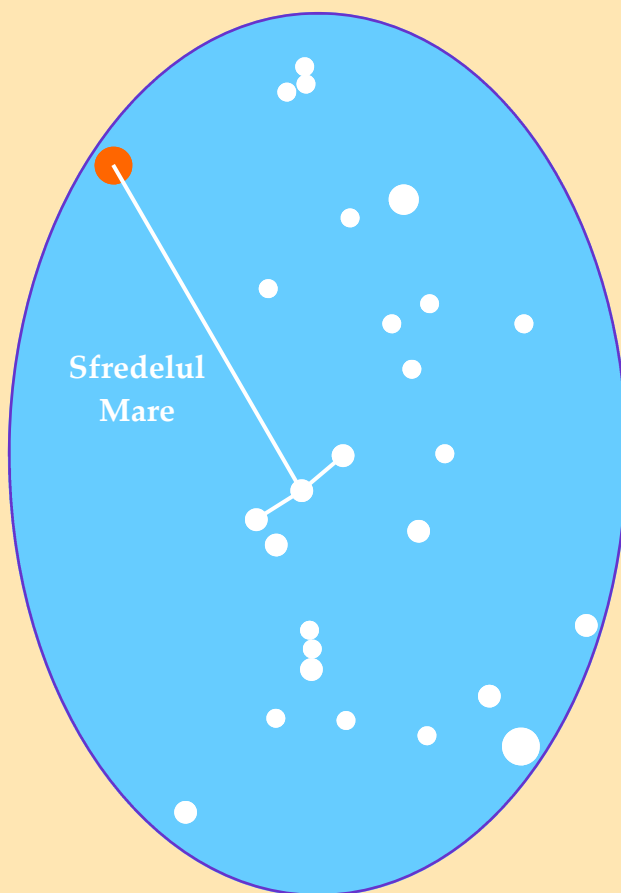
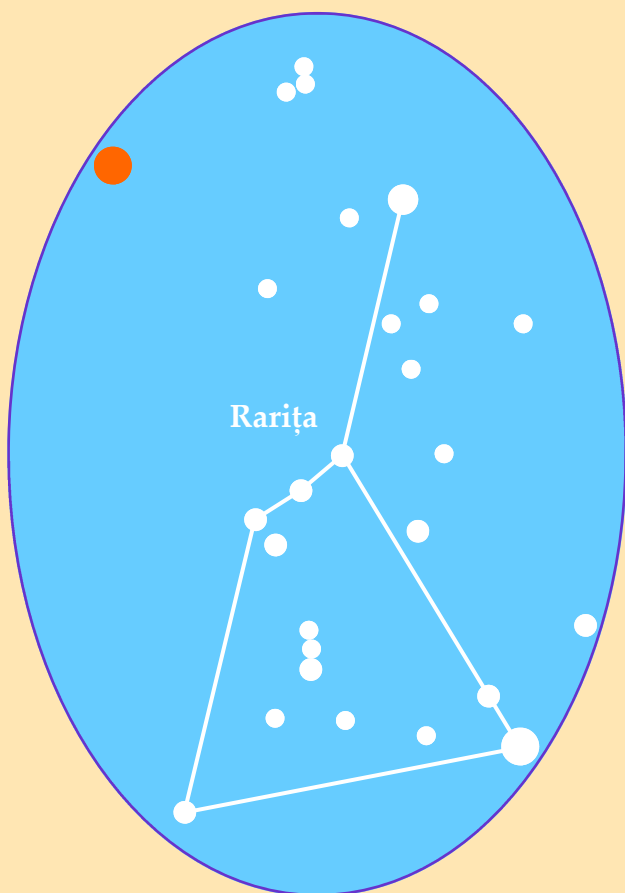
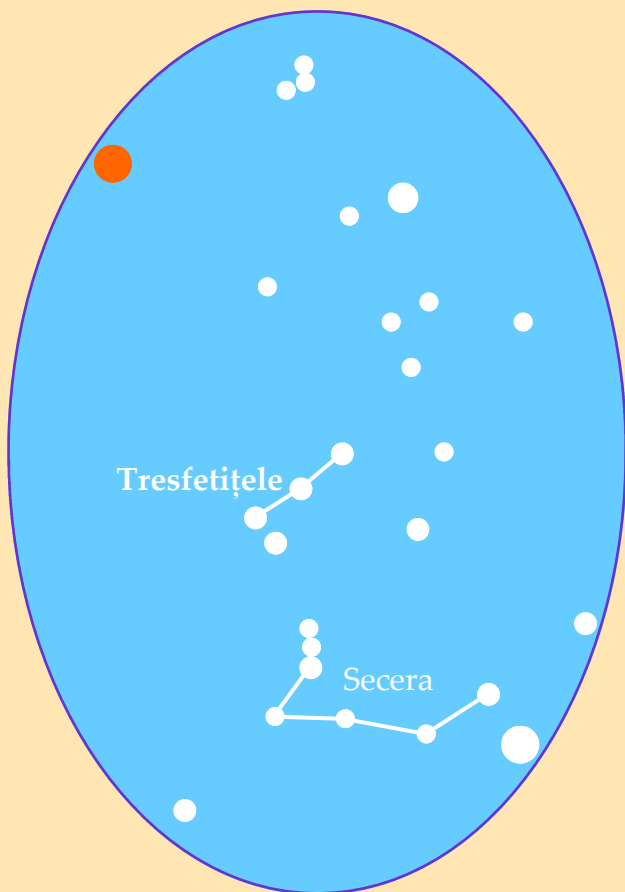


