

Chapter Three: The Sky, Stars and Falling Stars

For the peasants, the sky is solidly material, with an edge at the place it meets the Earth. It represents the bed clothes covering God's feet. However, the most cultured peasants recognize that we do not actually see the sky, simply its blueness, because it is so very far off.

In their conception, they imagine the sky as being:

- ★ a bridge between the celestial world above and the terrestrial world below;
- ★ a bridge like a thick iron arch which rests on the waters and upon several pillars. Near the waters, it has gates which are used by the angels to inform God about new things they have found in the terrestrial world;
- ★ another Earth, which can be used for ploughing and sowing, because it has fields with no edges (as we saw in the Sky Myth);
- ★ a skin which stays suspended in the air through God's power (as we find in David's Psalm, who said to God: "You who stretched the sky like a skin");
- ★ made of two pieces which can be united or opened along the joint indicated by the Milky Way.

Like the Earth, the sky is perceived as lived-in, but by God and His angels and saints, not by men. The souls of righteous men also go into the sky, to God, after their deaths. Hell too is placed in the sky by some, but further off. Other peasants imagine that Hell lies beneath the Earth, and that in it exist the fires of eternal torture.

Every night in the sky, the angels and saints carry out religious services, as priests do in the monasteries. When the angels use the bell-board in the sky, the cockerels hear it, and begin to crow. The sky's bell-board is also heard by good and faithful men on Earth.

On some nights, the sky lies close-by, such as on St. Vasile's night [at New Year], Boboteaza's Night [January 6, when Christ was baptised], and Revival Night [the Orthodox Church's Easter], but this is noticed only by the good believers. At these times, believers can ask God for anything, riches or health, and God will grant them all they desire. When the sky is close-by, the cattle can speak, and their voices can be heard by these same people. However, other peasants think that the sky is open like this only on the night of Ovidenie - November 21 - and that its beauties can be seen only by "shepherds who have never seen a woman's eyes". The sky and the Earth at this time are supported by St. Simeon Stylites, who lived on a pillar.

As we saw earlier, the cockerel has an important role in this Christian myth, but not like that in the legend where Electryon was changed into a cockerel as a punishment, as he failed to keep watch during the love-making between Ares (*Marte*, or Mars) and Aphrodite (*Venera*, or Venus). Instead, we have the cock heralding the celestial service; his final crow, just before daybreak, has the power to drive away evil spirits, which suddenly vanish. Ghosts that are surprised by the cock-crow remain fixed where they stand, which is why they always hurry away to their graves well before the cock sings.

The ancients considered only this final crow of the cock in their legend, which announces the sunrise, that is, Apollo's arrival; it was this which Electryon failed to warn Ares of in good time.

Some peasants believe in the existence of nine skies or heavens, in the last of which is God's Chair or Throne, where God lives with His angels. They also think that in every one of these nine must exist another distinct Earth, lit by its own Sun.

The canopy of heaven is lit in the night by the Moon, and the celestial candles, called stars, which are re-ignited by the angels every evening, to provide light to the Earth each night. Here, the people are very naïve!

The stars, as I said, are candles in the peasants' beliefs, and every man has his own star in the sky. Each man's heavenly candle is set alight at his birth. If that man is an emperor, then his star is great and brilliant, a *luceafăr*. If the man is a simple one, his star is small and faint. When the man dies, his star falls from the sky, and his candle is extinguished.

As we see, the peasants do not realize what falling stars really are, but think they are like the usual stars. For the peasants, all of Creation is God's gift to man, who is His beloved child. But if every man has a star, and that star is connected to his life, why are the stars in the sky always the same? Why do the

constellations remain identical? Are some men immortal? The people, of course, do not ask these questions. It is curious how little the people control their beliefs. How sometimes they can be very profound, but at others they can be so childish...

Such inconsistencies among the various beliefs, however, are present with all peoples at all times, and this is especially so in this particular instance. For example, the story regarding the Kings from the East, who, on seeing Christ's star in the sky, a new and very bright one, thought that a great emperor had been born, and went to pay homage to him; but this was a sighting of a comet, not a star.

Falling stars, candles that are extinguished while in flight leaving a brief trail of light, do not reach the Earth.

Thinking of fireballs [very bright "shooting stars" or meteors], the peasants add that there are other falling stars, which are round or long, and which can enter into men's houses, or fall to the Earth, or even land on men. These are the flying *balaurii* (the Romanian dragons) or *zmeii* (*balaurii* in human form), which walk in the night to disfigure or kill lone men. This is because the *zmeii* are evil beings. Thus, these stars are also known as lost or travelling stars.

