

The Tyranny of the Gingerbread House

Contextualising the Fear of Wolves in Medieval Northern Europe through Material Culture, Ecology and Folklore

Aleks Pluskowski

In this paper, I propose to contextualise the popular perception of the “fairy tale wolf” as a window into a normative past, by focusing on responses to this animal in Britain and southern Scandinavia from the 8th to the 14th centuries, drawing on archaeological, artistic and written sources. These responses are subsequently juxtaposed with the socio-ecological context of the concept of the “fairy tale wolf” in early modern France. At a time when folklore is being increasingly incorporated into archaeological interpretation, I suggest that alternative understandings of human relations with animals must be rooted in specific ecological and social contexts.

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The gingerbread house, or one constructed from any other sweet substance, is probably the most familiar monument in the fairy tale landscape and this is partially because its presence has not been contested; in a conceptual space that is being continually redefined, it remains an accepted, established symbol of the influential fairy tale in western culture, despite its sinister undertones. The wolf is also an instantly recognisable feature of the fairy tale environment, yet its presence there is increasingly disputed, with some aiming to eradicate it completely (Gisbon 1996:26). Without doubt, the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* is responsible for the most familiar incarnation of the “fairy tale wolf”, representing a cohesive yet flexible, cultural package with global currency (Fig. 1). Its evolution can be quickly summarised: a peasant folktale – mostly recorded by later folklorists in south-eastern France and northern Italy – was adapted and printed for the aristocratic salon by Charles Perrault in the last years of the 17th century, after which it moved with French Huguenots fleeing persecution into Germany, where it once more



Fig. 1. A modern incarnation of the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood by Matt Mahurin (Steele et al. 1985:121).

became transmitted orally and where a new, happier ending was added, possibly from the popular German tale “The Wolf and the Kids”. This transformation from printed to oral literature ensured its inclusion by the Grimms in their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in the first few decades of the 19th century, within a very different cultural milieu which saw the working *forêt* of the early modern French peasantry being replaced by the enchanted *Wald* of early 19th century German middle class household tales. At this time, its meaning and moral changed and it may have also acquired a contemporary political slant (Jäger

1989). In 1857, the 7th edition of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* formed the basis for successive English translations and ultimately led to global recognition. So far the collection has been translated into more than 160 languages – from Inupiat to Swahili – whilst in the United States there is a choice of at least 120 editions. As a publishing phenomenon, the Grimms’ fairy tale collection competes with the Bible (O’Neill 1999).

Today, *Little Red Riding Hood* can be found in a diverse range of media from advertisements and films through to comic strips, novels and reworked fairy tales. The story’s historical evolution, aptly described by Zipes (1983) as “the trials and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood”, has caught up not only the central character, now envisaged as a feisty and mischievous adult as much as an innocent child, but also the setting – the forest – and the villain of the piece – the wolf. Like all characters in fairy tales, this lupine is continuously recreated with contemporary meaning; compare, for example, the relative size and appearance of the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood in Cartwright and Amery’s version of the tale (2004) and Luc Besson’s *Chanel No. 5* television advertisement based on the same characters (1998), bearing in mind their respective intended audiences.

But why does all this matter to medieval archaeologists or historians? Although fairy tales by definition are set in no particular time or place (Hüsing 1989:64) and are regarded by many as “timeless” (O’Neill 1999:128), these stories containing wolves in woods, in particular *Little Red Riding Hood*, have been envisaged

as windows, albeit fragmentary ones, into human experiences of lupines in medieval Europe (Kruuk 2002:69). In fact, one folklorist citing the names Little Red Riding Hood and Fenrir in the same sentence, concluded that: “There is no doubt that the wolf of this tale is related to Nordic mythology” (Saintyves 1989:81).

Wolf conservationists appear to have largely accepted a vague medieval origin for the “fairy tale wolf” and actively strive to replace this lupine – a sign of a “bygone and primitive” mindset – with a more acceptable alternative based on the “real” animal. For example, one of the objectives of the leading wolf conservation society in Britain (the UKWCT) is: “to dispel the erroneous stereotyping that plagues them (wolves), such as the ‘Big Bad Wolf’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’” (www.ukwolf.org/uk-wolf-conservation-trust/about.php).

