

COVID-19 pandemic and bats: a lucky symbol of evil fortune

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Dear Editor,

Coronaviruses are present in humans for more than 5 centuries and all originated in bats. Bats represent nature's reservoir for this RNA virus family [1]. The bat can fly as a bird yet is not a bird.

Its uncertain status was not a mystery in Greek antiquity and philosophers didn't try to resolve this issue. Aristotle mentioned it as an animal with membranous wings, noting large ones in Africa, as Stabo described in his treatise "Geographica" [2]. According to the Chinese culture, bats are regarded as symbols of happiness and good fortune (health, serenity, wealth, virtue and long life). Chinese mothers used to sew small jade buttons in the shape of a bat on the caps of their babies to impart long life. In East Asia, colonies of tiny bats appear on nearly every kind of common household object for centuries. The above beliefs are also reflected in linguistics. The pronunciation of "bat" in Chinese (蝠), is "fú" - the same as that of "blessing" (福), and since the characters have not changed much overtime, the linking has endured [3]. In contrast, bats reflected in ancient Greece chthonic features as a flying creature of the underworld, the *Nyct-eris*, which took its name after the word "nychta" (night), symbolizing its nocturnal nature of a life in the dark. In the comedy of Aristophanes "Ornithes" (Greek: Ὀρνιθες, Birds), during a sheep sacrifice, a bat arose from the underworld, enchanted by the blood essence to suck it fresh and pure as it

was and then and only then, the worshipers were allowed to feast [2]. In ancient Greek Mythology, Minyades, the three daughters of Minyas, the King of Orchomenos in Boeotia, refused to participate in the celebrations to worship god Dionysus. Dionysus represented the chthonic or underworld aspect of the god of gods, Zeus. The coupling of Zeus with one of his daughters resulted to the creation of a god of fertility, ritual madness and ecstasy. Minyades denied the frenzy of the Mysteries dedicated to Dionysus (Bacchic joy) and therefore they



Figure 1 - Minyades being transformed into bats, Ovidius Metamorphosis, Giovanni di Tornese eds, 1559, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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were punished by the god being transformed into bats (Figure 1). The metamorphosis became a divine punishment, and the virgin young and innocent ladies transfigured into chthonic birds. Sophocles classified bats (Greek: Νυκτερίς, Nychteris) in the creatures which can not tolerate sunlight. If the bat is the soul living in the dark, imprisoned in the nether-world, the loss of freedom turns it to the chthonic side [4,5]. *Nychteris* firstly appeared in *Odyssey*, when Homer likened bats to the souls of the dead, as the last gather together like bats flying in a cave [6]. In Greek antiquity the desire of the speechless soul to be detached from the earthly chains and ascent was expressed by the metaphor of winged creatures. In the tales of Aesop, a bat was captured by a weasel, a predator of both mice and birds, managing to save its live by claiming first to be a mouse then a bird, confusing the weasel *Nychteris* as the only mammal capable of flying, echolocation ability and thirst for blood, occupied a cardinal place as a creature of unmitigated evil. Soon the beloved bird of Persephone, the loving wife of Hades, was branded as the bringer of misfortune. The lucky flying creature of the Chinese is considered the cause of the fatal Covid-19 pandemic which started in China and landed in Eu-

rope. Bats, somehow are once more demonized for transmitting disease and chaos, a pattern which still provokes logic and remains in vogue [7].

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