

# *Hellhounds, Werewolves and the Germanic Underworld*

## Alby Stone

There is a curious connection between dogs and travel to the realm of the dead. It can be found particularly in Indo-European mythologies, although it also occurs in Egypt, Siberia, and north America. According to the Vedic mythology of ancient India, for instance, the deceased must pass by the four-eyed dogs of Yama, king of the dead; and Greek mythology tells of the dog Kerberos, popularly endowed with three heads, who watches the entrance to Hades. Mention must also be made of the white, red-eared hounds of Celtic myth. But the idea of the underworld watchdog appears to have reached its fullest, and most complex expression among the Germanic peoples.

In Scandinavia, hounds are associated with Niflheimr, the mortuary land ruled by the grim queen Hel. The Eddic poem *Baldrs draumar* (*Balder's Dreams*) tells how Odin rides to Niflheimr to ascertain the meaning of the dreams that have been troubling his son. On the way,

He met a hound that came from Hel.  
That one had blood upon his breast,  
and long did he bark at Baldrs father.  
Onward rode Odin - the earth-way roared -  
till he came to the high hall of Hel. [1]

Also in the *Poetic Edda*, in the *Fjolsvinnsmal* section of the poem *Svipdagsmal*, two dogs guard Lyfjaberg ('Mount of Healing') the otherworld dwelling of the maiden Mengloth, which is surrounded by a wall of fire, and a clay wall called Gastropnir. H.R. Ellis Davidson [2] has convincingly identified Mengloth with the goddess Hel, on the grounds that there are enough significant parallels between Niflheimr and Lyfjaberg to suggest that the rulers of the two places were also probably meant to be one and the same. The two dogs are worth a closer look:

One is called Gifr, Geri is the other,  
if you wish to know:  
they are strong watchdogs, and they keep watch until the doom of the gods. [3]

*Gifr* means 'Greedy'; as does *Geri*. The latter is also the name of one of Odin's two wolves - the other is *Freki*, whose name has the same meaning. As Bruce Lincoln has shown, these names are all derived from the same Proto-Indo-European root, *\*gher-*, which is thought to denote the sound made by an animal, in this case the canine variety. In essence, the names all mean 'Growler'. The same source gives rise to the name *Garmr*, 'Dog', the dreadful beast that is said to be fettered before Niflheimr; and to *Kerberos*. Lincoln also points out that the same root has given rise to a class of words that he describes as 'sub-verbal utterances: sounds commonly made by people, none of which constitute actual words'. He concludes that the Germanic words so derived refer to greed as 'that characteristic whereby a human being is reduced to the level of a hungry beast: growling, ravenous, and inarticulate', and suggests that the association of dog and underworld may be due in part to the dog's widespread reputation as a devourer of corpses; the growl denotes 'the greed of none other than all-devouring death' [4].

To Lincoln's notion we may add the simple observation that the dog's common role in human communities makes it a natural candidate for the part of guardian of the underworld. But there is much more than that to be said for it. Dogs and wolves are closely related, in traditional mythology as well as in nature. The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* describes the monster Grendel and his mother in terms that leave little doubt as to their lupine nature - among the words used to describe them are: *werga*, *werhtho*, *heorowearh*, *brimwylf*, *grundwyrge*, all of which contain the elements *wearg/wearh* or *wylf*. Grendel is also called a *scucca* (demon), from which the second element of the name of Black Shuck, the supernatural dog encountered by nocturnal travellers in East Anglian folklore, is derived. It is also said of Grendel that *him of eagam stod ligge gelicost leoht unfaeger*, 'from his eyes shone a fire-like, baleful light' [5].

Grendel and his mother are both haunters and guardians of a burial mound in marshland, and are given an aquatic aspect to match - *brimwylf*, for instance, means 'water-wolf'. This brings to mind the bodies of water - usually rivers, but sometimes a lake or sea - that are invariably supposed to surround the Indo-European underworld, and those of some non-Indo-European cultures. This brings us, strange as it may seem, to St Christopher.

