

A MYTHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY OF SHEEP AND GOATS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *In this paper, the authors focus on the mythological typology of sheep and goats. First, they make it clear that a mythological typology of sheep and goats from Historical Banat can only be done by combining archetypal symbolism, pastoral folklore, and zoomorphic features with ritual, social and cosmological functions. Then, based on the references mentioned at the end of the paper, they investigate the mythological typology of sheep (black, rusty, with fairy eyes, and white sheep) and goats (white and wild goats) from Historical Banat. The conclusion of the study is that, despite the number of varieties compared (the number of sheep varieties is two times larger than that of the goat varieties) there are consistencies in all archetypes of both sheep and goats.*

Key words: *mythological typology, sheep, goats, comparative study.*

INTRODUCTION

Sheep and goats, among the earliest domesticated animals, occupy a central place in the symbolic systems of numerous societies. Beyond their economic value, they have served as sacrificial intermediaries, mythic ancestors, liminal creatures, and carriers of purity or disorder [7,10]. This study seeks to establish a mythological typology of these animals using a comparative structural approach, drawing from classical mythology, biblical literature, European studies, and modern ethnographic data [9,12,15].

The construction of a mythological typology of sheep and goats from Historical Banat can only be done by combining pastoral folklore, archetypal symbolism, and zoomorphic features with ritual, social and cosmological functions [1,5] – a typology that can be used in interdisciplinary research, ethnographic education or even in artistic projects. Therefore:

- Archetypal symbolism consists in universal images, motifs, and themes reflecting fundamental human emotions, experiences, and psychological patterns across cultures in time; it relies on two main foundations:

• Carl Jung's theory, according to which archetypes are innate, universal prototypes for ideas useful in interpreting observations and manifested as symbols in cultural narratives, dreams, and myths (e.g. the Hero, the Mother, the Wise Man);

• Collective unconscious, which is inherited, surfaces in similar forms in different cultures, and transcends individual experience;

- Pastoral folklore often idealizes nature spirits, seasonal rhythms, and shepherds and has for main elements the following [6,16]:

• Customs and rituals involving symbolic objects such as bells, carved staffs, or wool – i.e. protective charms, rites of passage (e.g. first transhumance), and seasonal celebrations (Mărțișor, Sânziene) – and involving fertility, protection, and renewal;

- Folktales and legends blending realism and fantasy and reinforcing moral values and communal identity, and featuring lost flocks, magical flutes, shepherds who outwit spirits, and talking animals;
- Herder / shepherd archetypes, i.e. guardians of ancestral knowledge, romantic figures, or solitary wanderers embodying harmony with nature, simplicity, and wisdom;
- Nature spirits and sacred landscapes, i.e. groves, mountains (the Carpathian Mountains are often portrayed as mystical thresholds between worlds), and rivers imbued with spiritual presence (e.g. enchanted pastures, forest nymphs, and protective spirits [11,13]);
- Oral poetry and songs, i.e. ballads, doinas, and laments expressing the hardships of rural life, longing, and love passed down orally, performed during communal gatherings or shepherding, and including coded language and metaphors of animal behaviour, weather, and wool;
- Seasonal cycles and transhumance mythologised through festivals, songs, and symbolic motifs like the blooming meadows or returning flocks, which reflect the rhythms of pastoral life (e.g. autumn harvest, spring migration, summer grazing, and winter sheltering);
- Symbolic animals, e.g. birds, dogs, goats, sheep, and wolves carrying symbolic weight and whose behaviour is interpreted as moral lessons or omens: in this respect, the Țurcană sheep represents ancestral lineage, endurance, and purity [2,8].
 - Zoomorphic features have:
 - Cosmological functions (cosmic balance and sacrifice, divine companions and mythic archetypes, embodiment of creation and fertility, liminal beings and threshold guardians, and sacred geometry and celestial mapping);
 - Ritual functions (magical and mythical transformation, protective and totemic roles, sacrificial symbolism, and seasonal and transhumant rituals);
 - Social functions (agonistic behaviour and dominance, cohesion and group structure, human interaction and inter-species communication, identity and territorial marking, and mate selection and sexual signalling) [3,4,14].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material used in this paper consists of articles and books on the comparative study of the mythological typology of sheep and goats. The research method used is the comparative method, historical linguistics and Indo-European reconstruction, ethnographic field parallels, structural typology based on recurring motifs and functions and iconographic analysis supported by original diagrams and figures. The aim is not to reconstruct a single proto-myth but to identify mythological constants that shape sheep and goat symbolism across cultures.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The mythological typology of sheep from Historical Banat concerns the following varieties of sheep breed (Figure 1):

- The Black Sheep – Archetype of the Marginal and the Visionary:
 - Folklore: the “black sheep” as a sign of a special destiny, sometimes linked to fairies or spirits;
 - Mythological function: symbol of otherness, of the shepherd-doctor or the lonely shepherd;
 - Real correspondence: Țurcană Brează, Oacheșă;
 - Rituals: kept in the flock as a sign of protection or warning;

