



**Andrea Bargan\***

Faculty of Letters and Communication Sciences,  
 Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava,  
 13 Universității Street, 720229 Suceava, Romania  
 e-mail: andreabargan@litere.usv.ro

## THE PROBABLE OLD GERMANIC ORIGIN OF ROMANIAN *iele* ‘(evil) fairies’

### Abstract

*Iele* (or *ielele*, with a definite article) is the name of the “evil fairies” (*zânele rele*) of the Romanian mythology. They are mentioned in old Romanian folktales and legends and they have been a constant source of inspiration for many Romanian writers, who transformed them into literary characters in their works.<sup>1</sup> Also, they have been a controversial subject of many folkloric studies, whose authors have tried to explain the origin and meaning of these supernatural female creatures. The present author aims to discuss the most significant (however divergent) opinions about the Romanian *iele* and to point out similarities with Germanic (and possibly Celtic) traditions, in which special categories of fairies have functions and names that resemble those of the Romanian *iele*. Under such circumstances, the idea of a probable Old Germanic origin of the Romanian term *iele* should not be regarded as out-of-place.

Keywords: divergent etymologies, similarities, Old Germanic material and proof, Celtic material

### 1. Evil fairies of the Romanians

As feminine supernatural beings, more like she-demons than fairies proper, the Romanian *iele* are believed to be organized in groups. Nude or transparently dressed, they sing and dance a peculiar ring-dance, leaving burnt circles in the grass. These are the main aspects mentioned by folklorists (see also below). Although not under the name of *iele*, evil fairies were mentioned as early as the first collection of Romanian folktales, published in German translation by the Schott brothers in 1845 (and translated “back” into Romanian as late as 2003). To the collection proper, the two German folklorists added their own comments on “mysterious beings” of Romanian folklore. Among those beings they mention a *sana*, which is just a German transcription of Romanian *zână* ‘fairy’. But, as the Romanian editor, Viorica Nișcov, observes in a parenthesis (see Schott/Schott 2003: 303), in the passage under discussion the two German intellectuals refer rather to the *iele*, since their *sana* is described as follows (my translation):

The *Sana*, that is *Diana*, rushes through the clouds with a great band of witches and fairies. Many Wallachians swear that they have heard those beings’ festive music come from the sky. Also, they will indicate places where those supernatural creatures have danced [...], the sign of it being withered grass and herbs; the *Sana* has great magical powers: she can turn one lame, deaf, or blind. She is especially powerful during Whitsuntide [Rom. *Rusalii*].

More recently, most significant details about the *iele* and their doings were given in a dictionary of Romanian magic-religious beliefs published by an outstanding Romanian ethnologist,

---

\*Dr **Andrea Bargan** is Lecturer of English and German Studies and Linguistics. Her work focuses mainly on text linguistics and on cultural studies.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Camil Petrescu’s *Jocul ielelelor* (1918).

Ion Taloş (2001: 71). Here is my translation of the most important passages of Taloş's entry entitled *Ielele*:

The *iele* are sometimes confused with the good fairies (*zânele cele bune*) [...]. But, as a rule, they are malicious [...]. People are afraid of them since they are passionately fond of handsome young men; their love affairs with young men eventually make the latter fall ill. [...] The *iele* usually appear in groups of two, three or sometimes more, and they look like girls, like ghosts, or like she-devils. They are often presented as very beautiful and alluring. [...] They place their tables on mountains, at crossroads, under a sycamore maple or under a walnut. Then they sing around the table [...] and they dance. [...] Wherever they danced, the grass looks as if it had been burnt [...]. The *iele* will commit evil deeds: they bring about hail, set fire to houses, steal linen [...]; they abduct, mutilate or paralyse men who heard their songs [...].

## 2. Divergent etymologies and interpretations

The origin of the Romanian term *iele* is controversial. Since the late nineteenth century Romanian folklorists and ethnologists have recorded and tried to clarify the name and functions of this very interesting category of supernatural beings. The now generally accepted etymological explanation of the term *iele* is that it simply reflects a kind of magically cautious usage of the Romanian feminine plural pronoun *ele* 'they' (see MDA-III, 2003, s.v. *iele*).

