

**FAIRYTALES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS:  
THE MYSTERIES OF EUROPEAN MYTHOLOGY  
PROJECT TREATMENT**

**THE FANTASTICAL BEINGS OF FAIRYTALES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS**

**Where did the idea of fairies come from, and did it have some kind of basis in reality? Why is the devil often depicted as humorous being in fairytales, when Christian teachings hold him to be absolute evil incarnate? How did legends about vampires and werewolves come into being? Are there fairytale figures that are common only to Europe?**

The answers to these questions, and many more regarding fairytales, myths and legends can be found in a documentary projects introducing the **most important mythical beings of folk tradition**.

Supernatural characters of this kind are among the most frequent heroes of folk stories. In European fairytales, myths and legends this peculiar combination of magical thinking, remnants of pre-Christian mythology and universal archetypes reigned all the way into the 19th century.

Supernatural creatures only began to gradually disappear from folk stories with the advent of rational, scientific thinking and the Industrial Revolution. But they did not disappear completely. The fairies and dwarfs of fantasy were merely replaced by new beings that seemed more realistic at first sight –the fictitious phantoms of urban legends and visitors from outer space.

**ORIGIN AND MEANING OF FAIRYTALES**

This original 22-episode documentary television series is an investigation into the supernatural creatures, made on the basis of serious historical and folkloric sources and commentated on by experts in folk traditions.

The main ambition of the series is, for at least a moment, to **"tear down" more than 200 years of stereotypes developed among audiences about how a fairy, devil or vampire looks and behaves, and "go back" to the days long before the Brothers Grimm and other collectors of European folk literature**. To the times when fairytales and legends were stories intended not for children, but for adults. When mythical creatures were perceived not as adorable bogeymen, but as terrifying demons of primordial chaos symbolizing the power of untamed nature. To the times when the stories were a basic binding force of European identity and united a fellowship that was otherwise divided by language, religion and national borders.

All of the various **forms of mythical beings will be presented based on commentary from leading European specialists from a wide spectrum of scientific fields** such as ethnology and anthropology (the origin and development of mythical concepts), archaeology and history (material and written records influencing ideas of fantastical beings), psychology and philosophy (interpretation of the meaning of mythical stories), medicine (the relation between ideas about fantastical beings and real human diseases or deformities) and zoology and palaeontology (how the observation of real animals influences the creation of ideas about mythical beings).

Key topics on which the series will provide answers will be **the origin and development of mythical, their function within European societies of the past, and their archetypal meaning for modern European civilization**. Audiences will also get to know the differences between the basic genres of folklore and their relationship to religion, customs and traditions, and primarily their ties to real history and monumental places in Europe.

**THEMES OF INDIVIDUAL EPISODES**

**The series is conceived on the basis of a coherent chronological line consisting of six thematic blocks**

ranging "from devils to extraterrestrials", that is, from the most popular fairytale characters of archaic European mythology to the modern fantasy figures of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The first thematic block (parts 1 – 4, *Devils, Fairies, Water Goblins and Dwarves*) will introduce audiences to the unknown, obverse side of the **most popular creatures from fairytales**. The second, "horror" thematic block (parts 5 – 7 *Vampires, Werewolves, Undead*) introduces **frightening creatures related to death and the transformation of the human body** and focuses on the **authentic documentation of these concepts from the countries of Europe**. The third team block (parts 8 – 10 *Headless Horsemen, Mountain Kings, Giants*) introduces **beings connected with the landscape of Europe** as such. The following part will be a return to **the traditional beings of legend and fairytales** (parts 11 – 14 *Dragons, Elves, Mermaids, Wild Men*). The next block (parts 15 – 19 *Kobolds, Witches, Cinderellas, Princes, Night-Mares*) will be dedicated to **creatures in human form – both positive and negative – including archetypal male and female heroes of fairytales and legends**. The closing episodes (parts 20 and 21 *Ghosts and poltergeists, Phantoms of War*) connect the past and present and **introduce the figures of urban legend and modern horror stories**, often connected to real cases, that people still tell stories of today. The last part (part 22 *UFOs*) introduces contemporary **ideas of extra-terrestrials** as a modern parallel of archaic stories about visitors from other worlds.

## 1. DEVILS, DEMONS AND EVIL SPIRITS

### The rulers of hell and sin

All of the world's mythologies know negative demonic beings of a spiritual nature, but few measure up to the devils of the great monotheistic religions. The opening episode introduces the development of European ideas of devils and shows that aside from the foundation in Jewish, Christian and Muslim concepts, the figures of devils in European fairytales show even older influences: old Scandinavian traditions about stupid trolls, Slavic ideas of evil demons called Bies, Central Asian tales of powerful giants and reflections of the oldest folk stories of all – myths about holy covenants, contests with totem animals and tales about the wicked co-creator of the world. The initial presentation of the immense cultural wealth of the European folk-tale tradition will thus serve as an invitation to the path of uncovering the mysteries of other fantastic beings...

