THE MYTH/ SYMBOL OF THE WOLF
IN SPARTA, DACIA AND ROME

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ABSTRACT

Since prehistoric times, the wolf has represented more than a wild animal, it has always been a genuine symbol of power. Its totemic value can be best noticed in the Balkans, and not only. In Asia as well, the wolf constitutes one of the main totemic symbols, being mainly related to the cult of the leader.

In the Balkans, this myth/symbol was highly valued, especially by the Spartans and Dacians. Thus, the Spartans connected the wolf to the trial of young people's maturity, and for the Dacians it represented a real state symbol, their flag (a wolf head) being called draco by the Romans.

The wolf had an obvious political value in the Roman world; it was a symbol that the Romans had borrowed from the “mysterious Etruscans”. It is anyway certain that the seal of Rome, Lupa capitolina, is an Etruscan creation, the Roman taking over its symbolic value and that of alma mater from the Etruscans, not only the political one. At the same time, this symbol can support the hypothesis of the origin of the Etruscans in the Balkans/Asia Minor where this totemic animal played a predominant role.

The symbol of the wolf is still found today in different stylized forms, marks or mascots, so is a regenerating myth.

KEYWORDS: wolf, symbol, Spartans, Dacians, Etruscans, Romans.

Introduction

In order to prove the importance of the wolf’s symbol/ myth for the Dacians, Romans and Spartans one must observe the implications of this symbol for the Indo-Europeans, as well as for the Thracians, the most important Indo-European population in the Balkans and beyond, the
predecessors of the Dacians.

In the Indo-European world, the wolf - *wlkwo* - was an eponymous totem for many nations in this group of peoples, the most accurate expression of their militaristic nature, since they were the people that conquered much of the world in antiquity.

The wolf had a very diverse mythology and symbolism. For the Arians, it appears as a character in *Rig Veda*, in which the wolf is a beast seeming to arise out of chaos.

This totemic symbol/myth was widely inherited in the most important branches of the Indo-Europeans: by the Greeks (especially the Spartans), the Dacians (actually, all Thracians, a very important Indo-European people, and the Dacians who were, as Herodotus used to describe them, “the most important and numerous of the Thracians” for whom the symbol of this animal became the most representative) and the Romans, where the symbol reaches its peak and gains its political universality, becoming the hallmark of Rome, although its roots are Etruscan.

As a warrior people, the Thracians had many totems patronizing this profession, the wolf being one of the most accurate. It is not by chance that it appears as a totem- State symbol for the Dacians, the Thracian tradition being decisive in this transformation.

For the Thracians, the wolf was culturally present, especially in their art, the Balkans revealing more and more artefacts depicting the majestic animal. Thus, a religious vase depicts a fighting, dynamic scene between a Thracian horseman and a wolf. The wolf is depicted attacking the horse. Likewise, on a golden plaque, a wolf is depicted attacking a deer; also an assault scene, most expressively depicted. Both in the Thracians’ art and the Dacians’ art, the wolf stands out as an essential element.

1. The Greek (Spartan) wolf

In the most important Indo-European ideology, the Greek ideology, the wolf appears as one of Zeus’ embodiments, through its attribute of *Lykaios*, also being one of Apollo’s attributes, the God of light, probably because of its very important qualities for predators, the night vision, thus defeating darkness. Apollo, the Greek god of light also had the attribute of *Lyceios* from *lykos* - wolf, since he used to protect the herds from wolves. The Greeks had many names reminding of

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5. *Apud* Anna Ferrari, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, traducere de Dragoș Cojocaru, Emanuela Stoleriu, Dana
wolves, especially with its light-related symbols. Apparently, the names used to come from Apollo’s valences, since after birth his mother became a she-wolf, hence Apollo’s epithet of Lyceios. Also a Lyceios, but this time depicting Zeus, was a very honoured deity in Arcadia, a rather fertile deity, Zeus bringing, from this posture, the rain as a result of blood sacrifices. In Greek mythology, the wolf was also a symbol of a guardian that punished those disobeying Gods’ commandments or violating the moral norms. Cerberus is also a wolf derivate - the dog.

