

CRISTIAN CEALERA

LEGENDS OF THE BLACK SEA

(Tales from Dobrogea)

Cover 1 - Painting by Ivan Aivazovsky - Black Sea

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Dobrudja - A land of legends

Prince Tomis and the Mermaid Princess

It is said that once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a great king who had many brave and handsome sons. One of the princes, the youngest, was named Tomis. The king and the princes had everything a man could ever want, fertile lands, countless armies, gold, silver and gems of all shapes and sizes, and no other king or ruler could boast of having as much wealth. Moreover, the waters that edged the kingdom's shores were bountiful and had fish aplenty and hundreds of beautiful and swift boats roamed the surface of the ocean.

A dark propensity had the King of the World however, and that was that he liked to hunt mysterious creatures and mermaids above all else. One day, after hearing from his captains that no mermaid had been seen nearby, the King summoned his sons to council. He told each of them to take a ship and sail to all corners of the world, to hunt the last mythical creatures that were said lived deep below the surface of the ocean. The princes obeyed and left each on his way, Tomis towards the East and his brothers towards the West.

Thus did prince Tomis sail in his boat for days and months without encountering any mermaids, all this until he reached our sea, the one of darkened waters. One night the prince's boat was caught in a terrible storm with waves the size of a palace that swept the deck of the ship. One of these waves took hold of Tomis and sent him into the depths of the Sea. The prince however, did not meet his end: a graceful being of the seas took him out of the maelstroms and swam him onto a shell covered beach. Her name was Negreana, a beautiful mermaid princess, daughter of the King of the Deep and one of the last beings of her kind.

The Water Princess cared for many days for the Land Prince, until he fully recovered. They fell in love and swore themselves to the other for all eternity. One day, Tomis returned to his ship and told the captain (one of his father's oldest retainers) that he had decided to stay in the lands of the mermaids and not complete The King of the World's bloody errand. On that same day, the storms once more came down upon the Sea.

Afraid for her lover's safety, the Mermaid Princess swam up to the Prince's boat. Tomis was not on deck, but the captain was. Seeing her, the captain grabbed a spear and plunged it into the Princess' heart. In that very instant, the Prince came up from below and witnessed the love of his life slowly sinking in the deep, embraced by the unseen hands of Death. Jumping after her, he joined her in Death's embrace... It is said that since then, the stormy Sea took the Mermaid Princess' name and that on the shore where the two lovers had spent many nights the local people built a proud city, which they called Tomis.



Photo - Edward Matthew Hale / Mermaids Rock/ Stânca Sirenelor (1894)

The Golden Dolphin

More than 20 years ago, in the village of 2 Mai, I met an old fisherman named Saša, a Ukrainian lost among foreigners who, for reasons unknown, had chosen to live alone and without family somewhere at the edge of the village. Uncle Saša was a joking man, witty and well travelled and often at night, by the fire, would tell me stories he had heard or himself seen throughout time.

One autumn night we were outside, under a half rotten umbrella he had received from a neighbour, looking at the rain that had started falling down over his homestead. Far above us, the cruel thunder gods fought one another, throwing lightning arrows to and fro. The sea had started losing its sky blue and became darker and darker, foretelling a storm the likes of which we had never before seen. It was then that Uncle Saša spoke: “The fisherman that hasn’t yet reached the shore will not live to see tomorrow. The Golden Dolphin will eat him.”

I was surprised, as never before had I heard that name. The old man told me that in days such as those, a mysterious creature that lives deep within the sea swims up and attacks the fishing boats. “It is a monster that glistens so that one cannot look upon it. It fiercely hits the sloop, capsizes it and then attacks those unfortunate to have fallen in the water. It just swallows them whole. I saw it once, when I was a young man and only God helped me reach the shore, but the boat and the others on it were less fortunate”, Uncle Saša recounted, and in his eyes I could read an indescribable fear.



I asked more questions and found out that the creature does indeed look like a dolphin, but it is far larger and not at all playful. “It attacks the fishermen, angry that they steal his fish”, my friend continued.

In the following years I would hear about the legend of the Golden Dolphin, every time told by old men that had been fishing at the dawn of the last century. It is a myth that slowly fades, in times such as these when fishing sloops have almost disappeared and when no sea creature, be it monster or not, has the courage to attack modern ships. Yet every time there is a large storm and the waters grow dark, I remember Uncle Saša and the Golden Dolphin.

The Legends of the Derwent Monastery

Derwent is a realm of legends untold. The story says that nearly two thousand years ago, when he reached the Dobrogea region, Andrew the Apostle schooled many disciples in the cave that bears his name. Four of them, three maidens and a young man, were sent to spread the word of God around what is today Derwent. After Christianising many locals, the four youngsters were arrested by the Romans who were already persecuting the Christians.

Saint Andrew's disciples became martyrs where today one can see four healing crosses. These crosses, it is said, were not laid by human hand, but grew from the ground after Saint Andrew's disciples were killed. After their death, that place was slowly forgotten, until a few hundred years ago.

One summer day, a deaf-mute shepherd from the village of Coslugea was out in the fields with his flock and at one point, as the animals were peacefully grazing, went to rest in the shade of nearby trees. There, he laid his head on the largest of the four stone crosses and fell asleep. After some time a terrible storm started and the man woke up, frightened by the fierce thunders. He could now hear the rustling of the heavens, the roar of thunder, the lashing of the rain and the ringing of his sheep's bells. He had been cured of his illness and could now hear better than any man. That was not all, however, as the shepherd could now also speak. Joyous for being healed, the man ran to the village and told his fellows all about the wondrous event.

