

# THE CATALANS' MYTHICAL UNIVERSE



MYTHS DO NOT BELONG ONLY TO ANTIQUITY, TO THE ORIGINS OF THE WORLD OR OF A NATION: A PEOPLE'S HISTORY NOT ONLY TRANSMITS ITS ANCIENT HERITAGE OF BELIEFS, IT CONSTANTLY RECREATES IT, JUST AS CATALAN MYTHOLOGY REMAINS ALIVE AND DYNAMIC.

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**“P**eople come from all around...” Catalonia is an old country peopled in successive waves, by *homines undecumque venientes* –men come from anywhere–, according to the medieval chronicles from the time when the Catalan nation began to take shape, a thousand years ago. This land, lying astride the Pyrenees and beside the Mediterranean, is situated in the east of the Western Mediterranean and the north of Southern Europe. A stopping-off point for races and civilizations, where the steep Pyrenean mountains drop down to the sea; a passage, coming from the north, the south, the east or the west, but also a point of arrival: a crossroads between different worlds, a melting-pot of races and cultures.

Within what are known as the Països Catalans –made up of the País Valencià, the Balearic Isles and Catalonia itself–, which share a common language, culture, history and will to be, the map of Catalonia forms a clearly delimited triangle whose sides are

formed by the Pyrenees and the continent of Europe to the north, the Mediterranean to the east, and the Iberian Peninsula to the west.

This triangle marks the various cultural origins that converge to form the Catalan cultural identity: Catalonia partakes of a Pyrenean universe, an ancient culture stretching from the Cantabrian Sea to the Gulf of Roses, a rural, mountain, farming culture; as well as of the Mediterranean civilization, sea-faring, mercantile and bourgeois; and at the same time of a Moorish and Hispanic influence.

A Catalan poet, Joan Maragall, talks of the confluence of mountain and sea in his fable of the mermaid and the shepherd who meet on the plain, fall in love and set up home. Catalonia is a constant historical dialectic between the mountain temperament, preserver of ancient traditions and resistant to attacks from outside, and the sea-faring temperament, liberal, dynamic, open to all winds, to all that comes from abroad.

The country's population has been shaped by successive waves of immigrants, from the Iberian tribes –the Celts, from the north–; Greek sailors and traders; a long and profound Romanization, still present in the Catalan language, in the laws and the way of life of the society; the Visigoths, at the end of the Roman Empire; the Moors; the Frankish reconquest that established the Spanish March, the origin of the Catalan nation, and so on. In Catalonia the three great Abrahamic religions –Judaism, Christianity and Islam– lived a long and fertile coexistence. Massive waves of immigrants succeeded one another, from the Mediterranean shoreline, from the south of France –Gascony and Languedoc–, from the south of the Peninsula –Murcia, Andalusia–, until today.

We could talk of Catalan mythology, then, as a confluence of different mythologies, legends and cultural traditions, which, while recognizing the plurality of its origins as its wealth, values its own differentiated identity.



It is possible to make out a Celtic source, pre-Roman, ancestral, rooted the length of the Pyrenees, with a profound substratum of beliefs and rites connected with woodland forces, with fire, the fertility of the soil and of the herds and flocks, the cult of the dead: the fairy tales and legends, customs and festivals express the mythical elements that inhabit the Catalans' collective unconscious.

Another universe, more explicit but also very ancient, is the Graeco-Roman universe, not only the one we refer to as classical, but also that which contains the traditions that extended throughout the Mediterranean even before it was a Latin sea, the *Mare Nostrum*. The predominantly solar calendar, marked by the seasons, the solstices and equinoxes; the natural sacraments of bread, wine and oil, the sea-farers' ceremonies and customs, the old circular dances, the bullfights, etc.

