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## THE SHAMANIC ROOTS OF EUROPEAN CULTURE: VISIONS OF THE OTHERWORLD AND ECSTATIC BATTLES FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT DAY

### 1. Medieval visions

In the landscape of medieval visionary literature, laymen's visions are particularly interesting since they explicitly illustrate the conflict between the clerical culture of those who compiled them and the traditional knowledge of the laity – the heritage of an archaic system of values that a hasty and superficial evangelization absorbed rather than eradicated.

These visions have a rather precocious beginning: the *visio* of Curma reported by Augustin in his *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*<sup>1</sup> (421). Equally precocious is the first vision attributed to a *miles*: the anonymous protagonist of a story by Gregory the Great (*Dialogi* IV, 37, 7–12)<sup>2</sup> set in 590. This *miles* was

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<sup>1</sup> Agostino, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, 12, 15 (in: Saint Augustin, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, traduction, introduction et notes de G. Combes, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, texts and translation by M. Simonetti, annotated by S. Pricoco, Milano, Mondadori (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla – Scrittori Greci e Latini), 2 vols., 2006.

also the first to declare he had seen a *pons subtilis*<sup>3</sup> in the Otherworld, under which a foggy river flowed<sup>4</sup> and which led to pleasant places<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, he was the first to report having met dead people there whom he knew very well<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, it can be said that since the end of the VI century an *auctoritas* as Gregory has attested the presence of the fundamental features of a mythical-ritual nucleus already organized in a coherent *continuum*: a protagonist identified as a *miles*-warrior, the crossing of a bridge, the presence of a *hortus deliciarum* located beyond the bridge, the meeting with the dead, the absence of a guide.

According to the story related in the *Dialogi*, the circumstances determining the vision were casual: during the pestilence that struck Rome and Italy in 590 "quidam uero miles in hac eadem nostra urbe percussus ad extrema peruenit"<sup>7</sup>. So illness was the accidental trigger for the ecstatic experience, the *medium* that gave rise to those alterations of the state of conscience which were able to facilitate the perception of a further dimension, the access to a superior level of knowledge. In shamanic cultures these circumstances represent one of the ways<sup>8</sup> of initiation for those who are destined to play the role

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<sup>3</sup> *Aiebat enim [...] quia pons erat [...] Haec uero erat in praedicto ponte probatio, ut quisquis per eum iniustorum uellet transire, in tenebroso foetentique fluuii liberetur, iusti uero, quibus culpa non obstiteret, securo per eum gressu ac libero ad loca amoena peruenirent* (*Dialogi* IV, 37, 8 e 10; Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, pp. 280 and 282). On the 'thin bridge' see CULIANU 1979, 301-312.

<sup>4</sup> *Sub quo [ponte] niger atque caliginosus foetoris intolerabilis nebulam exhalans fluuii decurrebat* (*Dialogi* IV, 37, 8; Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, p. 280).

<sup>5</sup> *Transacto autem ponte amoena erant prata atque uirentia, odoriferis herbarum floribus exornata* (*Dialogi* IV, 37, 8; Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, p. 280).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibi se etiam Petrum, ecclesiasticae familiae maiorem, qui ante quadriennium est defunctus [...] In eodem quoque ponte hunc quem praedixi Stephanum se recognouisse testatus est* (*Dialogi* IV, 37, 11 e 12; Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, p. 282).

<sup>7</sup> *Dialogi* IV, 37, 7 (Gregorio Magno, *Storie di Santi e diavoli*, p. 280).

<sup>8</sup> The other way is represented by the heritability of duties and powers: see ELIADE 1999, 39; see also HALIFAX 1982, 13.

of spiritual guide for their community: by means of “the crisis of a serious illness”<sup>9</sup>, the shamans-to-be get to know, because they have experienced them in person, the mechanisms of the crisis itself, and can master, because they have gone through them, the territories of death<sup>10</sup>.

This ‘test’ comes entirely unexpected for them, who don’t seek nor facilitate it at all, just like the trials awaiting other Otherworld pilgrims in centuries to come: Drythelm, the English *pater familias* of which Beda speaks in his *Historia ecclesiastica*<sup>11</sup>, who gets sick and dies in the first hours of the night and comes back to life at daybreak; the Italian Alberico, the *puer filius nobilis militis* who, according to the *Visio Alberici*<sup>12</sup>, falls ill and remains motionless as if he were dead for nine days and nine nights before returning to his senses; the famous Tnugdali<sup>13</sup>, an Irish *miles* and *vir nobilis*, who suddenly collapses and resurrects after three days, during which his body lies almost lifeless; the Saxon *rusticus* Goteschalk<sup>14</sup>, who had his vision during an illness that left him inanimate for seven weeks; Thurkill, the *simplex rusticus* of Essex of whom Ralph of Coggeshall writes<sup>15</sup>, who is visited in his sleep by saint Julian, who allegedly carries his soul away and leaves his body asleep for two days and two nights.

All of them are suddenly taken ill, and they all are unaware victims of a common destiny that deprives them of their vital

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<sup>9</sup> HALIFAX 1982, 18.

<sup>10</sup> HALIFAX 1982, 13 and 18.

