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Robert Borski — 25 Mar 1999, 00:48

From SWIMMING WITH THE UNDINES, Excerpt #3:

The number seventeen comes up a number of different times in the narrative of the New Sun, and each time it does it appears to carry a sinister valence.

The first time we encounter it is in the library of Master Ultan. One of the books shelved next to The Book of the Wonders of Urth and Sky is entitled Lives of the Seventeen Megatherians, and Blaithmaic is credited as its author. We're not privy to any of the book's passages, but given that at a later point Abaia, one of Urth's principal monsters and an enemy of the New Sun, is described as the "great beast Abaia," and knowing that megatherian means "great beast" in Greek, it seems safe to postulate the book concerns Abaia, Erebus, Ariocho, and Scylla, along with their lesser counterparts. And how many of these malign alien beings have crossed the gulfs of space and taken up residence in the Urth's oceans or beneath its crust? Seventeen, I postulate. Hence one possible context on its use as a number of charged sinisterness.

The second time we encounter seventeen is on the Field of Sanguinary Conflict. To announce their presence, the various combatants customarily shout out their names, and one such combatant identifies himself as "Cadroe of the Seventeen Stones." Seventeen Stones seems to refer to a place or a locale here, but we're given no further reference to any such place, so its use remains somewhat enigmatic, although I do note that the second syllable of Cadroe is "roe"--i.e., fish eggs--and that many of the Seventeen Megatherians appear to be aquatic. So perhaps Wolfe is merely seeking, however obliquely, to expand on this aspect of their nature.

The third time we encounter the number seventeen is in CLAW, when Severian reveals there are seventeen cells per wing in the Matachin Tower. If you're a prisoner here, obviously you're in dire circumstances, and the retrofitter of the tower (in actuality, a rocket ship) may have picked seventeen to convey exactly this notion.

Lastly, in CITADEL, we hear of the Group of Seventeen, the ruling polity of the Ascians. The Ascians are the longtime enemy of the Commonwealth and have aligned themselves with Abaia, Erebus, Ariocho, et al--in other words, the Seventeen Megatherians. Their use of seventeen in both title and membership thus seems designed as an honorific to commemorate this alliance. But as Michael Andre-Driussi also points out in his fine LEXICON URTHUS, typical membership in the former Soviet politburo comprised seventeen, so there's this additional likely resonance, especially since the Ascians, lacking shadows/souls, come very close to the ideal godless practitioners of Communism.

But how is it that Wolfe the author has chosen seventeen to take on these various sinister shades? Why not some other number? Is it meant strictly to reflect the politburo connection? Wolfe, after all, as a man of deep religious convictions, might well have a particular horror of political systems that preach atheism.

The answer, I believe, can be found in Genesis 7:11:

"In the year when Noah was six hundred years old, on the seventeenth day of the second month, on that very day, all the springs of the great abyss broke through, the windows of the sky were opened, and rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights."

In other words it's meant to signify the coming of the Megatherians, monstrous creatures of the abyss, Wolfe's posthistoric equivalent of Lucifer and the other Infernals. [1] And not only, it seems, have the skies opened up figuratively, but literally, just as Genesis notes. Because there are several references to a great flood that may have taken place in Urth's past. Severian, in describing the fourth and lowest level of the Citadel, mentions how "mud had seeped into the corridors until it lay to the thickness of one hand." Two sentences later he tells us, "Yet the water had never been high here." Water, of course, always seeks the lowest level, so bad plumbing and a great leak (though never mentioned) might account for it, but how about mud several inches high four floors beneath the surface? [2]

Additionally, when Jonas and Severian are riding atop the baluchither bound for Vodalus's forest stronghold, Severian describes their jostling motion thusly: "I feel now that I'm traveling through the Citadel in a flood, solemnly rowed." Look, however, at the reaction this produces in Jonas: "At that Jonas looked so grave that I burst out laughing at the sight of his face." But why does Jonas appear so disturbed? Sev's remark hardly seems anything but casual. And yet, as we recall, Jonas seems to know quite a bit about the Megatherians; notably, about how, because of their behemoth-like nature, they've confined to pelagic waters. He's also attempted to explain why the Great Wall has been built with his tale of the black beans, which unfortunately for us he never concludes. But do the black beans, besides calling to mind the beans of Jack and the Beanstalk, also refer to black beings--i.e., the Megatherians? (Keep in mind the punning nature of these various little embedded tales; monitor for minotaur and thesis for Theseus, for example, in "The Tale of the Student and his Son.") Are the black beans meant to be sown like Aeëtes' dragon teeth and produce warriors to combat Typhon? Since all of the Brown Book's tales are conflational, combining a number of different myths and archetypes, Cadroe's stones might also represent not only the missile David slew Goliath with, but the stones Deucalion threw after the flood that Zeus sent, although in the latter "great beasts" may have come forth from the waves, not men. Jonas, having been a servitor of the Hierodules, knows full well the facts behind his little tale, even if he doesn't share them, and this is why he reacts so gravely--if the creatures brought by the flood triumph, it means that he and his masters will have labored in vain, and that the New Sun will be guttered like a candle dropped into the sea.

[1] Notice how in part the Genesis quote is echoed by Maxellindis' uncle, the boat captain. Though he does not know it, the night before, he has heard undines and possibly Abaia moving upriver, but in describing the strange activities that have taken place--sort of a Second Coming of the Megatherians--he says, "Sometimes I felt like I wasn't on old Gyll at all, but on some other river, one that run up into the sky, or under the ground." (CITADEL, Chapt. XXXVII)

[2] It's possible the zoetic transport ship mentioned in URTH, being the future equivalent of Noah's ark, plays to the flood myth, but I feel it's more likely that the ship will be used to transport live animals to the mountainous Cursed Town--or possibly later to the Whorl.

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