Christianity extended its powerful and growing civilizing influence over this multiple and varied reality and with it

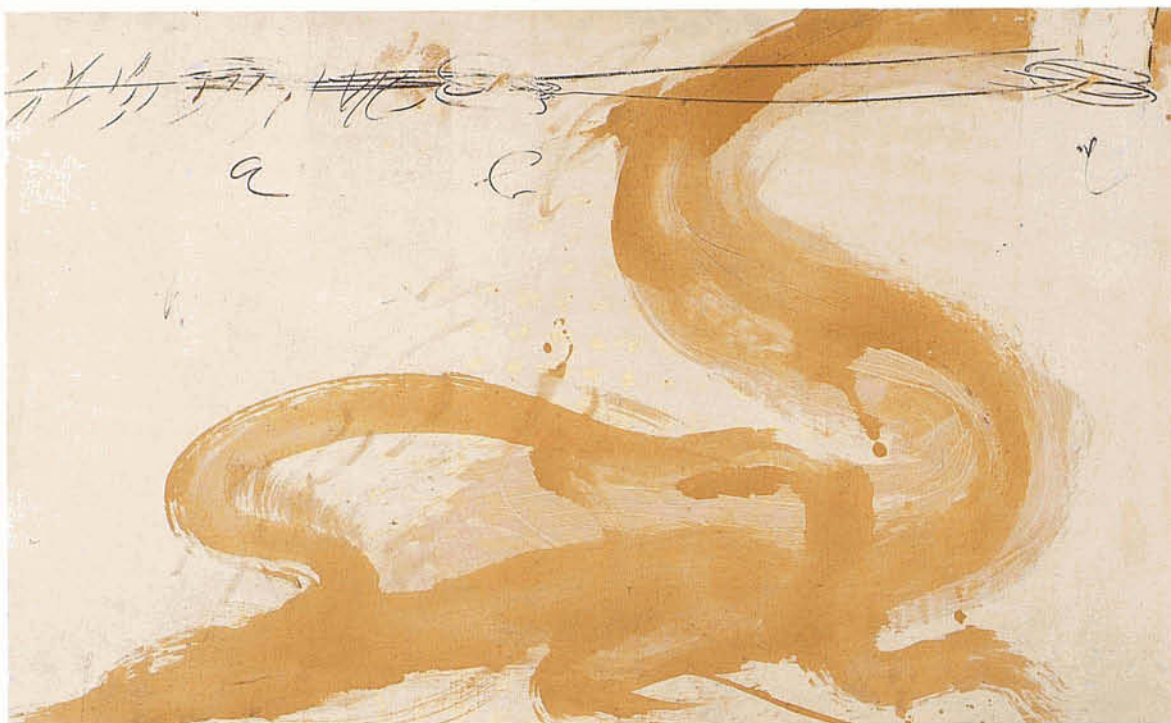
the tradition derived from Judaism: the faith in and cult of a single God and his son Jesus Christ, devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints; the foundations of moral behaviour; the lunar calendar, which marks the broad festive cycle stretching from February –Carnival– to June –Corpus Christi–, centred on the full moon of Easter. Nevertheless, beneath the established order of Christendom lie ancient “pagan” beliefs that Christianity had tried to eradicate, disguised, somewhat superficially “baptized”, syncretically incorporated into the religious, cultural and social universe developed by Christianity.

Other influences have left their mark on Catalan mythology and legend: the Moorish influence, especially in the southern half of Catalonia –which was Muslim for more than two centuries–, in the dances, in the fairy tales; the Frankish and Germanic influence, in the heroic and chivalric legends; the gypsy influence, from the fifteenth century until today, although minor; and yet others.

#### **A rescue operation**

The series of myths and beliefs that make up the symbolic and fantastic universe of the Catalans has been gradually built up, enriched, expressed and transmitted through the centuries by tradition, from generation to generation. It forms an inextricable fabric, in which different threads and patterns are mixed, a humus formed of roots, some robust and deep, others tightly packed capillaries: the collective unconscious, as C. J. Jung would say.

Nevertheless, not all the mythologies have, like the Greek, been described and ordered by a Homer or a Hesiod, almost three thousand years later, on the basis of the substratum of legendary tales, of expressions of popular wisdom, of the beliefs represented by the devotions, the religious ceremonies and the festivals. In many European countries, as in the case of Catalonia, it was only after the Romanticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that interest was roused in the traditions, folklore and various



DRAC (DRAGON) BY ANTONI TÀPIES, 1980

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cultural expressions of the people.

