EXPLORING THE MYTHOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUE OF GEOHERITAGE. CASE STUDY: THE BUCEGI MOUNTAINS

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This paper considers two of the cultural values of geoheritage: the mythological and the religious value, while introducing Omu peak and Ialomiţa cave, two natural destinations located within the Bucegi Mountains of Romania's Southern Carpathians. Although mythology and religion share common aspects, it is necessary to distinguish them. Mythology emerged in ancient times as a way of explaining the physical world, whereas religion characterizes an upper stage in the evolution of mankind. Mythology is reduced to spiritual beliefs, while religion is based upon sacred practices to recall and strengthen these beliefs. The religious value of geoheritage is conditioned by the existence of sacred relics or places of worship close to geological formations. According to the age of these items, the religious value can be either pre-historical or historical. Omu peak has only acquired a mythological value since hypotheses related to its religious value are not confirmed. Ialomiţa cave has acquired both a mythological and a religious value. In addition to their exploration as close components of geoheritage, a brief model for their assessment is also introduced. Both steps aim to encourage landform exploitation not only by means of scientific interpretation but also by revealing and explaining their cultural attributes.

Key-words: *geoheritage, mythological value, religious value, geomythology, Bucegi Mountains.*

1. Introduction and Aim of Research

Geoheritage comprises landforms and geological or geomorphological phenomena with renowned scientific relevance to which people have gradually ascribed cultural values in the course of time, including a mythological and/or a religious value (Hose, 2005). Such elements have already raised awareness among scientists and researchers concerned with their proper conservation and management (Gray, 2004), yet they also provide opportunities for leisure and education. Omu peak and Ialomiţa cave are located within the central and northern part of the Bucegi Mountains, a large area comprising a wide variety of geological and geomorphological features with a huge potential value for geotourism – a form of natural area tourism which "involves visitation to geosites for the purposes of passive recreation, engaging a sense of wonder, appreciation and learning" (Newsome & Dowling, 2006, pp. 3-4) since it

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"specifically focuses on geology and landscape" (Dowling & Newsome, 2010, p. 231). Broader approaches also consider cultural and historical values associated to geosites (Joyce, 2007; Reynard, 2008; Sadry, 2009).

Exploring the mythological and religious value of geoheritage is an important step of the research process that seeks to assess the overall cultural dimension of landforms and geoheritage sites. The cultural interpretation of geological and geomorphological elements, and more generally of landscapes, would normally be regarded as an alternative to their scientific interpretation for education and conservation. Within an organized framework and supported by sustainable geotourism practices, they shall prove nonetheless complementary.

Geoheritage, as well as any object of natural or cultural heritage, implies the existence of an outstanding value. Myths that have long been associated to landforms should not be regarded as merely common "stories" that randomly increase the attractiveness of tourist destinations but as archaic explanations accounting for the diversity of shapes and phenomena which were perceived rather than understood and hence considered mysterious (Kernbach, 1996).

Legends and myths often display recurring themes and motifs which are widespread in both the Dacian and universal mythology, allowing for symbolic associations and comparisons between different human cultures.

2. Myths *vs.* Legends. "Geomythology"

Myths and legends share common aspects and are included in the general term of "mythology". However, they are not synonyms. *Myths* are "sacred narratives" (Dundes, 1984, p. 1) whose value is symbolic. Events are placed in a time that is indefinite and absolute, and characters often exhibit supernatural forces and abilities. Their importance rises not so much from the facts they reveal, but from the meanings they bear. *Legends* are "more often secular than sacred" (Bascom, 1984, p. 9). These stories are usually placed within a definite spatial and temporal context and are related to real places and sometimes historical figures. Frequently the accuracy and extent of the facts are exaggerated.

Myths and legends are basic elements of the traditional folklore. They are almost entirely verbally passed on and therefore permanently altered and modified. As a result, there may be various legends related to one place or even multiple versions of the same legend.

In 1968, D. Vitaliano introduced the term "geomythology", which she defined as an interdisciplinary subject that seeks to reveal and scientifically explain the geological and geomorphological processes that underlie myths and legends. However, the term generally refers to myths that lead to the revealing of natural hazards ending up in catastrophes (e.g. volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, major floods or landslides). As the author argued, sudden and dramatic geological

and geomorphological events have a greater impact on communities than ordinary events – some of which may not even be perceived – and thus were more likely to stimulate the imagination of ancient people (Vitaliano, 1968, 2007).