Earlier etymological interpretations of the term *iele* reached divergent conclusions. As mentioned in Ciorănescu's etymological dictionary (2001, s.v. *iele*), the Romanian scholar B. P. Hasdeu considered (as early 1874)<sup>2</sup> that *iele* came from the language of the Dacian ancestors of the Romanians, whereas, for an origin of the same Romanian word, Cihac propounded Hungarian *lél* 'spirit', and Lokotsch propounded Turkish *jel* (*yel*) 'wind' (and, in this respect, Ciorănescu also mentions that the *iele* are also called *vântoasele* 'the windy ones'). Among the earlier etymological propositions enumerated by Ciorănescu, there is one that deserves special attention: in his book *Die Gepiden* (1922), the Romanian historian C. Diculescu pointed out, according to Ciorănescu, that Rom. *iele* comes "from Germ. *Elle*." In fact, Ciorănescu's indication is misleading, since Diculescu's main reference was not to German *Elle*,<sup>3</sup> but to certain Scandinavian terms related to German *Elfen* 'elves'.

In trying to demonstrate that *iele* can be Old Germanic (more precisely, Gepidic) loan, Diculescu referred the Romanian term to Old Danish *elle*, to dialectal Swedish *ellen* and to German *Elfen* ('elves'). His etymology was criticized as being based on mere similarities, not on serious linguistic analysis.<sup>4</sup> Forty years after Diculescu, Pellegrini (1962: 248) observed that that Diculescu's proposition (which had been promptly dismissed by V. Bogrea), "was not re-propounded by other scholars." In fact, Pellegrini actually was against all earlier etymological interpretations of Rom. *iele*, since his main aim was to promote his own etymology, based on a rather improbable derivation of *iele* from "a Balkan Latin \**Aellae*" (in its turn derived, according to Pellegrini 1962: 250, from a rare Greek *aella* 'storm'). However, for all objections to Diculescu's etymology, at least the idea of a possible Old Germanic origin of Rom. *iele* still deserves attention, as I shall point out below.

Worth mentioning at this point is an article published (in 1907) by a Transylvanian Saxon ethnologist, Julius Teutsch, who wrote a report (on Romanian folk traditions) in which he also touched the problem of the *iele* and of their name.<sup>5</sup> Teutsch asserts that Romanian peasants seem to see spirits everywhere: on hilltops, in valleys and caves, in wells and in the air. He pays special attention (Teutsch, 1907:2-3) to the singing and dancing fairies of the night, whose name he transcribes as

<sup>2</sup> In fact, as indicated in MDA-III (2003, s.v. *iele*) the term *iele* was first attested in writing as late as the third decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, Germ. *Elle* is a cognate of Eng. *ell* "an English linear measure equal to 45 inches" (AHDEL, s.v. *ell*), translatable by Rom. *cot* (literally "elbow"), as name of a traditional Romanian measure. There is no etymological relationship whatsoever

<sup>4</sup> See Nemeti 2002: 289.

<sup>5</sup> Teutsch's article is analysed in detail in Poruciu 2000.

*Jelele*.<sup>6</sup> During moonlit nights, *Jelele* (usually mentioned as "three sister-maidens") are said to fly singing through the air, or dance a ring-dance in clearings of the woods. After such dancing, their traces are found in circles of trampled grass. Sometimes *Jelele* lose one or another of their belongings, such as glass pearls, or whistles. Whoever finds such a whistle must only blow it and the most wonderful tunes resound. Sometimes marble shoes of those fairies are found too, and one can get rid of any sickness if one drinks medicine out of such a shoe. They say that each of those fabulous young ladies has her own tune. Such tunes are melancholy ones, and people avoid singing them, since they are afraid: *Jelele* will paralyse anyone who disturbs them or who mocks their tunes. However, in the text of his report Teutsch included a musical score of such a tune, as recorded by one of his friends, Paul Richter of Braşov.