# Romanian Peasants' Beliefs In Stars & Sky

By  
Ion Ottescu



English Translation By Andrei Dorian Gheorghe & Alastair McBeath

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&  
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Original Romanian text written by Ion Ottescu.  
Published in Bucharest, Romania, 1907.

This English translation prepared and © Andrei Dorian Gheorghe and Alastair McBeath.  
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The cover illustration shows the four main old Romanian constellations perceived in the modern figure of Orion, Tresfetișele (The Three Kings), Secera (The Sickle), Rarița (The Little Plough) and Sfredelul Mare (The Great Auger).



*The Constellations as Envisaged by the Romanian Peasants*

This sky-map is based on Ion Ottescu's original 1907 version. For clarity, only some of the stars making up the peasants' constellations are shown, joined by imaginary lines, and only a single name has been given with each constellation, together with the Roman numerals keyed to the description in the text. The general band occupied by the Milky Way is also illustrated. The map depicts the entire sky visible from Bucharest, although in practice, this is the same as the sky available from any site with a comparable northern latitude to that city, about  $44\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ . Chart prepared by Alastair McBeath.

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# Translators' Foreword

## *General notes*

Ion Ottescu's text is a remarkable document. It was first published in 1907 in Romanian, the culmination of twelve years' of research and investigation. In part, it preserves an oral tradition which, from the age of some of his correspondents, must descend to the late or mid 18<sup>th</sup> century at the very least, most likely a century or so before then, and probably still further. Whether it can be directly traced to the time of the Roman conquest of Dacia, and the subsequent Christianization of Dacia/Romania, as Ottescu himself suggested, is far less certain. The importance of Trajan still in contemporary Romanian thought and legendary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century implies that tales of Trajan and events around the time of the Romano-Dacian wars in the early centuries AD, were preserved orally for some considerable time, or were somehow revived at a time now sufficiently distant before the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to seem to have thus survived. The re-use of many, but not all, the ancient Greco-Roman constellations by the Romanians, does imply a separate, more important, set of local traditions which kept such influences relatively at bay, or amended them while still retaining part of their nature, even though these were apparently not always the same in different places.

Ottescu was working to compile his information during a pivotal time in Europe for such matters. In many places by the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a growing realization of just how much of such old traditions had been lost in the switch from predominantly rural, agricultural economies, to heavily urbanized, industrial ones, especially in northwest Europe, over the previous century and more. Elsewhere, this was a time when collections of all manner of folklore and local legends were being created by others who perceived what was happening too, and wished to preserve that information for posterity. Ottescu was not alone in specialising in astronomical folklore, but looking through those other texts, perhaps the most comprehensive of which was R H Allen's *Star-Names and Their Meanings* of 1899 (reprinted by Dover Publications in 1963 in facsimile, as *Star Names: Their Lore and Meanings*), we see how very little information had survived even then of the old European constellation and star names, other than those from ancient Greek, Roman and medieval Arabic texts, or those subsequent attempts to fill gaps or amend the constellations for different purposes. In the British Isles, for example, the most comprehensive survey of surviving local constellation names, collected in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is that by Marie Trevelyan (*Folk-Lore and Folk-Stories of Wales*, Elliot Stock, 1909, primarily Chapter III). She was able to identify old Welsh names for a mere seven constellations, plus the Milky Way and the ecliptic! She did list a further 27 names for other objects in the sky, mostly probably constellations, but could not link them to specific star-patterns. Consequently, as far as we are aware, the material preserved by Ion Ottescu in his work is unique in its completeness and depth among the surviving astromythologies of Europe, outside the Greco-Latin sphere.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first complete English translation of Ottescu's work ever published. We prepared an earlier version of it during the mid-1990s, and hoped to publish it around the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its original appearance, to the extent that a full camera-ready text was prepared in 1998. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a publisher then, and various problems subsequently prevented us from pursuing the matter as vigorously as was necessary. We have revised the whole text for this electronic version during 2008, so it can be published as part of the general celebration of astronomy and astronomy's impact on cultures globally, during the International Year of Astronomy 2009, 102 years after Ottescu first published it.

