

# The historical Basis of Lycanthropism

## or: where do Werwolves come from?

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**Werewolves, Lycanthropes<sup>1</sup> or Man-Wolves appear in many German, French and Scandinavian stories. Nowadays there exists an image of these creatures, which combines almost all the aspects of the werewolf-myths around the world, that was brought to us by Hollywood. By means of the legendary disinterest and the demonstrative ignorance towards European culture and folklore there was created an image of a dangerous monster in the dreamfactory of California.**

The modern werewolf is a man which was either bitten by a werewolf or has an ancestor with this disease. Werewolves live among us and change into wolves at full moon. They are stronger and faster than any man, are covered with fur and their teeth and fingernails elongate during these nights just to get back to normal when the night is over. These werewolves hunt men and celebrate feasts in full moon nights at which they eat men they have tricked to their cave. The only thing that can stop such a werewolf is a silver bullet. All other weapons are of no use.

Together with vampires and mummies the werewolves had many appearances in cheap horror flicks since this genre was born. But this image of a werewolf is quite new and has its roots partly in legends that have been told in Germany and France since the Medieval. In this essay I would like to give an account of the stories which led to the invention of such a monster.

### 1) Shape shifters

Shape shifters have a long tradition in most peoples around the world. Even in the first epic, as it is often called, the epic of Gilgamesh [13] of ancient Babylon, Gilgamesh, a king of Uruk blames the goddess Ishtar of having changed a shepherd into a wolf. Though this is most likely to be a metaphor, it clearly contains the changing into a wolf:

*You loved the Shepherd, the Master Herder,  
who continually presented you with bread baked in  
embers,  
and who daily slaughtered for you a kid.  
Yet you struck him, and turned him into a wolf,  
so his own shepherds now chase him  
and his own dogs snap at his shins.*  
(Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VI)

American natives had their mighty warriors dressed in the skins of bears and coyotes to give them the strength of this animal. There also was a strong belief in ancestors appearing in the shape of animals at time of

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<sup>1</sup> Lycanthrope: Greek *lukos* = wolf; *anthropos* = man

need. Even the Gods they praised were cherished in the shape of animals.

In India there were many Demons and Gods that could take on animal forms. There were even legends of men that were brought up by wild wolves and thus were able to communicate with the animals.

In Egypt, too, most of the Gods were thought of as animals.

In Japan there existed Myths of men that could change their shapes into tigers, panthers and other fierce animals.

African legends also tell of animal-men and the fighters and hunters often wear parts of lions' skins to get the strength of this animal.

Similar Myths of animal-men can also be found in Celtic, and Inuit mythology.

Many examples of these myths are known from the Norse culture. There were Germanic tribes, known as Berserks<sup>2</sup>, that were dressed in bears' skins. These tribes were feared in Scandinavia. When they wore their bears' skins in battle they were convinced to have the strength of this animal and had a sort of trance. In a blood-rush they slew anyone that came near. Unfortunately some of them could not control their temper and thus turned every taken village into a heap of burning planks. Until today a furious fighter is said to 'fight like a Berserk'.

There were other Germanic tribes that had belts of wolfs' skin and thus acted like wolves.

In Ovids 'Metamorphoses'<sup>3</sup> there appears a Greek king, Lycaon[9], which was turned to a wolf by Zeus for punishment. In the original Greek text, however, this King was slain with a thunderbolt.

So, the idea of Shape shifting is not new. It seems familiar to most cultures. But the shape-shifters were seldom thought of as being dangerous. They were cherished by their fellows in most cultures. So, where does the shape-shifting monster come from?

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<sup>2</sup> Berserkr: Old Swedish: Bear-Shirt or bear skin

<sup>3</sup> *In vain he attempted to speak; from that very instant His jaws were besplattered with foam, and only he thirsted*

*For blood, as he raged amongst flocks and panted for slaughter.*

*His vesture was changed into hair, his limbs became crooked;*

*A wolf;--he retains yet large trace of his ancient expression,*

*Hoary he is as afore, his countenance rabid,  
His eyes glitter savagely still, the picture of fury.* (Ovid, Metamorphoses i. 237)

## 2) The humanizing of Wolves

One question that arises when one tries to look into the myth of werewolves, is, why the wolf was chosen as the animal, a man can change to. Of course, there are much legends in which men change into bears, birds or other animals, but wolves seem to be more frequent. From Gilgamesh, over Ovid to European folklore the wolves and the changing to a wolf is present.