<sup>11</sup> Beda, *Historia ecclesiastica* V, 12: B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (ed. by), *Beda's Ecclesiastical history of the English people*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 488–498.

<sup>12</sup> P. G. Schmidt (hrsg. von), *Visio Alberici*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> He is the protagonist of the *Visio Tnugdali*: Wagner (hrsg. von), *Visio Tnugdali. Lateinisch und altdeutsch*, Erlagen, Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1882 [reprint: Hildesheim–Zurich–New York, Georg Olms, 1989].

<sup>14</sup> E. Assmann (hrsg. von), *Godeschalcus und Visio Godeschalci*, Neumünster, Karl Wachholtz Verlag, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> P. G. Schmidt (hrsg. von), *Visio Thurkilli. Relatore, ut videtur, Radulpho de Coggeshall*, Leipzig, Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1978.

strengths, leaving them *semimortui*, while their soul wanders out of the body escorted by a guide – an angel, saint Michael, saint Peter, saint Julian... – until its return to the body brings them back to consciousness.

Approximately one century separates the *miles's visio* referred by Gregory (end of VI century) from that of Drythelm, which Beda wrote in 731 (reporting facts which had happened in 696): only three hundred years later does another text, the *Visio Alberici* (1127), give us the account of a layman's vision, although only ten years old. To be true, the *Visio Alberici* had little or no resonance beyond the sphere of direct influence of the abbey of Montecassino, where the boy became monk. However, even though symbolically, it marks the start of a rich flourishing of *visiones*, whose beneficiaries were all laymen: the *Visio Tnugdali* was written in 1149, the two versions of Goteschalk's vision (the *Godeschalcus* and the *Visio Godeschalci*) were compiled in 1190 or soon later, the *Visio Thurkill* shortly after 1206.

The latter two slightly cross the chronological border marked by the *Tractatus de Purgatorio sancti Patricii*, composed between 1179 and 1185. Such border is important because at the base of the *Tractatus* is a ritual, besides a myth: a ritual controlled by a rigorous ceremonial and subject to repetition; so much so that it turned the site of Lough Derg into an important pilgrimage destination, which has been constantly frequented since the Middle Ages.

It is important to underline that the plot of this vision owes much to an imagery very similar to that of Eurasian shamanism: there are such experiences as being dismembered and

swallowed<sup>16</sup>, being boiling and roasted<sup>17</sup>, there are demons-smiths<sup>18</sup>, a descent to hell and ascent to heaven in order to achieve a complete mastery of the three parts of the cosmos<sup>19</sup>, the *topos* of the narrow or difficult passage represented as a thin bridge<sup>20</sup>.

But there are also other aspects of the *Tractatus* which can be attributed to a shamanic background: the battle against the demons, the warlike identity of the visionary, the fact that he symbolically adopts new clothes that are represented by the so-called *lorica*.

If on the one hand the evocation of a war scenario is certainly a reflection of the Pauline symbology of the *militia Christi* and the *pugna spiritualis*, on the other hand, as Franco Cardini noted, we can find the phenomenology of the 'sacred militia' in almost all those religions which are based on dualistic principles<sup>21</sup>: among these is shamanism, in which medicine

<sup>16</sup> *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii*, III viii, 3. Cfr. Warnke (hrsg. von), *Das Buch vom "Espurgatoire S. Patrice"*, p. 72: *dracones igniti super alios sedebant et quasi comedentes eos modo miserabili dentibus ignitis mordebant [...] bufones etiam mire magnitudinis et quasi igniti uisi sunt super quorundam pectora insistere et, rostra sua deformia infigentes, quasi corda eorum conati sunt extrahere*. On the meaning of dismemberment and swallowing see HALIFAX 1982, 20–22 and 114. See also ELIADE 1999, 53–88, 77 and 85–86. And PROPP 1985, 151–158 and 358–365.

<sup>17</sup> *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii*, III x, 2, e III xii, 6. Cfr. Warnke (hrsg. von), *Das Buch vom "Espurgatoire S. Patrice"*, pp. 78, e 86): *alii fornicibus sulphureis cremabantur; alii quasi super sartagine urebantur; alii verubus igneis infixi ad ignem assabantur [...] erant autem fosse singule diversis metallis ac liquoribus bullientibusque plenis, in quibus utriusque sexus diuerseque etatis erat demersa multitudo maxima hominum*. On the practice of boiling of the aspiring shaman see HALIFAX 1982, 20; and also PROPP 1985, 158–165.

<sup>18</sup> *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii*, III x, 2. Cfr. Warnke (hrsg. von), *Das Buch vom "Espurgatoire S. Patrice"*, p. 78: *alii diuersis metallis liquescentibus deguttauerunt. Demones omnes flagris ceciderunt*. On the role of blacksmith in the context of initiation see ELIADE 1980, 73. On the relationship between blacksmiths and shamans see ELIADE 1999, 499–503 and CARDINI 1981, 55–56.

<sup>19</sup> See HALIFAX 1982, 25–28.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview see ELIADE 1999, 512–516.