Fairy tales also perpetuate “erroneous” stereotypes of helpless princesses and witches in gingerbread houses, yet what some envisage as their cultural tyranny is blamed for sustaining widespread negative attitudes to the wolf, perhaps more than anything else. For one of the functions of the “fairy tale wolf” is to evoke fear, and the widespread fear of wolves is widely believed to have motivated their persecution in both the Old and the New World, and is clearly an important factor in determining current attitudes (Fritts *et al.* 2003:302). Here fairy tales are used to conflate a millennium of human responses to wolves and contribute to a normative view of the past: a past dominated by irrationality juxtaposed with a rationalist present. In this context the cultural package of the “fairy tale wolf” is extremely relevant to the wider polemic on human-animal relations in the past because it is something that influences – directly and/or indirectly – our own perceptions, not only regarding the historical dimensions of wildlife management, but also our ecological identity closely associated with the biological and cultural origins of “primal” fears, particularly for modern urban communities with little or no experience of wild wolves or other impressive predators. In this paper, I aim to build on the growing interest in folklore expressed by archaeologists (e.g. Gazin-Schwartz & Holtorf 1999) by offering a critique of the use of folklore and fairytales to inform our multiple understandings of the past. But rather than present a polemic against stereotypes, I shall explore the extent to which the cultural package of “the big bad wolf” can be used to open windows into “medieval” (or indeed earlier or later) perceptions and experiences of lupines. This central issue will be examined by comparing and contrasting two regional case studies: the first will focus on select cultural appropriations of wolves in the British Isles and Scandinavia from the 8th to the 14th centuries, and the second will outline the social and ecological setting for the “fairy tale wolf” in 17th-18th century France. By presenting “medieval” and “early modern” examples drawn from different geographical regions, I shall demonstrate the importance of context in the formation and maintenance of lupine stereotypes.

BEFORE *LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD*: RESPONSES TO WOLVES IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN AND SOUTHERN SCANDINAVIA

For dedicated biologists, let alone casual observers, wolves prove to be extremely elusive animals. This situation is comparable for the archaeologist, historian and art historian searching for wolves in the complex and dynamic landscapes of medieval northern Europe. Wolf remains are rarely encountered in excavations of medieval sites (Fig. 2) and, where they are found, they are often fragmentary and sometimes difficult to distinguish from large dogs (Pluskowski, forthcoming). In written sources and art, wolves tend to be restricted to specific contexts and are far less common than other wild fauna – both indigenous (such as deer) and foreign (such as lions). Moreover, in early Scandinavian, zoomorphic art – particularly applied art – individual species are difficult to identify, whilst from the 10th century lions and dragons dominate the pictorial menagerie. However, an interdisciplinary approach combining not only a range of primary sources, but also ecological, ethological and anthropological analogues, enables the following general conclusions to be reached:

- Wolves were not ubiquitous in the landscapes of medieval Britain and Scandinavia but they were typically associated with environments at the fringes of human activity.
- Wolves were not universally and consistently hunted, although the ruling elite encouraged their persecution.
- Certain social groups appropriated wolves on various levels ranging from the ontological to the aesthetic, for both positive and negative effect.

Responses to wolves in medieval societies were far from simple; some changed as these societies, and their perceptions of the natural world, changed, while others did not. These responses have been explored in detail in my recently completed thesis (Pluskowski 2003a), however, in this paper I shall focus on specific questions relating to the cultural package of the “fairy tale wolf”.

This lupine can be characterised as a predatory male, inclined to eat juveniles – human or otherwise – and associated with a wild, threatening environment. It is

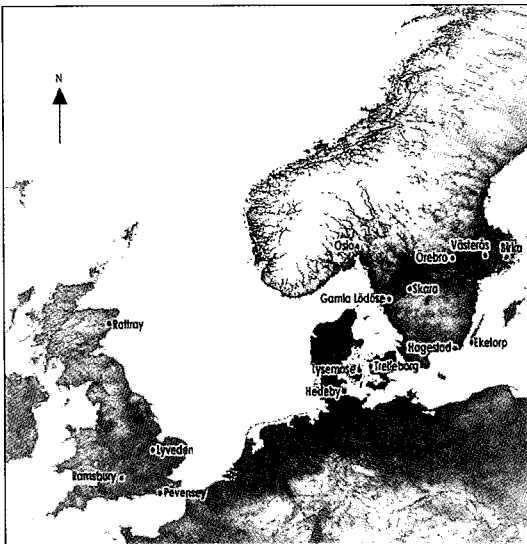


Fig. 2. Excavated and reported wolf remains from medieval archaeological contexts in Britain and southern Scandinavia. Map source: The Land Processes Distributed Active Archive Center (LP DAAC), located at the U.S. Geological Survey's EROS Data Center. <http://LPDAAC.usgs.gov>

useful to relate these to the original socio-ecological context of the archetype constructed and published in 17th- and 18th-century France, but in order to explore their relevance to a “medieval” setting these attributes will be examined in relation to human experiences of wolves from the 8th–14th centuries in Britain and Scandinavia. In this particular spatial and temporal context, could the wolf be used to express predatory, masculine identity? Did wolves attack, or were they perceived to attack, human beings? And finally, was the wolf’s environment threatening or perceived as such?