The Greeks used to depict it as a war hero, a sort of knight of the light. The Greeks’ she-wolf had also the role of a nurse. Hades, the god of the Inferno, also has the appearance of a wolf, through his clothes. As a wolf, Zeus had also a beneficial role, sending rains that brought wealth.

In the Greek world, for the Spartans, the myth/symbol of the wolf had the most impact. This totem was most suitable for Spartan militarism. Sparta was organized as a “military fraternity” and Apollo was one of the most adored gods, together with his wolf valence. Artemis, the goddess of hunting, was honoured under the appellative of Orthia, as a fertility patroness (an attribute of the Balkan wolf). The military fraternity included only Spartan citizens. The ideal of the Spartan education was to create the most dedicated citizen, one dedicated to the state, body and soul. Sparta was a State that made its warriors faithful to the State, not to a leader.

Considering its citizens’ creation and homogeneity, Sparta was a: “military community”. Resembling a wolf pack, Sparta lived to create this community.

The educational institution which ensured this community was organized under the close supervision of the State it was called agoge, and its purpose was to bring unity in the young Spartans’ minds and actions, for the State that educates them. The education of Spartan kids was

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7 Ibidem.


made under a strict discipline; they were considered a wolf pack, the State being the *alpha male*, hence the Spartans’ subordination and fidelity (actually their patriotism) remained a model even today: “It is a commonly known fact that especially in Sparta, citizens showed perfect obedience to the authorities and laws... this beautiful discipline of the Spartan society...”\(^{12}\) Also, young Spartans were not treated only as a pack, but also as lonely wolves, if we take into consideration their maturity test, *krypteia*\(^{13}\), or the two year secret life, when every Spartan had to survive as a lonely wolf.

Consequently, for the Spartans, the wolf is not a simple totem, it is the very symbol of their State, and its citizens are nothing but the wolf pack for the *alpha male* that is Sparta itself. Furthermore, the author of Sparta’s Great *Rethra*, Lycurgus, had a name also derived from the word wolf, or, in Greek language *lykos*. Bizarrely or not, the Spartans were invincible for many years just as their totemic animal was never tamed.

### 2. The Roman wolf

For the Romans, the symbol/myth of the wolf could be included in the category of “memorial myths”\(^ {14}\), according to Victor Kernbach’s theory, because this totem is present as a key-character in the legend that depicts the establishment of the famous citadel. The wolf, through its female variant, the she-wolf, becomes one with Rome, as a symbol for its “eternal character”\(^ {15}\). Although *lupa capitolina* is an Etruscan work of art, it was assimilated by Rome, becoming a true *alma mater* for its people.\(^ {16}\)

The presence of the wolf in the Etruscan culture (people of still unknown origins) makes the hypothesis of their Balkan origins acceptable, especially since the wolf was at the time a predominant symbol in that part of Europe. The fact is that the wolf was one of the sacred animals, assimilated both from the Greek and the Etruscan culture.

For these warriors, the wolf had a military symbolism rather than a metaphysical one. Thus, Mars, the god of war, was many times represented as a wolf.\(^ {17}\) Also common was the wolf as a

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\(^{16}\) To see our book Mădălina Strechie, *Noțiuni de civilizație română*, Craiova, Editura Universitară, 2008, p. 32.

\(^{17}\) Apud Anna Ferrari, *op. cit.*
symbol of pleasures while the she-wolf was associated with the fertility cult and for the Etruscans, the wolf had a role of a psychopomp\footnote{Ibidem.}, thus the animal borrowed human valences.