<sup>21</sup> See CARDINI 1981, 179.

men have the prominent task to fight (in ecstasy) against the spirits of illness so as to ensure well-being and health to their community and its members. And the *lorica* – a prayer with strong enchanting effects<sup>22</sup> – has its equivalent in the shaman's ritual ability to achieve invulnerability by wearing an armour-dress which will defend him in his future struggles against the forces of evil<sup>23</sup>.

## 2. Myth and ritual

We have said that the work of the monk of Saltrey represents an important watershed in the evolution of medieval visionary literature. Earlier *visiones*, in fact, closely follow a specific typology of shamanic initiation according to which the beneficiary of the vision, without having manifested any predisposition or expressed any specific intention before, falls sick and remains unconscious for a period of time, during which his soul detaches from his body and enters another dimension<sup>24</sup>.

On the contrary, the vision described in the *Tractatus* introduces a different typology, equally attested in ethnographic studies, in which the vision is achieved voluntarily, as the result of a difficult personal path to which a regulated ritual guarantees an institutionalised result. A ritual controlled by the local clergy, who release 'licenses' to certify the penitence done. A ritual that has its remote origins in the Palaeolithic, when caverns assumed a central importance in initiation practices because they represent the point of contact and passage between the two worlds<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> The *Loricae ad daemones expellendos* were long litanies typical of Irish monasticism in which the name of God and the saints were invoked to protect various parts of the body (hence the name of 'armour'). See CARDINI 1981, 158–159.

<sup>23</sup> On the symbolism of shamans' costumes see MARIOTTI 2002, 109–121 and T. I. Sem, *Semiotica dei rituali degli sciamani della siberia e dell'estremo oriente*, ivi, pp. 95–105.

<sup>24</sup> See HALIFAX 1982, 14–18 and ELIADE 1999, 39.

<sup>25</sup> See ELIADE 1999, 66, 67 and 72. See also BENOZZO 2009.

Thanks to the *Tractatus* and the following works it is possible to reconstruct the setting in which this ritual was developed, whose features recall initiation practices. First of all, the location: saint Patrick's purgatory lies on an island – Station Island – and is therefore surrounded by water<sup>26</sup>. The building, narrow, low and long<sup>27</sup>, strongly recalls a cave<sup>28</sup>. Besides, the presence of vapours – which is attested in texts from Guillaume de Lille to Jean Froissart<sup>29</sup> – suggests that such exhalations facilitated the ecstatic techniques in a similar way as 'sweat tents' do in shamanic practices<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, penitents' fasting is characteristic of initiation rituals<sup>31</sup>, and so is the 'official' acknowledgment of the experience they lived<sup>32</sup>. Finally, the ceremony that prepares the pilgrim to enter the purgatory partly follows the service for the dead: a circumstance that perfectly suits the condition of those who are going to be initiated in a context of ritual death and rebirth<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> On the orography of this kind of sanctuaries see CARDINI 1982, 91.

<sup>27</sup> So it is described by Gilbert de Lannoy and Antonio Mannini: Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Ch. Potvin, Louvain, Imprimerie de P. et J. Lefever, 1878, p. 171; see also FRATI 1886, 140–179, p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> It must be remembered that the 'vision pit' is a central element in many processes of shamanic initiation: HALIFAX 1982, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. by J. B. M. C. Kervyn de Lettenhove, Bruxelles, Devaux, 1871, tome XV<sup>e</sup>, pp. 145–146. Guillaume, among other things, describes the purgatorium like a "celier".

<sup>30</sup> See CARDINI 1981, 35; and HALIFAX 1982, 77–91.

<sup>31</sup> See CARDINI 1981, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Hence the custom to issue the attestations certifying the enterprise, and the penitent's duty to leave a written record of what he had seen: *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii*, III i, 9 ?; cfr. Warnke (hrsg. von), *Das Buch vom "Espurgatoire S. Patrice"*, p. 26; "quorum relationes et dicta iussit beatus Patricius scribi in ecclesia illa"; *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii*, III iii, 1; cfr. Warnke (hrsg. von), *Das Buch vom "Espurgatoire S. Patrice"*, p. 32; "redeuntium autem narrationes et dicta a canonicis loci illius sunt in monasterio scripta". The acknowledgement by the community of the fulfilment of the initiation rituals represents a fundamental step in the shaman-to-be's initiation. See MAZZI 1990, 15.

<sup>33</sup> See CARDINI 1981, 36.

### 3. Fighting in ecstasy: some examples from Rumanian folklore

In spite of the efforts of the Church, ecstatic battles did not remain the exclusive prerogative of the visitors to saint Patrick's purgatory – subject to severe regulations as a guarantee against possible deviant outcomes – but they kept on representing a salient feature of the beliefs of many European peoples. From this point of view, Rumanian folklore offers interesting perspectives, particularly because it appears to be the expression of an archaic popular culture that was subject to less rigid ecclesiastical control in comparison to that exercised over the rest of central and western Europe.