One reason for the popularity of this image could be the danger of a wolf. A wolf near a village meant danger for the inhabitants. No other animal is present in as many regions as the wolf. The wolf was and is present in Asia, Europe, America and from the polar regions to the warmest regions of the continents. So men learned to respect and fear this lone hunter and stories about extraordinary wolves came up.

In fairy tales all over the world wolves play a major role. In German tales, as of little red riding-hood or the seven goats, the wolf is the antagonist. So it appears in the Russian tale 'Peter and the wolf', Greek myths, Indian legends and modern tales such as the three piglets and Tex Avery cartoons.

In most of these tales the transformation is of the opposite kind as in werewolf myths. It is no man that becomes a wolf, it is a wolf, that has human traits. The wolves speak, walk on their hindlegs and behave mannish.

So, people in different regions of Europe grew up with tales of man-wolf hybrids. The step to myths in which men actually become wolves under certain conditions seems quite smaller if we keep this in mind.

## 3) Wargs

In Norse legal texts<sup>[5]</sup> we can find an interesting custom which might partly explain the fear of a man-wolf which haunts the woods.

Criminals who have committed a serious crime against the community such as murder, rape or treachery were banned from the village. They had to live in the woods thereafter; without a house, a weapon or help from others, which meant the certain death in the woods. They had to catch their food with bare hands and, probably because of this reason, were called 'Wargr'<sup>4</sup>. They were also referred to as wolves, the wolf being an animal known for cunning, conspiracy and cruelty. Their loneliness in the woods might also have been a reason for the people to call them 'wolf'.

If there was such a wolf out in the woods near a city, travellers were warned. Such a banned criminal might well be lurking for travellers and so there were warnings of a warg or a man-wolf in the woods. Natives knew well what this warning meant. But a stranger, which was not familiar with this custom might

well have made up an image of a two-legged wolf which hunted men.

There was also another kind of men, called 'wolf' in Norse culture. As mentioned above, the wolf was thought of as a conspirator and a cruel and fierce animal. Thus the name 'wolf' was also given to men that acted like this. A conspirative talk was referred to as 'talking with wolf's tongue'. A conspirator was referred to as 'wolf'. This motive we find several times in the poetic Edda [1+2]

*You have eaten the food of wolves  
and brought your brother the death.*  
(from: Helgi Hundingsbane)

A further interesting point is, that the name of the Norse God Loki (The traitor which caused the death of his brother Balder and will deliver the Gods to their enemies by treachery in the end) derives from the Indogermanic stem 'lok-' for wolf.

Thus there were man-wolves in Scandinavia. But they did not have the power to shift their shape, they did not bite men and turn them into wolves nor were they hunted with silver bullets. We do have a further piece in the puzzle of the history of werewolves but we are far from the whole image.

## 4) Infection by means of a bite

A further attribute of today's werewolves is the ability to turn other men into werewolves just by biting them. The origin of this aspect is not to be found in Norse myths, where man-wolves are just criminal men. It is to be found in Germany in the early Medieval.

In these days many stories were told in the fast growing villages of central Europe. And because there was no one to write them down they were distributed by telling them over and over again. With each telling they grew scarier and more unbelievable.

In this time people also had contact with rabies. There were wolves in the woods that carried rabies and infected dogs and men. A dog, infected with rabies, will not answer to his master's call and might bite him. A man will have foam on his lips and scream. He might even attack his own family. When in a village a man was infected with rabies and thus behaved like a fierce animal, people had no idea what had happened to him. The only thing they might know is, that this man was bitten by a wolf and now behaved, as if he himself was a wolf. So there appeared stories of wolves that could, by biting, render a normal man into a beast.

And there was a further kind of infectious wolves in German tales of this time. The 'Roggenwolf'<sup>5</sup> lurked in rye fields and bit the workers. He also had an evil mother (like Grendel of the Danish 'Beowulf' Saga), which was called 'Roggenmutter' or 'Kornmutter'<sup>6</sup>. The

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<sup>5</sup> *Roggenwolf*: German: rye wolf

<sup>6</sup> It was most probably this Mother which gave the ergot fungus his German name: 'Mutterkorn'.