According to Teutsch (who quoted Friedrich S. Kraus's *Volksglaube und religiöser Brauch der Südslawen*, 1890), spirits of the same kind as *Jelele* are known among South Slavs too. By starting from the Slavic name of such spirits, *vile*, Teutsch considers that the name of *Jelele* should be regarded as derived from Slavic. His main arguments (1907: 3) are: first, "in Romanian dialects *v* very often turns into *j*" (one of his examples being "*vite, vitele = jite, jitele = cattle*"); second, Romanian *-le* "means plural." In fact, to start with the latter, *-le* does not mean just plural (of nouns), but rather plural feminine of the Romanian definite article. As for pronunciation, Teutsch's transcription, *Jelele*, certainly implies the German value of the grapheme *j*, that is, /j/ as in Germ. *jetzt* and Engl. *yet*, whereas in Romanian *j* has an entirely different phonetic value, namely /ʒ/ as in French *jour* (cf. Rom. *jind* /ʒind/ 'longing', or *jir* /ʒir/ 'beech nut'). Therefore, on the one hand, the pronunciation of Rom. *iele* as /'jele/ has nothing to do with the dialectal pronunciation of *vite* as /'ʒite/; on the other hand, I know of no example of an evolution from a Slavic initial /v/, as in *vile*, to a Romanian initial /j/, as in the common pronunciation of *iele*.

In regard to pronunciation, initial /j/ is to be heard not only in Romanian words written with *ie-* (e.g. *iederă* 'ivy', *iepure* 'rabbit'), but also in some words written with *e-*, such as *este* /'jeste/ = 'is', and *ele* /'jele/ = 'they' (fem. pl., from sg. *ea* 'she'). In fact, it appears that the identical pronunciation of the pronoun *ele* (as plural of *ea*) and the noun *iele* was the starting point of the mainstream etymology sustained by Romanian specialists for that noun (see DEX 1996 and MDA-III 2003, s.v. *iele*, as well as Ciorănescu's above-mentioned entry *iele*). Those who assumed such a derivation certainly took into account that another name for the spirits under discussion is *dânsele*, which is the articulated plural form of the feminine plural pronoun *dânsa* (which is felt to be more polite than *ea* 'she'). It is true that the special usage of such a pronoun, as well as of other endearing (or, rather, cautious-euphemistic) names for the dangerous spirits under discussion (also called *frumoasele* and *mândrele*, both meaning 'the pretty ones') may lead to the conclusion that what we have here is a case of linguistic taboo, and that *iele* itself reflects avoidance of the "real" name of dangerous beings. However, I consider that there are important arguments against such an interpretation. First of all, whereas *dânsele* is a form in general use, an articulated form of the pronoun *ele* would sound quite strange in normal Romanian. Second, in Maramureş (one of the most conservative regions of Romania, as regards folklore), certain protective charms refer to the *iele* under the forms *ilioi* (masculine plural) and *ilioaie* (feminine plural),<sup>7</sup> and those suffixed derivatives can hardly come, in my opinion, from the pronoun *ele* turned into a noun. Under such circumstances, Rom. *iele* certainly remains in need of further etymological analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Teutsch's usage of the form *Jelele* clearly shows that what he recorded was the articulated form of Rom. *iele*. That fact concurs with what a Romanian dictionary (DEX) gives about the common usage of *iele*: "Especially with a definite article."

<sup>7</sup> T. Papahagi (1981: 284) gives a Romanian charm (from the very conservative region of Maramureş), in which an ailing man is said to have met various kinds of dangerous spirits (each kind having male and female representatives). Here is the opening lines of the charm under discussion: *S-a luat Ion de la casă./ De la masă,/ Pă cale./ Pă cărare .../ L-o întâlnit ilioi cu ilioaie...* (translatable as: "Ion went away from his home,/ From his table,/ On the road,/ On the path .../ He encountered *elves* and *female-elves* ...").