#### 3.1. The *strigoi*

In Rumania the term *strigoi* can be referred both to living and dead beings<sup>34</sup>. The *strigoi morți* are spirits that were not able to cross the threshold of the Otherworld: this can be a consequence of their weakness, of their incapability to find the way, or of the missed fulfilment of the rituals prescribed for the funeral. The souls of these restless dead have the power to visit our world especially on the occasion of ritual or calendar feasts (one of the most dangerous is the night of *Sângiorz*) when the two dimensions come into contact with each other and the passage from one to the other is considered particularly easy.

The *strigoi vii* ('alive'), can become such by chance or voluntarily, by learning the techniques of magic<sup>35</sup>. There are also those who became so because they were predestined (they are also defined *moroance*, *moroni*, *bosârci*, *vâlve*): signs of this predestination include being born 'with the tail' 'with a bonnet on the head', or 'with the shirt' (i.e. 'with the caul', 'behind the veil'), expressions that mean they were born in their amniotic

<sup>34</sup> On 'alive' and 'dead' *strigoi* see MUSLEA, BÎRLEA 1970, 244–270; and GHINOIU 1997, 193–194.

<sup>35</sup> See BENGA 2006, 15–29, p. 20.



sack<sup>36</sup>: this sack was then preserved by the midwife so that once adult they would be able to use it to become invisible. But there is the belief that they would become such also because they were conceived on the eve of a religious feast or during the feast itself, when religion prescribes abstinence from sexual intercourse<sup>37</sup>. They are believed to have a supernatural faculty that allows them, among other things, to penetrate into houses through closed doors or to play with bears and wolves without danger. Besides, they are thought to have the ability to leave their own bodies to take part in battles against other people with the same powers: ecstatic battles fought entirely unintentionally and in a state of unconsciousness<sup>38</sup>.

According to a common belief this happens especially on particular nights, mostly those of the feasts of saint George and saint Andrew, and that the *strigoi* take back their human form by doing three pirouettes. Their souls are said to leave their bodies while they are sleeping<sup>39</sup> and wander in the air riding horses, brooms or barrels. On these occasions they gather far from the villages, in wood clearings or in places generically defined as 'at the end of the world' or 'where the grass doesn't grow'. Once there, they take human form again and start fighting against each other with sticks, axes, sickles and other tools, in a competition to ensure themselves fertility.

In some places these spirits are believed to represent the different villages, therefore the winners are thought to gain wealth and prosperity for their village, to the detriment of near villages<sup>40</sup>. The tradition holds that these clashes last for the whole night, at the end of which the fighters are reconciled, sorry for having attacked each other. They finally return ex-

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<sup>36</sup> This trait recalls the Friulian *benandanti*: see GINZBURG 1996, 23.

<sup>37</sup> See BENGA 2006, 24.

<sup>38</sup> The same thing happens to the *benandanti*: see GINZBURG 1996, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Another trait in common with the *benandanti*: see GINZBURG 1996, 26-27.

<sup>40</sup> BENGA 2006, 23, note 30.

hausted to their own houses and beds, pale, unaware of what has happened to them, and they fall into a deep sleep.

Little is known about the meaning and the purpose of these night-time battles: a parallel can be established with the beliefs related to the Friulian *benandanti* – who are called to fight in ecstasy on particular nights, too<sup>41</sup> – and with the myth of the ‘wild hunt’ or ‘ghostly army’, well attested in the whole west of Europe since the Middle Ages<sup>42</sup>.

All *strigoi*, both ‘alive’ and ‘dead’, are attributed with the same ‘evil’ powers that usually belong to witches: they are believed to be able to spread epidemics among men and cattle, to give people the ‘evil eye’, to cause drought by ‘binding’ rain, to drain milk from cows, and above all to cast spells to harm others. Besides, they are thought to have metamorphic abilities that allow them to change into dogs, cats, wolves, horses, pigs, toads and other animals. According to an ancient custom, loud noises such as from shouting or playing horns and bugles are necessary to send them away or prevent them from coming<sup>43</sup>.

### 3.2. The *iele* (*zîne*, *Rusali*)

The Rumanian term *zînă* derives from Latin *Diana*, that

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<sup>41</sup> That is, on the nights of Ember, i.e. the four sets of three days within the same week (Wednesday, Friday and Saturday) the Christian ritual later adopted as feasts designed to invoke and thank the providence of God for the fruit of the four seasons. In an older and more archaic agrarian calendar, these days represented the ‘crisis’ of the cyclical seasonal changes and the risks underlying the transition from one season to another. The winter Ember Days fall between the third and fourth Sundays of Advent, the spring ones between the first and second Sundays of Lent, the summer ones between Pentecost and the Feast of the Holy Trinity, the autumn ones between the third and fourth Sundays of September, i.e. after the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September). This calendar connotation also shows clear affinities with the set of beliefs shared by the *benandanti*, who are believed to separate from their bodies to fight in ecstasy against the forces of evil – identified with ‘witches’ – precisely on the Thursday nights of Ember. See GINZBURG, 1996, 36–37.

<sup>42</sup> This myth develops from the belief in the periodic – but not accidental – appearance of creatures coming from the Otherworld, ghost armies mostly made up of dead spirits on their way back to the land of the living (or simply passing by). See MAISEN 2001.

