The Folklore of the Wild Hunt and the Furious Host

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When the winter winds blow and the Yule fires are lit, from the north of Scandinavia down to Switzerland, it is best to stay indoors, safely shut away from the dark forest paths and the wild heaths. Those who wander out by themselves during the Yule-nights may hear a sudden rustling through the tops of the trees -- a rustling that might be the wind, though the rest of the wood is still. But then the barking of dogs fills the air, with the hunters behind whooping "Wod! Wod!" a man's voice cries from above, "Midden in dem Weg!" and the host of wild souls sweeps down, fire flashing from the eyes of the black hounds and hooves of the black horses.

The wise traveller falls down at once in the middle of the road, face down. If he is lucky, he will take no harm other than the cold feet of the black dogs running over his body. More foolish folk are swept up, coming to earth far from home or left dead behind the furious host. Those who join in the Hunter's cry may get as their share of the booty a piece of human flesh. This is the Wild Hunt of Germanic folklore. It is known by many names -- Wutan's or Wuet's Army in the southern parts of Germany, the family of Harlequin in France, the Oskorei in Norway, Odensjakt in Denmark and Sweden -- but the basic description is always much the same. A great noise of barking and shouting is heard; then a black rider on a black, white, or gray horse, storming through the air with his hounds, followed by a host of strange spirits, is seen. The rider is sometimes headless. Sometimes, particularly in Upper Germany, the spirits show signs of battle-wounds or death by other forms of mischance. Fire spurts from the hooves and eyes of the beasts in the procession. The horses and hounds may be two- or three-legged. Often the newly dead can be recognized in the train. The furious host is always a peril to the human being who comes into its way, though sometimes it leaves rewards as well.

The first full description of a procession of ghosts was written in Paris about a night in January of 1092 (*Ordericus Vitalis*). The priest Wachlin, coming back from visiting a sick person, saw a swarm led by an enormous warrior swinging a mighty club in his hand. The shapes that followed wept and moaned over their sins; then came a horde of corpse-bearers with coffins on their shoulders -- the priest counted some 50 coffins. Then women on horseback, seated on saddles with glowing nails stuck into them; then a host of ecclesiasticals on horseback. The priest knew many of these people who had died

recently. He concluded at last that he had seen the "familia Herlechini," of whom many had told him, but in whom he had never believed: Now he had truly seen the dead.

The term "wotigez her" is used in the Middle German *Rolandslied* to compare the host of the Saracens simultaneously with the host of the Devil and that of Pharaoh. In the 13th-century *Diu Urstende,* the Jews who have come to capture Christ "with spears, swords, and arrows"are called "daz wtunde her." In the early 13th-century "Moriz von Craon," the hero appears bloodily wounded in the bedchamber of his captor, who says to his wife, "The devil is near to us ... or the wutende her." In Rudiger von Munre's "Von zwein Gesellen" an oath-formula appears "by deus ... and by wutungis her." An Alamannic poem from 1300 describes the sound of thunder in the air, breaking through valley and mountain with armed riders and a mist in which rode "daz wuotes her." The Middle German "Nachtsegen" (13/14 C), a medieval German version of the "from ghoulies and ghosties / and long-legged beasties / and things that go bump in the dark / good god, protect us" prayer, calls on god and the holy spirit to protect the speaker against "all unholden ... Truttan and wutan, / wutanes her and all its (or his) men." The romance of the prince of Braunschweig has the hero seeing "daz woden here, / where the evil spirits have their dwelling."