The Roman wolf was first of all a symbol for the warrior equipped with discipline, strength, and resistance. The cult of the Latin wolf most certainly had many military valences, especially through its manifestations; the \textit{Luperci} used to organize processions on the streets of Rome where they used to chastise women to make them fertile.\footnote{Jean Vertemont, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 205.}

Despite its symbolism, especially the military one, the animal did not have, for the Romans, monstrous attributes, on the contrary, its attributes where particularly human, if we consider that prostitutes used to be called she-wolves. There were also names connected with this symbol, such as \textit{Lucania}, that can be translated as the \textit{land of the wolves}. Also for the Romans the wolf was an attribute of the gods, and sometimes it even had the role of keeping them apart from the human world, as the pastoral god \textit{Lupercus}, a very ancient god whose attributes where those to defend the herds from the wolves.\footnote{Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 515-516.} This denomination actually comes from two words: \textit{lupos arcere}=\textit{to scar away the wolves}, a famous celebration around which the wolf-priests or the \textit{Luperci} were organized\footnote{Apud Coordonatori: Zoe Petre, Alexandra Lițu, Cătălin Pavel, \textit{Dicționar de mitologie greco-romană. Zei, eroi, mituri}, București, Editura Corint, 2011, pp. 241-242.}. In the cult of this priests, the symbol of the moon was very important (a symbol associated with the wolf even in our own mythology), together with animal sacrifices (sacrifying a dog, an animal that came from the wolf) and ceremonial dances.

3. \textbf{The Dacian wolf}

The wolf was the Dacians’ characteristic totem. It can find its origins in the Thracian and Dacian war gods. For the Dacians, it even became the symbol of their warriors, and even their state flag. Apparently, this animal was one of the “heraldic tattoos” of the Dacian tribes. As Mircea Eliade says, there is a strong connection between the church and the army and even a category of “military-priests”, described by the great scholar as the “wolf-warriors”.\footnote{Cf. Romulus Vulcănescu, \textit{Mitologie română}, București, Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1985, p. 92, p. 97, p.113.} The Dacians also had elite troops which used to wear wolf skins in battles.\footnote{Ibidem, p. 499.} The Dacians’ wolf-flag gained major importance in celebrations or war ceremonies when, apparently, the Dacians used to wear wolf costumes. The Romanian onomatology has a symbol/ myth of the wolf that is very well represented. This animal is depicted in a lot of “superstitions, beliefs and traditions which advocate for the
heredity of the lycanthropic theme in the Romanian mythology”.24

Romulus Vulcănescu depicts the merger between the two worlds, by analyzing the work of the great Mircea Eliade, Dacian and Roman, the building civilizations of the Romanian culture, both of them sharing this totemic symbol of the wolf. The Dacians were considered wolves and the Romans were the sons of the wolf-god Mars, one of Thracian origins, nursed by a she-wolf, which would later on become the Roman symbol by excellence, and thus the Romanian people being situated under a double „sign of the wolf”.25

The symbol of the wolf was present throughout the Charpatian-Danubian-Pontic space for a very long time, even before the Dacians, since it appears as a stylized, as well as a defined motive on the Cucuteni ceramics. This symbol is also well represented in the Dacian art. It was depicted on many Dacian art objects, as the ones discovered on the Dacian site Cârlomănești, where a statue was discovered, depicting a wolf with the body arched in an attack position.26 This animal had a close connection with the gods, as a god itself, one of the most important elements of Dacian mythology.27

The wolf had a very close connection with the Dacians, including an etymological one. This etymology, like a true linguistic history of the Dacian ethnonym, is analyzed by Mircea Eliade. The great scholar compares various languages from around the Thracians and the Dacians, stating three hypotheses on the Dacian ethnonym, all around the symbol of the wolf.

The first hypothesis, accredited by Mircea Eliade is that the name of the Dacians is mentioned for the first time in the work of Strabon daoi= Dacians, the word that can be found with the Scythians, also meaning wolves. Another ancient author, Hesychius mentions the Dacians using the word daos= wolf in the Phrygian language, (a language that belongs to a Balkan Indo-European people). The wolf appears in the Illyric language as dhaunos, a word that comes, as Mircea Eliade says, from the root dhau= to press, to squeeze, as the Dacian ethnonyme. By comparing the ethnonym, the scientist states another hypothesis according to which the Dacian ethnonym comes from the word davă= citadel, dava being also connected with the totemic animal, as Tomasek stipulates, since it can by translated as the villages of the wolves.28 Mircea Eliade agrees with F. Altheim which proposes that the Dacian ethnonym comes from an adjective that used to describe

24 Ibidem, p. 268.
the main characteristic of the Dacians, “those resembling to the wolves”.

The Romans used to call the Dacians *dahae*, and some Greek historians called them *daai*, denomination very similar to the Persian word *dahae* = *wolf*.