This is how the Romanian people once again found out about Derwent and the martyrs' crosses, as word about that blessed place was carried to all corners of the country. Since then, Derwent became a regular pilgrimage site for Christians everywhere, a place where all believers could find healing.

Another legend from the Derwent Monastery tells us the story of a sincere friendship between a Christian monk and a Muslim, in a time when their people fought each other in the name of faith.

Thus, there once was a hermit named Liinad who had his hermitage near Derwent. He befriended a Muslim dervish who had reached the area with the armies of the wondering Pechenegs (around the ninth-tenth centuries CE).

Liinad passed away and the man to bury him was his "heathen" friend who also placed a cross with rubies on his burial site. Legend says that a large stone cross also emerged from the ground, the very place soon becoming another Christian pilgrimage site. Moreover, where Liinad's hermitage was a healing spring appeared, where all Christians could soothe their ailments. The dervish disappeared from the story, probably continuing his migration with the Pechenegs, but his name, from which the name of the monastery is said to come, Derwent, was forever linked to Liinad.

The Legend of Saint Andrew and the Great White Wolf

An ancient Dacian myth and the story of the Christian Saint Andrew are curiously intertwined to form one of the most beautiful legends of Dobrogea.

It is said that when he reached the mesmerising region of Dobrogea, the apostle got lost in the wilderness, on a heavy night with terrible, stormy weather. It was then that a wolf pack appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but the wolves did not attack the Christian, they helped him. The Alpha male, leader of the pack, a giant, white wolf, took the Saint to the cave that now bears his name and where, it is said, the “First Called” spread faith in Christ among the Geto-Dacians in the area.

The so-called pagan aspects (for some) must not surprise us, as in many places in Romania Saint Andrew is also called the Wolves’ Apostle, as folklore says he was a shepherd whose flock no beast ever attacked; perhaps because we are well aware of the connection between the Dacians and the Draco symbol (Dracon, the wolf head banner), we can interpret this myth as being that of Andrew, “the Dacian Wolves’ Apostle”.

This is where the strange part of the story comes in. From the Orăștiei mountains we have an incredible Dacian legend, that of the hermit Leandru. A priest of Zamolxis (Zamolxe, Zalmoxis), Leandru the White-haired lived in peace with the mountain wolves.

The Great God changed his appearance to that of a giant white wolf. Leandru united all the wolves in Dacia into a great army and when Decebalus’ Sarmizegetusa was attacked by Romans, the beasts came to the Dacians’ help, fighting against the invader, though not even the wolves could save the Great Fortress from destruction.

Leandru and the wolves that survived the battle left Dacia, reaching Geto-Dacian Dobrogea, where they might have met Saint Andrew. Many will sarcastically point out that Sarmizegetusa was destroyed in the year 106 A.D., when Saint Andrew had long since passed beyond the veil. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a story, but one that the Romanian people have told for almost two millennia, combining the folk pre-Christian beliefs with those of the Church. It is a myth we are duty bound to cherish (not dissect and slander) and carry on.

The Bey's Fountain – The legend of the bewitched doe and the Hunter Prince

Old Halil slowly sat down on the log, with a deep sigh, trying as much as possible to ignore the pain in his back. The children had already gathered around him, small and big, boys and girls, some Muslim, others from the various Giaour peoples who don't believe in the Prophet, praise unto him.

Every night the children came into his courtyard and kept pestering him to tell them another of his many marvellous tales. About a year prior, Allah had called his beloved Dilara to Heaven and had left him lead what was left of his life alone; the children's visits had become the only joy he had left to soothe his loneliness and his thoughts of his long gone family. The villagers had become accustomed to their children being there and were even relieved to know they were safe and sound and not wandering around through the forest's many nook and crannies or through the wilderness.

Halil Baba very much enjoyed seeing them gathered there impatiently, how their eyes widen or their voices rise in awe as they hear about some brave act or other from the past. That night everyone had come: Metin, short and podgy, the tailor's son; Levent, as handsome as his name suggests; Lale, supple and doe-eyed; Filiz, always shy; Timur, the glib tongued but also daring Panait, Maria, daughter of Petre the blacksmith; Gheorghe with the voice of a nightingale, who had inherited this gift from his father; there were also Petre, the son of the schoolmaster and Cristina, barely out of her diapers, who would always tug at his pants to be lifted on his lap; Ari, the twelve year-old son of the Jewish man from the store; husky Stoica and Ana, beautiful and almost ready for marriage.

The old man breathed slightly better, now that his backache had subsided and to his audience's relief, started his story: "Once upon a time, so long ago that even I was not yet born, there lived in Babadag, the city of the saint Sari Saltik, a powerful Pasha so rich that by comparison, you could say even the Grand Vizier from Istanbul was poor. This Pasha was also wise and just and everyone loved and respected him, but he had a great trouble on his mind as well: he had a son as handsome as the sun but as restless as the birds in the skies. The boy was kind hearted, but indulged in the earthly joys too much, especially at an age when other sons helped their parents or defended their country sword in hand. Prince Mehmet's mind however was only on revelries and hunting. He was a great hunter and no doe or boar that had crossed his path had escaped his arrows.

