

## Images of the Wolf in the Northern Psyche



By Heimgest, DCG

The wolf is one of the most potent and deeply ingrained images in the Folk Soul of the northern peoples. From the far past to the present day it has held a fascination for all the tribal groupings that can collectively be described as ethnically Aryan. Thus it is an image which appears in the earliest myths from the Indian sub-continent; in the myths of the pre-Hebraic folk of the Middle East; the Hellenic Greeks; the early Romans etc.

Of course, the mythology of the Germanic and Celtic branches of our folk organism are full of lupine imagery. Few animals inspire such mixed emotion. On the one hand, it is feared, a creature of dread; on the other it is looked upon with affection and respect.

That the wolf is seen as noble and worthy of emulation is evinced by the giving or taking of a name which has some component relating to the wolf – for example, Wulfheim, Arnulf, Adolf, or simply Wolf or Wulf. These are not just Odinic names. They have been used by Europeans all through the Common Era, indeed, this practice is still popular. The wolf is also a ‘totem’ animal to many and in the past was more so.

The characteristics of the wolf, real or imagined, have found their way into everyday language. A man can be described as “wolfish”, or “giving a wolfish smile”. The “wolf whistle” encapsulates the image of the wolf (or werewolf) as a sexual predator, which is implied in many folktales concerning the creature. In France dusk is sometimes described as “between the dog and the wolf”; the day associated with the tamed and safe dog, while the wolf represents the sinister, strange night. In other places when the wind whistles, it is “the wolf sharpening his teeth”, and a powerful wind is sometimes known as “the wolf”. The examples are endless.

This fascination and duality of feeling aroused by the creature is also reflected in myth and folk legend. There are tales of the savage, devouring wolf, the archetype of which is perhaps Fenris Wolf. Then again, tales of noble, kindly wolves abound. All-Father Odin is himself accompanied by two of the animals. While it is true that tales showing the wolf as sinister and fearsome are found in the very earliest Aryan myths it is highly likely that the subjugation of our native faith by the alien creed did much to emphasize and embellish this aspect. We realize the Judeo-Christian clerics demonized all the personalities and images of our organic Odinic religion that they could.

Odin was presented and 'the devil' and it follows that his animal companions should likewise be cast as creatures of evil. Christianity attached innumerable diabolical links to the unfortunate wolf. One superstition has it that the devil sits between the creature's eyes, another that the devil actually takes the form of a black wolf, yet another that the Judeo-Christian devil created the wolf from a variety of constituents, including stone for his heart, reinforcing the image of the pitiless beast. Because they were seen to feed on the bodies of those slain on the battle-field they were depicted as 'corpse-demons', which also helped the Judeo-Christian propagandists to portray the Valkyries as demonic. In some regions it was said that unbaptised children roamed the land in the guise of wolves. In Shakespeare's "Macbeth" a wolf's tooth is one of the ingredients in the witches' brew, the witches themselves being based on the Norns. Again the examples are endless.

However, as with much else, so deep and potent was the image that not all could be subverted, and Christianity had to allow some tales showing the wolf in a good light. Sculptures in some churches depict the kindly wolf, which in Christian legend, stood guard over the head of the martyred St. Edmund. Many others tell of various 'saints' being helped or befriended by a 'good wolf'. These legends are based on pre-Christian lore, only the names are changed. However, in general Christianity portrayed the wolf in the worst possible light – unremitting evil, implacably inimical to man, and possessed of demonic cunning.

Tales of huge packs of wolves, organised like armies and carrying out precision raids were spread. In actual fact, the image of the ravaging, savage wolf is mainly fictional. While they were, and still are, a threat to livestock, the menace to humans is greatly exaggerated. While isolated instances of wolves attacking humans, particularly the weakly in times of famine, may have occurred, very few authenticated cases of attacks on the able-bodied were recorded. Tales of packs breaking into monasteries to attack the 'devout monks', or the Russian tales of packs chasing sledges and picking off the travellers are almost certainly false.

But the illogical fear of the wolf and its depiction as a creature of evil led to a great persecution of it. In England they were totally exterminated probably by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. All other countries have seen similar persecution, though they do survive in some areas of Europe, Russia and North America. Today, a greater understanding of these creatures is at last emerging, though they (like our folk) are under constant threat of extinction.



Common perception of the “*evil wolf*.”

