

## Mythologia Fulgurales: On the History of Lightning in Mythology and Christianity

“The phenomena associated with thunder storms are interpreted in the Bible as follows: *fulgur*, in so far as lightning flashes; *fulgor*, a longer lasting brilliance; *fulgetum* or *cruscatio*, repeated forked and sheet lightning; *fulmen*, the flash that strikes – the lightning bolt.”<sup>1</sup>

### I.

The atmospheric phenomena of thunder and lightning are primary elements in the mythological cosmos of all peoples. Its fiery appearance made lightning an ambiguous metaphor: lightning was regarded as procreative, like the rays of the sun, but also as destructive, like the flames of fire. As the image of a fiery erection descending from the heavens, lightning stood for virility; thus, its appearance was associated with fertility and food. On the other hand, lightning was viewed as a tool of destruction in the hands of gods of storm and thunder. The metaphors for lightning very quickly become independent and part of a widely branching system of symbols. In addition to the zigzag and trident, the axe, hammer, thunderbolt, diamond, sword, arrow, and lance are regarded as iconic representations of lightning.<sup>2</sup> Serpent, dragon, and bird of prey are ancient mythological symbols of lightning throughout the entire Eurasian region. The cosmic image of the storm dragon encompasses the widespread serpent motif in Greek mythology, the dragon as guardian of treasure, Leviathan, and, in the biblical references to the serpent, the Devil.<sup>3</sup>

Many peoples believed that lightning falls to the ground in the form of stones or sulphur to punish humankind. Yahweh, too, pours sulphur onto the Earth

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1 *Vollständiges Gebetbuch des Christen zum Gebrauche beim Gewitter mit der besonderen Andacht zu Ehren des heil. Donatus, des Schutzpatrons gegen Blitz und Ungewitter* [Christian Prayer-book for Use during Storms with Special Prayer to St. Donatus, the Patron who Protects from Lightning and Storms], (Neuß, 1895), p. 6.

2 J.C. Cooper, *Illustriertes Lexikon der traditionellen Symbole* (Leipzig, 1986), p. 26.

3 On the rich symbolism of lightning, see particularly W. Schwartz, *Die poetischen Naturanschauungen* (Berlin, 1879); H. Bächtold-Stäubli, ed., *Handlexikon des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin, 2000).