He had become too proud and had started killing for sport, as it was not the need of the hungry that drove him to hunt the creatures of the earth. One day, the prince heard that there might be a prized hind in a part of the woods below the Mountain, but so fast and deceptive she was that no hunter or ranger had managed to follow her, which made her the perfect prey for a Prince. Finding out all of this, Mehmet gathered his friends and a few servants and left for Deer's Forest. There, they found plenty of game, but the stags and does they saw were apparently not fit for the son of a Pasha. Many hours passed and

the Prince became bored, annoyed that he had travelled all that way for no reason. He dismounted his steed and sat down under an old oak, polishing his bow, listening here and there to the other huntsmen's calls or to the more and more distant voices of his friends, who were ransacking the forest. He was alone.

The summer sun was also hunting for the grass' green, skilfully throwing its arrows among the leaves of the old trees, while the rays' heat caressed the young Bey's face, urging him to pleasant rest. A sweet torpor surrounded him and his eyelids slowly closed, taking him to a land of dreams. Suddenly, a loud rustle nearby woke him up. The leaves stopped moving for but a second and then, just a few steps away, SHE appeared... a large, supple hind of unspeakable beauty, her skin a shiny, silvery brown that the Prince had never seen before and the eyes...those eyes were green and wet, as if the entire morning dew had gathered within them. He was bewitched, unable to move, as if the unseen threads of a spell had suddenly tied him to the old oak's roots. His bow and quiver lay forgotten next to him but the Hunter had lost his senses, charmed by the surreal eyes of the hind.

They looked at one another for what seemed like aeons, as if leaving the known timeline and sinking in the oblivion of a parallel time. Then, as sudden as before, the hind quivered and dashed back into the underbrush, disappearing into the dark green of the forest. Only after she was gone did the Prince tear himself away, picked up his hunting gear and ran up to his steed, which was lazily grazing nearby. Mehmet Bey desperately rode his horse after the creature and he too was swallowed by the forest. A strange thing was that every time he almost fell like stopping the pursuit and turn back to the hunting party, the hind appeared just a few steps ahead and as he spurred his horse after her, she would disappear again like a lightning bolt.

Thus the hunt went on for many hours until the woods became darker and darker as the light of the disappearing sun left them. When the sunset turned blood red over the forest, the Bey reached the edge of the forest, on the shore of unknown waters. In front of him, a spring sent its cold, fast waters forward, turning into a stream, then a river. The Bey followed it until there SHE was again, but this time she wasn't running anymore. However, in the fading light of the evening, the doe looked different. She was glowing and her brownish coat became paler and paler, almost white. The eyes, though, were the same, deep, mesmerising eyes in which the Bey became lost once again. Without resolve to do anything, he witnessed an unbelievable act: shrouded in a sudden mist, the doe changed her shape; it was still HER, but it wasn't. She had become a beautiful girl, dressed in white, with hair as brown as the doe's skin and eyes green as grass sprayed by the dawn's tears.

Sadness was present in her eyes. Without uttering a word, she turned her back on him and barefooted slowly walked into the icy waters of the stream. Her body slowly sank, more and more, as if she had walked into the deepest sea and not into a meagre stream that had just appeared from below ground. When the water reached her waist she

looked at him again. Her right hand rose gracefully and a slim finger became a call for the Bey. Mehmet stepped towards her, bewitched, slowly sinking into the water, until he reached her. The girl's arms wrapped around him, she smiled and then together, as if chained, began to sink, slowly, as if in a dance.

The moon was already high in the night sky when at the edge of the forest riders appeared. They were the Bey's friends and had searched for him for a long time. The men stopped in their tracks, afraid: on the surface of the water a nobleman's turban gently danced upon the waves; that and nothing more. The Prince had perished, he had drowned and nobody could say how it had happened. The hunters returned to give the Great Pasha the terrible news and the grieving father gave order for the stream to be dried but as time passed and as the Pasha passed as well, the stream had yet to disappear. Even today the water still flows from beneath and the river glows strangely, as it had on that fateful night.

The people from nearby villages say that Mehmet Bey was only one of many that had perished by her hand. She bewitches and punishes those that don't respect the laws of the forest and takes them with her into the spirit world. Maybe there, Mehmet the Handsome, son of the Pasha of Babadag still lives to this day, he may have learnt to become more considerate and more loving of the wonders the Creator has given us, mortals."

Halil Baba died many years ago. The children that had once listened to his tales are all grown up now, each with their own family and household. They often go to Casimcea, to the Bey's spring, to the Fountain, the very same from the old man's tale. They have discovered it and it hasn't changed in hundreds of years. They go there together, on hot summer days and in the evening, as the water becomes darker, they all look to see if the hind's ghostly visage or the Hunter Prince's sad face appear.

Skirtos the Dacian – The Gladiator of Tomis

As the crowd cheered, the gladiator entered the arena. The people of Tomis enthusiastically called out his name, proud of their hero, he who had delighted them with his acts of bravery for over two years. Skirtos, the Geto-Dacian native, was a young man just passed his 20th birthday, but the hard life he had lived had already left deep marks on his body.