When the *zmeii* come into men's houses, they search for boys and girls to torture, a belief which was magnificently described in the poem "The Flying Being" by the incomparable Ioan Heliade Rădulescu.

Of course, these *zmeii* have their own conflicts, and they can fight by hitting their heads together until they die. Their blood then falls to the Earth, becoming coagulated and blackened. The peasants think that if they burn this blood in their houses, the smoke will drive away their children's fears. Some teachers from Neamț County told me that this blood must be coal from the Earth, but I think it more likely to be ozokerite.

The travelling stars can be bewitched, and this witchcraft helps girls to determine in which direction their future lover lies. This is possible because there are said to be men who can say some magic words to stop a star falling, and then change its direction.

In finishing the Romanian people's beliefs in the stars and the sky, I recall what my mother told me about the stars.

The sky is supported by four pillars, which are four stars. I think they must be the four royal stars, Aldebaran, Antares, Regulus and Fomalhaut. In the ancient world, these were the sky's guardians, but for the Romanians, they are the supporters of the sky. It is wonderful how these two distinct ideas can be reconciled.

Certainly, even when called the Pillar, Polaris is not perceived as the sky's pillar, but more as a stake the sky revolves around.

My mother also told me about seven stars in the sky, stars which never stop moving; when they all come together in the same place, the Earth will be destroyed. Of course, these are the planets, the seven planets of the ancient world, because the people then did not separate the planets, Sun, Moon and stars. Perhaps the ancients observed that planetary conjunctions coincided with terrestrial disasters. Something similar was written in recent years concerning the conjunction between the giant planets Jupiter and Saturn.

The ancient Greeks lionised the sky in two phases: the starry night sky, Uranus, and the luminous day sky, Zeus (or Jove), which were the bases of their ideas of the sky. For the Greeks, the primordial trinity of genesis was formed by Chaos, Gaia and Eros, in which Chaos was infinite space, full of darkness, Gaia was terrestrial material which became the Earth, and Eros was the attractive force of universal gravitation. From Chaos were divided two parts of the darkness, a masculine and a feminine principle, Erebus and Nix or Night respectively, which gave birth to Aether and Hymera, the region of light superior to the Earth's atmosphere, and the terrestrial atmospheric light respectively. Thus, as in the Biblical Genesis, light was the first-born.

Then Gaia alone, but influenced by Eros, gave birth to Uranus, the starry sky, followed by the mountains and abysses of the sea, Pontus. Uranus became Gaia's husband, and together they were the primitive immortal couple, the source of all life, previously celebrated by the Hindu Vedic poets. The last child born of this pairing was Cronus, time. Finally, Gaia was revolted by Uranus' cruelty (he had halted the work of Creation, and hurled his children into the abysses of the Earth), and pushed Cronus to maim Uranus in order that he might no longer be able to procreate. Then Cronus and Rhea, the flow of time, became the second couple of Creation. However, later, Cronus too tried to halt Creation, by swallowing his children. His

last son, Zeus, defeated him, bound him in chains, and thus became leader of Creation. With Zeus, historical and mythological time began.

The Latin poets sometimes just said "Jove" for "the sky". For instance, in Horatius' opera we find *sub Jove frigido* for "under the cold sky".

The Romanian people made the sky into the house for God alone. For the rest, their physical conception is almost identical with the ancients. Anaxagoras of Clazomenae said that the skies were formed from stone. Anaximander, Anaximenes and Eudoxus of Cnidus considered they were formed of a solid material. Empedocles thought that the sky was made of air, transformed into crystal by fire, and that the stars were of fire that appeared from the Earth, like the emanations of inflammable marsh-gas, which, following on from Xenophon's addition, were kindled in the evening and extinguished in the morning.

Plato described the concave vaults which formed the sky.

Aristotle imagined that there were many skies made of clear crystal, so that they could be traversed by light. Each of these skies belonged to a separate, concentric sphere, with the Earth at their common centre, and each one supporting a single planet, such as Mercury, Mars, the Sun, etc., until sky number eight, which was the Firmament, that is, the sky of fixed stars. Beyond that was an infinite vacuum, although other authors admitted of the existence of a ninth sky, called the *Primum Mobile* [Prime Mover], which connected with the remainder of the skies through a common, uniform, movement.

The ancient Jews held similar beliefs. In the Talmud, it is written that the rabbi Barchana touched the point where the sky met the Earth, and hung his hat on the window of the sky. When he wished to retrieve his hat, however, he could no longer see it, because the sky had moved it away in its rotation. So the rabbi is waiting yet for the celestial sphere's revolution to bring back his hat, and he stands with his hand held out to catch it on its return.