<sup>43</sup> See BENGA 2006, 17.

probably replaced the local name of an autochthonous Daco-Getic goddess. The antiquity of the traditions related to the 'Rumanian Diana' is demonstrated by both documentary and folkloric evidence<sup>44</sup>. At the beginning of the XVIII century Dimitrie Cantemir provides an interesting testimony of these traditions:

*Dzina*, quam vocem a Dianae denominatione deductam suspirareris. Raro tamen singulari numero eam celebrant, sed plerumque plurali *Dzinele* utuntur, feruntque virgines esse formosissimas et venustatis largitrices.<sup>45</sup>

The *zîne* appear to have a rather ambivalent nature. They can be cruel, and for this reason it is advisable not to pronounce their name: so they are referred to as 'fairy godmothers', 'the ladies', 'the virgins', 'the Saints of the night', 'the Generous ones', *Rusalii* or simply 'them': *iele*. The latter are also mentioned by Cantemir, who, however, distinguishes them from 'fairy godmothers', whom he calls *ursitelle*:

*Heoile*: in lugubribus carminibus utuntur, non interiectionis in modum, sed ita ut certam quandam personam indigitare videatur.<sup>46</sup>

*Ursitelle*: existimant esse duas virgines, quae nascenti infanti adstent, eique pro lubitu animi et corporis dotes tribuant, et cuncta fausta aequae ac infausta, quae ipsi per totum vitae cursum accidere deberent, praedestinent.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, the term *Rusalii* originally had a more specific meaning as well, as it properly designated the spirits of the dead, that the ancient Slavic religion identified with some female aquatic divinities<sup>48</sup>. Their designation derives from the

<sup>44</sup> See ELIADE 1975, 159–160.

<sup>45</sup> Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Pars tertia: "De statu ecclesiastico et litterario Moldaviae", Caput I: "De religione moldavorum".

<sup>46</sup> Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Pars tertia: "De statu ecclesiastico et litterario Moldaviae", Caput I: "De religione moldavorum".

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> See GINZBURG 2008, 168. See also LITSAS 1976, 447–465.

religious feast of the same name (recalling the Roman *rosalia* festival<sup>49</sup> on which it was superimposed), since they were believed to wander in the night during Whitsuntide.

But the beliefs about these mythical entities also reveal interesting points of contact with those concerning the Friulian *benandanti* as well as, in more generic terms, with cults or practices of ecstatic nature. More recent testimonies indicate that in some women there was a particular tendency to fall into ecstasy during Whitsuntide; these women claimed that in that state of trance they had the opportunity to talk to God and the Saints, to alive and dead people, thus acquiring particular abilities to cure people and cattle. This condition, that could begin to manifest itself in childhood, was also named – certainly in connection with the feast it was related to – ‘becoming *rusalie*’<sup>50</sup>.

### 3.3. The *călușari*

The *călușari* are members of a male confraternity that practises a ritual acrobatic dance – the *căluș* – during which, with an overwhelming dynamism, they reproduce the tumultuous gallop of horses, thus giving the impression of flying.

The mythical patron of the group is Doamna Zînelor<sup>51</sup>, mistress of a fairy world, who is sometimes identified with Irodiada and Arada<sup>52</sup>: Mircea Eliade has related them to the female divinities associated to the different ecstatic cults of European folklore, divinities that the religious orthodoxy has interpreted – simplifying – as equivalents or substitutes for Diana<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> The celebration of the *rosalia*, connected to the cult of Silvanus and to the cult of the dead, took place in various regions of the Roman Empire between late May and mid-June. It had an enduring popularity especially in the Daco-Scythian provinces.

<sup>50</sup> See GINZBURG 2008, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Literally, ‘the mistress of the fairies’.

<sup>52</sup> There is an evident etymological connection to Herodias, a mythical character artificially superimposed on the biblical figure of Salome: in medieval penitentials this figure was associated with female ecstatic cults the inquisitors later interpreted as witchcraft practices.

<sup>53</sup> See ELIADE 1975, 160–161.

The etymology of the term *căluș* is based on Rumanian *cal*, 'horse' (of which it appears to be a diminutive) that derives from vulgar Latin *caballus*<sup>54</sup>: if on the one hand this derivation seems supported by the mimetic quality of some moments of the dance, which intend to imitate the running of horses, on the other hand it establishes a clear link to an animal which is symbolically connected to war and – above all – to the Otherworld and the fertility attributed to the spirits of the dead. But in Rumanian language the word *cal* can also designate an object that, if kept in the mouth, prevents from speaking<sup>55</sup>: this might represent a clue to the presence of a mute character in the group, or to the ritual silence the participants must observe during some moments of the ritual.