In Christian popular tradition, St Christopher was a giant who carried travellers across a river. The story is well known, and does not need to be repeated here. But Old English traditions of the saint are rather unusual. According to the Old English *Passion of St Christopher*, *se w s healf hundiscas mancynnes*, 'he was of the race of mankind who are half hound'. The Old English *Martyrology* elaborates upon this: he was *thaere theode thaer men habbath hunda heafod & of thaere eorþan on theare aeton men hi selfe*, 'from the nation where men have the head of a dog and from the country where men devour each other'; furthermore, *he haefde hundes haefod, & his loccas waeron ofer gemet side, & his eagan scinon swa leohte swa morgensteorra, & his teth waeron swa scearpe swa eofores tægas*, 'he had the head of a hound, and his locks were extremely long, and his eyes shone as bright as the morning star, and his teeth were as sharp as a boar's tusks' [6].

It is plain that this is not quite the patron saint of travellers that we are told about at Sunday School. It is a peculiarly Old English view of St Christopher. He resembles the monstrous *Healfhundingas*, a race mentioned in two Old English texts: *The Wonders of the East* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. More to the point, he resembles the lupine monsters of *Beowulf*. Like most other Indo-European traditions, the Germans seem to have conceived of an otherworldly ferryman who conducted the dead to the underworld; indeed, Odin was so pictured during the Viking Age. It seems reasonable to suppose that St Christopher's occupation and location struck a traditional chord familiar to Anglo-Saxon ears, and that the legend was consequently coloured by Germanic underworld motifs.

At this point, we must return to the Grendel family, and to Odin's wolves. Grendel and his mother are several times characterised by compounds of the word *wearg* or its variant *wearh*, which may be more familiar to readers of J.R.R. Tolkien in its continental German form *warg*, although it has similar forms in other Germanic tongues. This is a complex word: it is often used simply to mean 'wolf', but it also denotes an outlaw or the state of outlawry, in which case it refers to those who have committed crimes that are either unforgivable or unredeemable, and

who are cast out from their communities and doomed to wander until they die. Outlaws were traditionally forest-dwellers, and could be legitimately killed.

It would be easy to assume that outlaws were called *warg* simply because their offences were of an especially savage kind, and that they were likened to wolves, wild, bestial, and uncivilised, as a result. Anglo-Norman law, for example, stated that the outlaw would 'be held to be a wolf and . . . be proclaimed 'wolf's-head" [7]. Interestingly, the Frankish *Lex Salica* uses the phrase *wargus sit* ('he shall be a *warg*') of a despoiler of buried corpses [8]. But *warg* is not a straightforward word. It is derived from an Indo-European *\*wergh-*, 'strangle', via Germanic *\*wargaz*. It is suggested that the use of *warg* and its variants in Germanic legal codes, as a condemnation, 'originally was a magico-legal pronouncement which transformed the criminal into a werewolf worthy of strangulation' [9]. The Indo-European antiquity of this notion is demonstrated in Hittite texts which include the phrase *zi-ik-wa UR.BAR.RA ki-sa-at*, 'thou art become a wolf'; and the name *LU.MES hurkilas*, denoting demon-like entities who are set to capture a wolf and strangle a serpent - *hurkilas* being derived from the same root as *warg* [10]. The *warg*, in this analysis, is a strangler, but one who himself requires strangulation.

The *Lex Salica* is not alone in condemning corpse-violators as *warg*. Exactly the same thing can be found in the *Lex Ripuaria*, and in the laws decreed by Henry I of England. Medieval Scandinavian legal texts, however, tend to apply the cognate term *vargr* to those who kill by cowardly means, and to oath-breakers; however, the term is almost always used in compounds, which suggests that the archaic point has been lost. Ultimately, a *warg* is an outlaw, one who has literally become a wolf in the eyes of his fellows: a *warg* can become what he is by being outlawed, for murder or oath-breaking; or he can be outlawed for what he already is, a *warg*, a worrier of corpses.

