

– 228 DESCRIPTIONS –
Germany, Austria, Alpine regions,
Switzerland, Netherlands, Flanders,
Luxembourg, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia,
Finland, Jewish influences

SPIRIT BEINGS

IN EUROPEAN FOLKLORE 2



COMPILED & EDITED BY
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A

Aitvaras

The *Aitvaras* or *Aitvars* is a *nature-spirit* in Baltic, especially Lithuanian, folklore and mythology. In Latvian mythology *Aitvaras* corresponds to *Puke* or *Pūķis*. In Slavic mythology in general he is akin to the *Fire Snake*. According to one version, the word *Aitvaras* came from the Lithuanian *aiti* (tramp, twirler, tomboy) and *varas* (very fast movement). According to another version, the name is connected to the word *aitauti* (calm, quiet), but this version is less common. The etymology may also be related to the Iranian *pativāra*, like the Polish *Poczwara* (monster). Other names include *Atvaras*, *Altviksas*, *Damavykas*, *Damavikas*, *Gausinelis*, *Pisuhand*, *Sparųžius*, *Tulihand*, *Koklikas*, *Pukis*, *Puuk*, *Spirukas*, *Atvaras*, *Zaltvikšas* and others. Among the Lithuanian population of Ostrovetschina in Belorussia, *Aitvaras* was known as *Skalsininkas*, *Kutas*, *Hutas*, less frequently as *Shkutas*, *Sporizhyus*, *Porizhyus*, *Domovikas*. Before the spread of Christianity, *Aitvaras* was probably an upper-order deity, governing the wealth and relationships of people. The creature lived in the sky or in the forests. In some Lithuanian representations, covered for example in the émigré-newspaper *Renaissance*, *Aitvaras* is “a forest spirit running as a wind through the treetops. If one throws a knife into the whirling whirlwind, one may injure *Aitvaras*”. Legend has it that if you throw a splinter towards *Aitvaras*, a coin will fly back. But one shouldn't abuse the serpent's generosity – it may get offended and stop helping. The creature moves by flying and is mostly fiery, but it can change its appearance.

An *Aitvaras* looks like a white or black rooster with a fiery tail like a meteor and can act as a protective and benevolent home-spirit. An *Aitvaras* is said to emerge from an egg of a 9 to 15-year old rooster, or from the testicle of a black stallion. It can be attracted by egg-rich food, but, according to the general *Aitvaras*-folklore, the creature can be accessed in only two ways:

- either by selling a soul (not necessarily your own) to the Devil,
- or by breeding it yourself. This is believed to be done by keeping a black rooster (or a rooster with a colorful bright tail) in the house for seven years until he lays an egg. The rooster has then to hatch the egg himself. The *Aitvaras* will lodge itself in a house and most often refuse to leave.

He brings grain, milk, honey, gold and other kinds of wealth, which he sometimes steals from the neighbors. If he is angered, he burns down the house.

The creature was first mentioned in 1547 by Martynas Mažvydas. Later sources also compare it with the *Incubus*. In some aspects there is a similarity to the *Alp*. Otherwise, it is compared to the snake or, more frequently, to the dragon – the children’s toy “dragon” is accordingly called *aitvaras* in Lithuanian. In Lithuanian mythology, Aitvaras is a red flying spirit in the form of a fiery serpent, a dragon leaving a trail of fire in the sky. After the rise of Christianity, Aitvaras began to be counted among a class of devils and witches, presenting them as a black crow, heron, black or fiery rooster, very occasionally a cat, walking unnoticed in the daytime and turning into a dangerous dragon at night. There was a popular fable that such a dragon could steal a human soul and send it straight to hell with a wild scream. The Aitvaras is also described as looking like a bird (usually a rooster) when it dwells indoors and looking like a dragon while outdoors. The Lithuanian linguist from France, A. Greimas, notes that the Aitvaras eats eggs, entertains himself by plaiting horses’ manes and sending nightmares to people. It is believed that a mistress in a house where Aitvaras lives will be constantly ill. Getting rid of the creature is possible, but a difficult and very dangerous undertaking. If the Aitvaras becomes a nuisance, he can be driven away or killed. The latter, however, will bring a terrible fire to its murderer’s home. According to church beliefs, Aitvaras can return again even after being banished from the house with holy water. If an Aitvaras dies, it becomes a spark. As a genus of the air and fire beings, the Aitvaras is opposed to the chthonic *Kaukai*, *Kaukuchus* or *Barzdukkas* or *Bezzdukken*. In the 17th century Matthaeus Praetorius described these differences as follows:

“Until our time the Nadravians also call the Kaukuchus the Barzdukkas, whom they accuse of stealing crops and goods of all kinds. They distinguish them from the Aitvars also called Alf especially:

- *by place of residence, because the Barsdukkas lives on the ground, while the Aitvars lives underground;*
- *by appearance: the Barzdukken take human form, while the Aitvars appear in the form of a dragon or a giant serpent whose head is on fire;*
- *by actions: the Bezzdukken do no harm to the people they cling to (and even provide them with goods), while the Aitvars harm them;*

- by food: *The Kaukuchen are provided with milk, beer and other drinks, while the Aitvars must be offered only boiled and roasted foods, novelties and dishes that no one has yet tasted.*

Baltic snake cult

Via its serpent shape the Aitvaras is sometimes associated with the Baltic snake cult. This cult is referred to by Matthew Praetorius, who writes about the *Zaltones*, or Lithuanian snake charmers. The name is derived from the Lithuanian *žaltys* and Latvian *zalktis* (grass snake). Among the Baltic peoples, the veneration of the snake has been attested until modern times. Among the Lithuanians and Latvians, grass snakes were kept as pet snakes and fed with milk. It was considered the protector of livestock and could be equated with the Latvian *Piena māte* (milk mother). In a Lithuanian folk song, the grass snake is called the “emissary of the gods”. A Lithuanian proverb reads: “*The view of a dead Žaltys makes the sun weep*”. They were sometimes used to interpret the future and were also otherwise associated with superstitious practices. Keeping snakes and feeding them with milk is also attested for the Prussians and, according to Simon Grunau, they have been worshiped as an idol of the god *Potrimpos*.

Ajatar

In Finnish folklore, *Ajatar*, (also *Ajattara*, *Aijo*, *Aiätär*, or *Aijotar*) is an evil *forest-spirit* in either the shape of a dragon or a serpent – comparable to *Aitvaras* from Baltic mythology and *Tiamat* from Babylonian mythology – or wild forest-woman. *Ajatar* is possibly derived from the Finnish word *ajattaa* (to pursue or to drive). The feminine suffix *-tar* appears in several Finnish names, including a variation of *Louhi* (*Louhetar*, *Loviatar*, *Louhiatar*) and *Syöjätär* (*syödä* “to eat”, with the feminine suffix of *-tar*, means “devourer, Vampire”). Applying this to *Ajatar*, the verb *ajaa* is suffixed by the feminine *-tar*, translating as “female pursuer.” However, the name may as well have its root in *aika* “time”, from where *ajatar* would be an equally regular derivative.

It is said that *Ajatar* is the mother of the Devil. Through her connections with *Hiisi* and *Lempo*, she is said to spread diseases, pestilence and snakes. Anyone who looks at her becomes sick themselves. She lives in the woods located at the mountains of Pohjola and is described as having a hair-plait reaching to her heels and breasts hanging down to her knees,

similar to the Swedish *Skogsnufva*, Danish *Seawoman*, or the *Wildfraulein* of the Eifel. Ajatar is the granddaughter of Hiisi (master of the woods and spreader of disease) and is the master of Lempo and *Gnomes*. In strong contrast there is another tradition which depicts Ajatara as a beguilingly beautiful female guardian spirit who has the male gods at her feet. She is said to be wrapped in a transparent dress of *Will-o'-the-wisps* and to produce the most enchanting laughter in all of heaven.

Alb or Alp

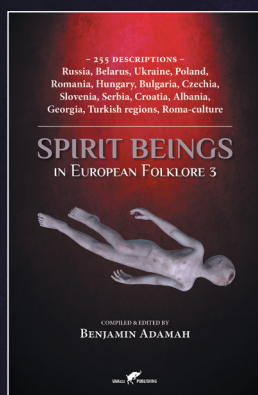
Alb, *Alp* or *Nachtalb* is a more recent name for a mythical (class of) creature(s) originally called *Mahr(t)*, *Mare* or *Moor(t)*, that preys on people at night, draining their energy. It is usually a small, black creature, that attacks sleeping people by sitting on them and pressing down with an increasing weight on their chest or throat, which for the victim is often accompanied by anxiety, difficulty breathing, nightmares or sleeping paralyzes. However, apart from a hairy creature resembling something like a dark ape, the *Mahr* can take any form – from eel or snake to cat, dog, bear, goat, etc. In the latter case it is sometimes called *Bocksmärte* or *Bockhexe* (*bock* meaning: billygoat). It also attacks pets, and sometimes even trees. It enters houses through keyholes or knotholes and it can materialize and dematerialize rather quickly. In some stories, the *Mahr* has a distinctly erotic character. Sexual intercourse between humans and *Mahren* is reported. The peoples of Westfalen and Thüringen believe these entities are much more active and strong, even moonstruck when the moonlight is brighter, though in contrast – and as a unique exception on the rule – the nipple sucking *Schrättele* (its name among the Swabians and Alemanni) is reported to love playing with sunlight that shines on a wall. When the rooster crows for the first time in the courtyard, or the daylight comes back into the house, the *Alb* usually escapes silently, mostly like a fleeing animal: a white mouse, a butterfly, a magpie, or even only like a wisp of smoke. Or it lies as a harmless feather, a broom circle, a straw on the bedspread, still being held convulsively by the redeemed.

