

The creation of the Earth: Dilemmas of the creator God*

The dualistic conception of the creation of the Earth is well known in the broad zone East of the Hungarian language territory to the Eastern shores of Asia, and Native Americans are also familiar with it. The various earth-diver creation myths have at their heart a common core, namely that God did not create the Earth alone, but that he had a helper whom He sent to the bottom of the sea to bring up bits of mud or sand with which God made the Earth as we know it. The first opinions on how this myth came into being and how its diversified system of motifs developed were proposed by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century researchers; only recently, after a long silence, has interest in the myth and its written version, the Apocryphal *The Sea of Tiberias* received new impetus.¹ My earlier paper was an attempt to explore, from a Hungarian perspective, the results of this renewed interest in terms of Hungarian variants of the myth.² By now, this work needs to be supplemented, because, among others, the motifs of the myth in question appear in other myth typologies, thereby connecting different creation myths and establishing new branches of thought worth exploring.

The idea of a piece of sand from under the water becoming the Earth has been imagined in various forms. A Vepsian text, for instance, states: “An old grandmother – may she rest in peace – told me that before there was an earth, there was a big lake, a huge lake, bigger than the White Lake. The water was above ground. But there were no people living at that time. The hedgehog brought up the earth stuck on his spikes. There were rivers and lakes and grass grew by the rivers, and trees, bushes and everything one needs. The hedgehog also made earth, and the earth was bigger than the lake”.³ This text describes a mythical animal, a chthonic creature, the hedgehog that created the Earth all by itself. Among the Romanian variants of the earth-diver myth there are many that place the hedgehog in the role of the Demiurge-Devil. The hedgehog creates the world together with God by bringing up bits of mud from the bottom of the sea. His main role is that of a craftsman, moulding with his hands

* The research leading to these results was financed by the European Research Council, according to the ERC grant agreement No. 324214 of the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (2007–2013).

¹ Most recently, among others, Badalanova-Geller 2011; Dimitrova 2014; Mátéffy 2014.

² Nagy 2004; 2006.

³ Ražauskas–Civjan 2004, 80.

and measuring with a ball of twine given to him by God for this very purpose. He creates the Earth from the bits of mud brought up from the deep waters, even if he does so on the orders of God. “There is no other animal in Romanian folklore that would be as attached to creation as the hedgehog.”⁴ Among the Hungarian etiological myths we also find a peculiar text, most probably collected by László Mándoki in Balatonederics in the 1950s:⁵

“The Milky Way was created when the hedgehog rolled along the sky: we see the holes he pierced with his spines.”⁶ This one sentence contains important information: the sky is a solid cover above the earth and the hedgehog is a creator being: he is responsible for the starlit sky. Thus, the sky must be solid, if one can pierce holes in it and behind or above it there must be light that shines through these holes. These are the stars. “One of the ancient, Finno-Ugric names of the Pleiades is ‘sieve’ or ‘star sieve’. This denomination is very common among Finno-Ugric and Turkish-Tatar languages; moreover, its influence can be detected in Baltic and Slavic languages as well. We might say that in terms of use this star name encompasses the largest Eurasian territory. [...] Since ancient Finno-Ugrians, and even their ancestors believed that the solid firmament had holes in it and the densely or sparsely placed stars could have reminded them of an important earthly utensil, the brim and grains or holes of a sieve or a sifter.”⁷ The Hungarian name for the Pleiades, “*szitáslyuk*” (literally ‘sieve hole’) also represents this idea and is probably an element of Hungarian popular belief of Eastern origin.⁸ János Harmatta not only lined up Hungarian linguistic proofs of the idea of a sky floating above the earth, but, similar to László Mándoki and József Erdődi, he also provided a series of data from other Finno-Ugric, Indo-European and Paleo-Asian peoples. This idea has been articulated before, as Harmatta quotes an earlier German study: “The archaic view that the firmament hovers above the earth like a solid, stone covering and from time to time their edges touch or even collide has been preserved best among Indo-European peoples partly in the form of linguistic data, partly in the form of myths”.⁹ The Germans might not believe that constellations are sieves, but they do consider stars to be lanterns, candles, even holes and windows.¹⁰ The oldest, so-called “Sleptche manuscript” of the Apocrypha about the Sea of Tiberias writes about a crystal sky resting upon sixty iron

⁴ Coman 1996, 81.

⁵ Unfortunately, the manuscript does not include the references of the source: the probability of it being collected by Mándoki is only a hypothesis.

⁶ Mándoki 1958, 47.