1. Could the wolf be used to express predatory, masculine identity?

In pre-Christian Scandinavia and the British Isles, the selective use of the wolf, along with other predatory animals, in visual expressions on a range of material culture can be linked to the construction of socio-cosmological identities. These identities appear to have been expressed in the material culture of relatively specific groups, for example, wolves on three early Pictish stones may represent collective identity (Cummins 1999:191), as do the shared motifs on the personal regalia and arms of 7th century aristocracies at Sutton Hoo, Vendel and Valsgärde (Fig. 3). In Scandinavia, aside from general associations between warriors and predatory animals, occasional references to the *ulfheðnar* in Old Norse literature point to more specific affiliations with wolves, such as animalistic behaviour, lupine

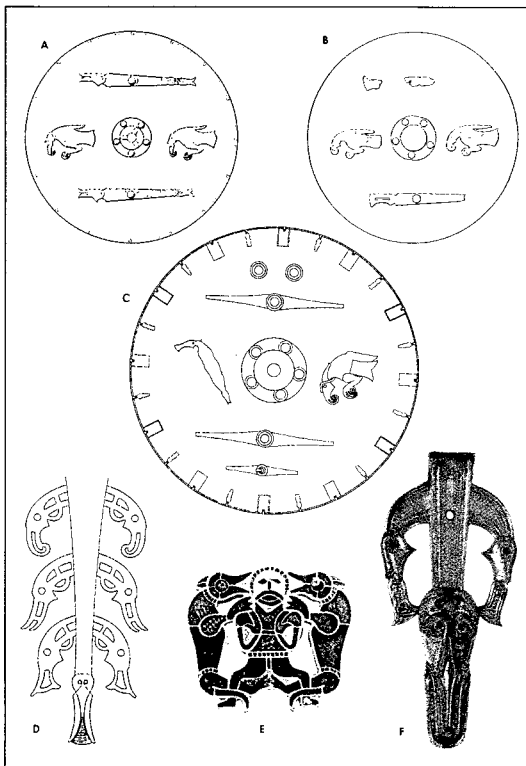


Fig. 3. Predatory animal motifs on artefacts from Sutton Hoo, Vendel and Valsgärde.

a) Shield from Vendel I with raptors and dragons (Bruce-Mitford 1978:98, fig. 72a)

b) Shield from Valsgärde 7 with raptors and dragons (Bruce-Mitford 1978:98, fig. 72b)

c) Sutton Hoo shield with raptor and dragon (Bruce-Mitford 1978:37, fig. 29)

d) Handgrip extension from shield II from Valsgärde 7, with stylised raptor, boar and wolf or dragon heads (Arwidsson 1977:Abb. 146).

e) Man flanked by wolves plaque from the Sutton Hoo purse lid (Bruce-Mitford 1978:513, fig. 377a).

f) Handgrip extension from the Sutton Hoo shield with flanking wolf or dragon heads – cf. d) (Bruce-Mitford 1978:19, fig. 11a)

Figs. a, b, c, e, f © copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

genealogies and the wearing of animal skins or costumes, probably as mumming aids of the type recovered from Hedeby and depicted at opposite ends of the “Viking Age”, for example on a helmet plate-die from Torslunda and a rune-stone from Källby (Vg 56), whilst incidents of human beings actually being transformed into wolves are rare in the sagas (Breen 1999:33-43; Price 2002:369-374). Criminals could also be equated with wolves in medieval English and Scandinavian societies (Jacoby 1974; Gerstein 1974), but whilst the equation of wolves and outlaws is not as clear-cut as was once thought (Stanley 1992), certain designations of criminal status resulted in depersonalisation, marginalisation and confinement to the boundaries of human settlements – a conceptual wilderness shared by wolves (Hough 1994-5; Reynolds 1998). These lupine identities were constructed within broadly zoocentric world views, in which the blurring of boundaries between certain human beings and certain animals is reflected by selective animal burials, the extensive use of animal personal names with potential amuletic functions (Glosecki 1989:188-9), and the persistent use of zoomorphic ornamentation into the 11th century. These identities were also typically male-oriented, although women appear in the literature with the ability to be transformed into wolves (e.g. *Volsunga Saga*, see Price 2002:364-5) and female personal names can incorporate lupine elements (e.g. Ulfhild, Jennbert 2003:220).

The use of wolves to express personal, as opposed to group, identity continued in Britain and Scandinavia after the widespread acceptance of Christianity. In England, the Roman vignette of the “wolf and twins” was appropriated from coins and classical literature, appearing on a range of objects, such as the Undley Bracteate, the Franks Casket, the Larling Plaque and a limited series of coins, reflecting the ideals of *Romanitas* tempered with local interpretations (Pluskowski 2003a:114-117). But the adoption of a female wolf to express positive identity was relatively limited. The she-wolf came to be associated with whores and her symbolic plasticity would be exploited by Dante (amongst others) to represent the corruption of the Church in the early 14th century (*Inferno*, Canto 1).