The oldest documentary evidence concerning the *călușari* dates back to the beginning of the XVIII century and comes from Moldova: once again, it is Dimitrie Cantemir who writes about them in his *Descriptio Moldaviae*, where he calls them *calucenii* and describes their traditions and beliefs:

Praeter ista saltus genera, quae in festivitibus locum habent, aliud est superstitiosius, quod ex impari saltatorum numero, septem, novem et undecim, debet componi. *Calucenii* isti vocantur, et semel in anno congregantur, vestibus muliebribus induti: caput corona cingunt, e foliis absinthii plexa, et aliis interstincta floribus, vocem mentiuntur femineam, et ne dignosci possint, alba tela faciem contegunt. Cuncti nudos in manibus gestant gladios, quibus illico transfoderetur, quisquis plebeius faciei ipsorum tegmen detrahere auderet. Id enim ipsis privilegium antiqua consuetudo concessit, adeo, ut neque in iudicio homicidii ea de causa accusari possint. Dux coetus vocatur *staricza*, secundus primicerius, cuius officium est, ut quod saltus genus *staricza* exerceri velit, exquirat, sociisque clam indicet, ne populus saltus nomen prius

<sup>54</sup> See ELIADE 1973, 115–122.

<sup>55</sup> In fact the term *căluș* indicates both the horse's bridle, which could be made of wood or iron, and something close to 'gag', i.e. a piece of cloth – mainly, but possibly made of other materials – which is put in someone's mouth so that that person cannot speak.

audiat, quam conspiciat oculis. Habent enim plusquam centum diversa metra, et ad ea compositos choros, nonnullos adeo artificiosos, ut qui saltant, vix terram tangere, sed quasi in aëre volare videantur. Ita per decem dies, qui Assumptionis Iesu Christi et Pentecostes ferias intercedunt, continuis laboribus exercentur, cunctaque oppida et pagos saltando currendove peragrant. Intra illud tempus nunquam nisi sub tecto templi dormiunt, creduntque se, si in alio loco cubaverint, statim ab *Aneraidibus*, quas *Frumosas* vocant, vexatum iri. Porro, si qui Caluczanorum coetus alii in via obviam factus fuerit, pugnandum est utrique, debellati viam victoribus cedunt, compositisque pacis legibus, per novennium se alteri coetui inferiores profiteri debent. In tali proelio si quis fuerit interemtus, nullum datur iudicium necnon quis ille fuerit a iudice exquiritur. Qui semel in talem coetum fuerit receptus, per novennium singulis annis eundem frequentare debet: quod si id neglexerit, eum a maligno spiritu corripit, et a frumosis vexari perhibent. Superstitiosa plebs illis morborum chronicorum expellendorum potestatem adscribit. Fit autem sanatio hoc modo: prostrato in terram aegroto, illi suos saltus incipiunt, et notato cantilenae loco iacentem a capite usque ad calcem per seriem calcant, tandem verba aliqua studio concepta eius auribus insusurrant, morbumque exire iubent. Hoc si ter per triduum repetierint, plerumque spei eventus respondet, morbique difficilimi, qui expertissimorum medicorum artem diu deluserant, hac ratione facili negotio expellentur. Adeo fides etiam in superstitione valet.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, the characteristics of *căluș* dances are not homogeneous in the Rumanian territory: the most archaic features are observed in the Danubian area, where it has properly ceremonial purposes and is practised in Whitsuntide (*Rusalii*) by an odd number of men who serve the function of curing illnesses and protecting the community<sup>57</sup>. On the contrary, in Transylvania the number of dancers is even, and their per-

<sup>56</sup> Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Pars secunda: Politica, Caput XVII: "De moldavorum moribus". See also GINZBURG 2008, 169. And ELIADE 1973, 117.

<sup>57</sup> GIURCHESCU 1992, 32–33.

formances – whose purpose is mainly to entertain – primarily take place between Christmas and New Year's eve. According to Anca Giurchescu, such discrepancies attest to different stages of evolution which can be related to the expansion of the 'ritual' form of the *căluș* from the Danubian region to the surrounding areas (Transylvania, Banato, south of Moravia) at the turn of the XX century.

This chronological shift has originally been explained as the progressive fragmentation of the tight relation between the *călușari* and the *iele*, whose manifestations and powers are considered to be more intense during the Whitsuntide (*Rusalii*). Consequently, the connection with ritual time presumably got weaker and the ritual itself lost its internal coherence. In this regard, it needs to be noticed that this shift from summer to winter and from a solstice phase to another caused the *călușari* to lose all contact with their original system of myths and cults – which was dominated by supernatural female forces – and to enter the sphere of influence of another mythical system, marked by solar symbology and male pre-eminence<sup>58</sup>.

With regards to this chronological alternation, Carlo Ginzburg advances the hypothesis that it may reflect “the probable correspondence between two different calendars, a solar one and lunar one”<sup>59</sup>. This correspondence is strengthened by the funeral connotations shared by the so-called ‘Twelve days’ (the days between Christmas and the Epiphany) and the *rosalia*, the Latin spring feast of roses connected to Silvano and to the cult of the dead that had precociously spread in Roman Dacia and that eventually merged with Whitsun; this semantic homology certainly facilitated – if not determined – the displacement of the *căluș* from one extreme of the seasonal cycle to the other.

Therefore, the double placement of *călușari* dances in the calendar might confirm their tight bond with the Otherworld,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 1992, 36–37.

<sup>59</sup> See GINZBURG 2008, 167.

of which they are mediators: in fact they are considered as personifications of the dead<sup>60</sup>, and therefore are thought to be able to cure diseases whose origin is not 'natural', but is rather attributed to the hostile intervention of dark forces.