Johann Geiler von Kaiserberg, writing in Strassburg in 1516, says that "those who die before the time which god has set for them as those, who enlist in the army and were stabbed or hanged and drowned, they must therefore walk long after their death, till that end comes, which god has set for them, and then god works so with them, as his godly will is." His contemporary Cysat adds accident and war to the causes of death that doom one to the "furious host." For the *Strassburger Chronicle* of 1516, Jakob Trausch writes that "Not only this year, but also many years since, one has heard that thing named the Wuetten-Hor in all lands, particularly Alsace, Breisgau, and other places, not only by night, but also by day, in woods and mountains. By night they went over the fields with drums and pipes, also through the city with great shrieking, with lights ... in Freiburg a woman saw her man who had fallen in war, and therefore ran into the horde, to him whose head was split, she ran to him and bound his head together." Hans Sachs' poem, "Das wutend heer der kleynen dieb" (1539) describes the furious host in gruesome detail, with the ravens flapping above and plucking out the eyes of the dead, till at last "there came one behind, who had been hanged the same day, had still his eyes and saw me."

The procession of the dead is, as one might expect, closely connected with foreboding death. In the Schwabian *Zimmerische Chronik* (1564-76), it is described how a nobleman, von Seckendorf, sees the grisly nature of his own death and has it prophesied by the furious host a year before the event, which duly takes place. The Norwegian oskorei stops either at places where someone has been or shall be murdered, in a manner to the Baltic werewolves described by Olaus Magnus in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), who, like the oskorei, come uninvited, drink up the ale and mead in the cellars, and whose Yule visit also portends a death in the approaching year. In England, the Wild Hunt comes to fetch the souls of the evil; in Jutland, the Hunt's strong riding foretells war and its passing through a house in West Jutland is a sign of great bad luck to come (Olrik, "Odinsjageren i Jyland", *Dania* VIII, p. 146). Landstad reports how the Telemarker Tor

saw the "Aasgaardsreiden" with his brother Gredgard riding in the host. He hurried at once to his brother, only to find him sitting "dead as a stock or a stone" (*Norvegs Folkslagsminne* 13, p. 17).

It is clear that, on the Continent, this army was first and foremost an army of ghosts, but it also may have had other characteristics. The use of the term "wutendes heer" to characterize Pharaoh's army attacking the Israelites, the Saracens attacking Charlemagne's army, and the Jews attacking Christ, suggests that the phrase was essentially tied to the idea of a host hostile to Christianity -- a host embodying the active forces of darkness, which also appears in *Das Väterbuch* (late 13th C) as "the devil's wutendez her." It would, perhaps, be going too far to suggest that this preserved a memory of the process by which Christianity demonized aspects of the native Germanic religion; however, it seems clear that the term had a quite specific connotation beyond the simple literal meaning of "furious host," which in turn supports the interpretation of early folklorists such as Grimm, that "wutendes heer" might originally have been "Wotan's Heer," with the god "conveniently ... stowed away in a cognate verb" (*Teutonic Mythology,* vol. III, p. 920). The close similarity of the genitive "Wutanes her" and the nominative "wutendes her" makes it at least plausible that the name of the heathen god could have easily been assimilated into the less telling phrase as his worship was forgotten -- though he does continue to appear both as in the Nachtsegen and Rudiger von Munir's "Wuotung", and as "Wuot." Both forms appear in Switzerland (Cysat): Wuttjns Heer, Guttisheer, Guttjns heer. The movement of the initial W to G is documented for the personal name, as is the loss of the final -n in the genitive compound, in Godesberg on the Rhine (from Godansberg, Wodansberg). On the Elbe, a feminine leader of the Wild Hunt appears, called Fru Wode or Fru Gode; the Wild Hunt is also said to be led by a Frau Gauden in Mecklenburg (Lisch, *Mecklenburger jahrbuch,* 8, 202-5). Grimm also suggests that *Hackelberend* (Westphalia) may be interpreted as "cloak-bearer" and seen as another name of Wotan (*Teutonic Mythology III,* p. 923). In 1666, the Swedish Johannes Scheffes mentions the nocturnal specter host in connection with Odin and identifies this with the German *Wutensher.*

The Old Norse materials have neither an Odin's Host/ Furious Host nor a Wild Hunt, but there are some references which may be related to the same source beliefs. The *gandreidh* described in *Njals saga* CXXV bears a close resemblance to the Furious Host materials:

> "(Hildiglumr) heard a great outburst, so that he thought both earth and heaven trembled; afterwards he looked in a westerly direction, it seemed to him that he saw then a ring and orbs of fire on it and in the ring a man on a gray horse. He shot swiftly on, and was faring hard; he had a burning brand in his hand; he rode so near to (Hildiglumr), that he could see him quite clearly; he was black as pitch. He spoke this verse:
>
> I ride a horse with foaming mouth and wet forehead, willing ill;
> flames are in the ends, poison in the middle
> Flosi's plans are like the flying staff

> Then it seemed to (Hildiglumr) that he shot the brand eastwards to the fells and it seemed to him that a great fire leapt up, so that it did not seem to him that he could see the fells. He thought to see the man ride east under the fire ..."

Hildiglumr tells this to another man, Hjalti, who says, "You have seen the gandreidh, and that always comes before great events." In his edition of the text, Finnur Jonsson comments on this that "One may not think of Odinn," though does not explain why not. Odinn himself boasts of knowing a spell for the confusion of "hedge-riders" faring through the air ("Havamal" 155). Witches are also called "mirk-riders" (Harbardhzliodh 20) and "evening-riders" (Helgakvidha Hjorvardhzsonar 15), though these latter titles may refer to the magical act of nightmare-riding, rather than to the wild ride through the air, such as that carried out by the "Darradhrljodh" valkyries before the Battle of Clontarf (*Brennu-Njals saga,* ch. 157).

Processions of the untimely dead do not appear in the Old Norse sources; however, this may be partially explained by the growth of the Valholl belief, perhaps via the developmental process of the Everlasting Battle story in which the slain are awakened by magical means to continue their fighting forever. Being specifically limited to their own battlefield and, later, to Valholl, the Old Norse furious host should not have been expected to go riding about at night. Further, even if a folklore tradition of a "furious host" of the dead, Odinnic or otherwise, had existed in the Viking Age, it is by no means certain that it would have been recorded in the Eddic materials, which largely deal with specific mythical events. The medieval Norwegian ballad "Draumkvaede" or, in some versions, "Draugkve'en," does seem to describe something closer to the "furious host:"

> There came the host from out the north, I thought it was the worst. In front rode Grutte Gray-Beard upon a jet-black horse (Landstad, *Norske Folkeviser*).

The other major variant of the ballad describes Grutte Gray-beard as wearing a black hat. Knut Liestöl suggests that this figure may well be a survival of a demonized Odinn, comparing the Odinsheiti "Höttr" (Hat), "Sidhhöttr" (Broad Hat), and "Harbardhr" (Hoar-Beard) to the description of Grutte Gray-Beard, interpreting the name "Grutte" as coming from a root meaning "to look angrily, fiercely; to have an angry or sulky expression in one's eyes" ("Draumkvaede", *Studia Norvegica 3,* 1946, pp. 70-1).

The earliest find which has been theorized to bear a relationship to the "furious host" belief is the Tune stone, which memorializes a man by the name of Woduridar.

Frequent efforts have been made to give this name an Odinnic or cultic interpretation (Eike, "Oskorei og ekstaseriter", *Norveg 23,* 1980, pp. 281-2), and the "furious-rider" could certainly be seen as fitting in with the "furious host", but the general lack of data surrounding "Woduridar" leaves all such theories in the realm of speculation.

The description of the strange procession as a hunt first appears in England, in the *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for the year of 1127.

> "Then soon thereafter many men saw and heard many hunters hunting. The hunters were black and large and loathly, and their hounds all black and broad-eyed and loathly, and they rode on black horses and black bucks. This was seen in the same way in the town Burch and in all the woods from that town to Stanford, and the monks heard the horns blowing, that they blew at night. Trustworthy men who watched at night said that they thought that there might lit well have been about twenty or thirty horn-blowers. This was seen and heard from when they came thither all that Lenten-tide to Easter. This was its incoming; of its out-going we can not yet say. God fore see."

The horn-blowing black men with broad-eyed hounds are entirely characteristic for the furious host, although the chronicle does not give a specific name for the phenomenon.