Before the adoption of heraldry, wolves appeared on occasional personal emblems such as the 13th century seals of Luvel (Wales) and a coin of Ulf Fasi Jarl (Sweden) as allusions to their bearers’ personal names (Pluskowski 2003a:201-3). The popularisation of heraldic emblems resulted in a new wave of animal identities adopted by both the secular and religious elites. Wolves appear infrequently in English seals and rolls of arms from the 14th century, more so in Welsh and Scottish heraldic emblems, whilst in Scandinavia the earliest use of a heraldic wolf can be attributed to Ulf Karlsson and his family in 13th century Sweden, although its use became popular only from the 14th century, a pattern repeated in Denmark, whilst Norwegian heraldry is striking for the virtual absence of wolves with the possible exception of the Galder family from the 15th century (ibid:203). This patchy distribution contrasts with the widespread incorporation of “wolf” into personal names, but, given the negative qualities of the wolf emphasised in Christian sources, why was it incorporated into individual identity

at all? The range of written and artistic sources suggests that the wolf was widely acknowledged as an archetypal symbol of violence and physical force, and whilst to some secular elites this may have been a favourable and appropriate emblem, amongst other groups, notably clerics, it was used to illustrate what they envisaged as negative and was employed to describe heretics, although rarely in Britain and Scandinavia. Hence the wolf, equated at times with violence, could simultaneously be an inspiring emblem and an embodiment of evil without presenting what may seem from a modern perspective like an implausible contradiction. Whilst the majority of those who initially adopted (proto-)heraldic wolves – which incidentally made up only 1% of European heraldic animal motifs – were men, the practice in general was not restricted to one gender, indeed noble women adopted such emblems from the 12th and increasingly from the 13th century (Pastoureau 1993:47-48, 146).

The use of heraldic animals overlapped to some degree with the use of animal bodies in visual display to express some form of identity, and wolf carcasses were certainly valued enough to ensure their transportation from kill sites in the wilderness to (proto-)urban centres, where they have survived in archaeological contexts as fragmentary remains. However, these remains are heavily outnumbered by those of other fur-bearers, particularly mustelids and foxes, a picture echoed in written sources which rarely mention the wolf as a commercial commodity from the 8th to the 14th centuries. The limited examples of wolf-skinning in Viking Age contexts (relative to other animals) supports the idea that its use was confined to specific groups or individuals, whilst in high medieval society, rather than being used as a garment to indicate status (except where it was associated with shape-changing), its function was likely to have been more practical, whilst wolf body parts were used, or at least documented for use, in magical/medicinal contexts. In summary, the limited and specific appropriation of the wolf to express group or personal identity supports the idea that it was employed within a predominantly masculine context to attribute or emphasize predatory or violent qualities in both a positive and negative light. People could be conceptualised as “prey” for those human beings with lupine or bestial identities, but was this relationship inspired by or mirrored in the behaviour of real wolves?

2. *Did wolves attack, or were they perceived to attack, human beings?*

Conservationists are keen to promote the idea that healthy wolves will not attack human beings and that incidents recorded in the past can be wholly attributed to rabid wolves, feral dogs or confusion. Biologists, on the other hand, are not willing to commit themselves to the impossibility of a wolf attack. A recent survey of documented wolf attacks on human beings from the 18th to the 20th centuries in Eurasia (Linnell *et al.* 2002) concluded that both rabid and healthy wolves had attacked and killed people, sometimes within a predatory context. Interestingly, in addition to identifying rabies and provocation as major causes of wolf attacks,

the survey suggested key environmental factors which may in certain circumstances have contributed (ibid:36-37):

- Scarcity or absence of wild prey species
- Woodland clearance
- Intensive grazing of livestock

The general effect of this was to bring human beings physically closer to wolves and thereby increase the chances of an attack. These observations can be set against the evidence for wolf attacks in medieval Britain and Scandinavia.

Rabid wolves – identified as the most likely culprits in attacks on human beings – are documented in medieval sources. The danger of rabies in both dogs and wolves – who are not natural reservoirs of the disease but can acquire it from other animals – was well known to classical, early Christian and Muslim writers. The earliest mention of the disease in Britain is in 1026 (Steele & Fernandez 1991:3), although the 10th century *Bald's Leechbook* refers to a cure for the bite of a mad dog (Swanton 1975:181), whilst the most detailed account relates to Carmarthen (Wales), where in 1166 a rabid wolf had bitten 22 people (Ithel 1860:51-2). There is no record of rabies in medieval Scandinavia. Wolf-dog hybrids, which are less predictable and manageable than dogs, have also been blamed for attacking human beings (Fritts *et al.* 2003:304). Leaving aside controlled cross-breeding, which is referred to in some classical and medieval sources (Pluskowski 2003:93, 180), “naturally occurring” hybridity in modern populations most frequently occurs near human settlements where wolves are found in low densities and feral and domestic dogs are common (Vilà & Wayne 1999:195-6). In medieval England, where human settlements were relatively densely distributed, there appears to have been a lack of wolves by, and almost certainly after, the end of the 14th century to potentially trigger hybridisation. Even if transient populations moved from Scotland into England they are unlikely to have sustained a significant generation of hybrids. In Scandinavia, despite the “ubiquitous” presence of wolves throughout the medieval period, the presence of settlements and intensively managed hunting grounds, and therefore sizeable populations of dogs, was extremely limited. Occasional episodes cannot be ruled out, and whilst the offspring of such hybrids may not have been easy to detect by sight, modern hybrids are reported as having unpredictable and inappropriately aggressive behaviour and presumably behaved in a similar way in the past (Crockford 2000:310), so perhaps these were subsumed into the descriptions of “mad dogs” that are documented across medieval Europe. There are certainly no reliable records of ordinary wolves attacking human beings in medieval Britain and Scandinavia, although such incidents may have gone unrecorded. When applying Linnell *et al.*'s environmental factors to medieval Britain and Scandinavia as a retrospective projection it may be possible to indicate the likelihood of attacks. The development of the wilderness in the British Isles is generally a prehistoric and early medieval phenomenon, although significant tracts of woodland and moorland were exploited in the high