3. Mythology *vs.* Religion

Compared to mythology which emerged in archaic times and generated intuitive and sometimes naive allegories to explain the reality, religion defines an upper stage in the evolution of the human culture (*Fig. 1*). "The mind of man is first led to adore the forces of nature and certain objects of the material world; at a later period it yields to religious impulses of a higher and purely spiritual character" (Humboldt, 1875, p. 7). Religion is a direct consequence of the evolution of myths in the sense that all major religions of the world lay their foundations on myths. Ancient beliefs like animism, and totemism, whose adherents ascribe spiritual attributes to non-human entities, are basic forms of religion. Since "l'homme archaïque n'accepte pas l'irréversibilité du Temps"[2] (Eliade, 1963, p. 172), societies seek to invoke and recall mythological events and renew their value through sacred rituals and ceremonies. Thus Time becomes "circulaire, réversible et récupérable"[3] (Eliade, 1965, p. 61).

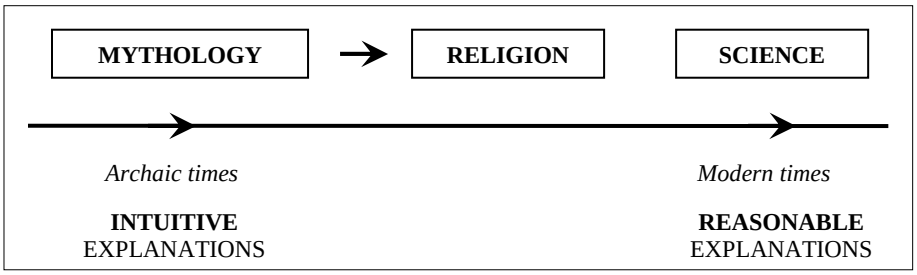

Fig. 1. The major stages in explaining the natural environment displayed chronologically according to the cultural evolution of human societies. Mythology was the first step in explaining the origin and diversity of the physical world. At a later stage, religion encompassed myths and codified them into an own system of dogmas (Kernbach, 1989, Author's Introduction). Science is the most recent stage of human evolution and development.

While mythology is reduced to ancient spiritual beliefs representing a parallel, independent and exclusively intangible reality, religion is based upon sacred practices to continuously recall, confirm and strengthen these beliefs.

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[2] (author's translation) "the Archaic Man does not accept the irreversible character of Time".
[3] (author's translations) "circular, reversible and retrievable".

The sacred character of rituals usually demands a specific environment and the presence – according to the nature of the rituals – of specific ceremonial items, symbolic representations, sacred texts or inscriptions, and later, sanctuaries or temples as places of worship. The existence and especially the preservation of such tangible elements in areas surrounding geological formations determine to a great extent the religious value of geoheritage. According to the age of these artifacts, the religious value can be divided in pre-historical – with items dating from Pre-Christianity – and historical – with items related to Christianity.

4. Methodology

Geoheritage is generally perceived as a shorthand for geological (Leman et al. 2008; Eder *et al.* 2010) and geomorphological (Reynard, 2008; Rodrigues & Fonseca, 2010) heritage. Due to the combination of natural and cultural elements and its outstanding value, geoheritage may rather be regarded as a self-standing category within the world heritage (Necheş, 2011).

Existing assessment methods for the geological and geomorphological sites (commonly referred to as *geosites* or *geomorphosites*) consider both religious implications (Pralong, 2005) and mythology (Serrano & González-Trueba, 2005). However, since no clear distinction is made between them, myths and legends fall within a broader category comprising mystic, symbolic and religious values (Reynard *et al.*, 2007), while the latter one itself is sometimes only considered as an intangible spiritual value.

The Bucegi Mountains have long been studied for their natural landscapes and cultural value. A recent study draws a parallel between the geological origin and geomorphological composition of landforms as revealed by scientific inquiry and the legends and popular beliefs associated to them as reflected in people's perception (Oprea *et al.*, 2012). One year before, a multi-purpose survey with multiple choice questions was applied in order to determine people's perception towards geoheritage conservation on the Bucegi Plateau, with a special emphasis on the Sphinx (Necheş, 2011). Results concluded that the former is perceived as both a natural and cultural (mythical) place, while the latter, due to its unusual shape, is preferably perceived as a cultural element. However, since no studies so far have specifically focused on the assessment of the mythological and religious value of geoheritage – a heritage which is "frequently neglected and threatened" (Hose, 2005), a brief assessment model is hence suggested (*Table 1*).

