

Chapter Six: Eclipses

Darkenings of the Sun and Moon are called eclipses.

The Romanian people think that eclipses of the Moon exist because the Moon is eaten by unearthly monsters called *vârcolaci* (Latin “worm-like creatures”, from *vermicolacius*, *varkolak* in Slavonic).

The *vârcolaci* are explained in various ways as being:

- ★ a kind of animal smaller than a dog, or simply small dogs;
- ★ *balauri* or *zmei*;
- ★ animals with many mouths like octopus suckers;
- ★ ghosts called *pricolici*;

They also have various origins, including appearing:

- ★ from children who die unbaptized;
- ★ from children born to unwed parents;
- ★ if someone chews maize while poking the fire;
- ★ if someone brushes dust towards the Sun while sweeping their house;
- ★ if a woman spins without a candle in the night.

One important question is, how does the Moon remain whole if she is eaten by the *vârcolaci*? Some people explain this by saying that as the Moon is more powerful than the *vârcolaci*, she can only be bitten by them, because if she were to be swallowed, it would be the end of the world. Thus many peasants make a terrific din when there are eclipses, in order to scare away the *vârcolaci*; they ring the church bells, hit trays, shoot guns, play instruments loudly, and so forth.

Other peasants say that because the Moon is so great, she tires out the *vârcolaci* which attack her, forcing them to liberate her. Still others say that it can all be explained through running; the Moon runs very quickly, and the *vârcolaci* can only nip briefly at her, before falling behind.

Eclipses of the Sun are explained by some peasants just like lunar eclipses; the *vârcolaci* eat the Sun, and the Sun is saved because the lion which he rides fights with the *vârcolaci*, protecting him.

An alternative explanation is that during a solar eclipse, the Moon runs quickly past the Sun, and God darkens the Sun in order that he should not see the Moon, because of their unacceptable love. This belief is actually quite close to reality, because during a solar eclipse, the Moon passes in front of the Sun, which is the cause of the eclipse.

Some peasants say that the Sun, seeing men's wickedness, is disgusted, and hides his face; or the Sun's darkening is a sign from God to cause men to repent their sins. This idea also recurs in an extended form, since there are peasants who think that eclipses of the Sun and Moon happen when God commands the *vârcolaci* to eat them, in order to scare people into abandoning their sinful ways.

Here is a further explanation, with a little poetry to it: *As Saint Sun and Saint Moon are very beautiful, some monsters that live in the sky desire to kiss them. When they try to do so, however, they actually swallow them, but the Sun and Moon are able to draw out of the monsters' mouths, and return more beautiful than before.* A more prosaic explanation also advanced is that the *vârcolaci* gnaw at the Sun and Moon so they can harm us on Earth, but we are very fortunate because the Sun and Moon can run so quickly, and avoid damage.

When eclipses occur, some Romanian peasants consider it necessary to light Easter candles and pray.

As we see, although the peasants are Christian, in their beliefs still exist reminiscences of the ancient Romans, who perceived the Sun and Moon as two deities. The belief that the Sun's disappearance would mean the world's end has its own logic. The most impressive form of this terrible event is the poem “The Dream” by Lord Byron. However, it is easy to imagine what the Earth would be like without the Sun's light and heat. The Romanian people think the same catastrophe would also follow if the Moon failed to light the night, because she is the Sun's sister, and we know that the Moon is seen only because she is illuminated by the Sun, so the end of the Moon's light would indeed precede the end of solar light, as Lord Byron observes in his poem.

I shall conclude these Romanian popular beliefs about eclipses with one more: *In a war, if the Sun darkens, the omens are bad for the Christian race; but if the Moon darkens, it is a bad sign for the Ottomans.* This belief recalls that of Alexander the Great at the Moon's eclipse on the eve of the battle of Arbela.

Connected to these ideas are those of the peasants who think solar and lunar eclipses foretell wars and calamities, but they see these as more especially foretold by comets.

One of the writers about the Indo-European race's origins, Adolphe Pictet, was surprised because he could not find any written mentions of eclipse myths among those of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It seems certain, however, that their beliefs were similar to the Romanians, because they made the same great din during eclipses. Thus Tacitus in his *Annales*, and also Juvenal, comment upon such noises being made during a lunar eclipse. A further old belief concerned the Thessalian witches, who praised themselves as they claimed to be able to save the Moon from the dragon who wanted to swallow her in an eclipse. The Thessalians used their magic, or made a terrific noise by hitting pails, to accomplish this.

The belief that eclipses represent an attack by monsters on the Sun or the Moon is universal, however, and was so from the earliest times, even with the ancient Aryans. In the *Mahabharata*, the old Aryan poem, the demon Rahu surreptitiously drank of the gods' elixir of immortality, but was seen doing so by the Sun and Moon, who told this to Vishnu. Vishnu beheaded Rahu in his anger, but Rahu's head was immortal, and it still follows the two great lights in the sky, trying to swallow them. Naturally, when this fiendish head swallows the Moon or the Sun, the body in question is able to escape again through Rahu's open neck; this is an amusing explanation for the integrity of the Sun or Moon after an eclipse. The same story is found in the *Vishnu Purana*. Later, this myth travelled from India to Mongolia, where Rahu became Araho, and the Mongolians too made a great noise during an eclipse to drive the monster away. Rahu could easily have become "draho", and been mixed up to form the Greek "drakon" and the Latin "draco", becoming "dragon", the Romanian balaur.

So the Romanian belief that the vârcolaci were the balauri clearly has a very early origin. However, the Romanian etymology of the word vârcolac indicates it derives from "wolf", thus the little dogs should actually be little wolves.

This belief about the wolf-vârcolaci must be very old too, and probably also Aryan, since it is found even among the Scandinavians.