Thus, the main role of the *călușari* is protecting the community and its territory from the destructive action of the *iele*, who belong to wild nature, to the other world, and who are connected to magic, illness and death. Vice versa, the *călușari* are attributed healing powers, particularly the ability to cure the diseases provoked by the *iele*.

The relationship between *călușari* and *iele* is very complex and includes similarity, polarity and ambivalence. The former are believed to be a sort of human counterpart to the latter, and in fact they share some common features such as white clothes, some objects that are thought to possess magic powers (e.g., flag and bells), the 'familiarity' with certain plants (garlic, mugwort), the use of specific instruments (bagpipe and violin) and a similar fast circular 'air dance'. Polarity is mainly expressed by the oppositions male vs female, day (sun) vs night (moon), cultivated vs wild, health vs illness, life vs death<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, the dancers ask for the protection of Herodiada but they risk to be victims of her crowd of disciples, that is the *iele*; they imitate their flight, but at the same time they emphasize their solidarity with the horse, a 'male' symbol par excellence<sup>62</sup>.

The above-mentioned ambivalence is confirmed by the belief that the *călușari* must first fall under the possession of the *iele*, and only later do they acquire supernatural powers that they in turn re-direct against these potentially hostile creatures, with the purpose to defend the community from their interference<sup>63</sup>. This *iter* is parallel to the process shamans undergo in

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> GINZBURG 2008, 34.

<sup>62</sup> ELIADE 1975, 162.

<sup>63</sup> GIURCHESCU 1992, 34. With regard to this, it is important to underline



order to acquire their new *status*: they have to fall victim to illness and then overcome it, to earn the power to cure it in others<sup>64</sup>.

This contradictory relationship with the *iele* explains, among other things, why the ritual of the *căluș* originally took place on the occasion of the *Rusalii*, whose date coincided with the change of season, the rebirth of nature and the celebration of ancestors: in fact, it was believed to represent one of the most critical moments of the annual cycle, since that astral conjunction gave the spirits of the dead the opportunity to return to the earth, and therefore the activity of the *iele* was particularly intense and dangerous<sup>65</sup>.

The *călușari*'s dance has a strong performative character: dancers interpret the defeat inflicted to the *iele* through movements, gestures and songs. In fact, this performance evokes the struggle of their 'army', armed with sticks arrayed in defence of the community, against the *iele*, invisible and dangerous enemies that jeopardize the survival of their society and that they alone can see.

### 3.4. The feast of the *Drăgaică* or *Sânziene*

The *călușari*'s dance has a female equivalent in the feast of the *Drăgaică* or *Sânziene*: the term *drăgaică* (<Bulg. *dragaika*) in Rumanian indicates the markets that are held every year between 15 and 24 June, the knolls where young women gather to practise dancing and, above all, those who perform this ritual, both as human beings and as their supernatural equivalents: the latter are attributed good powers (e.g. bestowing magical properties upon curative herbs, protecting seeds

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the similarities with the *benandanti*, who on certain days of the year are called to fight in ecstasy against evil creatures to protect the community from their wicked powers. Both *călușari* and *benandanti* also have the role of mediators with the Otherworld. See GINZBURG 2008, 166–172; and Id., *I Benandanti, passim*.

<sup>64</sup> To this respect see ELIADE 1999, 39; and HALIFAX 1982, 13 and 18.

<sup>65</sup> GIURCHESCU 1992, 34–35.

from fire) but also evil ones (such as punishing those who do not celebrate this feast properly by paralysing them).

The etymology of *Sânziene* is more uncertain: some speculate that the term might derive from Lat. *sancta Diana* (>*Sânziena*), others suggest from *sanctus Ioannes*, in consideration of the chronological coincidence – or superimposition – of the two feasts. It is important to remember that *sânziene* in Rumanian is also the name of the *Galium vero*, whose yellow or white flowers bloom at this time of the year<sup>66</sup>.

The first etymology implies a connection with Diana, and therefore with some female ecstatic cults later assimilated to witchcraft<sup>67</sup>: although only partially reliable, it is supported by a the early testimony (beginning of the XVIII century) of Anton Maria Del Chiaro, who sojourned at the Wallachian court from 1710 to 1717. In his *Istoria delle moderne rivoluzioni della Valachia*<sup>68</sup> he records this custom and relates it to saint John the Baptist's feast day, then comparing – rather arbitrarily, or because of the coincidence in the calendar – the dance of the only girl in female clothes (being the other ones dressed as men), who held a sabre, to the dance of the biblical Herodias.

However, this ritual had already been described by Dimitrie Cantemir, who recorded it at a possibly more archaic stage:

Dragaica, Ceres indigitari videtur. Etenim eo anni tempore, quando segetes maturescere incipiunt, congregantur, quotquot fuerint, vicinorum pagorum puellae, ac inter se venustiore et forma praestantior sub *Dragaicae* nomine eligunt. Hanc in agros magno comitatu deductam, corona et aristis plexa, pluribusque stropholis phrygio opere pictis exornant, ac claves horreorum manibus eius suspendunt. Sic ornata Dragaica, extensis manibus, et stropholis vento expositis, ita ut volantis speciem prae se ferat, ex agro domum redit, et omnes quotquot in eam societatem iver-

<sup>66</sup> See Pop, "Cerimoniali magico-religiosi romeni", p. 8, notes 1 and 2.