medieval period, at a time when the interior of the Scandinavian Peninsula was being increasingly colonised and developed (see below). Game, on the other hand, does not appear to have been scarce, irrespective of the establishment of controlled hunting space in England and Scotland by the 12th century and in Denmark by the 13th century, and the presence of mass-trapping sites in the Scandinavian Peninsula. However, elite hunting culture in these regions promoted variable levels of wolf-hunting, particularly in 13th century England and 14th century Sweden, thus increasing the risk of confrontations between human beings and wolves. Despite the success of wolf persecution in England, the modern timidity of some wolf populations – sometimes linked to historical persecution – cannot be readily projected back into the past, particularly given the inefficiency of wolf-hunting before the popularisation of effective firearms, the absence of unbroken, built-up areas and relative inaccessibility to wilderness. On this basis and in the light of relative human population growth, landscape development and the related expansion of pastoral farming and game management, the likelihood of wolf attacks may well have been higher in the 11th to 14th centuries than in the 8th to 10th, although this projection is not comparable to the regional rates documented in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Although good evidence for wolf attacks is lacking and ecological modelling can only take us so far, if such incidents did occur, it is unlikely that anyone would be surprised, since there is recurring evidence that ordinary wolves were perceived as dangerous to human beings. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, those (at least) subscribing to beliefs associated with the god Óðinn (Grundy 1995), the socio-religious role of warfare (Price 2002) and the concept of Ragnarök (which appears to have become increasingly important in the late 10th century, Grundy 1995:30; Martin 1972) conceptualised fighting in terms of predation with human beings and gods as viable predators and prey, appropriating the wolf to express their identity as discussed above, as well as to represent a link between this world and the next (Pluskowski 2004). Whilst the conceptualisation of the wolf as a devourer – of gods and people – continued to be popular amongst high-medieval, Icelandic saga writers, it was only briefly incorporated into Anglo-Scandinavian syncretic art before being pushed aside by Biblical predators such as lions and dragons that dominated the visual expression of the devouring mouth of hell developed in 10th century, Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Within Christian society, ordinary wolves continued to be perceived as a threat to human life, although typically within a moralising context. References are usually brief, for example, “wild bears and wolves came and devoured a large number of the people” (Ælfric referring to an incident at Vienne, Burgundy, *Sermon on the greater Litany, Homily 1.8*, Swanton 1975:83). In such a context, where wolves and human beings are juxtaposed as predator and prey, they may be read, on one level, as symbolising the devil preying on human souls or the folly of sin. However, such predatory scenes are virtually absent from extant religious art in Britain and Scandinavia – they may be represented on two early 14th century misericords from Winchester

(Wood 1999:35, 150) and here it is difficult to determine whether these are predatory or agonistic scenes – in one, a man is driving his sword into a probable wolf – and whether they are referring to a particular narrative. In contrast, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the biblical pairing of wolves and sheep as an allusion to spiritual danger appears far more frequently in written and artistic sources. Wolf attacks were also employed in narratives as recognisable natural hazards; for example, when describing the hospitality of the Welsh, Walter Map (*De Nugis Curialium*, 2, 21; James 1983:185) refers to an incident in which a host's wife turns out a guest into a blizzard, thereby violating the custom. The host returns and outraged at the breach of hospitality, kills his wife and follows the tracks of the guest whereupon he comes across a slain wolf, a series of broken spears and finally the man being menaced by another wolf. Begging his dying guest for forgiveness, the host kills the remaining wolf with his spear and takes the body of the man back for burial. Although the guest had accepted the apology, the incident provokes a protracted feud.

The sparse evidence coupled with analogues from modern ecological and ethological studies suggests that wolf attacks in medieval Britain and Scandinavia were relatively rare and if they did happen, they were perhaps increasingly likely to occur from the 11th to the 14th centuries, although wolves were *perceived* as dangerous in both pre-Christian and Christian societies. Whilst this danger predominantly reflected the wolf's status as a powerful and intelligent carnivore, it may have been accentuated by the animal's environment.

