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**IN THE NINTH HEAVEN – THE Gnostic BACKGROUND
OF THE ROMANIAN FOLKLORE TRADITION OF
THE “HEAVEN’S CUSTOM HOUSES”**

-Abstract-

In the Romanian folklore tradition, a considerable amount of sources attest the widespread belief in “the heaven’s custom houses”, as a constitutive part of the imaginary circumscribing the journey of the soul, after death. These traditions and the funeral rites inspired by them survive into the 21st century, while their origins seem to be lost *in illo tempore*. The rebellious angels or “the devils” are expelled from heaven by the Archangel Gabriel, who is acting according to God’s command. They disperse on the earth, in the waters, or remain suspended in the air, in the provisional state of an unaccomplished fall. The angels exiled in the air “concoct” the custom houses stationed between the heaven and the earth, which are destined to charge custom duties for the souls of the human beings, after their crossing over the thanatic threshold, in order that “no guilty soul may squeeze inside Paradise, and all sinners may be caught and sent in Hell”. The interval separating the heaven and the earth is thus defined as a border-space between the realm of good and the realm of evil, between Paradise and Hell. Inside this border-space, the trajectories of the souls, after death, unfold in different shapes, according to the logic of the good deeds and evil deeds fulfilled during the lifetime on earth.

The trajectory covered by the soul after death constitutes a common element of the Gnostic texts and the folklore texts about the heaven’s custom houses. The ample vision of the Gnostic theogony and cosmogony, the representation of the universe, of the nine heavens, the traumas and the beatitudes of the ascension which unfold against the background of a complex theology of redemption and damnation, of the confrontation between good and evil, make whole the rustic simplicity of the *rohatcas* and *zaplazs* built along the heavenly way leading from the earth to the gate of Paradise. The folklore imaginary of the heaven’s custom houses has its origin in the Gnostic imaginary of the Aeons and Archons, of the passage of the initiates through the planetary spheres and the intermediary heavens.

Keywords: the heaven's custom houses, the ninth heaven, Romanian folklore, Gnosticism, the Nag Hammadi Library

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Danubius, XXXI, Galați, 2013, pp. 309-326.

ÎN AL NOUĂLEA CER – FUNDALUL GNOSTIC AL TRADIȚIEI POPULARE
ROMÂNESTI CU PRIVIRE LA “VĂMILE VĂZDUHULUI”

-Rezumat-

În tradiția folclorică românească, mai multe surse atestă credința în „vămile văzduhului”, parte componentă a imaginarului care circumscrie călătoria sufletului, după moarte. Îngerii răzvrățiți sau „dracii”, pe care Arhanghelul Gavril îi alungă din cer din porunca lui Dumnezeu, se răspândesc pe pământ și în ape, sau rămân suspendați în văzduh, în starea provizorie a unei căderi nedesăvârșite. Îngerii exilați în văzduh „născocesc” vămile dintre cer și pământ, care au menirea de a vămuți sufletele oamenilor după trecerea pragului tanatic, pentru ca „să nu se strecoare vreun vinovat în rai, ci pe toți păcătoșii să-i prindă și să-i trimeată în iad”. Intervalul dintre cer și pământ se definește ca spațiu de frontieră între împărăția binelui și împărăția răului, între rai și iad, iar traiectoriile sufletelor se desfășoară, după moarte, în concordanță cu logica faptelor bune sau faptelor rele săvârșite pe parcursul vieții pământești. Traectoria pe care o parcurge sufletul, după moarte, constituie un element comun al textelor gnostice și al textelor folclorice despre vămile văzduhului. Viziunea amplă a teogoniei și cosmogoniei gnostice, reprezentarea universului, a celor nouă ceruri, traumele și beatitudinile ascensiunii, care se desfășoară pe fundalul unei complexe teologii a mântuirii și damnării, a înfruntării dintre bine și rău, întregesc simplitatea țărănească a rohătcilor și zaplaurilor dintre pământ și cer. Imaginarul folcloric despre vămile văzduhului își are originea în imaginarul gnostic al eonilor și arhonților, al trecerii inițiaților prin sferele planetare și cerurile intermediare.

Cuvinte-cheie: vămile văzduhului, al nouălea cer, folclor românesc, gnosticism, Biblioteca de la Nag Hammadi

In the Romanian folklore tradition, a considerable amount of sources attest the widespread belief in “the heaven’s custom houses”, as a constitutive part of the imaginary circumscribing the journey of the soul, after death. These traditions and the funeral rites inspired by them survive into the 21st century, while their origins seem to be lost *in illo tempore*. The rebellious angels or “the devils” are expelled from heaven by the Archangel Gabriel, who is acting according to God’s command. They disperse on the earth, in the waters, or remain suspended in the air, in the provisional state of an unaccomplished fall. The angels exiled in the air “concoct” the custom houses stationed between the heaven and the earth, which are destined to charge custom duties for the souls of the human beings, after their crossing over the thanatic threshold, in order that “no guilty soul may squeeze inside Paradise, and all sinners may be caught and sent in Hell”. The interval separating the heaven and the earth is thus defined as a border-space between the

realm of good and the realm of evil, between Paradise and Hell. Inside this border-space, the trajectories of the souls, after death, unfold in different shapes, according to the logic of the good deeds and evil deeds fulfilled during the lifetime on earth: “Between the heaven and the earth there are countless unseen roads, and the souls are following them in order to pass towards Paradise.”¹