⁷ Erdődi 1970, 99.

⁸ Pócs 1990, 529; on the basis of Mándoki 1968; and Erdődi 1970.

⁹ Harmatta 2004, 439.

¹⁰ Schott 2007, 1273; referencing the ninth volume of *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens* (Bächtold-Stäubli–Hoffmann-Krayer 1927–1942, 766, and after).

pillars.¹¹

The famous Hungarian Gypsy storyteller, Lajos Ámi draws an expressive picture of the edge of the world imagined as a plate and of the curved firmament. In the tale, “King Little Michael (Király Kis Miklós) cannot find any beautiful women to marry” we read the following about the journey of the protagonist: “When he reached the end of the world, where the swallow had to kneel down to drink water from the black grass¹² because there was no room to stand up straight, he found an old house”.¹³ The same idea can be found in two of János Berze Nagy’s tales, and in the tale of the storyteller, Ferenc Jóni entitled “Frog king”: “...where the swallow drank the water from the black grass kneeling”.¹⁴ This concept can be placed within the system explored by research; however, on the world-creating role of the hedgehog (who basically created the starry sky) we find nothing in Hungarian mythological studies.

The first volume of the four-volume work of Oskar Dähnhardt, *Natursagen* was published in 1907 in which the hedgehog appears as a mythical creature in two Bulgarian, one Rumanian, and one Latvian texts.

When God created the sky and the earth, he made the earth too large, therefore he could not cover it with the sky. He noticed that the Devil and the hedgehog were having a serious discussion about something, so he sent the bee to eavesdrop on them. “God does not know”, said the Devil, “that he should grab a stick and start pounding on the earth as hard as he can in order to make mountains and valleys. Then its surface will crumple and the sky will be large enough to cover it”. The bee told God, who did as the Devil suggested: he created mountains and valleys; covered the earth with the sky and blessed the bee so that its excrement (wax) lights up weddings and baptisms, and that its honey heals the sick.¹⁵

Here, the hedgehog is only the interlocutor of the Devil; the idea on how to correct creation comes from the Devil. In the Latvian text, on the other hand, it is the hedgehog that suggests to God to squeeze the earth if he cannot fit the large disc under the firmament: and so he did, and the wrinkles became the mountains and the valleys. In this case it was the hedgehog that God rewarded with a prominent garment made of spines so that no predator can approach him.¹⁶

¹¹ Badalanova-Geller 2011, 60–61.

¹² The storyteller explained that the grass could not be green because the sun could not ever reach under the eaves.

¹³ Erdész 1961, 312.

¹⁴ Ibid 319.

¹⁵ Collected by Sismanov, Dähnhardt 1907, 127.

¹⁶ Collected by Lerhis-Puškaitis, also from the end of the nineteenth century, Dähnhardt 1907, 128.

The Romanian variant: “Before the creation of the earth God and the devil were alone on the surface of the water. When God decided to create the earth he sent the devil to the bottom of the sea to fetch the ‘earth-seed’ in his (God’s) name. Three times the devil dived in the water but never fetched the earth-seed, because every time he took it in his own name. At last he dived for the fourth time in his own and God’s name – this time he brought up at least a little bit of earth, as much as he had under his nails (claws). God made of that some kind of scone (=a clod of earth) and settled on it to rest. The devil thought that he was asleep so he tried to roll him into the water, along with the clod, and make a Lord of himself. But whenever he reached out with his hand the clod of earth grew bigger, and eventually grew into a huge ball of earth. This compressed the water and when God woke up he saw that by then there was not enough room left for the water. As he had no idea of his own he sent the bee to the hedgehog, the wisest of all the animals God had created. But the hedgehog gave no advice, since God is omniscient. However, the bee hid and spied upon the hedgehog talking to himself: ‘God obviously doesn’t know that he has to create mountains and valleys to make room for the water.’ The bee returned to God with the news and God acted upon the hedgehog’s words of wisdom. But the hedgehog cursed the bee for eavesdropping on him: the bee is to eat nothing but feces. But God rewarded the bee and decided to make the bee’s feces not dirty and disgusting but worthy of eating – and that is honey.¹⁷ In another Bulgarian mythical text the hedgehog appears to be wiser than the other animals because he is the only one to realise that God should not marry the Sun: if they marry then the multitude of new suns born from their marriage would burn up the earth. He tells the other animals who then prevent the marriage.¹⁸