Analyzing all these denominations, obviously similar, Mircea Eliade concluded that many of the Balkan ethnonyms come from the wolf. Many of them were Indo-European, although they were not Dacian, thus this ethnonym can be found in other tribes from Arcadia, Phrygia, Asia Minor, The Caspian Sea and even the Etruscans had the word of *hirpini* = *wolves* (not to mention the artistic work of *The she-wolf*, adopted by the Romans themselves). The equivalence of the Dacians’ ethnonym with a zoonym has, according to Mircea Eliade, a religious justification deriving from a totem with strong roots in the Dacian history. Thus, the Dacians were protected by the Wolf-god, maybe because, like other Indo-European tribes, it was a tribe constantly moving until finding its own territory. The Dacian wolf can be compared with the Spartan wolf. For the Spartans, the wolf appeared in the manhood test of *krypteia* that young Spartans had to overcome by surviving in the wild for two years, like a wolf.29

The theory that the Dacians used to be an immigrant tribe in the Charpato-Danubiano-Pontic space explains their name. This is the second hypothesis issued by Mircea Eliade, a hypothesis that also relates the Dacians to the symbol of the wolf. Mircea Eliade compares the Hittite word for outcasts or fugitives with the word for wolves, the wolf-god protecting all fugitives, outcasts, exiled people, those outside the boundaries of their communities, as the twins Romulus and Remus, as the Greeks had a god-wolf in Delphi that protected those outside the citadel, a god named *Lycoreus*.30

The third hypothesis concerning the Dacian ethnonym is connected with the military symbolism of the wolf. The great religion historian thinks that the name of the Dacians comes from the war rituals or guilds that imitated the behaviour of the wolves, especially since this war fraternities were presented in all Indo-European tribes: Aryans, Persians, Celtics, Romans, Spartans etc. For the Dacians, this would be an Indo-European inheritance31, (by Thracian branch, taking into consideration that, especially with the Thracians, as in Aryans, there was a strong military organization, the warriors also leading the community). This hypothesis exploits the military valences of the wolf, being based on the fact the young warrior becomes a true beast, assimilated in a supernatural matter, the behaviour of the wolf. Mircea Eliade thus concludes that during the great reformer Zarathustra, in the Persian texts, parallels were drawn between the wolf and those outside the law, such as thieves or outlaws. The Persians have a strong symbolism of the wolf, very similar to the one found with the Dacians. They had elite military troopes called *dragons*, a definition of the

30 Ibidem, p. 15.
31 Ibidem, pp. 15-16.
wolf. The word *dragon* comes from the Latin word *draco*, -onis = defining the Dacian flag, a wolf’s head with a dragon’s body.\(^{32}\)

This animal was an important part of the Dacian fauna, together with the bear, another totemic animal for the Dacians.

Mircea Eliade explains that the metamorphose of the zoonym into an ethnonym has, for the Dacians, war valences: 1. the heroism of the Dacian warriors, named wolves; 2. the name given to victorious immigrants, the Dacian wolves, was embraced by the defeated ones.\(^{33}\)

All Mircea Eliade’s research on the symbol/myth of the wolf for the Dacians demonstrates an indestructible bond, a deity for all Dacians and, all together, a common divine ancestor; the Dacians and later, the Romanians are, in the words of Mircea Eliade born “under the sign of the wolf”.\(^{34}\)

### 4. The symbol of the wolf for Romanians

In the Romanian mythology, the wolf has a good side and an evil side. It was considered good because it used to bring a woman’s love and faith (through strands of hair from its fur, an equivalence with the wolf as a symbol of fecundity and pleasures for the Romans), and evil because it could destroy the light, by eating its source. In the popular calendar, many events are centred around the wolf, as a Dacian legacy. In the folk Romanian culture, the wolf has a phychopomp role (as for the Etruscans) by leading the spirit of the dead in the after world. The wolf symbol is also present in various apotropaic rituals. It even has patrons in the Christian calendar, Saint Peter for summer and Saint Andrew for winter and the women had an active role in defending the community from wolves. In the Romanian culture there is even a magic healing ritual connected with wolves, the common belief being that parts of the animal had positive effects on one’s health, especially women, by influencing their fecundity\(^{35}\) (a belief almost identical with the ceremony of the *Luperci*, as mentioned before).