The custom houses are built with rustic firmness by the angelic convicts turned into demons, at each crossing of the roads leading from earth to heaven: they poke a few pillars verisimilar to the erection of a *rohatca*², they place a *zaplaz*³ crosswise, for the purpose of checking the passage of the souls, and they establish their custom houses. Some of the sources describe even “iron doors“, mention the fact that the custom houses are very remote one from another, and set at an equal distance, just like the barriers on the imperial highways⁴. Beyond the *zaplaz* of the custom house, the texts describe a river, a spring or a “great water“, which the soul has to cross while performing the ritual cleansing of his sins. The narrative fragments in the anthologies state the number of the custom houses with a great deal of imprecision: “Some say seven, others say twelve, but most of them declare there should be twenty-four, or even ninety-nine.”⁵

Each of the custom houses has to charge custom duties for a particular category of human sins, consequently in the process of the otherworldly judging and taking tolls different fallen angels are involved: a custom of thieves, a custom of murderers, a custom of liars, a custom of drunkards, a custom of witches, a custom of plotters, a custom of the greedy souls, a custom of the workers of injustice. The custom-house officer reads the soul’s sins in a book with black leaves, written in white ink, while the guardian angel reads the good deeds in a book with white leaves, written in black ink. The sins and the good deeds are weighed on the beam and scales, and the balance of judgement means the soul either to the immersion in the infernal ebullition, or to the passage towards Paradise. The ritual is reenacted at the soul’s arrival at each of the custom houses, and the souls who have been granted the passage are now to be confronted with the toughest challenge: the passage across the Paradise’s foot bridge, “an extremely long foot-bridge, but narrow and thin like a nail, and sharp like a knife’s blade“. Beyond this foot-bridge, in the beatific realm of Paradise, ends “the long and without return road of the soul after death”⁶.

¹ Cf. Marcel Olinescu, *Mitologie românească*, p. 366; Simion Florea Marian, *Înmormântarea la români*, pp. 286-287.

² Romanian regionalism for “barrier”, deriving from the Ukrainian *rohatka*.

³ Romanian word for a “fence” made of planks.

⁴ This image in the Romanian folklore may be a transposition of the highway barriers common in the Byzantine, Turkish, Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires.

⁵ Cf. Olinescu, *Mitologie*, p. 366; Marian, *Înmormântarea*, pp. 287-288.

⁶ Cf. Olinescu, *Mitologie*, pp. 366-367; Marian, *Înmormântarea*, pp. 288-290.

The tradition of the fallen angels that inhabit the intermediary heavens is archaic, its origins can be identified in the Biblical literature. This exegetical connection is proved by the syntagms “Celestial Watchers“, *Grigori* or *Egrogroi*, “guardians“, which designate the fallen angels in *The Ethiopian Book of Henoch* or *1 Henoch*⁷, *The Slavonic Book of Henoch* or *2 Henoch*⁸, containing the ascension of Henoch through the ten heavens, and the Palestinian apocalyptic literature dating from the inter-testamentary period⁹. In the Corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls, *The Damascus Rule* (CD), II, unveils that the Heavenly Watchers fell because of the stubbornness of their heart, “and their sons also fell who were tall as cedar trees and whose bodies were like mountains“¹⁰. Although these texts have as a narrative background the Biblical myth of the fallen angels, included in *Genesis*, 6, 1-4, they present the rebellious angels with a new identity, as compared to the text of the Old Testament.

From a broad hermeneutical perspective, the Romanian folklore tradition of the celestial custom houses is equally enclosed in the history of the transmission of the Biblical Apocrypha, and in the history of the transmission of the Gnostic literature, which includes, in its turn, an important Biblical vein, reinvested with a new treasure of religious meanings, built through multiple ways of approaching the ancient text of the Hebrew *Torah*, according to different narrative, exegetical and theological principles, which ultimately concretized in the immense variety of the Gnostic sacred texts. In this respect, along the unknown chain loops of the historical time and textual history, a Biblical (Apocryphal-Pseudepigraphal) – Gnostic – Balkanic channel can be thrown into relief concerning the elaboration and transmission of the doctrine about the heavenly custom houses. The occurrence of the theme in the teachings attributed to Amma Theodora, to Saint Basil the New (ca. 10th century CE), and to his disciple Gregory¹¹ must be rather investigated as a christianization of a pre-Christian, non-Christian or heretical-Christian doctrine and system of imaginary representations of the intermediary heavens, the divine realm, and the universe of life after death. The narrative fragments anthologized by Olinescu and Marian do not mention the redemption of the soul through Jesus-Christ, the Son of God, but describe instead an economy of salvation alien to the redemptive work accomplished by the Christian Anointed One. In the frame of the individual eschatology of the human being confronted with the traumatic and

⁷ Ca. 2nd century BCE – 1st century CE.

⁸ Ca. 1st century CE.

⁹ Cf. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. II, pp. 163-281, 425-469.

¹⁰ Cf. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 84.

¹¹ Cf. *The Life of Saint Basil the New*.

irreversible event of death, the description of the passage of the soul through the heavenly customs reveals itself as a *gnosis*, as a knowledge endowed with the attributes of salvation.

