

ANCIENT MYTHS ABOUT ECLIPSES

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Eclipses have gone from being an omen of terror to being a scientific tool to becoming a tourist destination. The experience of being under a total eclipse was frightening to early people. The word eclipse is of Greek origin meaning “abandonment”. Suddenly, it is dark. Animals go to sleep. It is all wrong! No wonder myths arose, meanings created, and important events tied to eclipses.

Neuroscientists say we are born with certain templates for understanding our world. We look for cause and effect, meaning, and connections. Without scientific understanding, ancient people developed myths for eclipses. Quite a number of them involved a mythical creature eating the sun. The Chinese word for solar eclipse is “chih” which means “to eat.”

Variations on eating the sun:

Argentinians: Celestial jaguar

Buryats (S. Siberia): Giant bear

Chinese and Armenian: Dragon.

Hungarians: Giant bird

Indians (India): Rahu, Immortal head

Kwakiutl (W coast Canada) Mouth of heaven consumed sun or moon

Mayans: Gigantic serpent

Paraguayans: Celestial jaguar

Pomo (Native American): Bear (Their name for eclipse was sun got bit by bear. Bear fights sun and bites him and later fights sister moon and takes a bite out of her.)

Scandinavians: Sky wolf

Shan (Vietnam): Evil spirit took form as a toad.

Siberian Tartars: Vampire tried to swallow the sun and failed after burning its tongue.

Yugoslavians: Werewolf called Vukodlak

Variations on the cause of eclipses:

One Amazonian myth describes the sun and moon as lovers. They loved each other so much the sun’s light scorched the earth and the moon’s tears drowned it. It was decided they should live apart in the sky and only be able to touch each other’s shadow during an eclipse.

In Australia, aborigines thought it meant evil magic, disease, blood, and death.

The Batammaliba who live in Benin and Togo Africa believed the sun and moon were fighting. The only way to stop them hurting each other was for all people on Earth to resolve conflicts.

Ancient Egyptians believed the snake Apep attacked the boat of the sun god.

The Greeks believed the gods were angry and left the sky for the underworld.

Some Inuits believed the sun goddess Malina walked away after fighting with the moon god Anningan. An eclipse happened when Anningan caught up with his sister. Other Inuits believed the sun and moon temporarily left their places in the sky to check that things were going alright on earth.

In Korea, they believed the king of the land of darkness tasked his fire dogs to steal the sun to brighten his gloomy domain.

In MesoAmerica and parts of Africa, they described the sun and moon as fighting.

Romanians blamed a werewolf.

In Tahiti, they believed the sun Padi made love with the moon Amarak. A magic spell in the time of a solar eclipse could bring new opportunities and changes into one's life.

In some myths, sun and moon marry, and the newly visible stars during an eclipse are births.

Even where we don't have the myths, there is archaeological evidence the people were aware of eclipses. In Chaco Canyon (Anasazi) there is a pictograph that people think represents an eclipse. There is a circle with what looks like a corona and off in the distance a smaller circle that would be Venus.

Many people believe Stonehenge was used for watching various celestial events including eclipses.

How did ancient people react?

Aztecs: People cried and shrieked. The fair-skinned were slain and captives killed.

Chinese: Set off firecrackers, shouted, beat drums.

Indians (India): Beat pots and pans to frighten Rahu, an immortal head to drop the sun from his jaws. But, even if he ate the sun, it would come back because it would pass right out. The god Vishnu cut off the head of Rahu because he drank an immortality potion. Rahu chased the sun who had betrayed him and tried to eat the sun.

Ojibwe (N. America) fired flaming arrows to help the sun regain its light.

Paraguayans and Argentinians: shouted to frighten the jaguar

Various meanings were ascribed to eclipses.

In ancient times, births and deaths of leaders were correlated to celestial omens, including eclipses.

In ancient China, solar eclipses were considered to a reflection of the quality of the king, and the corona's appearance revealed political plots at work behind the throne. Certain corona configurations meant war.

In ancient Mesopotamia, a clay tablet from 1375 BCE indicated the eclipse meant the king was near death.

Navaho cosmology is about balance. An eclipse was special and a good time to reflect on cosmic order.

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