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<sup>4</sup> *Wargr*: Old Scandinavian: Strangler

subjects didn't even notice the bite sometimes. But soon after their returning to the village their appearance changed. The victims felt as if they were strangled. They had irrational thirst and hunger. Before their eyes they saw things that were not there and they became very aggressive. After some time their nose became flattened, black and wet. The tips of their ears began to bend down and became black as well. Their gums grew narrow and it seemed as though they had longer teeth. The tips of their fingers grew black too. To summarize the symptoms of a 'Roggenwolf-bite': The victim looked wolfish after some time.

In truth these men suffered from ergotism[3]. A disease that is caused by the contact with ergotoxin, which is produced by the ergot fungus (*Aspergillus fumigatus*), a fungus that grows on rye. A person, infected with this toxin suffers from hallucinations because of the structural identity of this toxin with a neurotransmitter<sup>7</sup>. But unfortunately these hallucinations are not the only effect of ergotamin. It also causes thin blood vessels to shrink and thus cause the death of exposed regions. First the fingers, the nose and the ears become black and foul. Then, whole legs and arms are fouling and some organs stop working. If the dose is high enough the subject may die.

Even in the present ergotism is linked with lycanthropic behaviour. In the novel 'Acceptable Risk' by Robin Cook[7], a group of biochemists investigate psychoactive derivatives of ergotoxin and use the Drugs on themselves. As a consequence these scientists turn into fierce animals at night and attack people without knowing anything of it the next day.

These two diseases in medieval Germany gave rise to stories about wolves, hiding in the woods or in rye fields, that can render men into wolves by biting them. But the infected man will stay a wolf until he dies. The element of a temporary shape shift is lost in these stories.

Thus we do have another piece of our puzzle: The transmission of lycanthropy by means of a bite.

## 5) Inheritance

A motive found in modern werewolf-stories is the inheritance of being a werewolf. In the Hollywood-Movie 'Teen Wolf', for example, a youngster discovers himself to be a werewolf. He inherited this doom from his father, who was a werewolf, too.

Some explanation for this aspect might be found in modern medicine. There are several genetic disorders that can lead to a werewolf-like look.

- Congenital generalized hypertrichosis (CGH) is an extremely rare disorder characterized by excessive hair growth on the face and upper body for which reason it has been dubbed "Werewolf syndrome" by the popular press. Individuals with this rare

phenotype have in the past appeared in circuses as "dog men" and "ape men".[2]

- Porphyria is a genetic disorder which renders the body unable to produce Heme (the oxygen transport molecule in the red blood cells). Even in mild sunlight, one can develop blisters and serious skin lesions. Also his lips and gums can become so taut that his teeth appear to be very prominent. Moreover, the Patient suffers from excess hair growth. [3]

But these diseases cause a Wolf-like look for the whole life. The motive of shape-shifting again is not found here.

## 6) Full Moon

Yet another aspect of today's Werewolves is the connection with the full moon. Many modern werewolves change to wolves only when the moon is full. This aspect is to be found first in French literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There this aspect first appeared in connection with the so called 'loup garou'<sup>8</sup>.

French culture owes much to its Celtic roots. It was not that much under the control of German tribes, and thus preserved much of its Celtic lore. In Celtic folklore the moon is a very important element. The cycle of the moon has a great influence on humans and plants. Thus it is not astonishing that in France the magical turning of a man into a wolf was connected with full moon. In this phase the moon has the greatest influence on all beings on earth.

A further reason for the appearing of the moon in the Werewolf-Myth is a psychological disease. There were and there are many people that think of themselves as being strongly connected to wolves. Some of them even howl at the full moon and eat raw flesh just to be nearer to their cherished animals. So the moon and wolf-men were already connected. But the connection to German werewolf-myths came with literature.

## 7) How to kill a werewolf

Almost more variable than the description of a werewolf are the ways of killing such a beast. It sometimes seems that in each story the werewolf is coped with differently. Many of these different ways are due to the cultural inheritance of the region where it came up first. But there are also many ways which came up quite recently. I will try to give a short account on the most important ones:

- As werewolf-stories came up, the catholic people of middle Europe soon found a way how to kill them in the stories. You just had to call the wolf thrice by his Baptist name. Like that you could reach his Christian soul and thus free him from the

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<sup>7</sup> This is what gave the Swiss chemist Hoffmann the idea of LSD, which he produced after the template of ergotamin.

