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# THE PARSIFAL PROJECT

## COMMON CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN EUROPEAN LEGENDS, MYTHS AND TRADITIONAL TALES

Case  
Study

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### Keywords

*Legends;  
Cultural heritage;  
Common roots*

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### Abstract

*The article is based on the Parsifal project, a European project funded by the Erasmus+ programme (Project Number: 2018-1-PL01-KA201-050865), which is being implemented by EuroEd Foundation Iasi, Romania. The project aims to bring cultural heritage to the attention of students in order to enrich their learning processes. The project looks at traditional tales and legends in each partner country (Poland, Italy, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania) with a view to identifying common European roots. The paper focuses on main themes and common features identified in Bulgarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish and Romanian legends: real and mythological characters and animals, heritage, environments and common objects, recurring situations and challenges, moral and ethical topics.*

## CONTEXT

Basic skills such as reading and writing skills lie at the foundation of education and enable young people's access to employment and social inclusion. However, the Pisa survey showed that 'one in four students in OECD countries are unable to complete even the most basic reading tasks, meaning they are likely to struggle to find their way through life in an increasingly volatile, digital world.' It goes without saying that, deprived of the benefits of the right education, young people will not be able to find solutions to the challenges of the future world of work and will not enjoy a decent life. The education system in each country must meet young people's needs and to that end must exploit technologies as means to promote and develop literacy skills (OECD, 2019). The Parsifal project offers a solution by resorting to students' cultural heritage. The project addresses students, teachers, principals and policy makers in the field of education (The Parsifal project, 2019). The project aims to improve students' literacy and digital skills by making use of the European cultural heritage, particularly traditional tales and stories linked to historical, cultural, geographical and artistic issues (The Parsifal project, 2019).

### EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural heritage is generally defined as a set of cultural values (both tangible and intangible) remodelled by the political, economic and social views of the present (Lammy, 2006). The concept of cultural heritage originated in the 19th century Europe with the emergence of European states in search for their identity. The word became more popular and widespread in the 1970s, when with the 1972 Unesco World Heritage Convention, the concept entered the global stage (Oriane Calligaro, 2014).

Cultural heritage is a comprehensive concept covering a wide range of values (concerning political, ethical or religious issues) and tangible and intangible realities: sites and monuments, cultural productions, traditions, historical experiences. Calligaro (2014) identifies three main dimensions of cultural heritage: material (artefacts, monuments), intangible (history, language, tradition) and political (expression of political values and principles).

Cultural heritage has been used for different purposes by people and society. As a result, the meaning of the concept, cultural heritage, has also undergone several changes in time. If in the past cultural heritage was meant to unite a society or nation, nowadays it faces new challenges in a multicultural Europe. Communities are required to treasure cultural heritage in an attempt to care for

something vulnerable together with a view to strengthening the values on which the European Union is founded and promoting a sense of respect for the values of all citizens and. Cultural heritage is often passed on from generation to generation through stories of achievements of people or events that relate to deep values and bear great significance that touch contemporary citizens (Holtorf, 2011).

### A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN LEGENDS FROM FIVE COUNTRIES

The Parsifal project's activities asked students to collect stories related to their local cultural heritage, share them with their peers from other countries by means of technologies and carry out a comparative analysis which points to common European roots. Their joint efforts led to a repository of legends and tales that are shared in many ethnic or regional cultures of Europe. Students collected 25 legends, five legends per country; the comparative analysis highlighted similarities and differences in terms of main characters, environment, challenges or moral and ethical meanings and purposes.

The teachers participating in the project encouraged their students to interpret the heritage of their home town from multiple perspectives and filter it through shared European values. This led to discussions and reflection and strengthened the understanding and importance of these common values.

The stories selected were analysed and put under the following categories: cultural heritage of the partner countries, main characters, recurrent situations and challenges, similar moral and ethical meanings and environment or objects.

#### Cultural heritage of the partner countries

Heritage can be tangible or intangible, natural or cultural, movable or immovable. We inherit places, monuments or traditions from our ancestors and we pass them on to future generations. Beautiful natural landscapes, wonders of archaeology, monuments and historical places have touched human sensibility and have been immortalised in legends, stories or myths.