The Gnostic hypothesis allows the exegetical insertion of the Romanian folklore scenario concerning the transit of the soul through the heavenly customs in the vast textual landscape of the Gnostic writings that describe the trajectory covered by the souls of the departed ones, beyond the thanatic threshold, towards the “treasure of light“ or “the realm of light“. The simplification or reduction to essentiality of the archaic Gnostic scheme, as well as the substitution of the ample orchestrations about Aeons and Archons by more rudimentary versions, imposed by the dimensions of the rural milieu, should be explained by the long chain of the textual and oral transmission, the links of which are overwhelmingly lost or unknown. Nevertheless, this very chain, which makes the object of a complex and difficult reconstitution, supposedly accomplished the transmission of the Gnostic wisdom between the North-African and Mediterranean communities of the Hellenistic period and the peasants’ communities of the Romanian Medium Ages. This linguistic labyrinth constituted of countless textual and oral versions, transmitted along countless textual and oral channels, and across a succession of historical levels and geographical spaces, reveals itself as a polyphonic register revolving around the hazard of the translations from the Greek, Latin or Coptic of the original versions into the vernacular languages of the Balkanic, Eastern-European or Central-European territory. On the other hand, the simple and essential structure of the Balkanic and Eastern-European folklore tradition about the heavenly customs was determined by the exigencies of the Christian monotheism, which imposed the reduction of the divine sphere as depicted in the Gnostic texts, to the trialectics of unity of the Christian God. Beyond the succession of the historical periods and the superposition of the religious spaces, the similarities or rather the mysterious continuity of the themes concerning the *post-mortem* destiny of the human soul in the writings included in the Nag Hammadi Library and the folklore traditions anthologized by Olinescu and Marian is striking.

First things first... The understanding of the ascensional way of the soul, according to the Gnostic systems of thought, is determined by the understanding of the overall representation of the divine sphere and of the details of the complex process of divine emanation, which preceded the creation of the intermediary heavens, governed by the Archons after the primordial sin. The Gnostic cosmology was reconstructed, as an ideal model for study, by Herbert Leisegang and Kurt Rudolph, according to the so-called “diagram of the Ophites“¹², a Christian-

¹² Cf. Greek *ophis*, “snake”.

Gnostic community from the 2nd – 6th centuries CE. The diagram of the Ophites, preserved by Origen (*ca.* 185-252 / 254) in *Contra Celsum*, VI, 25-38 consists of a geocentric vision of the universe: Earth-*Tartarus*, the earthly world and the underworld, stand at the centre of this system of concentric spheres; the terrestrial nucleus is surrounded by the sphere called *Behemoth*, named after the primordial monster of the extra-Biblical Hebrew tradition¹³, the supra-terrestrial space of the atmosphere; the seven concentric planetary spheres follow in order (Moon, Venus, Mercury, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn), and the eighth heaven or *ogdoad*, the heaven of the fixed stars, containing the signs of the zodiac; in the diagram of the Ophites the sphere of Saturn is separated from the heaven of the fixed stars by the Leviathan's circle, "the snake biting its own tail" or *ouroboros*, a negative master of the world the tyrannical presence of which is generating the intrinsic evil of the whole universe; the Leviathan's circle and the heaven of the fixed stars delimit the realm of evil and darkness from the realm of good and light; in the heaven of the fixed stars, the Paradise is represented in the shape of a rectangle containing in its middle the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and having its sides defended by "the flaming sword"¹⁴; on the upper level, the intermediary realm, governed by the spirit and the soul, is represented by the blue sphere of darkness (the limit of the visible *kosmos*) and by the yellow sphere of light; a small "circle of life", situated above Paradise, symbolizes the kingdom of Sophia, wherefrom the embryo of life or the divine soul descends in the human body; "the Kingdom of God", constituted of spirit, *pneuma*, is represented as the sphere of the Son and the sphere of the Father, while a small "circle of love", situated above the "circle of life", indicates the celestial place which attracts the Son downwards, towards the terrestrial sphere inhabited by the human family that fell into sinfulness, in order to accomplish the redemption. In other Gnostic systems a distinction is made between the Good God, unknown or estranged, and the Evil God or *Demiurgos*, the creator of the world¹⁵. The "Kingdom of God" is usually referred to as "the Kingdom of the Unknown God" or the *Pleroma*, "wholeness" or "plenitude" of the divine sphere, constituted out of the hierarchy of the Aeons¹⁶. In the Gnostic context¹⁷, the ensemble of the planetary spheres constitute *heimarmene* or "fate", the intermediary world between the terrestrial sphere and the hierarchy of the Aeons, and this "kingdom of the seven" or *hebdomas* is described as a space inhabited by anti-divine and anti-human powers,

¹³ Cf. *IV Ezdra*, 6, 49.

¹⁴ Cf. *Genesis*, 3, 24.

¹⁵ The School of Marcion, 2nd century CE.

¹⁶ The School of Valentine, 2nd century CE.

¹⁷ Cf. *Pistis Sophia*.

by demons, gods and maleficent spirits, named “Archons” or “leaders”. In the Archons is embodied the tyrannical evilness of the Leviathan’s circle, represented in the diagram of the Ophites. Each planetary sphere is governed by an Archon, and the leader of the Archons or “the Archon of this world” is identified with the Evil Demiurge, who has his throne in the seventh heaven (Saturn) or in the eighth heaven (the heaven of the fixed stars). As a border-space, *ogdoas* or the heaven of the fixed stars is represented in different ways in the Gnostic texts, either as a part of the realm of light, or as a part of the realm of darkness. One of the texts discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library, entitled *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* (102, 5), states that “he (the Father) created a great aeon, whose name is Ogdoad, for his own majesty”¹⁸.

