

HEDGEHOG IN COSMOGONIC AND ETIOLOGICAL LEGENDS OF THE BALTO-BALCANIC AREA

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Summary

The mythical hedgehog is an ambiguous being. In the available bestiaries it can interchangeably be perceived as a positive (benefactor of humans, God's helper) or a negative creature (evildoer, Devil's agent). It remains similarly ambiguous also in the cosmogonic narratives: here it brings up mud on its spines from the bottom of the ocean, so that God could create Earth, or advises God to squeeze the freshly created Earth, in order to make it go under the sky, and thus successfully complete the Creation. On the one hand, the hedgehog acts here as a God's helper. On the other, however, the squeezed Earth becomes jagged, thus causing emergence of mountains and valleys, which are generally associated with the Devil's activities. Moreover, the hedgehog sometimes even attempts to harm God. Besides, in some variants of the narrative about squeezing of Earth, to make it go under the sky, the role of the hedgehog is taken over by the Devil, and there are even such stories, wherein Devil is himself squeezing or crumpling the Earth.

The cosmogonic stories with hedgehog as an actor have been recorded along the whole length of the "Amber Road", connecting the Baltic Sea to the Balkans; moreover, hedgehog also appears in the Northern Russia, in the etiological myths of the Finno-Ugric Veps and Siberian Buriats, describing the emergence of various tribes, and that is not yet the end to it. Because the hedgehog tends to perform the Devil's functions in the dualistic cosmogonic narratives, in the Balkans it used to be linked up with the Bogomils of the Manichean deviation. However, Mircea Eliade proved this dualism to be of "Slavonic" kind rather than of the Manichean origin.

Nevertheless, the cosmogonic story, wherein the hedgehog advises God to squeeze the Earth so that it could go under the sky, is also well known among the Balts, especially Latvians, in whose stories the hedgehog's role can also be taken over by the Devil.

In numerous variants of this etiological legend the origins of the hedgehog's coat of spines gets explained as well: God has gratefully given it, so that hedgehog could defend itself from its enemies. But there are also quite different stories, interpreting the same thing, e.g. according to one Lithuanian etiological legend, the hedgehog had nice soft hair in the beginning, but after having hurt itself upon the fir tree's needles it started grumbling, snubbing at the fir tree and boasting of its own soft hair, thus causing God's wrath. Therefore God gave it "needles" too, and even far more pointed ones, than those of a fir tree. Here, the hedgehog's spines seem to be God's punishment, rather than a gift; thus reminding us again of its dualism mentioned above.

There is one more etiological legend describing the origins of the hedgehog's spines. This story seems to be unique to Lithuania, and it associates the spines to the sun's rays, and the hedgehog, consequently, to the sun. E.g.: *In the beginning, the animals received their fur or hair according to the place they each slept their first night in. The hedgehog on a mountain's top marveled at the rising radiant sun, therefore its spines look like rays.* It is possible to assume such interpretation to be stemming from the ambiguous Lithuanian word *žaras* 'ray', used in the text: it can also denote both 'glow; spark, ember' and 'prick, spike, spine'. The Latvian equivalent *zars* primarily means 'stick, branch', but it can also denote 'spike, prong, tine'; sometimes figuratively describing the sun's rays as well (cf. *Aiziet Saule laizdamās, Zelta zarus zarodama*).

Besides, hedgehog is also related to regeneration, it can be associated with uterus or embryo, the newborn. According to Marija Gimbutienė, "the prime symbols of the Regeneration Goddess are those symbolizing her uterus, e.g. fish, frog, and hedgehog <...>. Although the hedgehog, the spiny animal, is difficult to portray in clay, it has been known in European iconography since as early as the 5th millennium B.C." (Gimbutienė: 188–189). As pointed out by Janina Kursīte, in Latvian folklore the hedgehog symbolizes the Progenitress and her womb even up till now: e.g., in Latvian wedding songs, the bride is sometimes called a "she-hedgehog", and the married women – "hedgehog mothers" or

“mothers of hedgehogs” (*ežu mātes*). Correspondingly, in tales the hedgehog often appears from the inglenook, coming up to the childless elderly couple and introducing itself as “their baby”, thus obviously looking evocative of a newborn.

It seems worth trying to integrate all these different etiological motives related to the hedgehog. So, it takes part in the Creation, advising God to squeeze Earth, thus causing the mountains to emerge. And it marvels at the rising sun afterwards, having climbed onto the mountain’s top; probably the same one that appeared after the squeezing of Earth upon its advice? Moreover, the Sun rises up “from the underground”: in mythical terms, it is reborn every morning, coming up from the Mother Earth like a “newborn hedgehog” (cf. “the spiny red balls” found in the tombs, according to M. Gimbutienė). The rising Sun, in its turn, also in a sense “recreates” the world every morning, thus being related to cosmogony. Anyway, the hedgehog that had “marveled at the rising sun” in the morning, acquires spines that look like rays, thus becoming like a small “radiant” sun itself. Whereas the Sun, after rising up, proceeds to roll out onto the vault of heaven – the slope of the celestial mountain, precisely like a hedgehog rolling downhill in a spiny ball. Although the latter image of the “hedgehog-sun” has not been directly recorded, it naturally pieces itself up from the motives discussed above. Anyway, the hedgehog seems by no means inferior to the scarab of the ancient Egypt, rolling its egg – Sun upon the sandy desert. And the nocturnal travel of the Sun across the underground, the underworld, the realm of death, could in a way contribute to the interpretation of the chthonic aspects of the hedgehog’s character and its “dualism”.