Thereafter, the description of a ghostly hunt does not appear until the folklore collections of the nineteenth century. By that time, however, it seems to have been thoroughly established. Jacqueline Simpson comments that, "Since we can safely assume that in the 1840s Faye and Thiele were ... seeking out the oldest informants available, and that these too were drawing on childhood memories of what their elders had told them, the stories given here represent over 200 years of stable, homogenous tradition." (*Scandinavia Folktales,* p. 7) In Northern Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, the Wild Hunt seems to have come more and more into prominence, overshadowing the Furious Host described by Scheffes in the 1600s; the Hunt aspect never appears in Norway, however. The "Wilde Jagd" described by Flörke in Rostock, 1832, has aspects of both.

> "... the Wild Hunt, also called the Furious Host and in Mecklenburg the Wohl, a thing, of which I heard many shuddersome tales in my childhood and also afterward. Our field-workers ... were set in fear by the Wild Hunt, so that they only with trembling dared to go to work in the evening. First they heard a dog-barking of rough and fine voices through one another; as these came nearer, they saw many glowing coals flying through the air, and then, if they had not already run away, roared the whole host with horrifying raging, barking, blowing, as with hunting horns, and hard breathing among them. In my youth it was considered a wholly definite thing, that these were old robberknights, who had no rest in the grave, and for a little while drove forward through the Overworld with their hunting hounds, as they had been used to in life; a pious priest told me, however, that it was no one other thou the Devil himself with several evil angels, who amused themselves by frightening humans. The Devil took on for this the shape of the old heathen god Wodan, under which he had previously been worshipped in these lands, from which also the name Wohl came, which was corrupted from Wodan."

The theme that the Hunt is led by a nobleman doomed for his sins is common to both Scandinavia and Germany. A characteristic example of the story comes from Rugen: a great prince who loved the hunt more than anything else. When a herdboy cut the bark of a young tree to make a pipe, the prince tied the youth's guts to the tree and chased him about it. A farmer who killed a stag that was eating his corn, the prince bound living to a stag and let the animal run free in the wood until it had battered the man to death. "For such cruel deeds the monstrous man at last got the payment he had earned." He broke his neck while hunting, "and now it is his punishment after death, that he also has no rest in the grave, but must about the whole night and hunt like a wild monster. This happens every night, winter and summer, from midnight to an hour before sunrise, and then people often hear him crying: 'Wod! Wod! Hoho! Hallo! Hallo!', but his usual cry is 'Wod! Wod!' and from this he himself is called 'der Wode' in many places" (Jahn, Ulrich. *Volkssagen aus Pommern und Rügen,* pp. 4-5).

The various German, Swedish, and Danish stories of this ilk are clearly medieval or post-medieval in origin, and have imposed a form of social commentary onto the original legend. The leaders of the Hunt are almost invariably men of high status, either men who abuse their privileges in some manner or commit some form of blasphemy: hunting on a Sunday or uttering some phrase along the lines of "the Lord may keep his heaven, so he leave me my hunting." Not subject to earthly justice, they are punished in the afterlife. Such tales reinforce the peasant's sense of virtue in contrast to the "evil" folk in power; by setting the principal character into supernatural legend, they also express an otherwise unacceptable hostility towards and, perhaps, fear of the living nobility hunting through the woods. There also seems to be a progression from the ghostly procession to the horde of hunters which, with the emphasis on a single, named figure, eventually becomes the solitary hunt which often (though not exclusively) appears in Swedish and Danish legend.

A variant of the Wild Hunt in which the hunter chases after a supernatural female is known from Sweden to the Tyrolean Alps, and first appears in the Germanic countries as a part of Middle High German heroic literature, in the *Ecken-Lied.* The basic theme is characterized by this Swedish tale.