The tradition of the nine heavens is strongly evidenced in the spiritual space of the Romanian folklore. Tudor Pamfile anthologized testimonies about the “seven heavens” or “nine heavens”, in the context of the “opening of the sky” during Christmas Eve and Epiphany: “In some other regions people say there are nine heavens. In the first heaven is the Saint Sun, the Saint Moon, Saint Elijah. Afterwards there are other eight heavens where the saints stay in ranks, in an order established by God, and God sits above them all. (...) When the Mother of God met Jesus Christ, after the Resurrection, saddened as she was because of all the roads she had to walk in search of Him, she spoke to Him outloud: Oh, my son, I gave you permission to ascend from the first heaven to the second heaven, and from the second heaven to the ninth heaven, and You came downwards!”¹⁹ Likewise Marcel Olinescu mentions a christianized vision, of a Gnostic origin, of the nine heavens, in the context of a geocentric model of the universe, purged of the presence of evil and the Gnostic negativity: “There are nine heavens, placed one above the other, and all are made entirely out of precious stones. God sits in the ninth heaven, together with Saint Nicolai, whom He asks for advice concerning the businesses of the world. And the Saint Trinity resides there, too. In the first heaven abide the Saint Sun, the Saint Moon and Saint Elijah. In the other heavens abide the saints, according to their ranks. In the ninth heaven is located a great light, and square meals can be seen when the skies are opened, because the Paradise is there.”²⁰ In the edition of Tony Brill is included an interesting narrative about the creation of the nine heavens which has as a background the conflict between good and evil: “Afterwards God did not suffer the earth to remain like that, because He loved it a

¹⁸ Cf. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, pp. 67-70; Herbert Leisegang, *La Gnose*, pp. 168-173; H. Chadwick, *Origen Contra Celsum*, pp. 337-345; *Nag Hammadi Codex*, III, 4, Robinson, p. 229.

¹⁹ Cf. Tudor Pamfile, *Cerul și podoabele lui. După credințele poporului român*, pp. 7-11.

²⁰ Cf. Olinescu, *Mitologie*, pp. 66-67.

lot, and this is the reason why He continued to embellish it. He created as many stars in the skies, as many souls live on earth. When a star falls, you must know that a man just died. And a lot later, when He saw that the world turned evil beyond limits, and when He saw that He cannot grant access to the evil ones in His realm in that state, and in the same time He could not bare to abandon them to Satan, because He was at strife with him, He thought about making nine heavens and nine earths, until the evil ones shall be utterly cleansed of sin, and ready to go into the Kingdom of God²¹.

In *The Enneades*, in the treatise entitled *Against those who affirm that the Demiurge of the world is evil, and that the world is evil (the Gnostics)*, Plotinus (ca. 205-270 CE) rejects the Gnostic teachings, but offers, together with his refutation, a precious presentation of the doctrine about the divine emanation. He enunciates the stages of the process which enables the “steps“ of the creation to descend from “the first ineffable principle“ to “the sensible world“: the first ineffable principle generates the intelligible realities; the last of the intelligible realities descends into matter; out of the amalgamation of the last intelligible reality and matter results the Demiurge, who creates the sensible world. The spiritual germs exiled into the world endure a series of trials, and afterwards they ascend to their celestial origin, while the sensible world is doomed to destruction, to its return into non-being²².

The “theogony“ of the Aeons, of the *Pleroma*, was at the centre of the Gnostic doctrine preached by Valentine in the 2nd century CE, and the descendent “steps“ of the divine sphere and of the celestial-terrestrial universe follow an almost identical scheme, even if amply orchestrated within the Gnostic theological perspective, with the scenario of emanation refuted by Plotinus. This system of thought, as it was reconstituted on the basis of the testimonies preserved in the writings of the Christian heresyologists from the Patristic period²³, states that the *Pleroma* originates in *Propator*, who reigned initially, in eternity, in the state of absolute motionlessness, over the nothingness constituted of *Bythos*, “abyss“, and *Sige*, “silence“. The harmony of the consummate infinity of the Divine Unity is nevertheless perturbed by the discontinuity of “love“, *Agape*, which moves the *Propator* to bring into being the first couple of Aeons or the first *syzygy*: *Nous*, “spirit“ or “intelligence“, and *Aletheia*, “truth“. Out of the first *syzygy* emanates the second *syzygy*, constituted of *Zoe*, “life“, and *Logos*, “verb“, which generates, in its turn, other ten Aeons. Out of the second *syzygy* emanates the third *syzygy*,

²¹ Cf. Tony Brill, *Legendele românilor*, vol. I, *Legendele cosmosului*, p. 133.

²² Cf. Plotinus, *The Enneades*, II, 9.

