

## Alexander and Abrunca, an Encounter of the Self\*

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### Abstract:

A significant correlation of ancient European literature, old Romanian literature and Romanian folklore is achieved through the motif of the *journey* as a necessary means of enhancing the individual, as an indispensable way to self-knowledge. An emblematic figure, with a referential impact, which cannot be ignored in these three cultural domains, emperor Alexander (III of Macedon / the Great) travelled the world to look for whatever he could find by himself. He did that like any other hero, any other protagonist that old literature – as *bildungs literature* – introduces us to: the road without leads to the road within and the individual's enhanced inner dimensions. In the Romanian folklore, Alexander's journey is intensely impacted by the encounter with the protecting figure of a mysterious queen: Abrunca.

**Keywords:** ancient European literature, ancient Romanian literature, Romanian folklore, the journey as required road in the one's self-knowledge, Abrunca

Approaching the relations between folk epics and Romanian folklore is largely achieved in two ways: a) finding traces left by folk epics in folklore, and then b) signalling folkloric insertions in these books, certain aspects deemed to lend themselves to this kind of transfer. The awareness of such a link between this kind of canvassing written texts and folklore, in its various national or transnational manifestations, has shed light on the practice of an intense “bartering” of beliefs, themes, motifs, characters and symbols. These are combined kaleidoscopically, and the result translates into epic reliefs in which, like in a multidimensional game of puzzle, the various gleaned sequences can be retraced – whether they be thoroughly assimilated or just slightly altered and adapted.

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The journey, as a way to one's self enhancement, as a necessary road to self-knowledge, is a significant bridge between ancient European literature, ancient Romanian literature and Romanian folklore. The emblematic figure, with a referential impact, which cannot be overlooked in these three cultural areas, Alexander (III of Macedon / the Great) travelled the world to look for himself, like any other hero, like any protagonist in ancient *bildungs literature*. This is so because the travel without leads to the travel within and the individual's enhanced inner dimensions.

In order to accomplish this, one of the converging points is Alexander's journey towards the East, towards India, his expedition to "Land of Por Emperor of India" in the company of empress Cleofila and her two sons, and his encounter with the Land of the Amazons.

The "distaff's country" is an exceptionally special presence in Romanian folklore: in the tale of *Vit'eazu d'e apă* (*The Brave One b'rn of wat'r / The Brave Oneborn of water*) (Bîrlea, I: 380–400), the hero is promised "Abrunca/ fustian and quite quaint maid/ from the distaff's landeth, / which (is hath said) from h'r braid/ the floweth'r sings / from h'r mouth gold and pearls floweth" as a betrothed wife to persuade him to be born (Idem: 384). "I wanteth to wend to the wedding of the niece of Abrunca – the fustian and quite quaint maid of distaff's land" (*Ibidem*: 395) Just like for Ileana Cosânzeana "from h'r braid flow'r sings, nine realms hark" (Idem: 384). Not only is Abrunca endowed with all of Ileana's gifts, she is also a woman warrior: "And at which hour thee shall arrive on the bridge, in middle of the bridge – that gent sayeth – that gent shall riseth war upon thee, a wondrous war, fr in h'r landeth th're art nay men, but distaff only" (*Ibidem*: 389). The "distaff's country" symbolically starts from the bridge, which is guarded by "sentries at the bridge w're did dress as females" (*Ibidem*: 390). All aspects inevitably lead to the conclusion that this is the Amazons' homeland, where beautiful Abrunca is the Queen.

It is usually claimed that *the motif of the Amazons' homeland, the "distaff's landeth"* entered Romanian folklore through the folk epic of *Alexandria*: between the moment of his victory over Por emperor "of India" and his expedition to the land of empress Cleofila, Alexander braves "with his armies towards *the country of Amozen*. And there reigned a womanwith women..." (Chițimia-Simonescu, I: 65), Talistrada. "And I did not think that you will want to fight women. If thou shall beat me, no honor will be to thee; and if I shall beat you, a most wondrous'r shame thee shall not beest feeleth nowh're" (the rural modern morality!) the queen wisely writes in a message to him (Chițimia-Simonescu, I: 66). Therefore, Alexander avoids the fight,

although he gets “tribute and army p’r year ten thousand distaff soldi’rs on h’rseback” (*Ibidem*). He dares not fight them, but he accepts to fight side by side with them.

The exoticism of a matriarchal society – which is so alien to the modern mentality of the place – is likely to stand in stark contrast to the favourite topic of the Romanian fairy tale, consecrated by tradition: a lad – i.e. the male character – does or witnesses to a deed that will be an incentive to his all later actions; then the story unreels to reveal him in all the dignity and grandeur of his acts. When he has accomplished his mission successfully, his reward will be a wife (an extraordinary person, of course, a fairy, a princess, or at least the most beautiful maiden in the village), a character whose only part is to wait, more often than not passively, for the hero’s stormy tumultuous and initiatory journey to come to an end and for herself to be given to him as an exceptional prize.

However, it is equally possible that the intensity of this contrast to obscure archaic local realities and thus credit the assumption that the literary motif of a country of women exists in our Romanian tradition due to a cultural implant – the folk epic of *Alexandria* – which occurred as late as the 16th century. The tale of *The Brave One Born of Water*, anthologized by Ovidiu Bîrlea (*vide supra*), includes suggestions that at least diminish the assertiveness of this hypothesis; suggestions for the (hypo-)thesis that the *ancestral memory* of such a type of society belongs locally.

