

Trip to the country of the “Manairons”

ITINERARY OF THE PYRENEAN MYTHOLOGY BY LES VALLS D'AGUILAR

THE LEGENDS OF CERAMIC MURALS

Pyrenean mythology. **Noves de Segre**

Popular culture has handed down to us many legends. These have been passed on, over time, from generation to generation. They have been transmitted from grandparents to grandchildren, on winter evenings, around the kitchen fire, or in the living rooms, of old houses, in the villages of the Pyrenees. These are human interpretations of phenomena that did not, otherwise, have any reasonable explanation. It is within this context, and under these circumstances, that a whole series of fantastic beings appear. These creatures have been attributed supernatural powers, including the ability to turn mountains of rock into scree, prevent hailstorms, cure illnesses, and understand certain twists of fate. This is how the manairons appear: as enchanted beings, giants, witches, devils and even locust women...



The “manairons”. **La Guàrdia d’Ares**

It is said that, one day, the master of Cal Feu de la Guàrdia was going to Organyà with his servant. When they reached the place known as Arreposador, the master realized that he had left the pouch containing the manairons at home.

“Ton, you must go to my home and tell my wife to give you a little pouch, which is on my bedside table, but do not open it under any circumstance.”

The servant did as he was told, but he could not resist the temptation to have a look inside the pouch. He opened it and, all of a sudden, a flurry of manairons flew out of the box, all of a flutter, asking him for work and for more work.

“Build piles of rocks, and as many as you can!”, Ton told them.

And when it seemed to him that the manairons were starting to go a little too far, Ton gave them the order to return to the pouch. The surprising and inexplicable piles of rock that can be found in the woods of L’Obaga de la Guàrdia bear witness to this event.



The last Moor in the district. **Taús**

He lived alone, in a tower, with his heart always full of woe. Constantly watched and persecuted, he had to kill and steal if he wanted to stay alive. He was the last Moor left in the district. He had become so aggressive and untrusting that if anyone from the local area approached him, he would kill them without thinking twice. He was only calmed – and that was just to a certain extent – when he saw a woman. And in time, this weakness was to cost him his life.

His aggressive attitude got gradually worse over time, until one day the people of Taús put two and two together. Between them, they decided that a young man from the village should dress up as a woman and go to see him in his tower. And that is exactly what happened. When the Moor saw a beautiful, and well-dressed, woman approaching, he ran out to meet her and hugged her passionately. However, almost immediately, he noticed a strange coldness and suddenly fell dead, with a knife stuck deep in his abdomen, delivering a mortal wound.



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The bewitched. Castellàs del Cantó

The bewitched were very, very small women who used to live hidden at the bottom of a pool of water. They would only come out of their hiding place once a year: on St. John's Eve. As soon as it got dark, they would all appear out of the water and would start to wash clothes, which they then hung out to dry, in a nearby cave. The people from the neighbouring villages knew that these clothes were a coveted treasure. The home of whoever could snatch a piece of that enchanted laundry was sure to be protected from future misery; although, they would not become especially rich, either. It was obviously not easy to steal so much as a pillowcase or a handkerchief from them, because they watched their clothes with great zeal. It is said, however, that some clever individuals did manage to make off with some items.



The King of England's treasure. Biscarbó

There is a dolmen at L'Obac, which the people of the local village call *La Llosa del Corralet* (the Slab of El Corralet). The elders of Biscarbó used to explain how, back in ancient times, there had been a great war and that right there, at the point marked by slab, was buried a king of England, who had died in battle. They say that two married couples once arrived in Biscarbó, carrying picks and shovels. They found the dolmen and then set to work. They were looking for a treasure which, from what they said, was hidden just below the dolmen. Needless to say, they were immediately prevented from digging under the slab.



The forming of the Pyrenees. Argestues

The world was originally as flat as an ironing board. Then, God decided to put some mountains there. He took a sack full of rocks and, wherever he saw fit, he dropped a rock and, straight away, there was a mountain there. However, the rocks in that sack were so heavy so angular that the sack broke and all the rocks that were still in it, suddenly fell out, between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. When God got back to heaven, he looked down on those mountains and was so captivated by their beauty that he began to weep with emotion. They say that those rocks are now the mountains of the Pyrenees, and that God's tears formed the lakes that are scattered across them.



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THE LEGENDS OF THE PERIMETER ROAD OF THE “TARTER DELS MANAIRONS”

The stones of Santa Fe

A popular chronicle tells how, when the executioners stoned Santa Fe, she caught the rocks in flight, with her hands, without them hurting her, and let them drop to the ground. So many stones were thrown at her that the mountains around Organyà were inundated with them. Even today, it is still possible to collect them by the handful. They are rounded stones, like bread buns in form, and bear the mark of the five fingers of the saint, engraved upon them. In the past, they were known in Organyà as “the stones of Santa Fe”; now everyone calls them fossils.