²³ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, I, 1-8, 11-12, 13-21; Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, VI, 29-36; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 31, 5-8 and 35, 4, 35-36

constituted of *Ekklesia*, “church“, and *Anthropos*, “man“, which generates, in its turn, other twelve Aeons. *Sophia*, “wisdom“, is the last of the Aeons and is animated by an unrestrained motion. The divine hierarchy which originates in *Propator*, down to the level of *Sophia*, constitutes the *Pleroma*, the sum of thirty Aeons, the limit of which is named *horos*, a sort of celestial diaphragm. The entire *Pleroma* brings into being the couple of *Christos* and *Pneuma*. Animated by the four passions that represent the substance of the universe – fear, sadness, anxiety, prayer – , *Sophia* falls from her celestial place and transgresses downwards the limit of the *Pleroma*. The first three passions beget the psychic substance, the material substance and the substance of the demons, while the prayer brings into being the Demiurge, the creator of the terrestrial *kosmos* represented in the diagram of the Ophites²⁴. With the purpose of accomplishing the universal redemption, *Christos* descends in the terrestrial *kosmos*, in order to find *Sophia* and to bring her back in her celestial abode, within the *Pleroma*. The individual redemption of the human souls has as its premises the general effort towards salvation preexistent in the “nature“ of the *Pleroma*, the guidance of the redeemer and the possession of the redemptive knowledge or *gnosis*, but is realized effectively through the transformation of the redemptive knowledge into redemptive action and through the individual salvation effort, which has as a result the ascension of the soul from the terrestrial *kosmos*, across the intermediary heavens, to the Paradise located in the Ogdoad or to the ninth heaven. In the heretical Christian-Gnostic systems, as were those expressed in the sacred scriptures of the valentinian and ophite communities, Jesus Christ occupies the central position in the theocratic process concerning the redemption of the human souls. He is the Chosen One who preaches the redemptive *gnosis* to the disciples and to the members of the Adamic family. In the non-Christian Gnostic systems, as the one rejected by Plotinus, the central position is occupied by the appropriation of the redemptive *gnosis* and the ascendent trajectory of the soul through the intermediary heavens.

Therefore essential in all the Gnostic scenarios concerning the individual redemption is the ascensional trajectory of the human soul across the seven or eight intermediary heavens governed or guarded by the Archons, the demons and the maleficent powers. Correspondingly, the post-mortem scenario regarding the passage of the soul through the heaven’s custom houses, as it is expressed in the narrative fragments anthologized by Olinescu and Marian, is situated in a direct ideological filiation with the archaic Gnostic doctrine about the passage of the soul across the heavens ruled by the Archons. In this respect, the flourishing period of the Bogomilism southwards of the Danube constitutes an intermediary link between the Hellenistic *gnosis* and the cosmogonical-cosmological traditions

²⁴ Cf. Saran Alexandrian, *Histoire de la philosophie occulte*; Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 317-322.

incorporated in the Romanian folklore and in the folklore of the Balkans. After the Bulgarian climax of the 10th – 12th centuries²⁵ and after the bloody Byzantine persecutions²⁶, the Bogomil Church endured in Serbia and Bosnia until the 15th century, when the majority of its members converted to Islam. Consequently, it would have been impossible for the Bogomil-Gnostic ideas not to penetrate the Romanian religious space of the Middle Ages, either in a written or in an oral form, through the hawking of the books indited in Old Slavonic, or through oral transmission among the peasants' communities²⁷. Nicolae Cartoian described the events that put a mark on the history of Bogomilism in the Byzantine Empire, in Serbia, Bosnia and Bulgaria, as well as the emigration of the descendants of the Bogomils in the Romanian territories: "It is probable that the 17th century Bulgarian Pavlichians, who searched for refuge northwards of the Danube in order to escape from persecutions, did follow in the footsteps of their forefathers the Bogomils. In the same way, the Bogomils themselves might have come in search of their own salvation to our parts, during the times of great ire which they experienced under the kings Stefan Nemanja, Boril and Alexander, in the 12th – 14th centuries. Our safe havens were able to offer in that age not only refuge, but also a favourable ground for propaganda, so much so as the ecclesiastical structures were not yet powerful enough in order to oppose resistance. The remains of the Bogomil Church survive in the Hungarian parts until the 15th century, when they are overwhelmed by the trends aiming at the Reformation."²⁸

The cosmic Christianity characteristic to the region of the Balkans was expressed with predilection in the spiritual structures of a folklore *gnosis*, which

²⁵ Cf. Nicolae Cartoian, *Cărțile populare în literatura românească*, vol. I, *Epoca influenței sud-slave*, p. 46: "The Bogomils of Bulgaria met with a more fortunate fate. Here their position was buttressed by the masses of the people, to whom they appeared as liberators, because we can see them fighting on the same side with the invading troops of the Petchenegs and Cumanians, against the Byzantine armies, for the liberation of Bulgaria. Tolerated under the Asanests, they converted to their heresy almost the entire czardom. Persecuted later by the czars Boril (1121) and Alexander (1350), they managed to maintain their foothold in Bulgaria for a long period of time, enjoying under the Turkish rule a complete freedom of the cult."

²⁶ Cf. Nicolae Cartoian, *Cărțile populare în literatura românească*, I, p. 46: "In the Balkanic Peninsula, the heresy developed until the 12th century, when the Eastern Orthodox Church started to fight it openly. In the year 1111, the emperor Alexios the Comnen initiated the eradication of Bogomilism in the Byzantine Empire, burning at the stake, in the hippodrome of Constantinople, the leader of the sect, the physician Basil and his twelve apostles".

²⁷ Cf. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 374-375; Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. III, pp. 190-193; Eliade, *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han*, pp. 87-135.