Mountains have been at the centre of many European legends probably due to their mysterious atmosphere, dream-like scenery, height and closeness to the sky – and respectively to gods. Strange rock formations, similar to human figures, are tied to legends explaining their shape. Petrification is a motif recurring in various legends throughout Europe ("The Dragon Garden" (RO) and "Belogradchik Rocks" (BG), in which either mythological evil creatures (dragons) or humans

are turned into stone). In other legends, the formation of the mountains is the result of human sacrifice ("Lake Misurina and Mount Sorapiss", where King Sorapiss willingly agrees to be transformed into a mountain), an act of jealousy ("Rhodopa", where the beautiful Rhodopa is turned into a mountain) or a consequence of a victorious deed ("Neringa", in which Mount Naglis, a sandy hill, was created after the hero kills the dragon and pours sand onto its beheaded body). Mountains are often associated with feelings of wonder or fear; thus, in "Puntuko Stone" (PL) and "Devil's Stone" (BG), the two stones are said to have been thrown there by supernatural powers, which explains the way they managed to get to those isolated places. Other mountains are described as mystic or places of spirituality ("The Legend of Mount Ślęza" and "Belintash") or they simply are linked to a heroic story ("Bies and Czady" PL).

Natural reserves and protected areas are not only of scenic beauty but they also seem to have an aura of mystery or tragedy given by the legends they are connected with. The Romanian legend "The Lady's Rocks" presents the tragic fate of a queen who is buried together with the devil who wanted the wealth of her husband, the king. The creation or the appearance of rock formations are also related to evil powers in Polish, Bulgarian or Italian legends such as "Puntuko Stone", "Devil's Stone", "Bies and Czady", "The Legend about Neringa", "Lake Misurina and Mount Sorapiss" or to petrification in "Rhodopa" and "Belogradchik Rocks". Cultural tangible heritage consists of monuments, buildings, sites which generated legends related to human sacrifice ("Master Manole", RO or "Devil's Bridge", BG), saints ("Saint George and the Dragon", "St Petka and the stone bread" or "The Devil's Column"), important rulers, founders of cities ("The Legend about Vilnius City Foundation", "The Legend about Kaunas City Foundation"), human tragedies ("Beautiful Alda") or just heart-melting stories ("Legend of gingerbread").

Monuments and beautiful buildings of historic value, such as castles, have always been an important part of the cultural intangible heritage of every country. They are famous either because they were built by exceptional rulers or just because they were thought to have been related to them. Bran Castle, in Romania, gained its fame after Bram Stoker built his fictional character based on the life of the Romanian ruler, Vlad Tepes. The castle the Irish writer described in his novel is very similar to Bran Castle and although the Romanian ruler never lived there, the building became famous mainly because of this association with Bram Stoker's character. There is a totally different case in the Lithuanian legends "The Legend about Trakai Castle", "The Legend about Kaunas City Foundation" and "The Legend about Vilnius City

Foundation", in which the stories revolving around the castles reflect the historic reality.

### Main Characters

Dragons are some of the most important mythical creatures in cultures around the world and they are renowned mostly for their greediness and meanness, for being treasure guardians and for kidnapping young girls or demanding to be given beautiful maidens as gifts ("Saint George and the Dragon", "The Living Fire", "The Legend about Neringa", "The Legend about Wawel Dragon"). No matter the culture, the dragons seem to have the same appearance: the body of a serpent (or the body of a human and the tail of a serpent), multiple heads (very rarely just one), sometimes having wings, breathing fire or even being able to speak, living in the oceans, rivers, caves or forests in the mountains.

Devils began to play an important role in legends after Christianity spread across the world. They are mainly greedy and wicked and also try to tempt the true believers to abandon their faith. In "The Lady's Rocks", the Devil wants to steal all the possessions of a very wealthy king, his greediness reminding us of other dragons from Polish legends ("The Legend of Mount Ślęza" or "Bies and Czady"). The appearance of rocks or rock formations as a consequence of devils' fights with humans or with more powerful forces is another common feature of European legends. Sometimes the rock formations seal the entrance to hell, preventing the devils from return there, as it happens in "The Lady's Rocks" or in "Legend of Mount Ślęza". In other legends, strange rocks are thrown by devils onto people's villages, miss their target and end up in places they do not belong to ("The Devil's Stone" and "Puntuko Stone").