Table 1

Brief Model for Assessing the Mythological and Religious Value of Geoheritage

Value Type (Evidence)	**Main Value**	**Component Value**	**Observations** (related to the Component Value)	**Max. Score**
				Sub-scores
Intangible (No evidence)	**MYTHOLOGICAL VALUE** (LEGENDS + MYTHS)	LEGENDS	**= Narratives** (Recount facts)	**1**
				0-0.5-1
		MYTHS	**= Symbolic narratives** (Provide meanings)	**2** (2 x **1**)
				0-1-2
Tangible	**RELIGIOUS VALUE** (PRE-HISTORICAL + HISTORICAL)	PRE-HISTORICAL	**Pre-Christianity** (Traditional faiths / Consequence of myths)	**4** (2 x **2**)
				0-2-4
		HISTORICAL	**Christianity** (Not related to the Mythological Value)	**5**
				0-2.5-5
Tangible	**HISTORICAL VALUE** (ARCHAEOLO-GICAL + DOCUMENTARY)	ARCHAEOLOGICAL	**Artifacts, Petroglyphs** (Non-religious items)	**5**
				0-2.5-5
		DOCUMENTARY	**Written accounts** (Associations with real characters, heroes, peoples or events)	**5**
				0-2.5-5

The maximum scores available for each Component Value (displayed in the last column) range from **1** (the lowest) to **5** (the highest) according to the existence of material evidence which reflects the overall intangible/tangible character of the Main Value (displayed in the first column). Maximum scores can be divided in sub-scores according to the variability of each Component Value, with the lowest sub-score corresponding to no variable, the medium sub-score corresponding to one variable and the maximum sub-score corresponding to more than one variable (e.g. If no legend is related to a landform, the score is 0. If there is one legend, the score is 0.5. If there is more than one legend, the score is 1).

The **Mythological Value** is an overall intangible value. It encompasses two Component Values: legends and myths. Legends are narratives displaying random events, while myths are narratives that bear symbolic meanings. Legends can reach a maximum score of 1. Myths can reach a maximum score of 2 – considering they have twice the value of legends (2 x **1**)

The **Religious Value** is an overall tangible value (as it is determined by material evidence of a religious nature). It encompasses two Component Values according to the age of the evidence: pre-historical and historical. The former implies the existence of items related to ancient sacred practices as a way of recalling myths, hence the maximum of 4 points received – considering the religious items are twice as relevant as myths (2 x **2**). The latter implies the existence of places of worship related to Christian denominations (hermitages, monasteries, abbeys, churches, cathedrals, etc) and receives a maximum of 5 points.

The **Historical Value** – which was not discussed in the present paper – is an overall tangible value (as it is determined by material evidence of a non-religious nature). It encompasses two Component Values according to the type of evidence: archaeological and documentary. Both of them receive a maximum score of 5.

Each Main Value is defined by the sum of its Component Values.

Main Value (MV) = Component Value (CV1) + Component Value (CV2);

Mythological value (VMyth) = Legends (L) + Myths (M); **Religious value** (VRelg) = Pre-historical (PH) + Historical (H); **Historical value** (VHist) = Archaeological (A) + Documentary (D)

The overall Cultural Value is defined by the sum of the Main Values.

Cultural Value (VCult) = Main Value (MV1) + Main Value (MV2) + Main Value (MV3) = **Mythological value** (VMyth) + **Religious value** (VRelg) + **Historical value** (VHist)

5. The Mythological Value of Geoheritage. Omu Peak and Ialomița Cave

5.1. Omu Peak

Rising 2,505 m (8,218 ft) above sea level, Omu is the highest peak in the Bucegi Mountains. Shaped by intense wind and water erosion, the large rock on top of it – when viewed from a certain angle (S/SSW) – appears to be a large human skull (*Fig.2*). The nearby chalet was built at the end of the 19th century.

The shape of this landform is explained by a short legend originating in Dacian Times, which depicts Omu as a young man who was born and raised on top of the Bucegi Mountains, in a period when Dacia was flourishing. As his exceptional eyesight enabled him to notice the enemies from great distance, he used to spend all of his time on the peak that nowadays bears his name. Due to his ability, the Dacians foresaw attacks and won every battle. As he was getting older and his eyesight weakened, he was burdened with the thought that the land would remain defenseless. The Sacred Spirit, although sympathetic to his concern, was unable to provide him with eternal life, but in exchange turned him into a solid rock which is said to be watching over Dacia (Crainicu & Ioniță, 2010, pp. 54-60).