After the reformation the word *Mahr* was more and more replaced by *Alb* or *Alp*. This creature was already known for thousands of years and is still known by all Indo-European (and also the Basque) peoples. The ancient inhabitants of India accused the *Gandharven* – who are comparable to our *Elves* – of dancing in the forest, like dogs or monkeys,

and to place themselves like a hairy child in the throat of a sleeping person. The Greeks called the Alp *Ephialtes* (the jumper), the Romans *Inuus* (the squatter) or *Incubus* (the one who lies on top), the Lithuanians *Aitvars*, who has incredibly large hands and feet, the Latvian *Leeton*, who rides horses until they collapse from fear and exhaustion. Their desire to ride horses drives the Alp from Norway to Tyrol into the stables of the horses, like the Leeton, and he hustles them indoors or outdoors to the utmost exhaustion. The next morning they stand there snorting heavily, drenched in sweat, their manes inextricably intertwined. He even sucks the milk out of cows and does not spare goats and pigs – except the pigs of the Lechrain-region, who remain a horror to the creature. And finally, when nothing else is left for the Alp, it even clutches a tree and squeezes it with all its force, probably squeezing itself to death in the process. The tree, possessed by the creature, gets sicker from hour to hour and trembles even in the quietest weather.

Until Luther's time the name Alp belonged only to Central Germany as the name for a creature that causes the so called *Alpdricke* (pressure caused by an Alp), but it was originally applied by all Germanic peoples to a completely different class of mythical beings, the *Elfen* nature demons. The name was therefore probably only transferred to them at the end of the Middle Ages, since these *Alben* or *Elfen* were also able to cause physical discomfort, even pressure and shortness of breath, but by means of thunder and whirlwinds. The older and once pervasive already Old High German and Old Norse name is *Mara*, in contrast to *Ephialtes*, *Incubus*, *Aitvars* and *Leeton* female, as well as the Rhenish Franconian *Mahr*, while the Anglo-Saxon *Mara*, the English Nightmare, the Low German *Moor* is masculine and in Middle High German *Mar*, *Mare*, in Pomeranian *Mahrt*, the gender fluctuates, but in New High German the female predominates. The Dutch have *Nachtmerrie*, the French *Cauchemar* and the *Tretmare* from the Latin *calcare* "tread", the Slavs *Mora* or *Mura*, which are feminine, but the Bohemian *Morous* is masculine to which applies the other Pomeranian name *Murraue*. Despite a phonetic-legal difficulty, the multiform word probably goes back to Old High German *marren*, *hemmen*, *hindern*, and the Old Norse *merja pressen*, meaning "the (female) presser". Similarly, the expressions of the Austrians, Bavarians and some Middle German tribes: the *Trüd*, *Trüde*, *Drüde* points to the Gothic *trudan* (treading), as does the Old High German *truta* (*Trotte*), "press" and *Trutäre* "the jumper". Thus, the

FROM THE SAME SERIES:



Compendium 2 of the *Spirit Beings in European Folklore*-series covers the German-speaking parts of Central Europe, the Low Countries, the Baltic region and Finland. Via the Ashkenazi Jews, spirit beings from the Middle East entered Central European culture, which are also included. This originally densely forested part of the continent is particularly rich in nature-spirits and has a wide variety of beings that dwell in forests and mountainous areas (*Bergegeister*) or act as atmospheric forces. Also dominant are the many field-spirits and variations of *Alp*-like creatures (*Mare*, *Nightmare*). There is an overlap with the Nordic and Eastern European *Revenant* and *Vampire*-types, and we find several water- and sea-spirits. Among the German-speaking and Baltic peoples, invoking field-spirits was an integrated part of agriculture, with rites continuing into the early 20th century. The Alpine regions have spirits who watch over cattle. In general, forest-spirits are prominent. Germany has its *Moosweiblein* and *Wilder Mann* (*Woodwose*), the Baltic region has its *Mātes*, and Finland its *Metsän Väki*. Then there are ghostly animals, and earth- and house-spirits such as the many kinds of *Kobolds*, the Dutch *Kabouters*, and the *Kaukas* of Prussia and Latvia.

Compendium 2 discusses 228 spirit beings in detail, including their alternative names, with additional references to related or subordinate beings and a unique selection of illustrations.

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