Heroes are often linked to human sacrifice. In the Romanian legend "Master Manole", the builder is desperate to see the monastery he was ordered to erect finally finished. But in order to do that, he had to sacrifice his pregnant wife and build her within the walls of the monastery. This motif is also found in the Bulgarian legend "Devil's Bridge". It is important to observe that in both legends, the builders had to sacrifice not only their wives, but also their children. Although the building is made safe after the sacrifice, the builders either die or remain miserable for the rest of their lives. In both legends there is a supernatural power that demands a sacrifice in exchange for helping people to achieve the project. In "Devil's Bridge", the builder makes a deal with Satan so that the building is forever durable. Similarly, to the previous legends, the bridge is built without any human sacrifice but the master dies after finishing it. Female mythical characters are well represented in the legends of different cultures. The most important category is that of the gracious creatures:

fairies, nymphs, dryads, Iele (Romanian fairies or Nymphs) or Samodivas. All of them look like beautiful young girls, with long hair, who dance or sing beautifully and who are related to Nature. They can be gentle and kind but sometimes they are mischievous or even vengeful and destructive. In the Romanian legend "Iele/Nymphs", the mythical creatures make their appearance mainly at night and mortals who manage to see them or who are lured by their graceful dance are punished. A different type of female mythological creatures is a mermaid, with the upper body of a pretty woman and the lower body of a fish. Mermaids were feared because they were considered to bring bad luck to sailors, as they lured them with magical songs to the depths of the ocean. Although 'Iele' and mermaids have different appearance, they share the same way of attracting humans with their songs ("The Legend about Warsaw Mermaid", "Devil's throat cave").

Not only mythological characters generate legends. Real characters, with strong traits of characters, manage to remain in the collective conscience. "Dracula - Vlad Țepeș" is the legend about the Romanian ruler, Vlad Țepeș, whose method of punishing criminals and enemies by impaling them was considered to be of an extreme cruelty. What Vlad Țepeș, the ruler, has in common with the rulers from other legends ("The Legend about the establishment of Trakai Castle" and "The Legend about Vilnius city foundation" - Lithuania) is their determination, strong spirit and power.

### **Common Environments and/or Common Objects**

Legends are often set in natural places such as forests, riverbanks where civilizations and cultures developed. Mountains make the best background for legends since they can better describe either the formation of the mountains, interesting shapes of the rocks, their majestic appearance or simply the connection they have with an interesting story. Most of the times the magic and the awe of a mountain were combined with the realities of the mountain life ("Lake Misurina and Mount Sorapiss" - Italy, "Bies and Czady" - Poland, "The Legend of Mount Ślęza" - Poland, "Belintash" - Bulgaria, "The Lady's Rocks" - Romania, "Beautiful Alda", "Bies and Czady", "Legend about Wawel Dragon" or "The Pirin's Dragon"). All over the world, mountains are also considered to have a spiritual meaning as a result of their symbolic or natural energy ("Legend of Mount Ślęza" or "Belintash"). Spectacular buildings and monuments have become famous mainly due to the legends tied to them ("Master Manole" - Romania, "The Legend about establishment of Trakai Castle" - Lithuania, "The Legend about Kaunas city foundation" or "A legend about a taurus with a cross between horns" - Lithuania, "Devil's Bridge" - Bulgaria, "Romolo

and Remo and the foundation of Rome" - Italy, "Bran Castle" - Romania).