> "My father and my grandfather were out hunting in Solerud Forest one day. That evening they heard a strange barking; there was one hound barking very shrilly, and there were also two with a deeper cry.... All at once, a woman came running by with her hair streaming out behind her. Next came the hound that barked so shrill, and then the two others. Shortly after, along came a man with red hair and beard. He had a gun with him. He just went straight along. Father said this was Oden's hunt." (Simpson, *Scandinavian Folktales,* p. 226. Collected in 1944 from an informant born in 1860).

The woman is variously a wood-wife (Germany or Switzerland), a mermaid (W. Jutland), one of the "hulder-folk" (Sweden), or an elf (Denmark). The hunter chasing the woman always appears as a solitary figure. The theme of this supernatural hunt seems to have little connection with the damned lord leading a group of hunters. The red hair and beard

of the Swedish "Oden" seem more typical for the Old Norse Thorr (though Odinn is also called *Raudhgrani,* "Redbeard"). Celander ("Oskoreien ok besläktade föreställningar," *Saga och sed* 1942, p. 155) suggests that this is an independent tradition, with "Oden's" hunt of the wood-wife taken over from Thorr's troll-hunt. Thorr is in fact particularly noted for killing giant-women. In "Hárbarzljodh 23," he says "Mighty would be the race of etins, if they all lived; there would be no men in Midhgardhr," and Thorbjörn disarskald credits Thorr with more female than male trophies. Though there is probably insufficient evidence to make more than a tentative association between Thorr's pursuit of giantesses and the later hunter's pursuit of supernatural women, especially given the wide spread of the latter, Celander's suggestion that this version of the Wild Hunt legend may be an independent tradition is entirely plausible. If the hunt for the wood-wife or mermaid is indeed derived from a wholly different source than the large-scale hunt of the dead, which is clearly a later version of the original procession of the dead, then the association with Oden may be a simple product of a natural confusion between the two types of supernatural hunts.

The identity of the leader of the host varies from place to place. Often the horde of spirits is identified with an historical or legendary-historical figure. Gervasius von Tillbury describes King Arthur as the leader of the Wild Hunt (1211). In Lausitz and Orlagau, it is Dietrich von Bern -- Theoderic the Great in Germanic legend. Around the Hessian Odenberg, Charlemagne; in France, Charles the Fifth (folk etymology making "Charles quint" into "Hellekin," as in the 14th-century "Exposition de la doctrine chretienne"); in Dartmoor, Sir Francis Drake; in Sealand, King Valdemar; in Jutland, Christian the Second; in Norway, the oskorei is led by Sigurd Svein and Guro Rysserova ("Gudrun Horse-tail") -- the Sigurdhr Fáfnisbani and Gudhrun Gjúkadottir of the Eddic lays. In Middle and Upper Germany, the man who goes before the host was called "der trewe Eckhardt." Grimm identifies this figure as Eckhardt, Kriemhild's chamberer in Nibelungenlied (III, p. 935), and in the Heldenbuch, he is said to sit outside the Venusberg to warn people, much as he does in the accounts of the furious host. By 1534, Eckhart had passed into a proverb: "Du thust wie der trewe Eckhart, der warnet auch jederman vor schaden" (You do like the trusty Eckhart, who also warns everyone of harm). Some of the names appear only in Wild Hunt legend, as Ritter Alke of Greifenhagen, Graf von Ebernburg of Zabelsdorf, and Hans von Hackelnberg/Hackelberend of Westphalia. The most common names, however, are derivations from the **wodh-* root: in Schwabia, the army is "Wuotes Here" (*Zimmerische Chronik*); the hunter is "der Wode" in Rügen; the Middle German names "Wutan" and corresponding "wutanes her" have already been mentioned. Westphalia preserves the name Woenjäger beside the more difficult forms Hodenjäger and Bodenjäger; in the northern half of Jutland, we have Wojensjaeger, Uen, Uensjaeger. In Sweden, we have the Odensjakt, with Oden identified as an ancient king doomed to wander the world in punishment for his sins (in Varend), or as a sharpshooter who hunted on a Sunday.