He had been born a free man, nephew of a capable blacksmith from Axiopolis who had become a citizen of the Empire after the “*Constitutio Antoniniana*” decreed by Emperor Caracalla. Fate, however, had been cruel to Skirtos and his family. His mother had died when he was a mere five year-old boy and his father had left home to trade over the Danubius River but had never returned. He grew up on the city streets, had stolen, as a child, to put food on the table and when he was 15, he had killed, without intention, a slightly older lad that was part of a rival group.

The murder had sent him directly to the dungeons of the military *castrum* where he spent two years. There, in that disease infected and death bringing cesspool he was found by Parmon, a noble from Ibida, who had come to Axiopolis looking for slaves. As there were few wars and even fewer nations to enslave, slaves were harder to find and many Roman nobles had to buy them straight from the dungeons, from various corrupt guards and soldiers. Parmon needed good, sturdy working arms without too much expense. This is how Skirtos, born a free man, became a slave.

Even now he bore on his right hand the stigma of those times, the mark of Parmon. He had worked, for a time, with the other slaves on the farm near Parmon’s villa in Ibida, then one day he had words with a supervisor. Very young but incredibly strong, Skirtos had broken the man’s jaw with one punch...the reason for that fight was now long forgotten. Fortuna smiled on him that day: instead of being whipped, or even killed, for his deed, Skirtos found himself praised by Parmon, who immediately took Skirtos as family guard. He served the noble for years and one night, as they were in Histria with business, he had saved his life when bandits attacked them.

This last deed changed his fate: he was now 20 years old and freed from slavery, Parmon’s way of thanking him for saving his life. However, as he only knew how to fight, after a few days he volunteered, as a free man, for the *auctorati* in the largest *ludus*¹ in Moesia Inferior, that of Marcus Caspa from Tomis. He liked his life there, he had made friendships, had lived wondrous moments of debauchery in the company of Nubian slaves the *lanista*² had given him as reward, he had participated in parties where the wine, thick as the blood of the brown bear, nectar of the gods brought from the

¹ Gladiator school.

² Owner of a gladiator school.

mountainous Dacia, had flowed without measure.

Then there had been his first fight in the arena and his first kill as a gladiator, as it had been a *sine missione* fight, without mercy. Over the following two years he had fought four more times and had won each fight. He had gained renown throughout the entire province from his third fight, when he had killed the famous Hesta the Illyrian, a gladiator with over twenty victories in the arena and who had fought a few times, successfully, in the great Colosseum in Rome. The people loved Skirtos and Fortuna had smiled on him again: he was among the few Geto-Dacian gladiators in the province and every time he had a fight, the people were on his side, proud to have a champion of their own.

His fame had spread to the neighbouring provinces and Caspa carefully negotiated every appearance. He was even more wanted as he was an incredible *retiarius*³, dressed in a simple leather tunic but with his left arm clad in aronour up to his neck. He always wielded the trident in his right hand and always kept ready, in his left, the net which he used to trap his opponent. He also sported a gladius for the final blow and behind his back he had a dagger, which he only used in less favourable moments in the fight. The people were always cheering whenever the “fisherman” would vanquish a *secutor*⁴, a *murmillo*⁵ or a *thraex*⁶. His victories and the bloody show had brought Skirtos wealth. He had bought a house for himself and had met Samia, a beautiful woman lost in Moesia on her way, from distant, unknown land towards Rome, the gem of the world.

Today, on the Ides of March, in the Tomis arena, Skirtos the Bloodthirsty smiled as he thought of Samia, his beloved Samia who would shortly bear him a child, no doubt a son. The gladiator’s train of thought was interrupted by the bugles that announced the arrival of his opponent. It was, of course, a *secutor*, a “chaser”, who had a sword and a big helmet, as well as a medium shield. Skirtos measured the other gladiator who was shorter and older but less stout... an opponent that would be easily defeated. Both men saluted the box where the province’s governor sat, together with the city’s patron, the man who had organised the Games, Anianus Aurelius Priscius. Eager to impress the governor and keep the people thirsting for blood, Priscius had promised a *sine missione*, which soon started.

Skirtos quickly understood he had misjudged his rival: the *secutor* was quick, agile and used to parry and dodge the *retiarius*’ blows. Caspa the *lanista* had told him he didn’t know much about the man, only that he was a stranger from the North, perhaps a veteran. Before the fight Skirtos hadn’t wondered about his opponent but now he wished he knew more. Skirtos threw his net once more, trying to catch the other man’s left foot and throw him to the ground. Again, the stranger dodged on time. The fight went on for

³ Gladiator who fought with equipment similar to a fisherman.

⁴ Gladiator who had similar equipment to a *murmillo*, and had a distinctive helmet.

⁵ A slow moving, heavy armoured gladiator. He also carried a shield.

⁶ Gladiator armed in the Thracian style with a small shield and a short sword with a curved blade, the *sica*.

a while, each gladiator managing to avoid the other's blows. Skirtos was afraid of no man, he had never been defeated and it would not happen on this day. He would get home safely, he would be with his beloved Samia, singing to his unborn son the only song he remembered from his childhood.

He wanted to finish the fight quickly and, for the first time since he had started fighting in the arena, he didn't think wisely. He was happy the trident had found its target, stabbing the stranger in his hip. He didn't expect what followed. Fallen and defeated, the *secutor* used his gladius like a dagger. Unable to reach Skirtos, he threw his sword as if aiming at a tree. The blade went in deep, just above the heart. Skirtos' eyes widened, not understanding what was happening and then, as his vision blurred, he dropped the trident. He was the one standing and yet, he was defeated!