### **Recurring Situations and Challenges**

The comparative analysis revealed that all legends have common recurring situations and challenges: the conflict between good and evil, human sacrifice, loss, petrification, love and tragedy, treachery, jealousy and envy. The conflict between good and evil is the most common motif that appears in legends. It stems from the burning desire of ancient people to overcome all the obstacles they encountered in their ordinary lives. In almost all legends, good always triumphs over evil forces ("The Dragon Garden" - Romania, "Saint George and the Dragon" - Italy, "The Legend about Neringa" - Lithuania, "The Legend about Wawel Dragon" - Poland, "The Devil's Column", "Bies and Czady", "The Legend of Mount Ślęza" - Poland, Belogradchik Rocks - Bulgaria). Another recurring situation is that of human sacrifice, which is made either for the act of creation or for the sake of a beloved person. The idea of human sacrifice goes back to time immemorial. One of the most common reasons why people performed human sacrifice was to win gods' or other supernatural powers' favour. The ingenuity and artistry of most important buildings and constructions erected in the Middle Ages could not be explained otherwise but by the fact that a pact was sealed between the master-builder and a supernatural force, which involved the sacrifice of a beloved person or even of the self (the Romanian legend "Mesterul Manole - Master Manole", "Devil's Bridge" - Bulgaria, "Lake Misurina and Mount Sorapiss" - Italy). Transformation of man into objects is another recurring situation and petrification is the most common of all. Rocks and mountainous formations with strange shapes were considered to have appeared as a result of a spell cast over humans ("Lake Misurina and Mount Sorapiss" - Italy, "Belogradchik Rocks" and "Rhodopa" - Bulgaria). Tragic deaths are also recurring situations in various legends. Love and tragedy are often intertwined in legends. The emotions conveyed by a tragic story in which a young girl dies is even intensified if the death is linked to a love story. Both versions of the Romanian legend "The bride's Cave" depict the suicide of young girls who are forced to marry men they do not love. Version 2 of the Bulgarian legend "Belogradchik Rocks" presents the story of a young woman who is eventually turned to stone. The story of the Bulgarian legend "Devil's Throat Cave" deals with the tragic love story between the most talented player of ancient times, Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice. Tragedies may also occur due to the recklessness of the heroine (the Italian legend,

“Beautiful Alda”, depicts a young maiden who died out of vanity).

Female mythical creatures that appear in legends have supernatural powers which they use to dominate mortals. Whether they are creatures similar to fairies (the Romanian *Iele*) or mermaids (“The Legend of Warsaw Mermaid”), they use art in their desire of enchanting humans. Mermaids sing to hypnotise sailors and lure them to death. The Romanian mythical creatures can similarly use their beautiful voices to charm their listeners but they also dance their ritual *Hora*, a circular dance. In both legends, these beautiful creatures can be either evil, mischievous agents of revenge or they can show mercy towards mortals (“The Legend of the Warsaw Mermaid” – Poland).

### Similar moral and ethical meaning and purposes

Legends give insight into the values of a culture. Generally, the main role of a legend is to promote a certain moral and ethical value system which can apply to the whole society. In this way, a moral code is provided showing people how they should conduct themselves. That is why they are so inspiring, they teach us about moral values and they provide us with examples of behaviour that can elevate our attitude towards life. The heroes of European legends value bravery in fighting the evil and saving lives (“The Dragon Garden”, Saint George and the Dragon – Italy, Legend about Neringa – Lithuania, The Legend of Wavel Dragon – Poland, Pirin’s Dragon – Bulgaria), the spirit of sacrifice (“Master Manole”, “Devil’s Bridge”- BG), determination in pursuing his goal (“Pirin’s dragon”). He fights with a beast (a dragon, a devil or other mythical creatures). Regardless of the means they use in this combat – ingenuity, courage, or strength – the hero’s epic quest is designed to teach us that eventually good triumphs over bad.

### Future developments

A large full-colour map with the European Heritage sites with explanatory captions will be created to raise students’ awareness of their cultural heritage, enable them to define 'cultural heritage', distinguish between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, outline the importance of cultural heritage or list examples of cultural heritage.

A guide to stories and how to use them in teaching will also be produced. Such activities will raise students’ awareness about the significant role cultural heritage plays in our lives. Students will analyze and discuss important terms relating to culture such as values, morals, beliefs, behavior, customs, stereotypes, and generalizations (among many that could come up) in class conversation and also in their writing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The European cultural initiatives have promoted common historical and cultural roots: a common European heritage, often presented as the concrete materialization of shared values. They have connected people with the legacy of their past as sources of inspiration and creativity. Raising students’ about shared values and similarities may lead to a commitment to global solidarity and provoke reflections on the process of caring for the heritage.

Cultural heritage can play a very important role in education. Cultural heritage offers many opportunities to tell stories about the past which they can relate to their own experience. Stories about real heroes or events can reveal new perspectives helping adolescents to critically check the coherence of belief systems and values or to reshape their own value system and identities.

Stories can offer heroes and role models which can guide students in their search for their identity or place in the world. Heritage can contribute to the building of communities. Bringing citizens closer to their heritage is about bringing them closer to each other, which is an important step towards a more inclusive society.

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