3. *Was the wolf's environment threatening?*

Written sources, place-names and ecological analogues suggest that in medieval northern Europe, wolves, though not “wilderness-dependent” (Fritts *et al.* 2003:300), probably favoured areas of optimum shelter where suitable, natural prey was available, both associated with relatively limited, human activity (Pluskowski 2005). These areas correspond with the definition of “wilderness” as land unsuitable for cultivation, which, depending on the region, can be categorised into woodland, moorland, heathland, wetland and mountainous terrain, of varying proximity to human habitation, and not necessarily far from settlements. Tensions between human society and the natural world were focused on the wilderness in medieval northern Europe. As a useful economic resource it could be occupied, managed and connected, yet, because of its difficult and sometimes intimidating topography, it was conceptualised as a dangerous and uncontrollable environment (Ziolkowski 1997:5, 18). These tensions are partially reflected by the enduring perception of wilderness as distant and peripheral, despite a more complex, physical reality, although such sentiments may also have been influenced by the physical characteristics of this environment. Boreal coniferous woods – dominated by pine in Scotland and Scandinavia – develop a permanent evergreen canopy that creates light conditions differing greatly from temperate deciduous woods (Larsen 1980:5). The contrast between the lighter, southern deciduous woods,

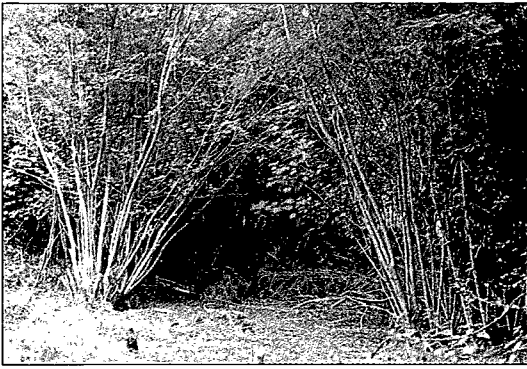


Fig. 4. Coppice stands in Hatfield Forest, Essex, England.

broken up with glades and scrub, and the relatively darker, northern coniferous woods may have also contributed to the southern impression of the central and northern Scandinavian wilderness as dark and impenetrable. But even in a deciduous, coppiced wood, lines of sight can be blocked, particularly where coppice stands are interspersed with other trees and undergrowth (Fig. 4), and blocks of managed woodland visually contrast with surrounding fields and meadows. Hence the vegetation architecture of woodland enables resident predators – wolves and human beings alike – to be “invisible”; here there is potentially little difference between the natural and supernatural inhabitants of a wood. Other wild terrain may generate comparable sentiments; vast expanses of moorland can have a similar effect through the opposite visual cues: that of an endless expanse; mountains and highlands are difficult to traverse, whilst marshes and bogs present potential hazards to both people and livestock, reflected by numinous threats in folkloric traditions. The potentially treacherous nature of wild landscapes is further indicated by the presence of shelters in both medieval Britain and Scandinavia. Shelter from wild animals may have been particularly important in high medieval Scandinavia, potentially taking the form of the buildings dated to the 13th century at Dovre (central Norway), which may have provided shelter for people crossing the mountains, particularly on pilgrimage routes (Berg 1995:317; Smedstad 1996), whilst the Gulathing laws contain regulations on the status and maintenance of shelters (no. 100, Larson 1935:105-6). Across medieval Britain, hospices – particularly associated with religious institutions – catered for the needs of travelling pilgrims and wayfarers (Gilchrist 1995:48). In addition to wild animals, there were potential dangers from “human animals” – impenetrable terrain favoured bandits and outlaws across medieval Europe (Ohler 2000:119). These individuals were not truly beyond the legal framework – they were very much incorporated into it – but, like wild animals, they were beyond the immediate control of society.

If the wilderness could be a threatening place during the daytime, it was even more dangerous at night. With limited illumination, the visual contrast between the safety of homestead or village and the darkest woods and moors would have been striking. In medieval Christianity, the night was conceptualised in direct opposition to daytime, paralleled by the cosmic polarity between the darkness of sin and damnation vs. the light of redemption and heaven (Verdon 2002). Nocturnal fauna, such as owls, were sometimes appropriated as visual symbols of this polarity (Miyazaki 1999:27). Religion equipped people to deal with the dark

and there is plenty of documented evidence for human activity (both licit and illicit) at night in the Middle Ages, at least within the confines of settlements, further supported by archaeological evidence for a range of devices to illuminate one's path through the darkness. Nonetheless, the audible howls of wolves may have from time to time reinforced the idea of the hinterland as the habitat of dangerous beings, emerging at night to prey on the unwary. But these conceptualisations must be balanced against the "hands on" exploitation of physical wilderness. The evidence suggests this was not a landscape to be exclusively feared and far from uncontrollable.