The traditional method for disposing of outlaws was hanging, a punishment that is only a minor variation on strangulation. This was the prescribed way of sacrificing to Odin. As the poem *Grimnismal* says, 'Odin's hall is easy to recognise: a *vargr* hangs before the western door...' [11]. Odin is known as *Hangaguth*, 'God of the Hanged'; in Old English, Old Saxon, and Old Norse, the gallows is known as the 'warg-tree'. Strangulation is implied by a number of references to the ropes or snares of the death-goddess in Indo-European myth; and here the name *Mengloth*, 'necklace-glad', may be significant, especially as one of the walls that surround her Lyfjaberg is the clay wall called *Gastropnir*, 'Guest-Strangler'.

The situation thus far can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the land of the dead is guarded by a canine or lupine creature. Secondly, that land must be reached by crossing a body of water. Next, *warg* applies to men who are legally wolves - or werewolves, for that is what we are dealing with here - and are condemned to the noose. Lastly, the references to Grendel in *Beowulf* further suggest that the dogs or wolves who guard or bar the way to the underworld are themselves *warg*.

There are two more things to note before we can progress further. One is an interesting kenning in another Eddic poem, *Helreith Brynhildar*: this is *hrot-garmr*, 'howling dog', which stands for fire, and in this case refers specifically to Brynhild's funeral pyre. The other is the wall of fire that surrounds Mengloth's Lyfjaberg. This is paralleled in several other medieval Norse texts by

walls of flame that surround otherworld realms. The two ideas could be linked: after all, cremation is itself a wall of fire that is a boundary between this world and the next.

This takes us, indirectly, back to *warg*. The *Roggenwolf* ('rye-wolf') of German rural folklore is a demon that lives in grainfields and ambushes peasants, strangling them. This creature, essentially a type of werewolf, is represented at harvest-time by the last sheaf, which is called 'Wolf' and tied up to nullify its malignance. Like Grendel, the *Roggenwolf* has a sinister mother, the *Roggenmutter* or *Kornmutter*. Another lupine connection is the fungus ergot, which is particularly associated with rye. This fungus, which gives the grain an unpleasant appearance, is sometimes known as *Wolf* or *Wolfszahn* ('Wolf-tooth'). Mary R. Gerstein [12] suggests that there is an etymological link between *ergot* and *warg*: she presents a number of examples where variants of *warg* are used to imply moral or physical corruption or disease, and in some they are coupled with the term represented in Old Norse by *argr* and *ergi*, and in other Germanic languages as *earh*, *earg*, *arag*, *arug*, and so on. This is basically a term used to denote passive homosexuality, and is specifically applied to the recipient in anal intercourse. It is also used to describe Odin, as a consequence of his use of the magical technique called *seithr*, an art appropriate to women. Gerstein's idea is that, just as *warg* indicates the transformation of man into wolf, *arg* denotes the notional change of man into woman. *Arg* and its cognate forms form the third corner of this etymological triangle.

Ergot contains a number of interesting substances, chief among which is lysergic acid, from which the hallucinogen LSD is made. Poisoning by ergot (ergotism) used to occur frequently in Europe. Among the symptoms of this virulent, and often lethal, condition are: disruption of motor control functions, causing tremors and writhing, wry neck, convulsions, rolling eyes, and speechlessness; dizziness, confusion, hallucinations, panic attacks, and delusions; extreme thirst, uncontrollable appetite; feelings of extreme heat, or even cold, with itching and tingling, swelling and blistering of the skin. Ergotism was known by a variety of names: St. Anthony's Fire, and - to the physicians of seventeenth-century England - 'suffocation of the mother'. In other words, the symptoms of ergotism mimic lycanthropic behaviour, and can often lead to a fairly convincing simulation of death by strangulation (wry neck) or suffocation [13]. In addition, the presence of lysergic acid is capable of taking the victim on a very bad trip indeed. From the observer's point of view, the symptoms are also superficially similar to rabies. Ergotism or rabies could explain the popular belief that lycanthropy is transmitted through the bite of a werewolf; and in this context ergotism may be the more likely candidate.