Silence fell over the arena. The Dacian fell. On his back, Skirtos the Champion looked up at the sun, as it became blurry and dark. His eyes closed and he didn't see the stranger who had got up. He was thinking of Samia, of his unborn child, of his home...he was thinking of life.

The following day, early at dawn, Marcus Caspa, the *lanista* and Samia, the saddened wife, left the city of Tomis in order to bury the remains of Skirtos the Dacian. On his tombstone, under the image of a gladiator in the arena, a craftsman had chiselled his epitaph: "*I, Skirtos Dakesis, a free man, wreathed with six victories, leaving this world before my time, lie at Tomis, the tomb as my home. I wish you health...*"

The legends of Mamaia

One of the legends of Mamaia takes us back a few hundred years, to a time when Dobrogea was still under Ottoman rule. The story says that in a village between the Danube and the sea there lived a beautiful, hot-blooded Moldavian woman, the widow of a brave man from Dobrogea who had fallen, years back, in a revolt against the Turks. The woman lived with her daughter, Constantina, who was as beautiful as her mother.

Because the Moldavian woman (whom the girl called Mamaia) had also fought against the Sublime Porte, the Pasha from Silistra decided to take her as a serf and brought her to the Danube fortress, where he ruled. The Pasha had heard of the beautiful woman but he had never seen her before. As soon as she was brought to him, he immediately fell in love. Since in Silistra was great turmoil, however, the Ottoman Pasha decided to send Mamaia away from danger and harm and built her a large, imposing house on the sea shore, where now lies the Mamaia resort. Remember, however, that the beach was not then as we now know it, as the trees and shrubbery reached the very water of the sea and sand there was little, only a narrow strip. Back then, there was a prosperous village here where both Romanian and Muslim people lived and they all respected Mamaia and cared for her and her daughter. The two women, however, were always sad and didn't really show themselves in the village much.

One day, when the turmoil in Silistra subsided, the Pasha remembered the beautiful Moldavian woman and sent a large boat with soldiers to bring her, only her, back to his city. The soldiers found Mamaia alone, took her against her will and set sail. The woman began shouting for help and that was when Constantine heard her mother's cries. The girl entered the sea, trying to reach her mother, but the water was too deep. Knowing that her daughter would undoubtedly drown, Mamaia started praying to God to save her child. Suddenly, a miracle happened: under the girl's feet a spit of sand started rising, which took her out of the water and out of harm's way, but as the girl kept running after the boat, so did the sand spit become larger and larger.

God had performed another miracle as well: the Turkish soldiers saw that Mamaia had disappeared from the boat. She hadn't jumped into the deep, cold waters of the sea, but she herself had become the sand spit that had saved Constantina's life. The Ottomans went back empty handed and in time, Constantina grew up, married a worthy man and they both lived happily there, near Mamaia's beach. This is what the legend tells us about the forming of this beautiful, wide beach of our coastline, appreciated not just by Romanians, but by the entire world.

Another myth tells us that hundreds of years ago, on the shore of lake Siutghiol, where Mamaia is located today, there was the sheepfold of a man named Costea Alisandru. This was also where often the Pasha of Babadag would stop, as he travelled

to and from Constanța.

The two had been friends for a long time and often times the Turkish Pasha stayed in the Romanian shepherd's home, eating the meals with his family. Costea's wife was called Lia and they had a beautiful daughter. As the Pasha became older, he started bringing his young son, Enver, with him in his journeys.

This is how Enver fell in love with Costea's daughter and decided to kidnap her. He took the girl into his boat but the girl fought him, all the while calling her mother for help, shouting "Mama Lia, Mama Lia". Trying to free herself from Enver, the girl fell into the water and drowned.

Desperate, the young man jumped after her, but could no longer save her. Looking for her body, Enver kept shouting "Mama Ia, Mama Ia", also asking for help, as he had heard the girl call out. Enver also perished and close to the tragedy's place, the Pasha from Babadag built a mill, around which a village was formed. That village became known as Mamaia.

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Selim Pasha, Nasîn Vida and the Siutghiol island

A few hundred years ago, in a land in Anatolia there ruled a wise and kind Pasha named Selim. He was not warlike, as other servants of the Sultan were; he was more of a scholar, a healer and an astrologer. Pasha Selim also had a "habit" that brought him a fair amount of troubles: he trusted people. One day, at the gates of his castle appeared a charlatan accompanied by fifty soldiers. That man showed him an edict signed by the Sultan and told him he had come to replace him.

Selim trusted him but when he reached Istanbul he found out he had been tricked. The Sultan even became upset with him and told him harsh words: "It's better to have as servant a clever charlatan than a weak and honest man." Upon hearing this, Selim was so saddened that he decided to leave. He left Istanbul and wandered for many years around the Empire, looking for a place to rest and pray, until he reached our fair Dobrogea.

From some Turkish people from the village of Anadolchioi (the Village of Anatolians, arrived from the region of Anatolia, Turkey) Selim found out that on the "sweet as milk" lake Siutghiol there is the Island of Vida Nasîn, a marvellous place where the former Pasha could build a house. Nobody from Anadolchioi (Anadalchioi) knew to tell him where the name came from, but Selim was not in a hurry and, being wise, knew he would one day find out the reason.