²⁸ Cf. Cartoian, *Cărțile populare*, I, p. 48.

has its origins in Hellenistic Gnosticism. The cosmogonical legends and myths having as protagonists God and Satanael²⁹, as well as the tradition of the nine heavens, configure an import of Gnostic-Bogomil ideology in the spiritual space of the Romanian folklore. The appearance of Saint Peter, at the end of the Paradise's footbridge³⁰, does not invalidate the Gnostic hypothesis, as long as the apostles are frequently mentioned in the Christian-Gnostic writings, a fact which is proved by the texts included in the Nag Hammadi Library. For about a millennium or a millennium and a half, through the unknown alchemy of the textual and oral transmission, the initial amplitude of the Gnostic teachings was simplified, reduced to the essential feature of the ascensional movement determined by the appropriation of the redemptive *gnosis* and threatened by the dangers of punishment or damnation. In its turn, the damnation of the sinful souls is not the result of a direct theocratical intervention, but rather the almost fatalistic consequence of the hidden mechanics of the justice which is immanent to the making of the intermediary heavens, overruled by the power of the demons of the air. In the predominantly Christian and rural religious space of the Balkans, the Pleroma was removed, together with its quasi-mythological complex details. In its stead, the Christian Trinity was not always enthroned. According to the initial Gnostic spiritual dynamics, the narrative space of the folklore rather preserved the nebulous and remote presence of God the Father, an image close to "the Unknown God", *Propator* or "the Father of the All", as it was expressed in the ancient Gnostic systems of thought³¹. In the Coptic writings included in the Nag Hammadi Library, like *The Blessed Eugnostos* (74, 20 – 75, 10) and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* (98, 20 – 99, 15), the God of the universe is called "the beginningless Forefather"³².

"The Archons", "the door keepers" and "the tax collectors" who guard the passage through the "barriers" of the intermediary heavens described in the Gnostic texts unveil themselves as "the demons of the air" and "the devils – custom-house officers" mentioned in the Romanian folklore traditions anthologized by Olinescu and Marian. In *Contra Celsum* (VI, 30; VII, 40), Celsus³³, the polemical collocutor of Origen, turns into derision the Ophites, who were learning by heart secret names and magical incantations, in order to address themselves to the "illustrious door keepers", during the ascension of the soul through the demonized planetary

²⁹ Cf. Brill, *Legendele românilor*, vol. I, *Legendele cosmosului*, pp. 13-18, 23-27.

³⁰ Cf. Olinescu, *Mitologie*, p. 367.

³¹ Cf. *The Apocryphon of John*, Berlin Codex, Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 22, 19 – 26, 2, Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 63-64; *Nag Hammadi Codex*, Robinson, pp. 104-123.

³² Cf. *Nag Hammadi Codex*, III, 3 and III, 4, Robinson, p. 227.

³³ 2nd century CE.

spheres. The soul passes over the “barrier of evil“ or the firmament, and afterwards has to cross “the eternally chained gates of the Archons“ and has to acquire, in exchange of mysterious formulae and entreaties, the favour and benevolence of each of the guardians of the planetary stations. After death, the soul is surrounded by seven Archons, who exercise their maleficent powers on his behalf, and by seven “angels of light“ as well, who come to his rescue. This concomitance of the demonic presence and the angelic presence is also preserved in the folklore versions recorded by Olinescu and Marian. For example, Origen quotes the propitiatory words, that the soul has to address to Astaphaeus, the Archon who is guarding the sphere of Venus: “Astaphaeus, lord of the third gate, overseer of the primeval source of water, look upon one initiate who has been purified by the spirit of a virgin (*Sophia*), let me pass, thou who dost behold the world’s essence. May grace be with me, father, let it be with me!“³⁴

Codex Askewianus contains two treatises drawn up in Coptic, known under the title *Pistis Sophia* or “Faith Wisdom“³⁵. In the contents of these writings, composed in the style of the Gnostic Gospels, Jesus recounts to His disciples, gathered on the Mount of Olives or on the ocean’s shore, His journey across the worlds of the Aeons and Archons, the power of whom He vanquished. Jesus encounters Pistis Sophia, “alone and grieved“, under the thirteenth Aeon, and narrates the adventures and lamentations of this being, who fell from the celestial rank of the thirteenth heaven into the realm of matter, in concordance with the valentinian scheme. Through His redemptive action, Jesus restores the celestial harmony and elevates Pistis Sophia to her place of origin. The celestial space is governed by the theocratical order of “God Who cannot be named“. Beneath Him is situated “the treasure of light“, inhabited by twelve saviours and nine guardians, and “the place of the righteous“, inhabited by the six “great princes“: Jeu, “the guardian of the great light“; Melkitsedek; “the great and good Sabaoth“, guardian of “the gate of life“, accompanied by the two “great leaders“, who deliver the souls of the sufferings endured under the sway of the Archons; the intermediary place of “the gate of life“ is ruled by “the great and good Iao“, surrounded by “little Iao, the good“, “little Sabaoth, the good“ and the angels. The divine justice is accomplished by “the Virgin of light“, who judges the souls and decides their eternal damnation or eternal happiness. She verifies if the souls received “the mysteries of light“ and “the seals of baptism“: those who received the initiation are sealed, while those who committed a crime are expelled in the exterior darkness, where they are destroyed. Beneath “the treasure of light“ lies “the place of the left side“, which encompasses the *kerasmos* or “the world of sunset“, ruled by “the great and unseen

³⁴ Cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 27, Rudolph Chadwick, *Gnosis*, pp. 172-173.

³⁵ Ca. 250-300 CE the 1st Book of the work; ca. 300-350 CE the 2nd Book.