## 2. FAIRIES, WATER SPRITES AND WOOD NYMPHS

### The beauty of the Slavic she-demons

We know fairies and water sprites to be kind-hearted beings who control powerful magic, and help good people on their road to happiness. In the authentic folk tradition though they had a somewhat different role – they were elemental female demons that generally had inconsistent relations with mortals that often resulted in heartless flirtation with human sexuality and cruel abductions of newborn children. For our ancestors living under strict Christianity, fairies and water nymphs (or "vily" and "rusalky" in the Slavic context) were embodiments of natural, unlimited female emotionality and eroticism.

## 3. WATER GOBLINS AND "WASSERMANNS"

### Demons of the watery depths

The Wassermann, or water goblin, is one of the most well-known mythological figures of the Central European folk tradition, and according to experts he is the most important figure as well. In spite of his undisputed significance though, general knowledge about the water goblin is replete with errors and half-truths. The episode dedicated to the water goblin tries to overturn this by showing his many original attributes, tabooed names and relationship to traditional rituals and ancient pre-Christian concepts.

## 4. DWARVES AND GNOMES

### **Masters of the underground realms**

The ancient nation of handy mineworkers who rule immense subterranean halls, guardians of fairytale treasures, laboriously extracted from the depths of the earth, unmatched smiths and braziers, off of whose anvils came the most powerful weapons and the most beautiful jewellery – all of these roles were held by dwarves in European folklore. The episode devoted to the residents of the underground charts the development of the idea of dwarves from the old Scandinavian *dvergjar* through the Germanic *Zwerge* to the Slavic *permoníks*, who were closely connected to the mining colonisation of Central Europe during the period of the High Middle Ages.

## **5. VAMPIRES**

### **Aristocracy among supernatural beings?**

Vampires have inspired more books and films than all other mythical creatures combined, and there is no doubt that they are the most popular supernatural beings of modern day. The episode dedicated to these undead parasites overturns the stereotypes created by modern popular culture, and shows the original concept of the vampire in the area of Central Europe and the Balkans as it relates to the human ideas of the soul, the body, death and disease. It also notes the famous vampire cases of the 18th and 19th century which shook all of Europe at the time.

## **6. WEREWOLVES**

### **A brief history of lycanthropy**

Werewolves have fascinated Europeans for hundreds of years, and we may dare say that, next to vampires, they are the most popular mythical creatures of all. The monsters that we know from horror movies though – nearly all of which are the successors of American motion pictures from the 1940s – have very little indeed to do with the original werewolves that our ancestors believed in. The episode dealing with lycanthropes charts the development of the authentic concepts, from the mythology of Ancient Greece to the last historical werewolves of the Slavic and Germanic worlds. The psychological and anthropological explanations for the human fascination with wolves, and the possibility of turning into one, is not forgotten either.

## **7. THE UNDEAD**

### **Zombies, skeletons and fexts**

Terrifying corpses that return from the dead - zombies, if you will - have been sowing terror in lovers of horror movies for nearly 100 years now. The idea has its origins in traditional African religion known as *Vodun*, or Voodoo. European “zombies” though were much more similar to intangible ghosts or apparitions. This episode compares African mythology regarding zombies with European ideas about the posthumous existence of the body and introduces the sundry methods for their creation, manipulation and extermination, including one particular rarity of Central Europe – beings known as *fexts*. Stories about this special kind of Central European undead began being told during the Thirty’s Years War, and still today we can find what are claimed to be there remains in the crypts of certain churches.

## **8. HEADLESS HORSEMEN**

### **On guard even in the afterlife**

A headless wraith dressed in armour is certainly not one of the supernatural creatures that people of today would see as an embodiment of absolute terror. Today we see headless horsemen instead as grotesque, half-comic figures, at best suitable for scaring small children. For our ancestors though, the headless apparition was the embodiment of entirely veritable punishments that the sinful human soul had to suffer in purgatory. The episode devoted to this strange kind of returnee from the grave introduces the importance of

“headlessness” as an attribute of demonic beings and the possible Celtic origin of this idea. It also introduces the most important figures of this type, said to have once haunted many a castle, château and ruin of Europe.