In our translation, we have endeavoured to retain as much of the spirit of the work, and to remain as close to the original Romanian text, as possible. We have retained specific Romanian terms wherever practical, but we have also given an English translation the first time each term appears in the work. In the original, there are some errors, and in places there are statements expressed curiously - occasionally archaically - and sometimes possibly offensively to modern eyes (the very low opinions of women in several places spring readily to mind), but we have usually translated these without comment. Where some clarification or correction was felt useful, we have inserted this into the text in squared parentheses: "[ ]". We have kept such additions to a bare minimum, but would recommend that anyone interested in following-up

on the non-Romanian myths that Ottescu sometimes discusses, should check beyond his text for best accuracy. A handy, referenced, guide to these is Ian Ridpath's *Star Tales* (Lutterworth, 1988), for instance, while on the derivations of star names, Paul Kunitzsch and Tim Smart's *Short Guide to Modern Star Names and Their Derivations* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1986) is invaluable.

One point of note concerns Ottescu's use of the term "paper" (or occasionally "notice", or a similar word), which is not used in its modern academic sense as representing a published article in a journal, but refers instead to the papers Ottescu received from his various correspondents outlining the myths and beliefs as known to them. Regrettably, we have not been able to establish just what happened to these original documents after Ottescu's book was published. If they still survive, they would be a valuable resource in their own right, especially as Ottescu himself points to the possibility that other constellations than he discusses were mentioned in them, towards the end of Chapter One. This provides a tantalising glimpse of what has almost certainly now been lost.

### ***Romanian diacritics and pronunciation***

These are just a few brief notes on the pronunciation of Romanian words, for those unfamiliar with them. At a general level, most consonants should be crisply pronounced, and most vowels kept short. "A" is similar to the short "u"-sound in English "bud", "come", "put". "H" is never strongly aspirated, but "r" is always trilled, and "l" should be pronounced as it is in English when it precedes a vowel. "U" is always said as the "oo" in "soon", "moon". The various accented letters are pronounced as follows:

"ă" as the vowel-sound in "nurse", "hearse", "terse" in English;

"â" and "î" are both midway between the "ee"-sound in "keep" and the "oo"-sound in "moon" (we retain Ottescu's original spellings here, although in modern Romanian, the "î" has been replaced almost entirely by "â" since 1993);

"ș" is pronounced "she"; and

"ț" is pronounced "tse".

