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## WOLVES AND DEATH: THE THANATOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE WOLF IN WESTERN SOUTH SLAVIC TRADITIONAL CULTURE

### SUMMARY

Associations of wolves with death and the world of the dead have been of common and frequent across European and Indo-European cultures throughout history. In arguing for similar thanatological symbolism of the wolf in the western part of the South Slavic linguistic and cultural region, mythologists and philologists of the 19th and 20th centuries have cited contemporary ethnographic and folkloristic data among their supporting evidence. However, in the folk beliefs, narrations and customs that were recorded systematically from the end of the 19th century for this region, indications of a direct connection between wolves and thanatological conceptions are exceedingly scarce. The article presents a synthesis of those ethnographic and folkloric elements that unequivocally link wolves with folk conceptions of death and the cult of the dead, and offers a sober assessment of their significance in the relative synchrony of 19th- and 20th-century traditional (rural) meanings and practices. Within the referential framework of folk thanatology, it also critically evaluates existing hypotheses on the connection between wolves and vampires.

Key words: wolf, death, cult of the dead, vampire, thanatological symbolism, mythology, traditional culture, western South Slavic region