The name Wodan or Wod does not appear in Normandy, England, or, surprisingly, Norway. However, Sigurd has undergone a curious change in the Norwegian folklore of the oskorei. While all the German and Norse legends in which Sigurd appear show him as a youthful hero, doomed to an untimely death. In fact, the depiction of this hero on the

Hylestad stave-church portals shows him as beardless; if the Sigurd of the Ramsundberget rune stone is bearded at all, his beard is very short, in contrast to the long-bearded smith Reginn in the same carving. However, M.B. Landstad records (*Norsk Folkeminnelags skrifter 13,* 1926) that Sigurd Svein is terrifyingly old, and decrepit to the point of blindness, so that when he should see, his eyes need to be opened with a hook. The old man with seeing difficulties is by no means similar to the young hero Sigurdhr Fafnisbani, though the ballad of Sigurd Svein is otherwise relatively faithful to *Völsunga Saga*: he is, however, remarkably similar to Sigurdhr's godly patron and forefather, the aged Odinn who also goes by the names Bileygr ("Weak-Eyed"), Herbundi ("Army-Blind"), and Helblindi ("Death-Blind"), leading to the suspicion that Norwegian folk tradition might have replaced the name of the god with that of his hero.

A variant form of the legend is that associated with the female Perchte/Holda/Holle (in Germany) or Frien/Freki/Frik/Freja (Sweden, Northern Germany). Like the masculine figures discussed above, Perchte or Holda leads a train of souls. However, her followers are sometimes young children (Orla-gau); she also steals children. She also acts as an enforcer of female social norms: she punishes women who have not finished their spinning by the appointed night or who spin on the wrong day. She often gives gifts to children, as her masculine equivalents do not. Particularly in Austria and Scandinavia, the Yule-time female figure who can either be the kindly gift-giver or the fearsome demon is St. Lucia, who also is associated with animal-masking. In Austria, she is *Spillalutsche,* "Spindle-Lucia," who punishes children and spinners with red-hot bobbins. In Schleswig-Holstein the Holda-figure is shown with a cow skin and horns, and a cow's head or foot marks Lucy Day on some of the Scandinavian rune-stocks (Liungman, Waldemar, *Traditionswanderungen Euphrat-Rhein,* part II. FF Communications 119, 1938, pp. 654-55). This bears a certain similarity to the Norwegian image of Guro Rysserova, who appears as a woman in front, but has a horse's tail.

The Wild Hunt or Furious Host appears at different times of the year, being frequently seen in spring and fall, but the most common and consistent period for its appearance overall is the Yule season. This fits in neatly with the Germanic tradition as a whole: Yule is the season in which hauntings and supernatural visitation of all sort are the most common. The hauntings in *Eyrbyggja saga* take place at Yule, as does the death of Glam in *Grettis saga.* Folk tales of all the Scandinavian countries have trolls or elves making their appearance at Yule, particularly in Iceland, where a common theme is the supernatural visitor menacing the woman who must stay home to look after the house on Christmas Eve. Christopher Arnold, writing in 1674, mentions "neither good or evil spirits, which are particularly in the air around the holy birth-time of Christ; and are called "Juhlafolker," that is, "Yule-folk" by (the Laplanders)." This name is suspiciously similar to the Old Norse "joln" for "gods" (in Eyvindr skaldaspillr's "Haleygjatal"), which both Magnusson (p. 433) and Faulkes (*Edda,* p. 134) interpret as being derived from *jól,* "Yule." The oskorei is also called *julereien* or *juleskreien.*

Another theme which is common to the Wild Hunt/ Furious Host legend is that of the human being interacting with the hunt in some way. Involvement with the host of the dead can often be dangerous or fatal. In the *Zimmerische Chronik,* one man bandages a