### ***A brief biography of Ion Ottescu***

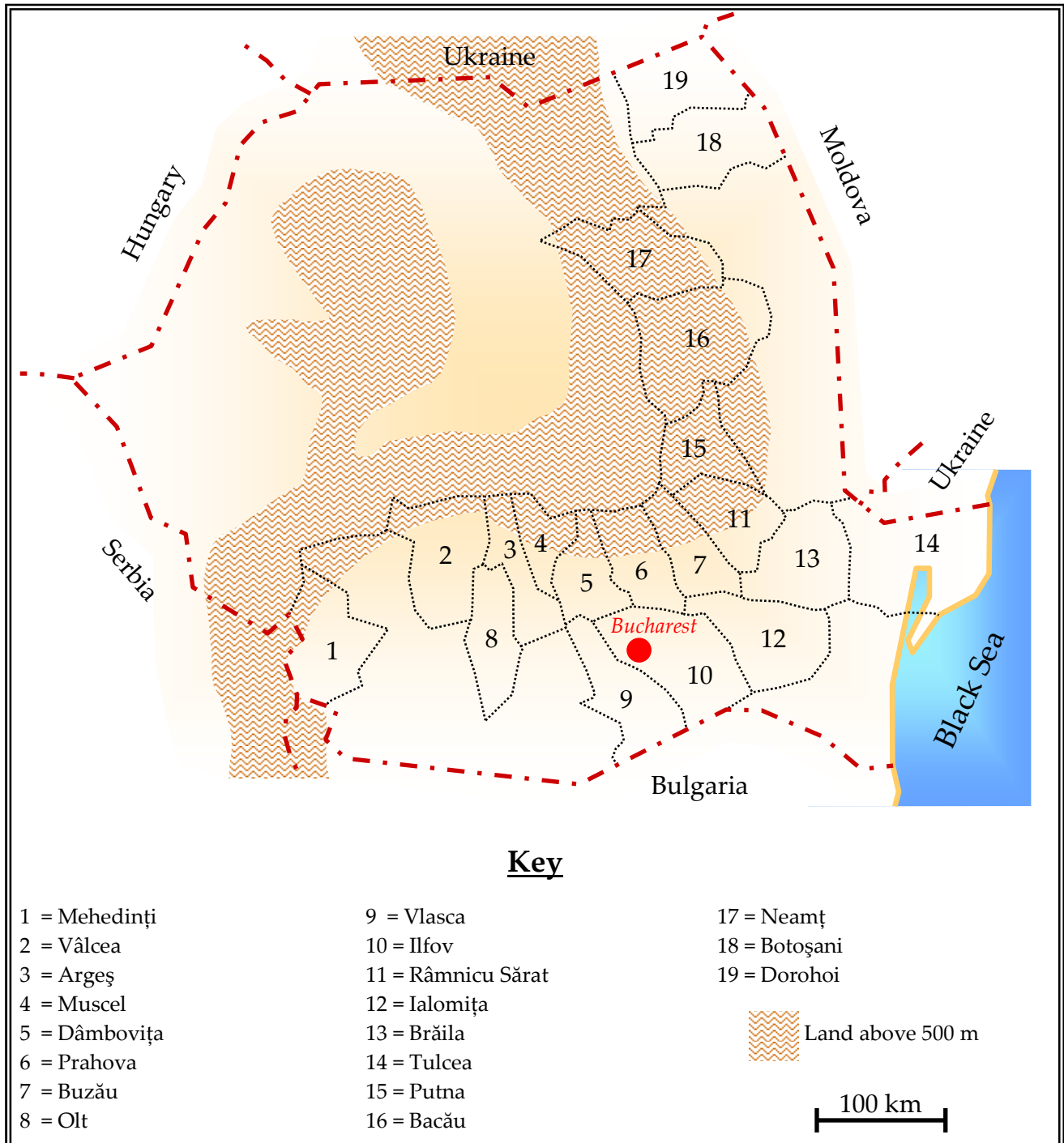
Ion Ottescu was born in the town of Buzău on September 9, 1859, and died on March 10, 1932. He obtained his degree from the Mathematics Department of Bucharest University, graduating in 1886. After this, he continued living in Bucharest, writing books on mathematics, geometry and cosmology for school pupils. During this time he was the director of a secondary school and a member of the Permanent National Council for Instruction. He later became the General Inspector of Schools (1912-1914). Modernly, he is regarded as the founder of the study of Romanian astromythology through his book *Romanian Peasants' Beliefs in Stars and Sky*. One of his sons became the Director of the Bucharest Conservatory, and another was private secretary to Nicolae Titulescu, president of the League of Nations during the 1930s.

### ***Sketch-map of Old Romania***

To give some idea of where all the places are in Romania that Ottescu frequently refers to, we present a sketch-map of the modern country overleaf, with the names of its surrounding eastern European nations. All the old Romanian counties mentioned are drawn on, and numerically keyed to their names. The capital Bucharest is also shown, along with the Black Sea coast, and the general highland area of the Carpathian Mountains. The north-western parts of modern Romania were conquered and ruled by the Hungarians from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. Despite the population being primarily Romanian, this region was only added to the country's area after Ottescu wrote his book. The concentration of information coming from the more mountainous regions, away from the capital, is perhaps indicative of the older customs holding out longest there. Neamț, for instance, the single richest source of material used by Ottescu, is an area almost exclusively composed of rugged highlands. Counties that contributed no information are not shown, and note that some of these counties no longer exist today. Those that do have often altered their boundaries significantly. Map by Alastair McBeath.



## Sketch-map of Old Romania



Andrei Dorian Gheorghe, Bucharest, Romania  
Alastair McBeath, Morpeth, England

December 2008

