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THE HALLEY'S COMET AND OTHER HEAVENLY PHENOMENA: OMENS AND
PROPHECIES OF THE WORLD WARS

(abstract)

Narratives about predictions of war and catastrophes form a rich sub-group of Hungarian legends. Several variants of these types of legend are common all over the Carpathian Basin. In these the Halley's Comet, frequent showers of meteorites, and other rare astronomical phenomena are interpreted as omens and heavenly signs of world war. These narratives lie, for the most part, on the fringes of different folklore genres (historical legend and belief legend). Some of this type of stories predict great historical events or changes, epidemics or famines and express an end-of-the-world feeling. From antiquity and the Middle Ages we have a lot of information, stories, and pictorial representations about Halley's Comet, which returns every seventy-six years. The situation changed in 1910 when the number of observations increased. The appearance of the comet in that year was a world-wide sensation in the contemporary press. The panic caused by the comet and the presumed end of the world predicted in the press became a global event.

Through the 20th century there were many folk narratives about Halley's Comet linking it as an omen to World War I. The author examines how this global sensation appeared in Hungarian tabloids, widely affecting the popular culture, and how the global event was preserved in local memories, and in folk narratives.

This type of narrative about the end of the world remains very popular in today's internet world as well.