A considerable body of folklorists—who were to be followed by ethnologists and anthropologists—set to work to transcribe at first hand, especially in rural and mountain areas, songs, sayings, fairy tales... to record customs, games, ceremonies, valuable rituals... and to collect objects, tools, significant material samples, in a kind of archaeological research into popular culture. In Catalonia, this task was especially important and the fruits considerable: a national conscience was reborn with renewed vigour, anxious to rediscover in its cultural heritage its own collective identity, differentiated from the other peoples and cultures that integrated, through the Spanish state, the same political unit. The Catalan cultural movement that ensued is still alive and fresh today.

Folklorists, writers and poets gathered and shaped this valuable cultural heritage; it was a labour of love, a rescue adventure, at a particularly opportune moment, as it would not have survived till today, in a post-industrial society marked by the mass media and consumerism, —the “global village”, as McLuhan would say. Now, the abundant ma-

terial they gathered is one of our chief documentary sources; the point of departure for describing the principal defining elements of Catalan mythology.

#### “This was and was not...”

Mythical tales tend to start in much the same way: *en arkhé*, “in the beginning”... *in illo tempore*, “in those days”... the sacred, original, archetypal time when the world was formed and life arose. Traditional Catalan fairy tales start with formulas like “Behold, in those days the beasts talked”, or else “the birds had teeth”, or else “of the fourteen winds, seven were good and seven were bad”. Though often also they make use of disconcerting expressions like “time was time” or “this was and was not” —similar to the *kāna ma kāna*, “that which was was”, of Arabic tales.

Catalan cosmology describes the formation of the highest mountains by magic or by a mysterious spell: the Pyrenees and, especially, the massis of Canigó: “Olympus of the fairies”. Behold, an evil being set fire to all the forests of fir —Pyrenees is said to come from the Greek “pyr”, fire— in order to trap the damsel Pyrene, daughter of Bebryx,

the king of that land; a hero or demigod, assimilated to the Greek Hercules, eventually buries her body and raises an enormous mausoleum of “mountain ranges over mountain ranges” from one sea to the other: the Pyrenees.

Montserrat —“sawn-off mountain”, a geological formation of fantastically shaped rocks—, the cosmic mountain situated at the heart of Catalonia, has a fabulous genesis: arisen from a mysterious ancient sea, like a submerged city, it stands right in the middle of a plain as if reaching for the heavens. This was the home of the divinities until the Christian faith drove them out. At its peak is the sanctuary of the “Moreneta”, the patron of Catalonia, a black-faced Romanesque Virgin which appeared to a group of shepherds in a cave. Montserrat is the “ladder of glory”, a link between earth and heaven: in vain the Devil tried to destroy it. But at the end of time, because of the evil of humankind, the mountain will once more sink into the primeval sea and only the followers of the black Virgin will be saved.

A host of legends tell of the mythical formation of mountains and rocks, of caves, islands, lakes, of rivers and



WALL OF THE DINING ROOM IN HOTEL ESPAÑA, BARCELONA

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springs... The land, the landscape, has magical, sacred connotations. Even the ancient oak groves are natural sanctuaries; in them, many theophanies have taken place and many images of the Virgin Mary are worshipped.

#### The cosmic tree

Every culture imagines its own country as the centre of the world, which at the birth of time was a garden, a paradise with a tree bearing wonderful fruits –apples, pomegranates, the three golden oranges, conferring immortality, eternal youth, love, strength, the ability to understand the speech of the birds and the wisdom of the mysteries of life and death... and beside it flows the spring of the water of life, with its miraculous powers. Its guardian is a dragon, a terrible serpent. Catalan fairy tales are full of references to this enclosed garden on an inaccessible island, in a far-off land –the land “of no return”–, where there is the tree, the spring, the plant or the flower that break spells and cure illness or death: the battle with the monster is the initiatic test *par excellence*; by slaying it one becomes a hero with special powers and gains the hand of the princess in marriage along with the royal

crown –the monarchy handed down matrilineally, in exogamic marriage. Tree-worship is still present in the Maypole festivals and other tree ceremonies: the tallest or most vigorous tree in the forest is carried in a solemn procession to the middle of the town-square, where it is replanted and decorated with flowers, a green branch, a flag, or else with bunches of apples or oranges, or loaves of bread in the shape of the sun, the moon or the stars; or with chickens, sausages or cured hams on the *cucanya*, or greased pole. The tree is a symbol of fertility; around it are held female circular dances around the male –ribbon dances, gypsy dances, horn dances–, festivals and picnics. In the mountain regions, the old, dry tree is ritually burned at the end of a year –at the summer solstice– as a fire-tree. Often, its fruits make the young women who eat them fertile and their branches protect the home and the crops from storms, spells and witchcraft.