<sup>67</sup> See GINZBURG 2008, 65–98 ("Al seguito della dea").

<sup>68</sup> Anton Maria Del Chiaro, *Istoria delle moderne rivoluzioni della Valachia*, in Venezia, per Antonio Bortoli, 1718.

ant, pagos, cantando et saltando peragrat, stipata cunctis reliquis sodalibus quae eam canticis sat concinne compositis sororem et dominam quam saepissime vocitant. Huius honoris villicae Moldavorum puellae plerumque sunt avidissimae, licet perpetua consuetudine cantavit, ne ea, quae Dragaica personam gesserit, intra triennium marito elocetur.

The *Drăgaica* is an agrarian ritual that is still practiced on the day of saint John (or *Sânziene*), in order to bring prosperity to the community and to protect the crops, especially cereals. It is celebrated with a dance performed by a group of 5–10 girls, one of which – exactly as Cantemir reports – is chosen as *Drăgaica*, and declared ‘Mistress of the crowd’<sup>69</sup>: she is dressed as a bride and adorned with ears of wheat, while the other girls are dressed in white, wear colourful scarves<sup>70</sup> and a little crown of *Galium verum* (*sânziene*) flowers, and hold handkerchiefs they then tear apart so they can give out the shreds to the inhabitants of the nearby houses.

They walk in procession across the village and the fields and every so often they stop at crossroads to dance in a ring. In some areas half the group wear male clothes and hold sickles or sabres<sup>71</sup>, and once at the crossroads they violently clash against other equally ‘armed’ groups coming from nearby villages. There is the belief that thanks to such dances – and clashes – fruit ripen earlier and do not get spoiled.

This feast marks an important phase in the rural calendar, because it is close to the summer solstice which, just like the other seasonal key moments (the winter solstice and the two equinoxes), has been long considered as the time in which the

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<sup>69</sup> This detail induces us to carefully consider the parallel Del Chiaro establishes with Erosiade, but above all the complex relationships between *dicta* and *facta*, between beliefs (or legends) and ceremonial traditions, and ultimately between myth and ritual.

<sup>70</sup> Is interesting to notice that the ribbons, or the multicoloured scarves, are already attested in Cantemir’s *Descriptio*.

<sup>71</sup> This represents an important element of continuity with respect to what Del Chiaro wrote in his work.

borders between worlds – this world and the Otherworld – and conditions – the dead, the living, the gods – become transitory and permeable, and therefore susceptible to be crossed in both directions: if on the one hand evil entities can easily harm men, on the other hand men have the opportunity, if they act properly, to positively influence their own future and that of their community, or simply make truthful predictions. The connection with the world of the dead is also demonstrated by the custom of collecting alms, in which the offerings – generally fruit: apples and apricots – are intended to propitiate the favour of the dead, of whom the beggars represent a sort of ritual ‘double’<sup>72</sup>.

In fact, the feast of the *Drăgaică* appears to have an ambivalent nature, as it catalyses good and evil forces: if this mythical entity can facilitate good results in farm work and rich harvests, it harshly punishes those who do not follow its precepts or who violate its prohibitions. But in the *Drăgaică* we can recognise a fantastic creature similar to fairies and to the other female entities associated to Whitsuntide, a creature that men need to honour if they want the earth and the fields to bear good fruit.

From the dreamlike, ecstatic battles fought by the *strigoi vii* to the choreographic ones performed by the *călușari* and by the young dancers of the *Drăgaică*, these examples drawn from Rumanian folklore wonderfully illustrate the vitality of some pre-Christian beliefs founded upon oneiric journeys and ecstatic ritual fights, a pattern documented in many other European regions<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> See Pop, “Cerimoniali magico-religiosi romeni”, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> See ELIADE 1975, 158–159.

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### Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the traces that shamanic thought and culture have left in European medieval texts. It is particularly interesting to note how many elements of this system of thought are preserved in medieval literary works by Christian authors. A privileged observatory is offered by visionary literature, in which converge many characteristic topoi of the shamanic imaginary. In this regard, there are very interesting descriptions of the Other World, its topography and inhabitants. Likewise, we also find some illuminating forms of access to the ecstatic experience: in relation to these I consider that the XII century represents an important borderline era, which later was most influential regarding the forms of search for the vision.

With these premises it will be interesting to compare some forms of shamanic ecstasies attested in the modern age on European territory: an example is offered by night-time battles that some predestined people fight on specific days of the year against maleficent spirits in order to safeguard their own community. Italian *benandanti* and Romanian *strigoi* share the same mythical and symbolic horizons and offer numerous elements of reflection regarding the *longue durée* of some cultural phenomena.

**Keywords:** shamanic culture, medieval texts, visionary literature, Other World, Rumanian folklore, benandanti, călușari, strigoi