Omu Peak is often associated with the sacred mountain Kogaion (a.k.a. Kogaionon) (Kernbach, 1989, p. 283), place of Zamolxis (a.k.a. Zalmoxis), the main figure of the Dacian mythology, and of Deceneus, the high priest. It is believed that rituals and ceremonies were held in this place every year. N. Densusianu recounts that *Omu* and *Zamolxis* are merely two of the several alternate names of *Saturnus* – an "ancient agricultural divinity of Latin and Roman origin" (Guirand, 1987, p. 215) – thought to have been worshipped in ancient Dacia by the Pelasgians[4] and later by the Getae (Densusianu, 1913). He also states that a notable geological formation, located south of Omu Peak and overlooking the glacial cirque of the Cerbului Valley[5], is in fact a carved representation of *Saturnus* (Densusianu, 1913). This iconic landmark (*Fig. 3*) is readily accessible from the tourist route that nowadays connects Babele chalet and Omu chalet.

A brief legend about Omu Peak is also displayed in Carmen Sylva's *Peleş Stories* (Carmen Sylva, 1933, pp. 100-126).

Fig. 2. Omu Peak and the rock on top of it that greatly resembles a human skull. View from the south (Photo by Irina-Maria Necheş, August 25th 2012)

[4] The "legendary" character of this assumption is implicit, since the Pelasgians were a Pre-Indo-European population who inhabited the Balkan Peninsula south of the Danube, the western part of the Anatolian Peninsula and the coastal regions of the Adriatic and Aegean Seas.

[5] Roughly translated as "the Deer Valley".

Fig. 3. The rock overlooking the Cerbului Valley, thought to represent an ancient deity, *Saturnus* (Photo by Irina-Maria Necheș, August 25th 2012)

5.2. Ialomița Cave

The most representative geological structure of its type in the Bucegi Mountains, Ialomița cave was carved by water erosion in the limestone bedrock on the right bank of Ialomița river. In terms of morphology, it displays a sequence of chambers linked by galleries and passages (Micalevich-Velcea, 1961). At the entrance of the cave it lays a small hermitage dating from the 16th century (*Fig. 4*).

Legends related to it may not be scarce, but written records are almost non-existent[6]. The legend of Zamolxis introduces a cave hosting a sacred stone with miraculous powers guarded by a sacred spirit. Shortly after becoming a high priest, Zamolxis was granted eternal life thus becoming god of the Dacians

[6] Most references regarding the Dacian mythology, although dating back to ancient Greece, are scarce and inconsistent. Among the people concerned with this subject there were Plato, Herodotus and Strabo (Kernbach, 1989).

and gaining control over the sacred stone. He is thought to have been living deep into *the Hidden Mountain* ever since (Crainicu & Ioniță, 2010, pp. 20-34).

Fig. 4. The wooden building located in front of Ialomița Cave currently serves as monastic cells but also provides shelter for tourists and visitors. Bottom left corner: Ialomița hermitage, located at the very entrance of the cave (Photos by Irina-Maria Necheș, August 20th 2012)

The myth of Zamolxis was presented in the 4th book of Herodotus's *Histories* and it depicts Zamolxis as a slave living on the Greek island of Samos. After acquiring freedom and accumulating wealth, he returned home and invited his fellow Thracians to a feast. During this celebration he preached on the life after death assuring his listeners that no one would ever die, but everyone would accede to eternal life and wealth. He eventually retreated in a specifically prepared underground chamber (cave) that was known only to him. He lived there for the following three years while people mourned him as they thought he had perished. In the fourth year he returned thus convincing everyone of the truth of his preaching (Herodotus, c.440 BCE, Book 4, Chap. 30, p. 338).

Despite being regarded as an initiation myth, it also exhibits in a symbolic manner the theme of death and resurrection, commonly encountered in the universal mythology (e.g. *Orpheus* in the Greek mythology, *Osiris* in the Egyptian mythology, *Odin* in the Norse mythology, *Krishna* in the Indian mythology, *Quetzalcoatl* in the Aztec mythology) and also featured in the Christian religion. According to historical records, the Dacians believed in this myth so blindly that warriors would venture in any battle with no fear of death. And if a battle was about to be lost, they wouldn't hesitate to take their own lives; an example would be Decebalus' suicidal death in 106 CE after the second war against Trajan.

A brief legend about Ialomița cave is mentioned in Carmen Sylva's *Peleş Stories* (Carmen Sylva, 1933, pp. 88-97).