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<sup>8</sup> loup garou: French: loup = wolf; garou = man-wolf (derived from Norman 'garulph': gar = man; ulph = wolf)

wolf-demon that possessed his body. The werewolf will just turn to a man again.

- Regions in which Celtic myths were still alive had another way to cope with werewolves. You had to climb an ash tree. Ash trees are holy in Celtic lore and a werewolf might not follow you there. He will go away and bother you no more.
- Another ritual which has both Celtic and Christian roots is stabbing him thrice into the forehead. The werewolf will lose three droplets of blood and the demon will leave the body. In this way you can also fight witches.
- A quite modern way of getting rid of werewolves is the silver bullet. A wound of a silver bullet might not heal in a werewolf's body. So he has to die. There are German werewolf-stories of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. *Der Werwolf von Hüsby*) in which a werewolf is killed like this. Of course this method is much younger than the invention of gun powder.
- There is also a very good method brought to us by Hollywood. In the case your friends or the stars of the movie are turned into werewolves by a werewolf bite, you might not want to shoot them with silver bullets. So some clever authors thought of a more sophisticated way to turn everything good. You just have to find the master-werewolf. That means the first of his kind, which infected all the others. If you kill this werewolf all his descendants will become humans again. The spell is broken and you can write the indispensable sentence 'HAPPY END' on the screen.
- There were other ways over the years, such as stabbing his heart with a silver pole (like a vampire), to burn him, to cast a magic spell on him or to find an antidote against lycanthropy. But all these ways of killing a werewolf come from the heads of stressed authors that wanted to alter a cliché a little.

## 8) Summary

As we have seen, the animal-men appear all over the world in independent cultures. The man-wolves are common to all countries where wolves live. But the ability of a man actually being able to change to a wolf and back is relatively new and constricted to Europe. So, this is the place, where we have to look for the origins of the werewolves.

Here, it seems the werewolves had different origins. The warg of Scandinavia as well as the Germanic tribes that believed in becoming a wolf by wearing a belt of wolfskin, as well as rabies and ergotism. These four phenomena seem to have led to the first werewolf-stories in medieval Germany. The motive of a bite by a wolf and the belt are common to most of these stories.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that the werewolf-stories developed quite slowly. It took more than 200 years until this myth had ripened. And it still develops. Each generation seems to add one more detail to the stories and thus make the werewolf even more dangerous. The most recent addition is the mention of a 'Werewolf-Virus' which is transmitted in saliva and thus enables werewolves to infect others. This addition is a product of the recent progress in the retrovirus-technology and the stories which tell of werewolves that infect others by biting them.

Because the werewolf-stories developed over such a long time it is quite unlikely that there exists something as a werewolf described today. Because if there had been such a monster at any time, you could localise the origin of this myth exactly. Some story would suddenly, without precursors, appear in one particular place, that tells of a man, which can change to a wolf in full moon nights and is able infect others by biting them. But such a prototype does not exist.

Thus I tend not to believe in actual werewolves, which hunt in full moon nights. At least I never had the bad luck to meet one.

*by Martin Wettstein, July 2003*

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### Literature:

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- [2] <http://www.angelfire.com/Woodensharrow/texts.html>
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- [4] Charlotte Otten, *A Lycanthropy reader*, Syracuse University press 1986
- [5] Alby Stone, *Hellhounds, Werewolves and the Germanic Underworld*, Mercian Mysteries No.20, 1994
- [6] <http://www.accessexcellence.org/WN/SUA05/wolfman.html>
- [7] Robin Cook, *Acceptable Risk*, Berkeley Publishing 1996
- [8] <http://www.exn.ca/stories/1996/10/29/05.asp>
- [9] <http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/Lycaon2.html>
- [10] <http://www.wikipedia.org/>
- [11] <http://www.siue.edu/CHAUCER/monk.html>
- [12] <http://www.crystalinks.com/werewolves.html>
- [13] <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/index.html>