We also know about a Bosnian legend that tells the story of how the Devil threw his recently cut hair under a pile of wood: the hair immediately turned into a hedgehog; there is a Bosnian belief claiming that the hedgehog is the smartest animal and lives longer than any other. He remembers everything that happened in the past, all that humans have already forgotten. He knows the magical plant that gives eternal youth.¹⁹

It must be noted that the hedgehog’s figure is surrounded by a thick network of

¹⁷ Dähnhardt 1907, 42–43. Source of this text: Marian, Simeon Florea 1903: *Insectele în limba, credințele și obiceiurile românilor, Studiu folcloristic*. București: Edițiunea Acad. Rom. 122. Dähnhardt mentions Russian, Belarussian, Serbian and other Bulgarian variants as well. One newer Serbian source: Jung 1989, 178–179; 1992, 165–166; citing from: Bota, Đorđe 1955: Narodni život i običaji u selu Jarkovcu (u Banata). Novi Sad, 37–38. (Dähnhardt considered “the eavesdropping bee”-motive Armenian and dating back to before Bogomilism, whereas “the hedgehog aiding and advising God in creation”-motive he believed to be of Iranian origin (see *ibid*: 42–43.) Compare: Nagy 2004, 201–202; 2006, 302.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 131.

¹⁹ Tolstoj–Radenković 2001, 246.

significations: besides having technical knowledge, he also has knowledge of all living things.²⁰ In Serbian folklore the special skills of the hedgehog are also spoken of; only he is capable of finding and bringing the herb that opens locks.²¹ According to a Macedonian text, the Moon wished to marry the Sun: the hedgehog prevented the wedding similarly to the previously cited Bulgarian text. In addition to these nineteenth-century publications, new variants emerged thanks to the expeditions launched in the Socialist countries in the 1980s aiming to collect Bible-related texts: the archaic, pre-Christian class of creation myths has also been enriched. A zone was outlined from the Baltic region to the Balkans in the south, along the Amber Road, reaching into North Russia and even to the Siberian Buryats, where in the folklore texts the hedgehog appears as an active agent of creation; he plays a role in the creation of dry land. These expeditions discovered Lithuanian, Romanian, Bosnian, and Banat Bulgarian variants of the previously cited Bulgarian and Latvian texts.²²

Similar to the Bulgarian text, other Romanian variants (still from the beginning of the twentieth century)²³ include the dramatic moment when the creator God stops in his tracks and realises that he has spoiled the work of creation. He made the earth grow and lifted the sky and saw that the latter was smaller than the former, and thus the edges of the earth remain uncovered. The myth questions God's perfection by suggesting that God might be wrong. We know the Bible verse concerning the quality of creation claiming: "and God saw that it was good"; this proposition is contradicted by God's statement describing the earth and the sky as being of different size. Laura Jiga Iliescu starts from the assumption that those who told the story of creation, being Orthodox Christians, believed in the Old Testament, but also believed in the dual myth. To resolve this contradiction, she focussed her research on the figure of the bee. God sent the bee to ask the hedgehog's advice, who was offended because God had not asked for his advice before starting creation. He refused to give the solution but the bee eavesdropped on him hiding behind a rock while he mumbled to himself. When the bee flew off the hedgehog cursed him "to eat what he excretes on his side"; God, however, blessed the bee to excrete honey to feed others, and its wax to give light. The blessing concerned the bee, which thus transmuted into a sacred animal; it represents virginity and monastic life in the Christian system of symbols. This story is the prefiguration of the redemption narrative, an image of the Fall and of Purgatory. Iliescu claims that the dilemma of the creator God was not

²⁰ Coman 1996, 82.

²¹ Belova 2009, 396.

²² Gura 1999; Tolstoj–Radenkovič 2001, *passim*.

²³ The main sources of the texts cited by Mihai Coman and Laura Jiga Iliescu: Voronca, Elena Nikoliță 1903: *Datinile și credințele poporului român, adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică de...*, Chișinău. Cernăuți: I. Wiegler; Pamfile, Tudor 1913: *Povestea lumii de demult*. București: Socec și C. Sfetea.

admitting his own imperfection, but that the mismatch of the firmament and the earth of creation was part of his redemption plan.²⁴ Thus, the believers could consider the textual traditions describing creation to be true even if in church they heard a different narrative on the subject.

Returning to the topic of the curious, ambivalent character of the mythical hedgehog: he is God's helper, but in other texts he is also the Devil's partner; the earth is squeezed either by him or the Devil so that it can be fit under the firmament. Jordan Ivanov thinks that the hedgehog is a replacement for the Devil, in other words, he is commensurate with the Devil. On the one hand, he is a chthonic character (as we have seen in the texts presented above); on the other hand, he brings light, he has solar features. The latter can be illustrated with numerous examples.