### 3. Germanic (and Celtic) clues

It is surprising that Teutsch, a man of German education, says nothing about the striking similarity, in name and functions, between the Romanian *iele* and a category of German spirits, *Erlen*, which actually echo Danish *eller* (that is, one of the Germanic terms taken into account by Diclescu in his explanation of Rom. *iele*).<sup>8</sup> Dan. *eller* has something to do with Goethe's well-known ballad "Erlkönig." The elfish king mentioned in that poetic text has daughters whose song, dance and form of revenge are as frightening as those of the Romanian *iele*. As regards the name of German *Erlen*, in the entries on *Erle* of the Duden etymological dictionary (1963) and Pfeifer's dictionary (2004), respectively, the compound *Erlkönig* is presented as a wrong loan-translation, coming from Herder: in 1778, the latter transposed Danish *ellekonge* (from an earlier *elverkonge* 'king of elves') as *Erlkönig* in German. Herder's folk-etymological transposition was most probably due to the influence of *Eller*, a dialectal German variant of the tree-name *Erle* 'alder'.

It was Herder who translated (into German) a Danish folk ballad<sup>9</sup> about a young man, Olaf, who rides out at dawn and comes upon elves dancing in the woods. One of the elfish maids invites Olaf to dance with her, but he refuses and tells her that he is to be married the next day; the elfish maid puts a fatal sickness on him; so, when he returns home, he is dying. All these details can sustain a connection (such as the one propounded by Diclescu) between Rom. *iele* and Dan. *elle*, a connection that appears to have been taken into account in the Danish-Romanian dictionary Høybye et al. 1984, in which we can find Dan. *elledans* and *ellefolk* translated into Romanian (with no comment) as *dansul ielelor* and *iele*, respectively. Diclescu should not be forgotten at this point; since (as observed in Pellegrini, 1962: 248) he had also observed that *hora ielelor* ("the ring-dance of the fairies") corresponds to Dan. *elledans*. However, in order to turn what looks like coincidence into credible etymology, further linguistic analysis is needed.

First of all, taking into account that Dan. *elv* (< Old Norse *alfr*) and Eng. *elf* (< Old Eng. *ælf*) are cognates of Germ. *Alb* 'elf' (< Old High Germ. *alb*), all of them being usually referred, by etymologists, to a root *\*albh-* 'shining', which is said to represent the base of Latin *albus* 'white' (> Rom. *alb* 'white'). What must be marked here is that Lat. *albus* is far from having a clear Indo-European origin. In fact, as indicated in the Ernout/Meillet dictionary of Latin (ed. 1985, s.v. *albus*), "names of colours are usually non-Indo-European"; it is at the end of the same entry that Ernout and Meillet consider that "*\*-bho-* is a suffix". Therefore, we may draw the conclusion that the terms of the Germanic *elf* family may come, like Latin *albus*, from a pre-Indo-European substratum, and that their final consonant (reflecting an archaic suffix, probably pronounced *w* in early Germanic), was eventually dropped in Danish. I may add that Celtic might provide an *ell-* lexical element possibly corresponding, in shape and meaning, to Dan. *elle* (as well as Old Norse *él* 'storm' and to several other Old Germanic terms to which I will return in the final part of this article).

Germanic putative relatives of Lat. *albus* may represent relics from a Northwest European substratum. It may be from the same substratum that a Celtic (Welsh) lexical family comes from. I refer (with caution, since I am in need of more Celtic proofs) to the following words that I found in Pughe's Welsh dictionary of 1832, from which I also extracted the meanings given in parentheses: *ellyll* ("a wandering spirit, an elf, a demon, a phantom, a goblin"), *ellyllaidd* ("like a demon; selfish"), *ellylldan* ("*ignis fatuus*, will-with-the-whisp, Jack-of-the-lanthorn"), *ellylles* ("a she demon"), *ellyllyn* ("a little devil, an elf"). For all the fact that Pughe presented Welsh *ellyll* simply as a compound showing *ell* ("what is outward, separated or divided; outward, prominent, conspicuous; extremely, very") plus *yll* ("that tends to part, or to separate"), the striking similarities, in forms and meanings, between the Germanic *elf* family and the Welsh *ell-* family suggest more than mere coincidence. Nevertheless, without totally dismissing Diclescu's vision, I will propound another Old Germanic origin for Rom. *iele*.

<sup>8</sup> About the connection between Dan. *elv* 'elf' and Dan. *elle-* (in compounds), see also Grimm/Grimm(ed. 2015).