He loved that island more than one can say and over some old, stone ruins he built a big and beautiful house, surrounded by centenary oaks. Often, as he walked around his property, he found stones marked with curious markings which even he, learned man that he was, didn't manage to elucidate.

Trying to find out more about the island that was now his home, Selim went to nearby villages, Muslim or not. The locals told him that in olden times, on that island there lived a Giaour (infidel) who had come from far away. "He talked alone, he was kind hearted but always sad. He had a strange name, hard to pronounce, but people called him Nasîn Vida (Publius Ovidius Naso)." This is what the locals told Selim, remembering that Nasîn Vida, who often travelled to Kiustenge (Constanța), died on the Siutghiol Island, where he was also buried.

Selim was very puzzled by this story so, one day, he copied the markings on the stone and sent them to Istanbul, to his friend, the wise Temirhan. Temirhan deciphered them and a year later he replied that the locals were indeed right and that on the island there had indeed lived a great scholar from the times of Rîm (Rome), "exiled there by his Padishah". Selim looked for the scholar Nasîn Vida's tomb for years, without success. He lived a long time in peace, respected by both Muslims and Giaours, always helping the needy.

As for the Sultan's upsetting words to Selim, which had caused him to leave, well, they turned out to not be true: the clever charlatan from Anatolia deceived and caused great harm to the Sublime Porte, until the Sultan understood he was wrong to turn the wise Pasha away. They even say that for many years the Sultan had looked for Selim, to restore his titles, but never did he think to look for him in Dobrogea, on Nasîn Vida's Island.

Bibliographie (adaptation) - Titus Cergău "Insula lui Ovidiu" (Ovid's Island), Ed. Sport-Turism, 1979, story heard by the author from Toma Vartivar, plough-man from Mamaia village; Alexandru P. Arbore - "Din etnografia Dobrogei" (Dobruja's Ethnography), 1920.

The village of bad people

Once upon a time, instead of the “sweet as milk” Siutghiol lake there was land and there, there was a large and wealthy village, but as it happens to a person that wealth seems to change them, so did it happen to the people living in the village, whose hearts were as black as night, they were avaricious and uncaring about other people’s troubles, thinking only about their own needs and pleasures.

Only one woman in the village, widowed many years before, had a pure heart and was always ready to help the needy that sometimes passed the village. The good woman had a beautiful daughter, barely a woman herself, who started taking after her mother. One day, when the kind widow was gone to the market in the Sea Fair to sell food, thieves came to the village.

Seeing as the widow’s homestead was unguarded, they went in and took everything they could carry. They saw the girl and, entranced by her beauty, kidnapped her without a second thought. As they were leaving the village, they crossed paths with the widow, who was returning home. Terrified and scared, the woman walked around the village, asking her neighbours for help, but the wealthy villagers didn’t care for the woman’s pain, as long as they were fine.

Heart broken, the kind woman could do nothing else but pray unto the Heavens for help...and God listened to her and a heavy rain, as no man had seen before, started over the village. Not rain, what am I saying, it was a flood, with stronger winds and more terrible than the one Old Noah endured. The water grew so much, so quickly that everybody drowned, bad villagers and thieves alike. As if by a miracle, the whirlpools took the kidnapped girl and left her at her mother’s house, where the kind woman was waiting, full of hope. This is what the Heavens had done for the good woman. The only place safe from the rising tides was the piece of land where their house was and this is how both the lake and the Siutghiol Island came to be. There, the two women lived a long time, safe and without worry. Then, when the widow passed away, her daughter married a kind man, arrived in those parts from a far away village and they lived there happy and in peace with their children, on the flood born island.

Story source (adaptation) - Titus Cergău, legend heard from old man Rusu from Canara village

Leuke – the White Island of the Hero Achilles, the Virgins’ Sacrifice and the Oracle

Back in the times when the Black Sea was called Axeinos (inhospitable), Milesian Greeks from Orgame, Histria and Tomis had a legend they cared for very much indeed. It was the myth of the White Island, Leuke, where, it was said, the legendary Hero Achilles had been buried.

An ancient writer, Arctinus of Miletus, wrote that it was here where Patroclus’ body was also brought, Achilles’ best friend, killed by Hector in Troy. According to another legend, here, on the White Island, Achilles was brought back to life by the immortal gods and lived for many millennia with the beautiful Helen, who he had loved so during the Trojan Wars.

Aside from the myth, we know today that the Greek sailors called the island Makaron (the Island of the Happy), imagining a heavenly world here, where the souls of the dead could rest in peace.

There are many legends connected to this island in the Black Sea, Leuke (White), which is now called Snake Island and all these myths have as a central character the Hero Achilles, killed beneath the walls of Troy but reborn in spirit, once his mother Thetis brought his body on the island. One of the most interesting stories is the one about the existence of an Oracle of Achilles on the island.

About a temple built in honour of the immortal hero we know from Flavius Arrianus (1st-2nd centuries CE). He wrote about the Oracle of Achilles in the year 130 CE, in his work *Periplus Ponti Euxini*: “Some say that from those that come onto the island, those that came on purpose bring victims from their ships, which some they sacrifice, come they release in honour of Achilles”. Those who chanced to come onto the island, brought by storms, also went to the Oracle and paid hefty sums for a victim, which they could buy from the priest of Achilles (“If the Oracle rejects the sacrifice – as there is also an oracle in the temple – they add to the price they pay...”).