The wolf that was tricked

The wolf is the most feared animal in the Pyrenees. It is a really ferocious beast that sets upon flocks of sheep as if it had gone mad. There is, however, a popular folk tale which explains how, many, many years ago, the wolf was very different: it was originally a tame and trusting animal and one which the other beasts of the forest used to make fun of, time and time again. That was until the poor beast got tired of this and, from then on, decided to take its revenge and to become the worst animal of them all.

The bear, the cursed man

The people of the Pyrenees believe that the bear is a cursed man. Perhaps this explains why, over the centuries, they have felt an almost sacred respect for one condemned to carry such a shameful humiliation around the world. Neither in the way that it walks, nor in its behaviour, has this beast completely forgotten its human origins. In the past, shepherds did not usually speak badly of the bear. When there was an attack on their flock, they would therefore usually add that the beast had only attacked when it was very hungry and that it had only carried off one animal.

The greedy snake

The people of the Pyrenees consider the snake to be an ambiguous and mysterious creature. They have a thousand and one stories to tell about it. One of the best, and most widely known across this mountain territory, is that which portrays the snake as a beast of exquisite taste, which makes the mother who is breastfeeding her baby fall asleep and then falls in love with her breast, while giving the baby its tail, so that it does not cry. Pyrenean mythology also tells us about snakes with hair, flying snakes and snakes that, in fact, were women who had been bewitched.

Blue, the witch scarer

The witch is a person with a deep-rooted tradition in the Pyrenees. Legends about witches are told in almost every village: witches who cause hailstones, who injure cattle, who lead shepherds astray... They say that the witches of Els Pallars, Andorra and L'Alt Urgell used to meet in a Sabbat, on the Basseta plain, near the place where the shrine of Sant Joan de l'Erm currently stands. They also used to say that, in order to prevent the evil power of witches from entering their houses, it was necessary for people to paint their window frames blue, like the one before you.

The tree with the rings

Certain examples of the forestry heritage of the Pyrenees have, on account of their unique characteristics, caused all kinds of legend to be told about them. A supernatural explanation was the only one possible when no other could be found. This red pine, standing in front of you, which is native to these parts, has a curious formation of rings that runs along its trunk. You will not find anything like this anywhere else in the whole forest. Popular culture attributes magical powers to this. Must it have some?

The devil's piss

How many Pyrenean souls have been sold to the devil? The evil one often appears in the collective imagination of the people of these mountains. Sant Ermengol came upon the devil at the Trespunts (three bridges) gorge, near Organyà, when he was in the process of destroying part of a bridge that the builders had constructed that very day. As a result, he was hung from the very top of the stone wall. While there, however, he tried to cause a flood with his own urine. The mark left by “the devil's piss” still remains, as a reminder of that event.

The clothes of the bewitched

The bewitched were very, very small women who used to live hidden in caves and gullies. Only once a year, on St. John's Eve, did they dare to come out of their hiding place. As soon as it got dark, they appeared outside the water and started to wash clothes, which they then laid out to dry in a nearby cave. The people of the neighbouring villages knew that these clothes were treasure. Whoever could snatch a piece of the enchanted laundry would ensure that their home would be safe from misery in the future; although, they would not become rich, either.

The plant of the “manairons”

The *manairons* can be harvested from a particular plant on St. John's Eve, as long as there is an old (full) moon. The legend that has come down to us in present day does not, however, specify which plant this is. This is probably a secret that is zealously guarded by those who have had the immense luck to catch a handful of *manairons* and to put them away in their pouch. Is this the plant of the *manairons*? Or what about this one?

The Moor's hut

The Moors are the protagonists of many Pyrenean stories, and anything that the human memory was not able to place at a specific time in the past was attributed to the “time of the Moors”. This explains the use of the popular term “Moors' huts” to refer to the hundreds of dolmens that are scattered throughout the mountains. Here is the “Moor's hut” of Plan Fornesa. It must date from between between 2500 and 2100 BCE, and was excavated by Serra i Vilaró in 1920. Several fragments of pottery and human bones were found there; this material is now in the Diocesan Museum of Solsona.

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THE FOREST LA GUÀRDIA “TARTERS DELS MANAIRONS”

What does science say?

The mounds of rock at Guàrdia d'Ares are the product of the accumulation of blocks of Permotria rock, which are mixed with conglomerate sediments dating from the Oligocene period. They can usually be found in shady areas, on the mountainside. Their formation is always due to the washing of the finer elements that constitute the non-lithified conglomerates of the Oligocene. This washing of the finer material may be carried out by precipitation, groundwater, the melting of snowdrifts or the melting of ice within the soil itself. According to the prevailing climatic conditions, both in the present but also in the past, this washing process can be intensified, or even brought to a stop. It does not require very much (periglacial) time to bring the blocks to the surface: this explains why the Guàrdia blocks may be activated by different washing processes taking place at the same time. In this way, they serve as good sensors and indicators of climate change and of erosion conditions.



Ajuntament de
les Valls d'Aguilar



Consell Comarcal
de l'Alt Urgell

L'ALT URGELL



Generalitat de Catalunya
Departament de Territori
i Sostenibilitat



Diputació de Lleida



ara
lleida