Woodland, the archetypal home of wolves in medieval fables and a popular *locus* of danger and enchantment in romance literature, was arguably one of the most important resources across medieval Europe, and depending on the needs of the local population fully exploited and managed. In Britain and southern Scandinavia it was harvested for building material and fuel (Rackham 1980; Bergendorff & Emanuelsson 1982), in the case of the latter resulting in the location of iron-working and charcoal production in or near woodland, whilst in northern Scandinavia there was no shortage of fuel, and trees were not managed in a comparable way. The primary use of woodland in this area was for "leaf fodder", whilst tar could be extracted from pine roots. Lumber was sold to towns across Scandinavia, and from the thirteenth century exported from western and southern Norway to England (Orrman 2003:282). Domestic animals could be driven into woods for pasture and pannage whilst resident wild species could be hunted (Hooke 1998:142-3). The importance of preserving woodland was recognised across northern Europe, even on the fringes; Norse kings on the Isle of Man enforced controls on the utilisation of woodland resources, although by the high-medieval period Manx woods seem to have dwindled into nothing (Garrad 1994:645). Successful woodland management was difficult to sustain, particularly when different social groups were competing for land use – and this failure is highlighted by the collapse of iron production in Telemark (southern Norway) in the 11th and 12th centuries and in Iceland in the 15th century (Orrman 2003:281). Aside from woodland, other "wild" landscapes were managed, even if only on an irregular basis, and they were "owned" or "claimed"; even if held collectively (O'Sullivan 1984:151). Moorland was predominantly utilised in terms of pasture and fuel, whilst mountainous and upland terrain, such as that in north-western Scotland, central Wales and central Norway, could be used for transhumance, hunting, mining and, where woody plants occurred, fuel and building material.

Moreover, these were not the static, "timeless" landscapes of fairy tales; from the 8th to the 14th century areas of wilderness were becoming increasingly exploited in Britain and southern Scandinavia. In the former, the intensification of agricultural activities, growth of urban centres and development of marginal landscapes resulted in the contraction of what had been "relatively" large islands of wilderness, whilst royal *foresta* were able to limit encroaching agriculture with varying degrees of success. In central and northern Scandinavia, by the end of the first millennium,

farms and settlements had been pushed to higher or more northerly locations, relying predominantly on pastoral farming (Svensson 1998), and stretches of woodland without permanent settlement were slowly contracting (Price 2000:32). In the south, the expansion of settlements' outfields in the Viking Age contributed to the decline in woodland, although the main phases of clearance took place in the high medieval period (Berglund 1991). At this time, population growth in Britain, and in fact in Europe as a whole, was dramatic; between c. 1000 and 1350, the population of Britain had tripled to an estimated 3.1 million (Fossier 1997:245). The evidence for the Church's hostility towards wilderness has been somewhat overemphasised (Harrison 1970), but religious motivation for land reclamation, combined with population growth, resulted in a contraction of habitat suitable for a range of wildlife, including wolves (Williams 2000:36). In southern Scandinavia, the population was three times larger in 1300 than in 750, and only 5% were located in the limited number of mostly small towns (Benedictow 1996:155-6, 181-182), a rise closely linked with the development of the Scandinavian interior. These patterns would continue up to the mid-14th century when population decline and the desertion of settlements, farms, summer pastures and transhumance routes resulting from climate deterioration, famines, the Black Death and other epidemics enabled British and Scandinavian woodland to stabilise and even regenerate in some areas. So whilst the wilderness was at times conceptualised as fearful and dangerous, it was also envisaged and managed as a valuable resource. Human responses to the wolf's environment in medieval northern Europe paralleled responses to the wolf itself – attempts at controlling the uncontrollable in an increasingly ordered world.

All of the themes explored above – the use of the wolf to express human identity, the potential threat of a wild predator, and the multiple values attached to wilderness – are found in medieval folklore which has survived interwoven with literature (Sautman, Conchado & Di Scipio 1998:13). Wolves in these stories are typically associated with greed or deceit but their role is more complex and warrants closer examination. Between 1022 and 1024, Egbert of Liège composed a tale entitled “De puella a lupellis seruata” (About a Girl Saved from Wolf Cubs), in which a child is attacked by a wolf and dragged back to the woods to feed to its cubs but is miraculously saved by virtue of her red (baptismal) tunic – this has been interpreted as a prototype of the “Little Red Riding Hood” type story (Ziolkowski 1992:574; Berlioz 1994). Although incorporating elements of local folklore, Egbert's poem is a carefully framed *exemplum* of the saving power of baptism (Ziolkowski 1992:573) and very unlike the typical warning folk tale with its fatal ending (Velay-Vallantin 1998:277). On another level, it is an *exemplum* of divine omnipotence over all creation – of which wolves are a part (the poem concludes with the line “God, their creator, soothes untamed souls” – which could refer to both the wolves and the baptised (Ziolkowski 1992:558-9), ultimately expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah (11:6). The use of wolves to represent divine omnipotence occurs throughout medieval, northern-European literature, for