Particularly useful in this healing ritual was a plant called “the werewolf’s tail”, considered as beneficial against the metamorphose into a werewolf. Its denomination could come from the translation of “wolf’s fur”. The werewolves were wolves transformed into people or the other way round. The term comes from the Slavic *vyrkolac* = wolf’s fur, and the most interesting Romanian belief considers the Rainbow itself as a werewolf, in direct connection with the light, the werewolves being those who ate the sun and the moon. Dimitrie Cantemir recalls, in his work,

\(^{32}\) Ibidem, p. 19.

\(^{33}\) Ibidem, p. 21.

\(^{34}\) Ibidem, p. 28.

Descriptio Moldaviae this Romanian ancient belief in werewolves, that he calls pricolici or tricolici\textsuperscript{36}, other synonyms for werewolves.

In Romanian mythology, the wolf appears as a true character with both good and evil valences. Its status was that of a beast that needed to be tamed, a symbol for bravery, wildness and metamorphoses. The wolf also appears as a character in literary works, such as Dimitrie Cantemir’s \textit{Hieroglyphical History}. Of great importance in Romanian mythology is the day of 21\textsuperscript{st} of November and also the date on which Saint Peter is celebrated.\textsuperscript{37}

The Romanian calendar contains “The Days of the Wolf” and “The Congregation of the Wolves” which coincide with the celebration of Saint Peter, as patron of the wolves. This celebration has a much older tradition, possibly Thracian. These ancient traditions are possible since, in the popular belief, the wolf was, at the same time, a totem, a protector, a guide and a patron of the warriors, in one word, a true “mythical alter-ego of man”.\textsuperscript{38}

The werewolf is, in Romanian mythology, a metamorphose of the wolf into man, a fantastic being of cosmic proportion, for that it is seen as a “moon demon, resembling a dog held responsible for eclipses”.\textsuperscript{39} As for the Spartans, the Dacians and the Romanians consider the wolf as a real character, maybe a little controversial, but never submitted, with cosmic powers, and with the moon under its power.

\textbf{Conclusions}

Throughout the ages, the wolf was a very important totem in the world’s mythologies, especially in the Indo-European one. This myth/symbol was embraced in most cultures, revealing its valences. It was a character throughout the world’s literatures, appearing as a protector in the \textit{Jungle Book}, as a surviving hero in Jack London’s \textit{The Call of the Wild} and \textit{White Fang} or an apocalyptical beast in the \textit{Red Riding Hood} and other fairy tales.

In the Romanian culture, the symbol of the wolf guided the Romanian people from its origins, because, as Mircea Eliade stated, we were born “under the sign of the wolf”, from both our parents, the Romans and the Dacians, while preserving the characteristics of the Indo-European wolf. Our ethnonym itself: \textit{valah} comes from the name of the animal that reigns over the family of the canines, according to Mircea Eliade. Its strength, intelligence, hierarchy, discipline, agility and the skill to survive made the wolf become similar to people through metamorphose, as a werewolf,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 387-388.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Mihai Coman, \textit{Bestiarul mitologic românesc}, Bucureşti, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române, 1996, pp. 185-187.
\end{itemize}
a proof of the respect, not of the fear, that it used to inspire in the Romanian collective mental.

Its symbol can be found today in marketing brands, as an exponent of commercial companies or football teams, through its derivate, the dog, but, most of all, it is present as a political model, hence the expression “the young wolves”. Even though part of its relatives, the dogs, were tamed by people, to become their allies, the wolf remained a survivor. This is way its myth/ symbol was regenerated from one mythology to another, over time.

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