<sup>9</sup> The ballad under discussion (with versions recorded in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese) is to be found on <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elveskud>

## 4. For another Old Germanic solution

In regard to Diclescu's etymology, there rises the question: was there (in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries)<sup>10</sup> any Gepidic cognate showing a form similar to the one of Dan. *elle* (from an earlier *elv*)? It is true that Old High German *alb* has cognates with initial front vowels and that sounds of the *w* type were dropped not only in Scandinavian words, but also in Romanian words of Latin origin: Lat. *pauimentum* > Rom. *pământ* 'earth, ground', Lat. *lavare* > Rom. *spăla* 'to wash', etc. However, in the absence of Gepidic written attestations, nothing guarantees that the Gepidic language (from which a number of words can certainly have been borrowed into Romanian – (cf. Gamillscheg, 1935: 255-260) really had a cognate of Dan. *elv* or *elle*, with an initial *e* and possibly without a final *w* sound, that is, a word that could become *iele* in Romanian.

My doubts about Diclescu's Gepidic solution mainly rely on the fact that Gepidic is known to have been closely related to Gothic (a language with sufficient written attestation), and, in regard to lexical material of direct interest for the present article, Köbler's Gothic etymological dictionary (1989) includes an entry on Goth. *\*albs/\*alfs* 'demon, elf' (a term that could be reconstructed on the basis of Gothic names such as *Alverigus, Albis and Albila*). That is why, if Gepidic did contain a cognate of *elf*, such a word must have had a shape that was closer to Old High Germ. *alb* than to Dan. *elle*; and it is hard to derive a form like *iele* from a form like *alb*.

Nevertheless, I consider that we should not give up the search for an Old Germanic solution for Rom. *iele*. I take into account, first, that several serious scholars (beginning with B.P. Hasdeu, already mentioned above) were of the opinion that Romanian cannot possibly lack loans from idioms of Old Germanic tribes which, over a period of several centuries, represented a remarkable military and political factor in territories of today's Romania. Second, I also take into account that at least two important scholars considered that some of the Old Germanisms of Romanian reflect magic-religious beliefs of early Germanics. E. Gamillscheg (1935: 255) propounded a quite credible "East Germanic" etymology for Rom *știmă* 'pixy, ghost' (as in *știma apei* 'water fairy', or *știma casei* 'spirit of the house').<sup>11</sup> It was also Gamillscheg (1935: 260) who considered that a word like Rom. *știmă* reflects the Old Germanic "belief in spirits" (*Geisterglauben*). In his turn, a remarkable representative of Romanian historical linguistics and classical studies, H. Mihăescu (1993: 322-323), showed himself to be convinced that Romanian contains words *d'origine certaine ou fort probable germanique*, including *filmă* '(evil) fairy' (for which a Gothic origin had been propounded as early as the 19th century by B.P. Hasdeu).<sup>12</sup> Mihăescu, like Gamillscheg, also considered that the Germaic domain of "mythical beings" (*des êtres mythiques*) is reflected by Old Germanic loans that survived in Romanian.

It so happens that in my investigation of Old Norse vocabulary, namely the lexical material included in de Vries's dictionary of 1961, I came upon a series of terms which, in my opinion, can represent a basis for a more credible Old Germanic etymology for Rom. *iele*. First of all, also by taking into consideration the Romanian *iele* are also known as *vântoase* ('windy ones'), my attention was attracted by Old Norse *él* 'storm, battle' (clearly reflected in Icelandic *jel* and Swedish *il*, as well as in Finnish *iili* 'storm', as a Germanic loan). The word under discussion was considered by de Vries as being etymologically obscure. As obscure are a couple of terms that are given (as possibly interrelated) in the same dictionary: *elja* 'concubine' (as cognate of Old High Germ. *ella* 'mistress, lover' and of Old Eng. *ellen* 'zeal, courage'), *eljan* 'courage, force', and possibly even *elska* 'to love'. Semantically, if we take into account that the Romanian *iele* were regarded as producers of stormy weather, and also as passionate (and even deadly) lovers, we may consider that the Old Germanic lexical material provided by de Vries's dictionary opens the way for a credible clarification of Rom.