Arrianus further writes: “They also say that Achilles appears to those that arrive on the island, in their dreams, but also to the ones who sail very close to it, telling them which part of the island is better for landing...Others say that being on watch, Achilles appears to them on the mast with the same face as the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux – patrons of sailors). Others say they have also seen Patroclus in their dreams (Patroclus, beloved friend of Achilles, killed by Hector at Troy, whose body was brought to Leuke Island – source, Arctinos of Miletus)”.

Several ancient sources mention a great temple built here, the birds and animals that lived on the island but say nothing about snakes, seen in great numbers in modern times. According to ancient legends, the island’s birds dipped their feathers in the sea, flew round the temple, sprinkling water on it but never dared fly over this sanctuary (“In the Sea, no bird can fly over the sacred temple located on the island where Achilles is

buried”).

In 1823, Russian sailors discovered on the island the ruins of a great, white marble temple and the German archaeologist Ulrich Kohler studied them. Even then the building’s walls were impressive, two-meter tall ruins and they say each side of the temple measured thirty meters.

Therefore, the ancient sources talk about an oracle and a temple of Achilles but especially about the sacrifices made to honour the immortal hero (human and animal sacrifices). Regarding the human sacrifices, we end by recounting the stories of two other ancient writers, Maximus of Tyre and Philostratus. It is practically a legend...

They say that a merchant often stopped on Leuke where Achilles always welcomed him. One day he asked the mortal man to do him a favour: to bring him from Ilion a specific Trojan girl, from the family of Hector. The merchant thought Achilles to be in love with the girl. He left to Ilion and a few months later returned with the girl, who he was ordered to keep on the ship. The merchant went to the temple, where Achilles organised a feast for him. When he left he was given many gifts and was told to leave the girl on the shore. As the ship sailed away from the island, from the deck, the merchant saw how Achilles threw himself at the girl, as she was screaming terribly, and ripped her apart, like a beast. This way, it seems, Achilles once more took his revenge, after death, on Hector’s kind, the man who had killed his beloved Patroclus.

It was called Leuke in old days, or the White Island but we now know it as Snake Island...a mysterious and millenary piece of land thrown in the middle of the Old Sea, a place of secrecy and legend, century-old reason for hostility between neighbouring nations, each vying for control, but we know it belongs to the Black Sea. The Romanian and Ukrainian people both have numerous legends about this island and in many of them we can find the existence of a passage to the other realm, the spirits’ realm. Foreign travellers that have passed near the Danube Delta hundreds of years ago have written the Achilles’ White Island has a Magical Gate at its center that leads to the underworld. Those that reach it and are kind-hearted wake up in Heaven whilst the evil-doers reach the bottomless pits of Lucifer. It is a charmed gate, as it cannot be seen anytime or by anyone. If you want to reach the other side, you first have to find the Fairies’ Fir Tree, whose branches you have to hold on to and pull yourself up to pass through the gate.

Some say the name Leuke could be translated as “the realm of those bound to the earth”. Who knows...superstitions...legends? Even now, old fishermen, wither Romanian or Ukrainian, say that on the Island there still lives the Earth’s Maelstrom (Sorbul Pământului), supernatural entity that takes care the laws of nature are respected by mortals. Nobody has seen this Maelstrom for thousands of years, but a grain of truth there might be to this legend...

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Photo source - thorsvaldsensmuseum.dk - Achilles meets Priam, king of Troy

Saint George, the Dragon and the story of the old Danube Branch

I've heard this story for the first time, told at dusk by a fisherman, when I was in the Danube Delta, in Sfântu Gheorghe (Saint George) village, where the old river flows into the Black Sea. I was telling our host we were tired after the five hours spent on the ship (The Passenger, as it is also known) that had brought us from Tulcea. We were talking about the sinuous path of the Sfântu Gheorghe branch and how eerie the frequent meanders of the river are, and the man smiled faintly and said, almost in a whisper: "Well, if that is how the Snake's path was..." Surprised, we asked him to recount the story and he told us what he had learnt, as a child, from the village elders.

"They say that when the world was ravaged by the Great Dragon, the Giant Snake, which no man could kill, Saint George came. A strong and brave soldier, wielding a Spear of Light received from God, he fought the Great Beast for a long time, all over the Earth. He managed to strike a mortal blow against it, but the Creature still didn't want to go back to the Hell it had come from. Trying to get away, the dragon reached our lands and was crawling towards the sea. Its tail, long as seven villages had steel scales and, as it moved, it dug the earth, leaving behind a serpentine trail. The beast perished and where it had passed a channel was left, which the Danube quickly claimed. This part of the river, the people called after the Saint and the same name they gave to the village", the man finished his story.

I couldn't stop thinking about the story, especially since I had always wondered how the fishing village had gotten its name. We mustn't forget that in Dobrogea there is no other place whose name references the Dragon Slayer. I found out that 800 years ago, the village's name was the same, as the Genovese that traded here knew it as Sancti Giorgi, name they had learnt from the locals.