Another ritual to do with trees is the *tió de Nadal*, the Yule log that becomes fertile and “craps” sweets and presents; the old *tió* symbolizes the continuity of the home, of the family hearth, which is renewed each year. Its ashes fertilize the

crops, its flame in the hearth will protect against storms. The winter solstice, the day of the New Sun, Christmas Day, burns with the fire of the *tió*; at the summer solstice, the festival of the Full Sun, the magic night of Midsummer’s Eve is set alight with bonfires on the mountain tops and in the town squares. These are the biggest and most traditional celebrations in Catalonia. From the tree to the fire.

#### Dragons, giants and water nymphs

In the beginning, the world was inhabited by fabulous, chimerical creatures: dragons, monsters, giant worms, kicking mules, bulls and other fire-spitting beasts were the lords of the earth; snakes poisoned the lakes and springs; eagles and griffins flew overhead. An antediluvian fauna? In fact, they are representations of primeval supernatural forces. They abound in fairy tales and legends: monsters that terrorize towns and kingdoms, demanding tributes in the form of human victims, especially young virgins. To this day, they make up the fantastic bestiary of many traditional celebrations: the “*Patum*”, the “*corre-focs*”... Remains of zoolatric rites directed at the divinities



of the crops? The medieval imagination brought them into the brimming liturgy of the celebrations as creatures that submitted to the triumph of the Eucharist, to the God of the Christians.

The first humans were a race of mythical giants, enormous creatures who worshipped the ancient gods: "Moors" –that is, pagans, non-Christians. They carried huge rocks which they hurled into the sea to form the islets off the coast; they built megalithic towers and cabins, with huge blocks of stone, the prehistoric menhirs and dolmens we know. Their names express the powers they had, their characters: Mountain-shaker, Rock-crusher, River-sucker, Pine-plucker, Sharpiron, Strongbeacon... Many of them were frightful-looking: great thick beards, warts, a single eye in the middle of their forehead –just like the Polyphemus of the Odyssey. Some became protectors of the cities –they were their collective personalization–, others –the "Moors"– wanted to destroy them: hence the terrible battles between giants, like the one between the Gegant del Pi and the Gegant de la Ciutat. Nowadays they parade and dance in solemn processions at each town's *festa major* as its liveliest popular representation.

Other mysterious creatures that inhabit the world around us are the spirits of nature, related to the four elements: in the earth, the dwarfs, who lived in caves under the ground, where they forged magic swords; in the air, the Will-o'-the-wisps, that fly like the wind and sneak through cracks in doors and windows and come down the chimney, they are the spirits of the home, and then there are the *llufes* and the women of smoke; in the fire, the salamanders –and also infernal dragons and the *guites*–, who feed on the flames and set everything in their path alight with their

fiery breath; and in the water, the beautiful *gojes*, *alojes*, *encantades*, water-women, a kind of fairy or nymph that lived in springs and lakes, caves that are palaces of ice like shining glass, and the mermaids that bewitch the sea. Water nymphs and mermaids that seduce men and that even married them and bore their children. All the same, love between the spirits and human beings normally came to a tragic end. Christian teaching fiercely pursued the deep-rooted popular belief in these mythical creatures and turned them into demons or witches with evil powers, to be driven off with palm fronds, laurel branches and other holy plants.

### Restless souls

A widespread belief even today is that of souls in purgatory, souls of the deceased hovering in the air around us. Very often they are the spirits of very young people whose life has been cut short prematurely; others have suffered a violent death –by the sword or the rope–, contrary to nature; dead people whose body has not received Christian burial –abandoned on the battlefield, drowned, lost– and who for this reason have been denied eternal rest. But more often than not they are dead people who have been condemned to roam for ever more because of some terrible sin. A prime example of these restless souls is the Count Arnau, condemned to gallop the skies with his pack of howling dogs, blowing his mournful hunting horn, because of his sacrilegious affairs with the nuns of the convent of Sant Joan de les Abadesses and the unpaid wages of his workmen. Another restless soul is that of the Evil Hunter, who went into a church after a wild animal, without bowing to the Holy Sacrament.