Fig. 5. Waterfall inside the cave, in the sector known as "the Lakes"
(Photo by Irina-Maria Necheș, August 20th 2012)

Fig. 6. Shallow lake inside the cave, in the sector known as "the Water Gallery"
(Photo by Irina-Maria Necheș, August 20th 2012)

In the course of time people – including historians and ethnographers – have struggled to place indefinite mythological events within a real and well-individualized geomorphological frame. According to Strabo's *Geography*, the cave of Zamolxis is located within a mountain that "is held sacred and is thus distinguished […] as well as the river which flows by it" (Strabo, c. 20CE, Book 7, Chap. 3, p. 457). Numerous attempts have since then been carried out in order to locate the sacred Kogaion and especially the cave, which has been supposedly identified with Ialomița cave (Bucurescu, 1997, p. 14; Crainicu & Ioniță, 2010, p. 7). None of these alleged assumptions have however been proved, all the more since – as imaginary products (Boia, 1998; Mayor, 2004) – myths seek to explain reality by means of their own laws and methods which do not fall within scientific reasoning.

6. The Religious Value of Geoheritage. Omu Peak and Ialomița Cave

Omu peak and Ialomița cave are natural elements enhanced by an unquestionable mythological value. The question that arises is whether they also have a religious value.

Besides the legend explaining its anthropomorphic aspect and the association with the sacred mountain Kogaion, Omu peak is said to have been a sacred place. However none of the hypotheses supporting this statement is supported, since no evidence has been discovered to confirm the practice of a ritual or ceremony, neither in ancient times nor more recently (Anghelescu & Avanu, 2008).

The mythological value of Ialomița cave emerges mainly from its association with Zamolxis. Although no ancient relic has been found in this place either, the cave has nevertheless acquired a renowned religious value. The small hermitage located at its very entrance was built at the initiative of Mihnea Vodă, son of Vlad the Impaler, whose very short rule over Wallachia lasted only one year (1508-1509). In this case, however, the religious value of geoheritage is not a direct consequence of the evolution of myths since it doesn't refer to ancient or prehistoric beliefs, but to a more recent period – the Late Middle Ages – when Christianity had already spanned across Europe[7].

The result of the brief assessment of the mythological and religious value of Ialomița cave and Omu Peak is displayed below (*Table 2*).

[7] Dacia was conquered by and included in the Roman Empire in 106 AD. At that time both Dacians and Romans followed mainly traditional faiths. It was only in 380 under the rule of Theodosius I (347-395) that Christianity was officially adopted in the Roman Empire.

Table 2

Assessment of the Mythological and Religious Value of Ialomița cave and Omu peak

		IALOMIȚA CAVE	OMU PEAK
Mythological Value (VMyth)	Legends (L)	**1** (2 legends)	**1** (2 legends)
	Myths (M)	**1** (1 myth)	**0** (no myths)
Religious Value (VRelg)	Pre-historical value (PH)	**0** (no Pre-Christian religious items)	**0** (no Pre-Christian religious items)
	Historical value (H)	**2.5** (1 hermitage)	**0** (no Christian places of worship)
Historical Value (VHist)	Archaeological value (A)	**0** (no non-religious artifacts)	**0** (no non-religious artifacts)
	Documentary value (D)	**5** (2 associations with historical figures – Mihnea Vodă and Decebalus)	**0** (no associations with historical figures, heroes, events etc.)

Ialomița cave
VMyth = 1 + 1 = **2**; VRelg = 0 + 2.5 = **2.5**; VHist = 0 + 5 = **5**
VCult = VMyth + VRelg + VHist = 2 + 2.5 + 5 = **9.5**
Omu peak
VMyth = 1 + 0 = **1**; VRelg = 0 + 0 = **0**; VHist = 0 + 0 = **0**
VCult = VMyth + VRelg + VHist = 1 + 0 + 0 = **1**

Conclusions

Among the landforms with potential value for geotourism, Omu Peak and Ialomița cave are two major geoheritage sites located in the Bucegi Mountains. The former only has a mythological value which, to a certain extent, is also supported by the "legendary" character of its religious hypotheses, while the latter, apart from its mythological value, also has a religious and a historical value.

Although the Bucegi Mountains are almost entirely encompassed within the borders of a protected area, namely The Bucegi Natural Park, a proper and

effective legislative and operational framework to ensure the reasonable and sustainable exploitation of its diverse resources is still needed. Within a holistic approach, geotourism – as an organized form of tourism – would seek to facilitate the conservation of landforms mainly by involving tourists in activities with an educational purpose, such as interpretive tours.

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