## **9. RÜBEZAHL AND OTHER MOUNTAIN KINGS**

### **Guardians of the mountain giants**

Rübezahl (or Krakonoš or Liczyrzepa, as he is known in the Czech Republic and Poland), the guardian of the Giant Mountains on the border of the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany, is one of the most distinct mythological guardians of the mountains of today's Europe. Beginning with him, this episode devoted to the guardians of the mountain describes the development of the idea of a defender of the high mountains from archaic pagan mythology, through the cultural influence of the Italian prospectors and Alpine lumberjacks of the High Middle Ages, to literary fame in the 17th and 18th centuries that ensured the immortality of this character.

## **10. GIANTS, OGRES AND TROLLS**

### **Size matters**

This episode devoted to the humanoid creatures that incarnate the creative force of the Earth will put emphasis on their context within the elemental phenomena of avalanches, earthquakes and volcanic explosions and the world of mountains, rocks and caves. It describes the development of the concept of giants from antique mythology through the biblical interpretation to folk fairytales and legends, and last but not least introduces the most important mountains, rocks and rock formations of Europe associated with tales of these truly monumental beings.

## **11. DRAGONS**

### **The mightiest of monsters**

Dragons are among the most majestic of colossal creatures, which combine the traits of many types of animals in one. They probably reached European mythology from ancient Mesopotamia. The episode devoted to European dragons, which differ from the Asian conception, presents the origin and meaning of these negative beings, which were originally associated with water and earth. It also describes the development of the European interpretation of the dragon –from an embodiment of powerful elements, through Christian allegory of evil and avarice, to the most common adversary of fairytale heroes.

## **12. ELVES**

### **A beauteous nation, hidden from sight**

The stereotypical idea of the elf as a skinny creature with long hair and pointed ears was only created by modern fantasy in the second half of the 20th century. Elves of earlier centuries formed a mysterious nation, the exact physical nature of which is very difficult to determine. The episode dealing with these popular beings introduces them as a mysterious people that appear in places that formed the frontier between the organized world of human civilization and the chaotic realm of wild nature, and uses examples from German and Anglo-Saxon mythology, as well as parallels from other European countries.

## **13. MERMAIDS**

### **The oceans' dangerous beauties**

These seductive beauties, half-woman and half-fish, can be found in the maritime folklore of all of Europe. But were mermaids merely the figment of the grand imaginations of sailors, or do the legends have some core of truth? The episode devoted to mermaids focuses primarily on the area of the Baltic and the North Sea and environs. In addition to folklore, it will also deal with specific historical cases of alleged observations and findings of mermaids, and scientific theories explaining what are often curious mistakes.

## 14. WILD MEN

### Guardians of the wild wood

It is strange how little we know today about the supernatural beings that were the most common for our ancestors. This is especially true for the “hejkal” and the “leshy” – wild forest men – two of the most frequent demonic beings of the folk tradition of Central Europe. The episode dedicated to the mysterious inhabitants of the forest, associated primarily with *audible* experiences, describes all of the known aspects of the mysterious tradition about ghostlike forest demons that acquired their popularity as the Green Men primarily during the Renaissance, but whose origin is much older.

## 15. KOBOLDS, GOBLINS AND IMPS

### Mysterious protectors of the household

Some of the most important mythical beings kept their headquarters right inside human households. Foremost among them were all kinds of protective spirits, generally appearing in the form of small household imps. The episode dealing with the guardians of the European household notes both their origin in the pre-Christian cult of deceased forefathers, and their relationship to similar nations of tiny supernatural beings. First of all however, it introduces a motley pallet of names, characteristics and localities associated with household imps throughout all of Europe.

## 16. WITCHES AND BABA YAGA

### Fairy tales' main fiend?

Queen among the evil beings of Europe is the witch, the shrew who deals in dark magic. From the beloved fairytale of Hansel and Gretel fighting the traps of the gingerbread house, through the Witches' Sabbath of the early modern age to the insidious neighbours of the last century, witches represent immortal embodiments of absolute evil. The episode dealing with witches first of all differentiates several layers of narration that come together in this character in an indelible knot. The witch works one way in fairytales for children, where she is an abstract embodiment of absolute evil, and differently in folk stories and legends, to say nothing of archaic pre-Christian myths.

## 17. CINDERELLAS

### Heroines of women's fairytales

The immortal stories about Cinderella are amongst the most popular fairytales. In fact, maybe it is the most popular fairytale *of all time*. The various versions of the story of Cinderella can be found literally all over the world, and the European version alone has over five hundred versions! Based on the example of this eternal tale, this episode focuses on the role of the main female protagonists of the stories, who as underestimated outsiders become admired and respected members of society. At the same time it offers an answer to the question of why such stories continue to speak to women of all generations, nations and religions.