Restless souls wander at the end of the year; on the night of the first day of

November, the doors of the Land of Death are opened and the deceased slip out to revisit their families: it's important that you be ready, appease them with prayers, light candles in their memory, put flowers on their graves, lay a place for them at the table and hold a funeral supper with them: only nuts –especially chestnuts and pine nuts–, and the little offerings of bread dedicated to them, the typical “panellets”, nowadays sweetmeats characteristic of this time of year.

#### The cult to the saints and the Virgin Mary

The Will-o'-the-wisps and fairies were banished from the world of traditions by the teachings of the Church; on the other hand, many pagan, Mediterranean and Celtic deities –of the fields, the herds and flocks, the weather or healing– have adopted the form of patron saints and protectors, invoked in times of adversity and devoutly venerated on special days: the gatherings and pilgrimages to the saint's shrine, usually set on the tops of hills, often the site of earlier pagan devotions and cults. Alongside the exemplary lives of the faithful, the Christian calendar has integrated ancient, pre-Christian beliefs, a kind of minor polytheism.

And so, too, the profound belief in the Great Mother has survived in the Christian prayer book in the exemplary figure of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, commonly invoked throughout the Christian world as the Virgin, but worshipped by the Catalans as the Mother of God. Their traditional iconography, in a primitive Romanesque style, presents her as a Mother sitting with the Son on her lap, crowned with a flower or with a fruit in her hand. Many “mother-of-gods” have been found by sheep, cattle or shepherds, in caves or springs, under rocks, or in the trunk or the branches of a great tree.

#### Mythical heroes

One of the most famous figures from the fairy tales of the Pyrenees is John of the Bear: the son of a Pyrenean bear and a damsel, he becomes a hero who conquers fire and the underground or infernal divinity. This is not the Promethean fire of Greek mythology, that made it possible to forge metal and allowed the advance of industry, but –as in many other mythologies around the world– the fire of the hearth, which sets food cooking, the passage from raw to cooked. John of the Bear conquers the god of fire who prevents him from cooking his supper, and the god of fire submits to him and puts himself at his service. Apart from this, the Bear is ever-present in Pyrenean folklore: the dance of the Bear and Roseta –a pretty maid dressed in green and adorned with wild flowers– symbolizes the struggle between the spirit of Winter and the Spring. The victory of the latter celebrates the appearance of the first flowers. One of the most admired heroes, though, is the knight Saint George, who guided the Catalan armies in the reconquest. Saint George gave battle to the dragon to free a princess; from the blood that spilt from the monster's wounds was born a red rose. Every year, on the festivity of Saint George, the patron saint of Catalonia, roses are sold in the streets and the young men buy them for their beloved. Saint George's defeat of the dragon, like Saint Michael overpowering the devil and Saint James on horseback trampling the infidel, are simply three iconographic versions of the same story: that of the eternal struggle of good against evil.

Most legendary heroes, however, refer to the beginnings of the history of Catalonia: Otger Cataló and the Nine Barons of Fame –a version that sets out to create a later parallel with the legends of





SANT JORDI I EL DRAC BY BERNAT MARTORELL, 1438

the Twelve Lords of France or the Knights of the Round Table—, and even the Count Arnau—with the magic sword forged by the dwarfs in the bowels of the earth and presented by the fairies of the cave at Ribes—fighting the invading Moors; Jofre the Hairy, considered the first of the line of count-kings who ruled the country for half a millenium, whose deeds gave rise to the Catalan coat-of-

arms. The four stripes on the golden background are the marks left by his lord, the King of France, after dipping his fingers in the wound the count received on the battlefield against the invading Arabs—a reward for his heroism. King James the Conqueror, who pioneered Catalan rule in the Mediterranean, is also surrounded by an aura of legend.

But myths do not belong only to antiquity, to the origins of the world or of a nation: a people's history not only transmits its ancient heritage of beliefs, it constantly recreates it on the basis of subsequent events; and so Catalan mythology remains alive and dynamic, both remembering the nation's origins and guiding its people towards the resplendent future they dream of. ●