Propator“, accompanied by Barbelo and “those thrice strong“. The twelve Aeons follow, where matter is gradually amalgamated with light, together with the sphere *heimarmene*, which separates the twelve Aeons from the terrestrial world. It is this sphere which has two gates, leading the souls in the world or out of the world, “the gate of men“ and “the gate of gods“, also named “the gates of the Sun“, because they are situated at the poles of the Sun. Through the words addressed to the disciples, Jesus inspires them and illuminates “the man of light“ abiding in each and every of them. In the second treatise, Jesus, also called Aberamentho, describes “the Archons of destiny“ in front of the apostolic community and the terrible punishments applied by them to the human souls. In order to appease the fears of His audience, Jesus celebrates the mysteries empowered to work purification from sin, but the manuscript, partially damaged, contains only the first mystery, “the baptism with water“. The revelation continues and is concluded by an exposition on the fate that confronts the soul of the sinful man, after death. The second Book included in Codex Askewianus contains a prayer addressed by Jesus to “the Father of the treasure of light“, on behalf of His disciples: “Thou Father of all Fatherhood of the Infinite, hearken unto Me for My disciples‘ sake; whom I have brought before Thee, that they may believe on all the words of thy truth, and grant all whereof I cry to Thee, for I know the name of the Father of the treasure of light.“³⁶

The ordeals of the soul during his ascensional journey are equally mentioned in the two *Books of Jeu*, which belong to a later phase of Gnosticism³⁷. The stations of the Pleroma, called “marks“ and “seals“ of the upper “treasures“, are described in detail and depicted in drawings and diagrams. Jesus imparts to His disciples the instructions of the ascension through the intermediary heavens and exhorts them to seal their souls with the power of the magical names and numbers: “When you come forth from the body and reach the first Aeon and the Archons of that Aeon appear before you, seal yourselves with this seal: the name *Zozeze*. Say it but once. Seize this number: 1119, with your two hands.“ Other secret names to be uttered are *protethpersomphon chus* and *eaza zeozaz zozeoz*. When the Archons of the first Aeon hear these names, they will be frightened, they will withdraw westwards, towards the left side, and the soul will be able to reach untroubled the second heaven: “(...) that ye may complete it and be delivered before the Archon of this Aeon and his snares, which have no end. But you are my disciples, make haste to receive my word carefully to yourselves, that ye may know it, that the Archon of this Aeon may not strive with you (...)“. The same scenario is reenacted at every step of the ascension, up to the eleventh Aeon, other names and magical

³⁶ Cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. I, *Gospels and Related Writings*, Schneemelcher and Mc. Wilson, pp. 361-369; Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, chapter 12.

³⁷ Cf. Codex Brucianus, dated ca. 3rd – 10th centuries CE.

invocations being uttered for each segment of the passage. Beyond the threshold of the twelfth Aeon, the soul enters the Pleroma, constituted of “the great unseen God“, “the great immaculate Spirit“, and the twenty-four “unseen“ and “unbegotten“ gods, in front of whom he also has to declare name, seal and number. Over the threshold of the fourteenth Aeon, the realm of holiness begins, and the access of the soul is granted only through “the mystery of the forgiveness of sins“³⁸. This passage, which is mediated by the knowledge and the pronounciation of the magical names and numbers, has as a correspondent within the spiritual space of the Romanian folklore the meeting of the soul with “the dog“, “the cat“ and “the man“ on the Paradise’s footbridge, which stands as the last and the most severe of the heaven’s custom houses: “The cat dashes at the soul, in order to tempt him with the earthly temptations, but the faithful dog dashes at the cat and drives away the temptation. Then a man shows up, and if the soul has a farthing tied to his finger, he gives it to the man and escapes, so that he may cross the footbridge and reach the gate of Paradise (...)“³⁹. In the economy of the Gnostic salvation, the gesture consisting in the giving away of the “farthing“ plays an identical part with the pronounciation of the magical names and numbers, with the appropriation of the *gnosis* of the seals. The “coin“ which was given to the “man“, “the coins“ and “the knot-shaped breads“ which have to be given to the custom-house officers, represent the ritual elements deemed to remove the successive barriers thwarting the passage of the soul through the intermediary heavens and his entrance into the paradisiacal realm, where the soul will be immersed in the limitless space inhabited by the freedom of salvation.

The Nag Hammadi Library configures the same background of the Gnostic redemption, of the individual eschatology. *The Gospel of Truth* (34, 35 – 35, 5) unveils valentinian textual affinities in the following statement: “This is the word of the Gospel of the discovery of the Pleroma, for those who await the salvation which is coming from on high.“⁴⁰ In the *Apocryphon of James* (8, 30-35), Jesus addresses a number of exhortations to the apostles, especially to James: “And many times have I said to you all together, and also to you alone, James, have I said, ‘Be saved!’ And I have commanded you to follow Me, and I have taught you what to say before the archons.“ After the departure of Jesus, James and Peter advance on the ascensional way, go over the first two heavens, but they return in the middle of the community constituted of apostles and disciples⁴¹. In *The First Apocalypse of*

³⁸ Cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. I, *Gospels and Related Writings*, Schneemelcher and McL. Wilson, pp. 370-373; Rudolph, *Gnosis*, p. 173.

³⁹ Cf. Olinescu, *Mitologie*, p. 367; Marian, *Înmormântarea*, p. 290.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Nag Hammadi Codex*, I, 3 and XII, 2, Robinson, p. 47.