Furthermore, the itching and burning sensations caused by extreme vascular constriction - often a prelude to tissue necrosis, gangrene - could also be construed as a foretaste of the fires of hell, and the experience would augment the effects of the lysergic acid. The growth of ergot is stimulated by certain atmospheric conditions: it grows best in overcast and damp weather. Epidemics have been linked to volcanic eruptions, particularly in Scandinavia; and the presence of nearby marshland or lakes is enough to moisten the air sufficiently to facilitate the growth of ergot [14]. To this we must add the simple fact that rye has long been the traditional, staple grain of Germany and Scandinavia; although ergot is by no means exclusive to that cereal. With that in mind, it may be useful to note that the most commonly accepted interpretation of the controversial name *Beowulf* is 'Barley-wolf', which hints at the same theme, and adds the notion of the warrior

as one who can change into a ravening beast, a lycanthropic transformation that is also expressed in the Norse term *berserkr*, 'bear-shirt'.

It is difficult to summarise this complex argument with clarity. The basic Indo-European (or even Eurasiatic) myth, of the dog that keeps watch over the realm of the dead, has been augmented by the peculiarly Germanic idea of the outlaw as wolf, and as a foredoomed sacrificial victim. The term *warg* may originally have applied exclusively to those guilty of desecrating buried corpses, or perhaps even those who killed in a cowardly manner. The latter, if the etymology of *warg* is any indication, may have been stranglers - in other words, those who killed by a method normally reserved for human sacrifice. Like those men who are *argr*, 'passive' homosexuals, the *warg* occupies a marginal position: just as one is a man who acts like a woman, the other is a man who legally *is* a wolf - and is also, it must be remarked, as good as dead in the eyes of his fellows. Such people are able to travel between the worlds of life and death, like the shaman. That these ideas came to grow together is shown in the Middle High German epic *Eneide* by Heinrich von Veldeke, who characterises Kerberos as both *arg* and *warg*:

Cerberus der arge  
und alle sine warge  
die an hem hiengem.

Kerberos the *arg*  
and all the *wargs*  
who follow him. [15]

The phenomenon of ergotism apes both the lycanthropic state of the *warg* and - thanks to the lysergic acid present in the growth - the journey to the otherworld. It also gives the victim an unpleasant precognition of the flames of the funeral pyre, the wall of fire that must be crossed to reach the land of the dead. As we have seen, this fire is itself characterised in one poem as a dog, and in German folklore the fungus that causes the foretaste is called a wolf, or the tooth of a wolf.

The liminal status of the dog, and its role as guardian, has been dealt with in more detail in Bob Trubshaw's *Black dogs: guardians of the corpseways*. It remains only to emphasise that this analysis underscores the argument presented there.

## References

- 1: My translation.
- 2: H.R. Ellis (Cambridge, 1943), *The Road to Hel*, ch. 7.
- 3: My translation.
- 4: Bruce Lincoln (Chicago, 1991), *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, ch. 7. All quotations are from p. 100.
- 5: Cited by Sam Newton (Cambridge, 1993), *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia*, p. 6.
- 6: Cited by Sam Newton (*Ibid.*), pp. 5-6.
- 7: Quoted by Mary R. Gerstein (Berkeley, Ca., 1974), 'Germanic *Warg*: The Outlaw as

- Werwolf, in G.J. Larson (ed.), *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, p. 132.
- 8: Katherine Fischer Drew (Philadelphia, 1991), *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, p. 118.
- 9: Gerstein (op. cit.), pp. 133-4.
- 10: Ibid., p. 134.
- 11: My translation.
- 12: Gerstein (op. cit.), pp. 153-4.
- 13: Mary Kilbourne Matossian (New Haven, 1989), *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History*, pp. 11-12.
- 14: Ibid., pp. 13-14, 94-5
- 15: Quoted by Gerstein (op. cit.), p. 150.
- 16: Bob Trubshaw (*Mercian Mysteries*, 1994)