\*\*\*\*\*

***“Better stay from him – he’ll rip your throat out, Jim.”***

(From Warren Zevon’s ‘cult’ classic song, “Werewolves of London”.

Another aspect of the wolf image in folklore and legend is that of the man-wolf, the ‘werewolf’ (Anglo-Saxon ‘wer’ = ‘man’).

“All Teutons have believed in the existence of the Werewolf” (New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, Teutonic mythology section, p. 227).

Usually in legend the werewolf is a living person who has the power to change his shape to become a terrifying and ferocious man-wolf creature. The metamorphosis can be self-induced, or is sometimes the result of a spell being cast on the unfortunate victim, or some genetic curse carried in a family blood-line. Some were also believed to be those who had returned from the realm of the dead.

One of the best-known legends relates how the great hero, Sigmund, and his comrade, Sinfjoth, while travelling through a forest discover two men asleep in a cave (in some versions a cabin) with two wolf skins hanging above them. These two anonymous men were ‘werewolves’, cursed into that form by a foe with great magical powers, However, they were granted permission to leave their wolf skins every ten days and resume human form for twenty four hours. It was during such a time that Sigmund and Sinfjoth discovered them. The two comrades decided to don the skins themselves, but once they were on it proved impossible to remove them. They had now taken on the curse.

They immediately began howling like wolves, and became ferocious, attacking the sleeping men, and even each other. For ten days, they remained as werewolves, but on the tenth day were able to take off the skins. They burned them immediately, thus breaking the curse forever.

This is but one tale, but so numerous are they in our folklore that it would seem reasonable to suggest that some actual phenomenon lies at the heart of the legends, even if the tales as they come down to us are highly coloured and lurid, through the passage of time. Many possible explanations have been proposed at various times. It has been suggested that the tales of werewolves (and other were-creatures) are based on the acknowledgement of the dual nature of man, the 'beast' lurking beneath the surface. Mythology from many Aryan peoples includes reference to these creatures.

In ancient Greece, the followers of Dionysus were alleged to have revealed this 'beast in man' during the ecstatic rites, and to have donned wolf masks during hunts through the forest. There is also the ancient Greek legend of Lycaeon, a man Zeus changed into a wolf as punishment for killing a child. The cult of Zeus Lycaeus grew, in which adherents also wore wolf masks.

Several noted Greek writers including Herodotus and Plato gave plausibility to the idea. Later in Rome, Pliny was among those who treated the idea seriously. It is, in ancient Greek, that the term 'Lycanthropy' is first recorded. Lycanthropy is thought to be a mental illness which causes those afflicted to believe they have taken on a lupine appearance, and who perform acts of savagery which they find revolting when they have returned to normal. Throughout Europe there have been many cases where 'lycanthropes' were captured, confessed, and usually executed. This, of course, was during the time of the 'witch burnings' and no doubt many people apprehended for being werewolves would have confessed to anything, given the interrogation techniques employed.

A fairly modern explanation for the phenomenon was presented in 1963 by a Dr. Illis, in a paper entitled "On Porphyria and the Aetiology of Werewolves", presented to the Royal Society of Medicine. He showed the similarity between the symptoms of lycanthropy and congenital porphyria. This is an extremely rare disease, not to be confused with the more common forms. It is a hereditary disease, and thus tends to appear in definite geographical locations, which are similar to areas where there have been reports of outbreaks of lycanthropy.

The sufferers break out in skin ulcers if exposed to the sun's rays. These ulcers often deepen to cause severe damage to the tissue structure and the nervous system. This often leads to disturbed behaviour, and perhaps not surprisingly, those afflicted tend to go about at night, shunning the sun's damaging light. This alone would be bound to arouse suspicion, especially in the sparsely populated, wild and rural areas inhabited by our forebears. Coupled with the bizarre behavioural patterns and damaged skin tissue, we can see still more clearly how suspicion could be aroused.

This explanation may also elucidate the tradition which states that exposure to the moon's light triggers the transformation of the werewolf. It has, of course, been shown that the moon has a definite and strong influence on basic physiological processes. One experiment, carried out by a scientist called Brown in 1954 and again in 1959, proved that oysters open their shells in response to the moon's phases and tidal force. He placed boxes of oysters in a desert and noted that they responded to the moon's influence as they would have done if they had been in a sea covering their location. Although they were subject to no tidal currents, they were affected by the moon's influence.