- Zoomorphism: black face, contrasting facial design;
- The Rusty Sheep – Archetype of the Past and Melancholy:
- Folklore: appears in stories about old shepherds and lost flocks;
- Mythological function: evokes ancestry, connection with ancestors and the winter solstice;
- Real correspondence: Țurcană Ruginie;
- Rituals: used in customs of ending grazing;
- Zoomorphism: reddish-brown wool, rustic appearance;
- The Sheep with Fairy Eyes – Archetype of Beauty and Magic:
- Folklore: appears in fairy tales as an enchanted animal, guarded by fairies;
- Mythological function: symbol of feminine beauty, mystery and dream;
- Real correspondence: Țurcană Oacheșă;
- Rituals: present in love stories and in doinas;
- Zoomorphism: contoured eyes, expressive face, graceful movement.
- The White Sheep – Archetype of Purity and Sacrifice:
- Folklore: appears in carols and ballads as the “proud sheep” or the “sacrificial sheep”;
- Mythological function: symbol of ritual sacrifice, purification and beginning;
- Real correspondence: varieties of Țurcană albă (Creață, Bucălaie);
- Rituals: sacrificed at Sânzienne or on the eve of a wedding, for luck and fertility;
- Zoomorphism: white body, fine wool, gentle eyes.

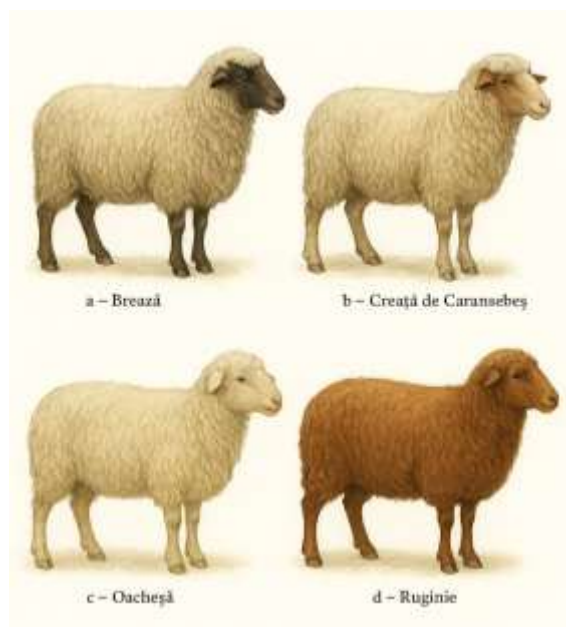


Figure 1. Varieties of Țurcană sheep breed:

a – Brează; b – Creață de Caransebeș; c – Oacheșă; d – Ruginie.

Source: own creation

The mythological typology of goat from Historical Banat concerns the following varieties of goat breed (Figure 2):

- The White Goat – Archetype of Wisdom and Protection:
- Folklore: white goat as a totemic animal, sometimes a companion of fairies;

- Mythological function: guide between worlds, protector of the flock and the shepherd;
- Real correspondence: white goat of Banat, local varieties;
- Rituals: invoked in incantations and initiation stories;
- Zoomorphism: white fur, penetrating gaze, straight horns;
- The Wild Goat – Archetype of Chaos and Fertility:
- Folklore: present in the New Year goat game, as a being that dies and is reborn;
- Mythological function: symbol of fecundity, force of nature and sacred disorder;
- Real correspondence: Carpathian goat, black mountain goat;
- Rituals: goat dance, zoomorphic mask, fertility cries;
- Zoomorphism: agility, spiral horns, unpredictable movement.



a



b

Figure 2. Varieties of goat breed: a – White Goat; b – Wild Goat

Source: own creation

Table 1.

Sheep and Goats as a Symbolic Pair

Structural Oppositions	
Sheep	Goats
Purity	Liminality
Order	Chaos
Solar	Chthonic
Domestic	Wild
Victim	Trickster
Community	Individuation

Source: own creation

These binary relationships appear consistently from antiquity to modern folklore. Despite their oppositions, both animals act as mediators: between humans and gods (sacrifice), between social time and ritual time (seasonal rites) and between nature and culture (pastoral lifestyles) (Figure 3, 4, 5).



Figure 3. Mythological roles of sheep



Figure 4. Mythological roles of goats

Source: own creation



Figure 5. Comparative binary opposition

Source: own creation

CONCLUSIONS

The Mythological Typology of Sheep and Goats presented above captures the six main archetypes of sheep and goats: Black Sheep – Marginal and Visionary; Fairy-Eyed Sheep – Beauty and Magic; Rusty Sheep – Past and Melancholy; White Sheep – Purity and Sacrifice; White Goat – Wisdom and Protection; Wild Goat – Chaos and Fertility.

We need to emphasise that, despite the number of varieties compared (the number of sheep varieties is two times larger than that of the goat varieties) there are consistencies in all archetypes of both sheep and goats.

Sheep and goats constitute a fundamental symbolic pair within mythological and ritual systems. Their complementary functions—purity vs. liminality, order vs. chaos, cosmos vs. wilderness—are persistent across time and geography.

The typology proposed here highlights recurring archetypes that transcend specific cultures while also revealing local variations preserved in modern ethnographic practices. Through this comparative approach, we observe how ovine and caprine symbolism

continues to structure collective imagination, pastoral identity, and ritual performance from ancient civilizations to contemporary folk traditions.

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