<sup>10</sup> I refer to the period (discussed in detail in Diclescu 1922) during which the Gepids had their own kingdom, which included much of today's western-central Romania.

<sup>11</sup> Gamillscheg took into account an "East Germanic" *skima*, which can be easily referred to Gothic *skeima* 'lighting implement' and Germ. *Schemen* 'phantom, apparition'. As for phonetic evolution, the very early shift of *sci* to *ști* is a well-known early Romanian phenomenon (cf. Lat. *scire* > Rom. *a ști* 'to know').

<sup>12</sup> Rom. *filmă* can easily be referred to three terms included in Köbler's Gothic dictionary (1989), namely *\*filma*, *\*filmei* and *\*films*, with meanings such as 'bewildered stupor, astonishment, amazement'.

*iele*. Phonetically, the fact that the gemination *ll* occurs in certain Old Germanic terms of the family given above indicates that a “dark *l*” could survive in Romanian without becoming *r* in an intervocalic position (cf. Lat. *mola(m)* > Rom. *moară* ‘mill’, but Lat. *calle(m)* > Rom. *cale* ‘way’).

## 5. Conclusion

Taking into account that even Lat. *albus* may be of an obscure substratal origin, like its putative Germanic relatives, we can envisage the possibility of a connection not only between the Germanic *alb-elf-elv* family and the one of the Germanic *el(l)-* terms given above, but also between all those and the Welsh *ell-* family of words that refers to elves and demons. Also, if we consider the long contact between Old Germanic intruders and local forerunners of today’s Romanians, we must admit that *iele* can prove to reflect (like *știmă* and *filmă*) Old Germanic pre-Christian beliefs that impressed non-Germanics of Southeast Europe.

## Works cited

- Ciorănescu, A. 2001. *Dicționarul etimologic al limbii române* (ed. Mehedinți, S. and Popescu, M. M. București: Saeculum.
- DEX – *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). 1996. București: Univers Enciclopedic.
- DUDEN - *Das Herkunftswörterbuch*. 1963. Mannheim: Dudenverlag.
- Ernout, A. and Meillet, A. 1985. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Gamillscheg, E. 1934-1935. *Romania Germanica - Sprach- und Siedlungsgeschichte der Germanen auf dem Boden des alten Römerreiches*, I-II. Berlin: Gruyter.
- Grimm, J. and Grimm, W. 2015. *Irische Elfenmärchen*. Paderborn: Salzwasser Verlag.
- Høybye, P. et al. 1984. *Dicționar danez-român*. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- MDA – *Micul dicționar academic*, 2000-2003 (vol. I-IV). București: Univers Enciclopedic.
- Mihăescu, H. 1993. *La romanité dans le Sud-Est de l’Europe*. București: Editura Academiei.
- Nemeti, I. 2002. “Zănele în mitologia românilor,” *Revista Bistriței*, XVI, 285-307.
- Papahagi, T. 1981. *Grai, folklor, etnografie* (ed. V. Rusu). București: Minerva.
- Pellegrini, G. B., 1962. "Rumeno *iele* – Nota etimologică." *Zbornik za filologiju i lingvistiku*, IV-V (245-251), Novi Sad.
- Pfeifer, W. et al. 2004. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Poruciuc, A. 2000. “Protective Snakes and Frightening Fairies: A Transylvanian Saxon’s Views on Romanian Folklore of the Early Twentieth Century.” *Romanian Civilization*, Vol. IX, Nr. 1 (73-78).
- Pughe, W. O. 1832. *A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*. Denbigh: Thomas Gee.
- Schott, Ar. and Schott, Al. 2003. *Basme valahe* (ed. and transl. Viorica Nișcov). Iași: Polirom.
- Taloș, I. 2001. *Gândirea magico-religioasă la români – Dicționar*. București: Editura Enciclopedică.
- Teutsch, J. 1907. "Einiges vom Aberglauben der Rumänen." Sonderabdruck aus *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, Wien, 37. Band.
- Vries, J. de. 1961. *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Leiden: Brill.