Given that the moon can affect metabolic processes in oysters, we can accept that such processes in animals and humans will also be affected, a fact which has been known to magicians, and used by them for many ages past.

As stated above, the disease porphyria is very rare. It could not possibly explain all the cases of lycanthropy or other werewolf activity. Also, many convicted 'werewolves' were victims of malice and hysteria on the part of informers. Nevertheless, something deep in the subconscious must have made these informers make accusations of this particular crime/curse, rather than some other form of 'demonic' offence.

Interestingly, in Jung's 'Psychology and Alchemy', the wolf is comparable to the whale or the dragon, the 'beast in man' which devours his humanity. In alchemic terms this is the swallowing of the ego by chaos, the burial of the soul in the body, the hiding of the gold in the prima matter.

Other foundations of the werewolf legend must also be considered. In the field of magic, shape shifting is well known, as also is the ability to create 'thought forms'. The mentions of shape-shifting are numerous in Odinic myth. Gods and goddesses often took on animal or bird form for a variety of reasons, as did various heroes and magicians. There is also the magical practice of seeking your 'totem' animal. It is not uncommon for people involved in ritual of this type to take on the characteristics of the totem creature, sometimes with accompanying fierce behaviour. The wearing of an animal skin is common practice in this ritual.

These various magical legends and rites could be at the heart of much of the werewolf beliefs. Let us also remember that a cult of 'wolf berserkers' also existed. These warriors emulated as far as possible what they believed to be the actions of the wolf. When in a frenzy, and wrapped in a wolf skin, they would have presented a terrifying aspect to anyone who saw them. It would not take much imagination on the part of those confronted by them, to believe and report, that not only had they taken on the savage qualities of the wolf, but had actually become wolves. The individual berserker may also have believed that he became a wolf temporarily, after unleashing the 'beast in himself'.

Robert Eisler, in his book, "Man into Wolf" postulates the theory that the werewolf belief has its origin in a prehistoric clash of cultures between a peaceful vegetarian folk and an

aggressive, fur-clad, meat-eating tribe that they were either attacked by or with whom they were forced to amalgamate by changing circumstances, for instance an ice age. This event left a deep trauma in the collective unconscious of this folk which has not yet been healed. There is also a sexual element frequently involved, as with vampires. But where the vampire is often seen as a polished, if ruthless ‘seducer’, the werewolf is a crude, brutal rapist.

Old case histories of lycanthropes record the sufferer developing a taste for raw meat and a craving to howl and rush naked through the woods, and sometimes a wish to kill and rape, and even eat, women and young girls. Perhaps the sex criminals of the past were believed to be werewolves.

Whatever the basis of the werewolf legend, and there is obviously more than one such basis, the creature is very deeply rooted in our psyche.

Numerous ways to kill such a creature have sprung up, many adapting to the coming of Christianity, and so silver crucifixes and so-called ‘holy water’ play a part in many beliefs and legends. There are also numerous ways to become a werewolf, either deliberately or unwittingly. One legend suggests that a werewolf cursed into that form can break the curse by not eating human flesh for nine years. Nine, of course, is a very significant number for our folk, though it is not known if this figure of nine years is given because of that. Nor has fascination for the werewolf abated as the popularity of werewolf films and stories attests. As recently as 1930 a French farmer was seriously accused of changing into a wolf at night.

Finally, although the great majority of werewolf legends portray the creature as bestial and savage, deserving to be hunted down and killed, the exception to this occurs in the reporting of the friendly ‘Wulver’. This creature, a man-wolf which inhabits the islands of Orkney and Shetland, is said to approach those lost in the wilds and guide them to safety.

Magic? Madness? Subconscious urges and fears? The werewolf lives!

**Editorial note:** *Those who wish to read further on this subject are advised to read “Of Wolves and Men”, by Barry Holston Lopez (pub. J. M. Dent, 1978). This is an excellent book which approaches the subject with sympathy. It seems to be written from a pagan point of view, and is a celebration of the inter-relationship of all living things. It places the blames for the alienation of our race from its natural heritage exactly where it belongs – on Judeo-Christian tradition.*

**This article is used with permission. Copyright 2007 Heimgest, DCG, Odinic Rite. Do not re-post this article without permission of the author.**