Alexander’s discoveries *en route* largely complete his identity in the sense that, since they face him with this world of the Amazons, where beautiful Abrunca (in Romanian folklore) / Penthesilea (in classical Greek mythology) is queen, they gather into the reversed polar reflection of the world (structured around the masculine patriarchal principle), which is his world, whose emblem he is by virtue of his excellence.

Abrunca is probably Alexander’s complementary pole, meeting him in a process of imminent cosmic depolarization and mutual reflection, of one into the other. This is so because the qualities Alexander manifests and is called to manifest towards his people are similar to the qualities and powers Penthesilea / Abrunca undertakes and carries towards her own people. The symbolic decoding of Abrunca’s character and, the more so, of her name, entails an extremely tempting area of research. “Abrunca” – the name of the beautiful queen ruling over a nation of women warriors – as a betrothed wife to the Brave One born of water, reverberates in a strange and exciting way: archaic, forceful, but at the same time, protective, almost parental. Or so

its seems at least to a ear sensitive to the Romanian phoneticism. The name carries with it an inherent symbolism of the sounds, generator of the mental image: an arc described by the *a*-s of the extremities, vaulted over a handful of tiny-tiny parts, gathered into one another – the many consonants cramped in the middle. Semiotically, this is a potentially iconic sign, in the Peircean sense of motivating (phonic) structure through meaning. (Marcus-Calude: 23)

However, trying to overcome the potential (self)suspicion of (my own) popular etymology, I resorted to a proper etymological approach and I discovered at our origins, in the Latin mythology, a divine entity possessing precisely the attributes suggested by the Romanian name: *Averruncus*. The phonetic similarity between the two names involves the usual evolutionary changes from Latin to Romanian: the intersubstitution of labials *v/b*, the disappearance of the interconsonantic unstressed *e*, the elision of the final consonant, then of the final vowel; to which the attachment of a feminine desinence is added.

*Averruncus* occupies a minor rank in Roman mythology and can be described as a deity responsible for *aversion*. The term has to be read in its Romanian contemporary meaning, of ‘repulsion’, emotional ‘rejection’, but especially in its Latin primary sense, of mechanical action: read sequentially, as *re-pulsion*, *re-jection*, his powers become much more transparent and easy to understand. Seeking further, we find the name *Averruncus* as a derivative of the verb *āverrunco-averuncāre* – ‘to remove’/ ‘divert’/ ‘detour’/ ‘avoid’, ‘push away’ (a calamity, a cataclysm) (Gaffiot: 199) – out of which comes, in a straight line, the Romanian verb “*a arunca*” (‘to throw’), and which is connected semantically with *āverto/āvorto-avērtēre/avortēre*.

*Averruncus* is a *reactive* god, “avorter of evil”, known as an aid in avoiding calamities and a fortune bringer for those who worship him. It is also one of the deities protecting the *new born baby and his mother* (Hofmann: 402) against malicious *Silvanus*. Sometimes he is referenced as a male deity, but we find it in a feminine hypostasis also (Mythome). *Silvanus* is known as the protector of forests and cultivated fields, and also of the *married man*<sup>1</sup>. As long as his name is also one of the *alter-names* of *Mars*, of the *proactive* masculine principle, the competition *Averruncus-Silvanus* may be read as a proto-European episode of the confrontation of matriarchal socio-mental structures with the patriarchal ones.

Beyond being a name, *averruncus* is also a qualifier, given to higher ranking deities such as *Apollo*, *Asclepius*, sometimes *Mars*

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<sup>1</sup> cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silvanus\\_%28mythology%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silvanus_%28mythology%29).

himself. Besides this attribute, in his role of evil rejector, Apollo, for instance, receives other functions, too: *Apollo Averruncus* diverts misfortune; *Apollo Articenens* carries the protective bow; *Apollo Coelisplex* scrutinizes the skies, *Apollo Culicarius* drives the troublesome insects away – all this in the Latin area. The Greek counterparts are *alexikakos* – ‘the one who protects against the evil’, *aleximoros* – ‘the one who keeps death away’, *apotropaïos* – ‘the one who does not give permission, does not allow/ detours’, *apopompaïos* – ‘the one who carries/ leads/ transfers away’, *alexeteiras* – ‘the one who defends/ defender/, guardian’, *alexiares* – ‘the one who keeps the curse away’/ ‘who keeps the war away’, *aleximbrotos* – ‘the one who protects the mortals’. All of this is gathered under the same semantic umbrella: ‘protection’.

The folkloric Abrunca sums up all these qualities and carries out the same missions. By the status of a fighter queen, also in her position of an extreme reward for the Brave’s effort and responsibility to assume a human destiny and a descent into matter, we infer that she must be an exceptional being, intangible for the average man, to whom only the knowledge mediated by fame is allowed. She possesses the epithets by which traditionally the singular Ileana-Cosânzeana is described, which (is hath said) “from h'r braid/ the floweth'r sings / from h'r mouth gold and pearls floweth” (Birlea, I: 384). Thus, we infer the superhuman nature the tale confers to her, and the convergence of functions discovered above reinforces our belief that the character of the Romanian tale continues and subtly preserves the connection with the mythological Roman figure, in a genetic relationship that the passage of time did not fracture. As a protector and a female chief, benefiting from a status and attributes of divine origin, Abrunca is the tutelary effigy of the group organized in a matriarchal way.

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