ghost and becomes ill, another man answers the hunt with the same result. In Pomerania and Westfalia, the Hunt chases travellers to death. M. Landstad cites a Telemark story of the "Aasgaardsreid" leaving a dead man hanging where they had drunken the Yule ale. "He was dressed as a Nummedaler and had silver buttons on his best. The Aasgaardsreid had taken him in Nummedal and carried him along, and they had presumably ridden so bard that he had burst" (*Norsk folkeminnelags skrifter 13,* p. 20). The motif of the living person who is picked up by the horde and carried somewhere else is particularly common in Germany and in Norway. A curious form of this theme which is unique to Norway has people undergoing a sort of involuntary separation from their bodies, which lie as if dead while their souls are faring with the *oskorei,* as Landstad describes: "She fell backwards and lay the whole night as if she were dead. It was of no profit to shake her, for the Asgardsreid had made off with her." The woman then awakes to tell how she had ridden with the host "so that fire spurted under horse-hooves" (p. 15). In Pomerania, doors are closed against the Hunter to keep children from being carried off; in Bohuslän, it was said that "Oden fares from up in the air and takes creatures and children with him."

A number of the tales of the Wild Hunt describe the punishment of someone who mocks at the hunt, as in Neuvorpommern, where "A miller's boy stood before the mill, when the Wild Hunt went over him. 'Take me with!' the youth cried. 'Half part!' Wode said, and as he came back, cast a human leg before the mill, crying, 'Häst du wullt jagen / Kannst ok mit gnagen!' -- If you wanted to hunt, you can also eat. The boy tried to get rid of the leg in all possible ways, but nothing worked" (Jahn, *Volkssagen aus Pommern und Rugen,* pp. 7-8). Variants of this story are repeated a number of times in Northern Germany.

Those who help the Hunter or members of his train, however, are often rewarded with gifts. In the *Strassburger Chronicle*'s example of the Freiburg woman who bandaged her dead husband, the woman was given "a great golden head, from which she should drink ... the woman held the head in her hand, and nothing happened to her. It was found afterwards, that the golden head was good, and had been no betrayal. The devil had certainly stolen it somewhere." Those who hold the hounds of the Danish Wolmar are given apparently worthless trifles which later turn into gold. In the North German stories, similarly, the foam which a hound-holder wipes from the Hunter's horse turns into gold pieces (Jahn, p. 12), and a man of Boeck who fixed Frau Gauden's carriage wheels was given the dung of her hounds, which afterwards became gold (Grimm, III, p. 926). A combination of both themes appears in another North German tale in Jahn's collection, where the man who calls to the Hunt is given a horse-leg with the words, "There have you also something for your hunting," but the next day the horse-leg has become gold (p. 30).

While it takes a foolhardy person to interfere with the Hunt, only the courageous survive when the Hunt accosts them. In "Local Traditions of the Quantocks" (*Folklore* XIX, 1908, p. 42), C.W. Whistler reports that a man "dared to cross the path in the dark, and was overtaken by the Wild Hunt as it passed overhead. And when he looked up, there was the devil himself following the hounds and riding on a great pig. What was worse, the devil pulled up and spoke to him. 'Good fellow,' he called, 'how ambles my sow?' The man was most terrible feared, but he knew that he must make some answer, so he replied,

'Eh, by the Lord, her ambles well enough!' And that saved him, for the devil could not abide the name of the Lord, so that he and his dogs vanished in a flash of fire!" Another well-known Mecklenburg legend has Wod engaging in a tug-o-war with a peasant whom he meets on the way, but the man is clever enough to tie the chain to an oak, so that Wod cannot pull him up into the air. "'Well pulled!' said the hunter, 'many's the man I've made mine, you are the first that ever held out against me, you shall have your reward.'" The peasant is then given some blood and a hindquarter from Wod's stag, which have turned into gold and silver by the time he has reached his cottage (Grimm, III, pp. 924-925).