The legend is surprising, considering the well-known tale of the Saint tells us a different version. A Christian Roman soldier, George rushed to help the people of Selena, a city in Libya, terrorised by the Great Dragon. He killed it with his long lance, which we often see in Orthodox iconography. Years after this deed, the Roman Emperor Diocletian asked the Christian soldiers to publicly renounce their religion (persecution edicts issued in 303-304 C.E.). George refused and was killed. This is the official story of one of the greatest martyrs of Christendom. To me, however, more appealing is the Dobrogea legend of the Dragon killed there, at Sfântu Gheorghe, where the Danube flows into the old Euxine Sea.

The Argonauts and Absyrtos' Sacrifice

The most beautiful legend (and the most tragic) regarding the founding of Tomis is connected to the myth of the Argonauts, men who thousands of years ago arrived in the Black Sea in pursuit of the legendary Golden Fleece.

Reaching the Euxine Sea, Jason and the heroes aboard the Argo went to King Aetes' Colchis (modern-day Georgia), where the coveted treasure lie, the Golden Fleece. After having stolen the Fleece, helped by Princess Medea, the Greek heroes sailed back towards their homeland. They also took the young woman with them, who was in love with Jason, but they took her young brother as well, Prince Absyrtos. With Aetes following them, Medea convinced Jason to commit a gruesome deed: to sacrifice Absyrtos in order to delay their pursuers. The Prince was cut into pieces and the grieving father, King Aetes, had to stop and collect his young son's remains and give him a proper burial, with the proper rites. Jason thus managed to escape and he reached Greece safe and sound.

The legend says Absyrtos was sacrificed right here, where later the city of Tomis would be founded. This is the reason why many link the name "Tomis" to the sacrifice, while some translate the term as "dagger blade", because this is exactly the shape of the promontory known today as "The Peninsula" or "The Old Town".

The legend of Dapyx and his warrior daughter Gebila

One summer evening, in the village built in the shadow of the Old Mountains, there came an old man, almost blind, wearing rags and with his face pained by the dog days of summer and a long journey. His bundle, carried over his shoulder was empty, but he proudly held a lute as old as he was.

As the Moon started shining its light on the houses and as the old man felt his strength recovered after a slice of bread and a pot of wine, he called the villagers around him and started telling his tale.

"Many years ago, when I was a young lad, not far from here there was a large, beautiful fortress belonging to the Geto-Dacians. It was ruled by the kind King Dapyx, a brave and just king, who had united many worthy warriors around him and perhaps Dapyx and his men would have lived a long, happy life, but the times were in turmoil. Armies sent from Rome arrived in our lands, with thoughts of conquest and plunder. Crassus was their leader, a cruel man and full of venom, who wanted to eradicate any

trace of the locals. And Crassus fell on Dapyx with his whole army, as the local king refused to submit and pay tribute, as other weaker kings had done”.

The old man stopped for a second, drawing his breath and sipping more wine, as thick as bear’s blood, and then continued his tale:

“For a whole month did the Romans try to get past the fortress walls, without luck, as the Geto-Dacian arrows filled the sky and fell mercilessly on the enemy soldiers, mangling them just like the keen hawk does to the unwitting pigeon. As he was trying to scale the walls, Crassus saw the king’s daughter, Gebila, on the ramparts, and right then and there fell in love with her. He immediately halted the assault and sent the king an envoy, telling him he would leave the city if the king agrees to give Gebila to him as his wife, but both the king and his daughter refused. Then, with even greater anger, the Romans fell upon the city. One by one, the Geto-Dacian warriors fell. King Dapyx sent the old men, women and children into hiding, in the Keiris Caverns, a large but deceptive cave network, where one could easily get lost. The people stayed there, safely, as the war raged on. Then one night, a night such as this one, on the walls there were but two people, king Dapyx and his friend, Gebeides. On that same night, at a hidden gate, there had come an old priest, envoy to the king from the Dacians across the Danube.

Send your warrior to ask for an army and you shall vanquish your enemies, the priest had said. Dapyx believed him, but he was nothing more than a traitor. As soon as Gebeides left the city, the Romans caught him near the hidden gate and bound him up. They got into the city, but Dapyx didn’t surrender, instead he drank a cup of poison, leaving for the immortal world of the Great Zamolxe.

The Romans destroyed the fortress and then they went to Keiris, telling the people they would let them leave if Gebila becomes their leader’s bride. Crassus was surprised as the Geto-Dacians agreed and even sent them their requested dowry: 101 milky white horses for the bride and her 100 handmaidens.

Lo and behold, as the maidens left the caverns, dressed in white, riding the white horses, they took out sharp blades and poisoned arrows and bravely fell upon the Romans, killing many of the soldiers on that day. They too perished, to a one, the last to die being Gebila, pierced by cold, iron arrows, but on her face there was a comforted, broad smile, as she knew she would be received by the Great God.

Maddened by anger, Crassus ordered all the exits to the caverns bricked up, leaving the other Geto-Dacians there to starve to death. Story goes that some children managed to escape, going through narrow, winding tunnels that lead to the shores of the Old River. Those children grew up to continue the fight against the invaders.”

The old man finished his story and sighed heavily. He then went to the edge of the village, to lie under the night sky, full of stars, the same as when Dapyx’ warriors were fighting on the fortress ramparts. He moved about, trying to shield his back, where the

old wounds of Roman rope had left deep marks. Thus, Gebeides eventually fell asleep, dreaming of Gebila, who he had never had the courage to declare his love...

Adapted after Alexandru Mitru, „În țara legendelor” (In the land of legends).

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