In the Hungarian text the hedgehog becomes a solar being, bringing light by piercing the firmament. There is a Lithuanian text which develops the association according to which the hedgehog's spines are identical to sunbeams and, thus, the hedgehog *is* the sun: In the beginning the animals received their fur and hair according to where they had spent their first night. The hedgehog slept on top of a mountain and in the morning he admired the rays of the rising sun; this is why his spines are similar to sunbeams.²⁵ The spines are prickly as are the sun's rays in another form of Hungarian myth that has numerous variants in Southwest Hungary: in Zala, Somogy and Baranya counties. The myth about the personified celestial bodies is from the collection of János Berze Nagy:

“The Sun and the Moon once got into a quarrel. The Moon threw spines at the Sun, who in return threw dirt and mud. This is why the Sun is so prickly and burns, and why the Moon's light is so blurry.”²⁶ The idea of a creator hedgehog in myths and its association with light has been preserved by Inner Asian Turkish peoples. The origin myths of two Buryat tribes, the Khat and the Ongon, is about the conflict between the deity of the earth and the deity of the sky. The Terra Mater, the “Wide Earth” took the sun and the moon and the earth was covered in darkness. The “High Sky” was put in a difficult position, so he asked for the hedgehog's help; but the latter refused to give him advice because of some earlier offence. A favourite of the celestial god, the rabbit, however, managed to eavesdrop on what the hedgehog was mumbling to himself. Thus, the sun and the moon were put back in the sky; but the sons of the High Sky, who made fun of the hedgehog, were sent to live on the Earth and

²⁴ Jiga Iliescu 2012, *passim*.

²⁵ Razauskas–Civjan 2004, 85.

²⁶ Berze Nagy 1940, II. 606.

they became the patriarchs of the two tribes. They mocked the hedgehog for not having legs and rolling around on the ground.²⁷

The renowned professor of Turkology Erika Taube, suggests that myths and tales preserve long-forgotten cults and might even assist in the interpretation of archaeological findings. There are scattered data on the hedgehog in the scholarly literature and in the etiological myths from Central Asia, especially among Turkish peoples, that describe the hedgehog as a culture hero who guards sunshine for humans. Taube laments that these particular myths have been neglected by research for more than a hundred years. In her research,²⁸ Taube discovered that for the Tuva the hedgehog appears as a creator deity; namely, as the creator of the earth: he formed the surface of the earth on which grew living creatures – we know such deeds of the hedgehog from Europe also. We also have data from Tuva claiming that languages were assigned by the hedgehog. Among the Buryat Mongolians the hedgehog, besides being considered a culture hero, is also known as a creator deity. Only these hedgehog-myths are able to explain north Chinese (from the Russian region) archaeological artefacts (the earliest from between the fifth and third century BC): various golden hedgehog figures. Even though shaping a spiny animal from clay is a difficult task, this is also when the first clay hedgehog figurines appeared in Europe; followed by “little red, thorny balls” as sun representations found in graves a thousand years later.²⁹ The hedgehog figurine with something on its back that appears to be the sun is also from Central Asia (fourth or fifth century BC), which might well prove the early occurrence of the myth in which the hedgehog is the guardian of the sun.³⁰ From Radloff’s dictionary, it is possible to reconstruct another myth: in several Altaic dialects Ülgen: the supreme god, sends the hedgehog as an emissary to the people to tell them that they are going to die but then they will be resurrected. There are two variants according to the type of myth: the hedgehog only relays the first part of the message and forgets about the second part; or he is held up on his way and, by the time he arrives, a false messenger, the rival of the creator god who wants to meddle with his plan, has already preceded him and conveyed only the part about dying. This is why the hedgehog is responsible for the mortality of humans,³¹ thereby proving the dual, ambivalent nature of his character. There is more fruitful research to be conducted on the mythical aspects and traits related to light; although we can most likely only rely on data

²⁷ Razauskas–Civjan 2004, 80. Source: **Hangalov**, M. N. 1960: *Mify kosmologičeskie i etologičeskie: Sobranie sočinenij*. T. III. Ulan-Ude, 11–12.

²⁸ Taube 1990; 1999; 2002; 2008; 2009.

²⁹ Razauskas–Civjan 2004, 90–91. (L: bibliográfiát!)

³⁰ Taube 1999, 150–151; 2008, 95.

³¹ Taube 2002, 175.

already unearthed as it is unlikely that any new data will come to light later.

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