While these tales show the Hunt as Märchen, attempts have also been made to interpret the legends as based on natural phenomena. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Wild Hunt/Furious Host was often compared to the stormwinds of winter. A more plausible explanation was offered by the Danish scholar H. F. Feilberg: in "Hvorledes Opstar Sagn i Vore Dage" (*Dania* II, 198294, p. 121) he describes how, one evening near Odense, he heard a great rustling and hound-barking in the air over his head, and how he thought at once of the Odinsjaeger, but "Next day I asked the teacher of natural history at Latin school which migratory birds it was that I had heard." Hylten-Cavallius (*Wärend och Wirdarne* vol. I, p. 216) cites the Wärend expressions, "that is Oden's hunt, those are Oden's hounds that can be heard in the air" for the passing of the wild geese, and in eastern Hinterpommern, the Wild Hunt comes in the spring and fall, when the migratory birds come and go. It cannot be denied that the eerie barking voices and rustling of a flock of geese passing overhead is very likely to have contributed to the longevity of the belief in the Wild Hunt; however, it does not explain the legend. Wild geese, after all, do not visit the northern countries around Yuletime, when the Wild Hunt most often rides. Further, Iceland is a favorite stopping place of many sorts of migratory birds: if the legends of the Wild Hunt were heavily based on flocks of geese, one might have expected them to have survived better there than anywhere else. However, Iceland lacks hound-and-horse hunting, and also lacks the sort of social stratification which may have contributed strongly to the development of the Furious Host into the Wild Hunt elsewhere.

Otto Höfler, in his *Verwandlungskulte, Volkssagen, und Mythen,* has strongly put forth the idea that many of the medieval records of the Wild Hunt/Furious Host were actually descriptions of a ritual folk-procession. The fact that the host appears by both day and night, coming into the city streets as well as terrifying lonely travellers in the dark wood, may support this theory, as does Vulpius' 16th-century description of the Nürnberg *Fastnacht* train as "the wild host, very strange figures, horned, beaked, tailed ... roaring and shouting ... behind, on a black, wild steed, Frau Holda, the Wild Huntress, blowing into the hunting horn, swinging the cracking whip, her head-hair shaking about wildly like a true wonder-outrage." Vulpius also calls this procession "das wuthende Heer" (Meissen, p. 124). Similar living trains appear in the Tirol, such as the *Perchtenlauf* described by J.V. v. Zingerle in 1857:

> "The Perchtenlauf was earlier usual on the last Fasching-evening. It was a kind of masked procession. The masked ones were called Perchten. They were divided into beautiful and ugly.... The beautiful Perchten often

> distributed gifts. So went it loudly and joyfully, if the wild Perchte herself did not come among them. If this spirit mixed among them, the game was dangerous. One could recognize the presence of the wild Perchte when the Perchten raged all wild and furious and sprang over the well-stock. In this case the Perchten ran swiftly away from each other in fear and tried to reach the nearest, best house. For as soon as one was under a roof, the Wild One could not have them any longer. Otherwise she would tear apart anyone, who she could get possession of. Even today, one can see places where the Perchten torn apart by the wild Perchte lie buried" (Sitten, *Bräuuche, und Meinungen des Tiroler Volkes,* in Höfler, p. 59).

This idea of a Yule/masking game becoming terrifyingly real also appears in a Danish folk-tale, where a young woman dances with the Yule-buck, which then comes to life as the Devil himself and batters her to death against the barn walls (Simpson, Jacqueline. *Scandinavian Folktales,* pp. 80-1). Christine N.F. Eike, in her article "Oskoreia og ekstaseriter" extends Höfler's investigation to the Norwegian materials, concluding that there may well be an original relationship between the living bands of young men that travel about during the Yule season riding horses, drinking beer, and so forth, and the tales about the bands of the dead who do the same.

Overall, the legends of the "Furious Host" or "Wild Hunt" seem to have maintained a remarkable degree of consistency through their wide range of time and space a consistency which can, perhaps, be best explained by the essential reality of the underlying belief to those who held it, from the heathen period through the time of our own grandparents. So when you go out into the night this wintertime, listen carefully for the barking of dogs and the cry "Midden in dem Weg!" Do not mock at the horde that sweeps past, but be ready to carry home whatever Woden or Holda should give you, for the lowliest of gifts from the Hunt's leader may be found to turn to true gold like the very folk-stories themselves, whose quaint dialects and humble words cloak the gold of our forebears' souls.

Book-Hoard

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