

Albanian Tales

The Albanians are an Indo-European people inhabiting the southwestern Balkans. They are to be found primarily in the Republic of Albania and in Kosova, where they form the absolute majority of the population, and in the western part of the Republic of Macedonia, where they form about one-quarter of the total population. There are also Albanian minorities in the neighboring countries of Montenegro and Serbia, as well as old settlements in southern Italy and Greece. Albanian territories in the Balkans formed part of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries, during which writing and publishing in Albanian was forbidden. Accordingly, written literature was late to develop. Oral literature, handed down from generation to generation, was thus of greater significance to the Albanians than to many neighboring peoples. It was here in oral form that the wealth of their traditional culture was preserved, without the need for books.

The Albanians are a small people. At the declaration of independence in 1912, there were less than one million people in the country. Empires and foreign occupants have come and gone, and the Albanians have been subjected to many foreign influences over the centuries. Their oral literature, in particular their folktales and oral verse, reflect this heterogeneous background.

Though a historical stratification of Albanian fairy tales has not yet been undertaken, it is evident that certain elements of classical antiquity have survived, in particular in figures of mythology. The *zana*, for instance, the courageous and often formidable mountain fairy of Albanian oral literature, derives its name from the Roman Diana, goddess of the hunt, as does the Romanian *zîna* (forest nymph).

Evident to any knowledgeable observers, too, are many old Balkan elements common to the neighboring Balkan cultures of the southern Slavs, the Romanians and the Greeks. It is difficult, especially in the case of Albania, to evaluate just how old these common Balkan elements are. One example is a Balkan motif of immurement in the grim tale of Rozafat Castle in Shkodra. The story of a woman being walled in during the construction of a bridge or castle in order to stabilize the foundations is widespread in oral literature in Albania, the Balkans and elsewhere.

Albania's centuries as part of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamization of the majority of the population created strong links to the folk cultures of Turkey and the Middle East. Albanian and Turkish tales have many parallels. Pashas and dervishes abound in an otherwise European context. Figures of Oriental legendry, such as Nasreddin Hodja and Sari Salltëk, from Turkish Sarı Saltuk, are well-known in Albania, as are figures of fairy tales and mythology such as the *div* from Turkish *dev*, *div* (ogre, giant); the *qose* from Turkish *köse* (barefaced man); the *xhind* from Turkish *cin* (jinn); the werewolflike *karanxholl* from Turkish *karakoncolos* (black bogey, black werewolf); the *perria* from Turkish *peri* (fairy, good jinn); and the dwarf-like *xhuxh* or *xhuxhmaxhuxh* from Turkish *cüce* (dwarf).

Other figures of mythology which occur regularly in Albanian fairy tales are the *kulshedra* (dragon), the *shtriga* (witch), the *lugat* (vampire) and the *katalla* (Cyclops). Among the forces usually representing the power of good are the *ora*, a female fairy who can serve as a protective fairy godmother, the *drangue*, a semihuman figure who combats the dragonlike *kulshedra*, and in particular the *Bukura e Dheut* (Earthly Beauty), a fair maiden with magic powers who lives in the Underworld.

Albanian fairy tales, often centered on the struggle between good and evil, typically have a young, male protagonist. Female figures are usually secondary and passive, reflecting Albania's traditional patriarchal culture. The hero will often use a ruse to get the Earthly Beauty or some animal to assist him. Snakes are particularly common and are uniformly good in Albanian tales and mythology. Among other animal figures common in folktales are owls,

nightingales and the *gjysmagjel* (Half Rooster), a one-legged bird who has many an adventure in the course of its travels, carrying its weary companions on its back or in its belly. Rams and stags also occur, which have magic powers in their horns.

Albanian folktales were first recorded in the middle of the nineteenth century by European scholars such as Johann Georg von Hahn (1854), Karl H. Reinhold (1855) and Giuseppe Pitrè (1875). The next generation of scholars to take an interest in the collection of Albanian folk tales were primarily philologists, among them well-known Indo-European linguists concerned with recording and analysing a hitherto little known European language: Auguste Dozon (1879, 1881), Jan Jarnik (1883), Gustav Meyer (1884, 1888), Holger Pedersen (1895), Gustav Weigand (1913) and August Leskien (1915).

The nationalist movement in Albania in the second half of the nineteenth century, the so-called Rilindja period, gave rise to native collections of folklore material such as: *Albaniké melissa / Bêlietta sskiyptëtare* (The Albanian Bee, 1878) by Thimi Mitko, *Albanikon alfavêtarijon / Avabatar arbëror* (Albanian Spelling Book, 1882) by the Greco-Albanian Anastas Kullurjoti and *Valët e Detit* (The Waves of the Sea, 1908) by Spiro Dine. In the last fifty years, much field work has been done by the Institute of Folk Culture in Tirana and by the Institute of Albanian Studies in Prishtina, which have published numerous collections of fairy tales and legends. Unfortunately, very little of this substantial material has been translated into other languages.

The only substantial collections of Albanian folk tales to have appeared in English up to the present are: *Tricks of Women and Other Albanian Tales* by Paul Fenimore Cooper (New York 1928), which was translated from the collections of Dozon and Pedersen; *Albanian Wonder Tales* by Post Wheeler (London 1936); *Albanian Folktales and Legends* by Robert Elsie (Peja 2001); and *Faith and Fairies* by Mustafa Tukaj (Shkodra 2002). The large and significant manuscript of Albanian fairy tales, translated into English by the Scottish anthropologist Margaret Hasluck, remains unpublished for the moment.

Further Readings: Cooper, James Fenimore, trans. *Tricks of Women and Other Albanian Tales* (New York: W. Morrow 1928); Elsie, Robert. *Albanian Folktales and Legends*. 2nd edition. Peja: Dukagjini 2001; Elsie, Robert. *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2001; Tukaj, Mustafa. *Faith and Fairies: Tales Based on Albanian Legends and Ballads*. Edited by Joanne M. Ayers. Shkodra: Skodrinon, 2002; Wheeler, Post. *Albanian Wonder Tales*. London, Lovat Dickson, 1936.

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