## 18. PRINCES AND DRAGONSLAYERS

### Legendary manly heroes

While a social outsider like Cinderella is the most frequent hero of "women's" fairytales, "men's" fairytales are dominated by strong heroes, often dragon slayers. The warrior who defeats the insuperable dragonesque monster is one of the most distinct heroes figures of myth and legend, and may well be the most important archetype of the mythological masculine hero. The episode dedicated to this archetype shows the most famous dragon slayers of the tales of Europe. It also deals with the wider issue of heroes and heroism in European culture, primarily their origin, development and historical transformations.

## 19. NIGHT-MARES

### **Demons that attack in the dead of night**

The mare (better-known today as the night-mare), a terrifying demon that comes to torment the unsuspecting human in his sleep, is a kind of exception among supernatural beings. Foremost demonic creatures, the human home was a kind of untouchable place where, under normal circumstances, they could not reach. The episode dealing with this monstrous, demonic parasite looks not only at bad dreams but also presents the linguistic and cultural diversity of these ideas and focuses primarily on their psychological and medical explanations.

## 20. GHOSTS AND POLTERGEISTS

### **Messengers from beyond the grave**

For hundreds of years, the souls of the dead have been among the scariest supernatural beings that the human imagination has been able to evoke. Across the ages ghosts have changed quite a bit though, and the way we see returnees from the grave has undergone a complex development. The episode dealing with European ideas about the residents of the underworld focuses primarily on their alleged contacts with the world of the living, particularly specific historical cases of appearances of spirits in the Middle Ages on in to the present – from the rendezvous of the German, Czech and Roman Emperor Charles IV with a ghost, to modern cases of poltergeists. Based on the development of the very concept of apparitions, the gradual rationalisation of European folklore will be demonstrated all the way from magical and religious concepts to experiments seeking scientific explanations for phenomena.

## 21. PÉRÁK THE SPRING MAN AND THE WAR PHANTOMS

### **Mechanical phantoms of the Second World War**

The next-to-last episode presents the unique, and none-too-known phenomenon of mysterious urban phantoms such as the Czech *Pérák*, the Slovak *Fosforák* or the German *Hippenmännchen*, that were talked about in Central Europe during the restive period of the Second World War. These apparitions were generally described by narrators of the time as real people who simply possessed unbelievable powers of movement or escape, generally thanks to some kind of miraculous discovery or mechanical invention. The war-time phantoms will thus be presented as a transitional form between supernatural beings of traditional, folk narration and the phantoms of modern urban legend.

## 22. UFO AND THE PHANTOMS OF TODAY

### **Visitors from outer space and human xenophobia**

The final episode of the series will introduce the fantastic beings of modern folklore – the perfidious maniacs of urban mythology, spawned of the subconscious uncertainties, worries and xenophobic moods of modern-day urban Europeans. In addition to urban legends it also introduces what is, for now, the last reincarnation of faith in supernatural beings, that is, 20<sup>th</sup> century mythology in the guise of UFOs and visitors from outer space. Although references to the existence of extraterrestrials are overabundant in modern Europe, it remains an undeniable fact that the past offers us a much greater amount of "eyewitness" reports of meetings with fairies, dwarfs or giants – the likelihood of both kinds of reports are more or less the same. The last episode series shows that both of these ideas are not only compatible, but in lots of ways shows the archetypal consistencies in the human understanding of reality.

## **UNIQUENESS AND EXPERT BACKGROUND OF PROJECT**

**In spite of the unarguable attractiveness of the theme of fairytales, myths and legends, which are so close to the heart of absolutely all generations, there is not and historically has not been a television series with similar ambitions .**

The only – remote – parallels are purely documentary projects dealing with history's mysteries (the successful series of *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, GB 1980), folk horror stories (*Campfire Tales*, GB 1997), or the more recent dramatic projects accenting the theme of fairytales (*Once Upon a Time*, USA 2011–, *Grimm*, USA 2012–).

**The project also recalls the importance of Europe as a "fairytale superpower" – a part of the world where, thanks to the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, ethnology became a distinct scientific discipline looking at folk traditions, and which is a global apex in research into folk narratives.**

The primary expert reference for the series will be Czech ethnologist and folklorist Petr Janeček, Ph.D., the author of the series of urban legends collections *Černá sanitka (The Black Ambulance)*, which has enjoyed television, radio and theatrical versions, as well as other European specialists in folk traditions and folklore (for example in Slovakia – dr. Hana Hložková, CSc., Poland – dr. Teresa Smolińska, Germany – Christine Shojaei Kawan).