultural practices (such as those that recall “folk Orphism”) linger only under the guise of superstitions. In that respect, although “local” werewolves and vampires are not as blood-thirsty as Bram Stoker’s Dracula, they are still feared as harmful intruders from the Other World, and methods of protection against them are still remembered in many villages. The scheduled presentation will contain many ethnographic items selected from among the thousands of answers to the questionnaires of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas. Also, the author will make use of the materials included in his own volume, *Prehistoric Roots of the Romanian and Southeast European Traditions* (Sebastopol, CA: Institute of Archaeomythology, 2010).