⁴¹ Cf. *Nag Hammadi Codex*, I, 2, Robinson, p. 33, p. 36.

James (25, 25 – 28, 15), Jesus reveals to James the mystery of the “twelve hebdomads“, of the “seventy-two heavens“ ruled by the authority of the “twelve Archons“. The power situated on the lowest hierarchical position engenders the angels and countless celestial hosts, and the unknown and far off God is named “the-One-who-is“, according to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* or “I am that I am“ in *Exodus* 3, 14. James is exhorted to reach “the-One-who-is“, to soar high through *gnosis* or redemptive knowledge, beyond the intermediary heavens, in order to annihilate his identity and his self in “the-One-who-is“ through the sufferings of martyrdom and *unio mystica*, in spite of the fact that he is afraid of the powers and the hosts of the Archons, who are heavily armed: “And you will no longer be James; rather you are the-One-who-is.“ Even if the redemption of James is meant to be perfect, because Jesus vanquished the armies of the Archons and opened the celestial way towards “the-One-who-is“, James himself has to pass through the calvary of the confrontation with the Archons and to utter the right ritual answers at the crossing over each heavenly threshold: “James, behold, I shall reveal to you your redemption. When you are seized, and you undergo these sufferings, a multitude will arm themselves against you that they may seize you. And in particular three of them will seize you – they who sit there as toll collectors. Not only do they demand toll, but they also take away souls by theft. When you come into their power, one of them who is their guard will say to you, ‘Who are you or where are you from?’ You are to say to him, ‘I am a son, and I am from the Father.’ He will say to you, ‘What sort of son are you, and to what father do you belong?’ You are to say to him, ‘I am from the Pre-existent Father, and a son in the Pre-existent One.’ (...) When he also says to you, ‘Where will you go?’, you are to say to him, ‘To the place from which I have come, there shall I return.’ And if you say these things, you will escape their attacks. (...) But you will go up to what is yours.“ The text also mentions the passage “through the breath of this Archon who is named Adonaios“⁴². *The Second Apocalypse of James* (55, 5-15; 56, 20) describes “the Just One“ as the guide of the Gnostics‘ souls during their passage through the “door“ of the heavenly realm: “And those who wish to enter, and who seek to walk in the way that is before the door, open the good door through you. And they follow you; they enter and you escort them inside, and give a reward to each one who is ready for it. (...) Behold, I shall reveal to you those things that that neither the heavens nor their Archons have known.“⁴³ *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (56, 15 – 63, 15), a hermetical treatise composed ca. 2nd century CE, in Egypt, within the religious area of the temple dedicated to Hermes Trismegistus at

⁴² Cf. *The First Apocalypse of James*, 30, 5 – 31, 15-30 and 32, 25 – 39, 15; *Nag Hammadi Codex*, V, 3, Robinson, pp. 262-267.

⁴³ Cf. *Nag Hammadi Codex*, V, 4, Robinson, pp. 273-274.

Diospolis, refers to the journey accomplished by the mystagogue and the initiate in the Ogdoad and the ninth heaven, as well as the mystical union between the ascensional wayfarers and the universal Mind or “the unseen God“, invoked by the magical names Zoxathazo and Zozazoth: “Lord, grant us a wisdom from your power that reaches us, so that we may describe to ourselves the vision of the eighth and the ninth. We have already advanced to the seventh, since we are pious and walk in your law. (...) I am Mind and I see another Mind, the one that moves the soul! (...) I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning. I see a fountain bubbling with life. (...) For the entire eighth, my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. (...) I call you father, Aeon of the Aeons, great divine spirit. (...) Father Trismegistus! What shall I say? We have received this light. And I myself see this same vision in you. And I see the eighth and the souls that are in it and the angels singing a hymn to the ninth and its powers. And I see him who has the power of them all, creating those who are in the spirit. (...) Rather, by stages he advances and enters into the way of immortality. And thus he enters into the understanding of the eighth that reveals the ninth.”⁴⁴

The trajectory covered by the soul after death constitutes a common element of the Gnostic texts and the folklore texts about the heaven’s custom houses. The ample vision of the Gnostic theogony and cosmogony, the representation of the universe, of the nine heavens, the traumas and the beatitudes of the ascension which unfold against the background of a complex theology of redemption and damnation, of the confrontation between good and evil, make whole the rustic simplicity of the *rohatcas* and *zaplazs* built along the heavenly way leading from the earth to the gate of Paradise. The folklore imaginary of the heaven’s custom houses has its origin in the Gnostic imaginary of the Aeons and Archons, of the passage of the initiates through the planetary spheres and the intermediary heavens. In the region of the Balkans, to recognize nowadays the fragments detached out of the labyrinthical wealth of these archaic teachings in the texture of the popular narratives is tantamount to identifying the stones taken from the ruins of the cities of late antiquity and incorporated in the structures of the rural houses’ walls. The hazard of the predominantly unknown chains of the transmission of this redemptive *gnosis*, along two milleniums, is compensated only by the vitality and persistence of the beliefs and rituals that mediate the passage of the soul from the world of the seen into the world of the unseen. Because the soul will get hell if he did not learn the magical names, numbers and fomulae, or if he does not carry in his hands the coins, the candles and the knot-shaped breads which are meant to enable him to reach safely at the other end of the Paradise’s footbridge, in the ninth heaven...

⁴⁴ Cf. *Nag Hammadi Codex*, VI, 6, Robinson, pp. 324-326.

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