

Chapter Four: The Sun

For the Romanian people, the Sun is a living and holy being: Saint Sun. A tale from Neamț County runs: *It is a sin for men to speak ill of the Sun, because if he is annoyed, he will no longer send light and warmth to them. Sometimes, he may even burn them!*

The Sun is portrayed as a beautiful man with a face so bright that the entire Earth is illuminated by it. Daily, the Sun traverses the canopy of heaven, riding a buffalo from early morning to noon (because this uphill way is the more difficult), a horse from midday into the afternoon, and a lion from the afternoon into the evening. Other peasants simplify this to just a buffalo or a bull from morning to noon, and a lion or a horse from noon to evening. It is possible that this belief is connected to the fact that in the summertime, the Sun rises immediately after the constellation of the Bull, and when it sets, the constellation of the Lion (or the Horse in its popular Romanian form) is the first seen in the west.

At evening-tide when the Sun dismounts, he eats a piece of wafer, and drinks a glass of wine; other peasants think that he eats like this three times a day.

After his supper, the Sun travels through “other space”, taramul celalalt, which surrounds the Earth, on foot, and reappears next day in the east. His unseen way between sunset and sunrise passes through underground caverns and hidden vaults.

Some peasants, however, think that the Sun rides only a lion to cover his whole route through the sky. In the evening, tired, he and his lion sleep in a dark place. During their rest, some large monsters transport them back to the east. Next morning, if the Sun slept well, he rises glad and bright, but if he slept badly, he rises angry, and hides his face among the clouds.

The lion does not like to stay near us all the time, so in the winter months, he runs further away from the Earth, to make us ask him to come back closer again.

Here is the peasants’ physical explanation for the Sun: he is formed from hot, bright beams, and because of this, he lights and warms the Earth; or he is a globe surrounded by beams that he sends to us through God’s power.

These beliefs are not far removed from those of the ancients.

To the Greeks, Helios-Hyperion, the brilliant one who walks above, emerged in the east from the course of the River Oceanus, or from a lake formed by this river, and ascended into the sky until he reached the middle-sky, or culmination point. He then descended into the west, touching the Earth again as he sank into Oceanus, according to Homer.

Homer and Hesiod did not say how the Sun then covered the distance from the western Oceanus to that in the east, but the later poets told that the Sun after setting slept in a golden bed with wings, one of Hephaestus’ (Vulcan’s) creations, which transported the Sun on the River Oceanus (which surrounded the Earth) from west to east.

In the *Rig Veda*, the Sun’s disc is compared to a fire-wheel that runs across the sky. This beautifully simple idea was developed by the Greeks in their poetry, where the wheel became a chariot drawn by luminous horses which breathed light and flames. Helios became the grandiose driver of this supernatural chariot. He was a strong, young, beautiful god, with a golden helmet and a glorious mantle, long hair and terrifying looks, who sent rays of light in all directions.

The Romanian peasants transformed the bed with wings into another bed carried by monsters, and the River Oceanus into a road surrounding the Earth. Helios remained a model of masculine beauty, but only his face radiated solar light. The peasants abandoned the superb celestial chariot, making the Sun instead a rider. In exchange, the fiery chariot and horses became those of Saint Ilie, patron saint of thunder and lightning (as we will see in the chapter on atmospheric phenomena), dispossessing Zeus (Jove) of these elements. There is in fact a great similitude between the names Helios and Ilie.

Mythologically, in the winter, Helios goes to visit the happy Ethiopians, like Apollo to the Hyperboreans. Meanwhile in our popular belief, the unhappy Romanians are left to beseech the Sun to return, because he does not like to be with us all year long; but the Sun is indifferent, following his regular pattern in time, like a migratory bird.