example, in England the wolf of St Edmund, and in Scandinavia the wolf miracles of St Magnús and St. Oláfr (Collinson 2000), and in each of these cases it is difficult to interpret these animals as *figurae diaboli* (although, of course, the wolf was frequently used in religious contexts to symbolise the devil), but rather as impressive and potentially dangerous predators acting against their perceived natural behaviour due to divine intervention – all the more impressive because they could not be controlled by ordinary mortals. At the same time as Egbert was incorporating local folklore into his exemplary poem, other oral folktales employing wolves as central characters were probably circulating, ultimately subsumed along with elements derived from classical literature into the *Ysengrimus* in the mid-12th century (Charbonnier 1983, 1991; Mann 1987), in which individual animals are given names and human personalities; notably the wolf Ysengrim and the fox Reinardus. The *Roman de Renart* (c. 1170s, running to 15 branches by 1205) is the crystallisation of these earlier antecedents, from which numerous other versions of the rivalry between the fox and the wolf proliferate. Other elements from the pool of lupine folklore circulating in northern Europe at this time were incorporated into the bestiary entry on the wolf, first added to the series of stories derived from the *Physiologus* as early as the first third of the 12th century (Baxter 1998:88). Although the contexts of these different sources vary, there is a recurring emphasis on the wolf as a predator – references to his mouth and teeth are prominent and he is frequently paired off with viable prey animals. The conceptual importance of consumption, and of being consumed, in 11th and 12th century western European (including southern Scandinavian) culture is underlined by its diverse expression in religious art and thought (Bynum 1995; Camille 1993; Pluskowski 2003b 2004). The wolf, relatively limited in biblical importance and thus in mainstream religious art and thought, pushed its way into high-medieval culture by virtue, not only of its importance in pre-Christian societies but also, as an apex predator, of its ecological relevance in the north. Elements from the modern “fairy tale wolf” are certainly recognisable amongst the range of lupine representations in medieval Britain and Scandinavia, though the social and ecological context within which this archetype was constructed is very different. But in order to underline the importance of context in understanding the cultural plasticity of the “fairy tale wolf”, a contrasting case study will be presented, focusing on the society which produced the earliest publications of *Little Red Riding Hood*: early modern France.

THE FOLKLORE AND ECOLOGY OF GIRLS AND WOLVES IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE

The French, literary, fairy tale originated from the conversation and games developed by highly educated, aristocratic women in their Parisian salons from the 1630s through to the early 18th century. By the 1670s, the fairy tale had become an acceptable *jeu d'esprit* in the salons, combining an inventive tale to amuse listeners with the representation of proper aristocratic manners (Zipes

1999:30-33). By the 1690s these tales were being written down for publication and became an essential part of the aristocratic culture surrounding the court of the Sun King, Louis XIV. These aristocratic fairy tales blended local peasant folklore and medieval courtly romance with contemporary utopian visions reflecting the desire for better social conditions in France at the time. This is a very different context to the household tales of early 19th century Germany and the children's books of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the era of fairy tales in late 17th century France is all but forgotten and the only name even vaguely remembered is that of Charles Perrault, responsible for the first printed account of *Little Red Riding Hood* (*Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*) in 1697. In Perrault's version, the wolf consumes the girl with no happy ending of rescue or salvation. This lupine is a specific kind of predator: a well-spoken seducer, and moreover an urbanite rather than a rustic (Warner 1995:183), exemplifying Perrault's male-dominated civilising reworking of the peasant tale (Zipes 1993:31). The source of the fairy tale is difficult to pin down, particularly as the majority of oral versions collected in the 19th and 20th centuries may have been influenced by the widely disseminated literary versions. Furthermore, the fact that oral storytellers would tailor the ending and impact of their tales to their audiences presents further problems and may partially account for the uneven distribution of tragic and happy endings. What sort of world view and conceptualisations of human-animal relations did these folk tales reflect?

Part of the answer may be resolved by situating the wolf of the peasant hearth and the aristocratic salon in the broader, social and ecological contexts of early modern France. The evidence points to an era of difficult relations with wolves at the lowest levels of society punctuated by vivid episodes of depredations on human beings. These reached their zenith in the mid-1760s when almost 100 people, mainly women and children were killed (and often partially eaten) in the county of Gévaudan (today in the département of the Lozère), echoing an episode of depredations in the same region in the 1630s (Thompson 1991:256). Despite the continuing controversy over the identity of "the beast", as the culprit came to be known, at the time two exceptionally large wolves were highlighted as likely candidates amongst the 200 or more killed in the ensuing hunts. These episodes must be situated ecologically – wolf numbers appear to have dramatically increased in the 18th century – nearly 700 were killed in the Gévaudan alone in 1761-2, both the Norman wolf-hunter Denneval and the Marquis de Hallay were reputed to have slain around 1200 in their lifetimes, whilst upward of 5000 were killed around Poitiers between 1770 and 1784 (*ibid*:100, 257). Rising wolf numbers may have outstripped available wild prey, resulting in the extreme, socio-ecological situation in which shepherds, frequently children, became closely associated with the alternative food source – livestock, thus increasing the likelihood of encounters (Linnell *et al.* 2002:37). These depredations were more unusual than the sporadic attacks by rabid wolves increasingly documented in the 17th and 18th centuries – here peasants turned to both magic and God for protection, their prayers mediated by saints such as Hubert, Pierre and Marculphe (Steele & Fernandez 1991:4,

Théodoridès 1986:59-61). This brief sketch suggests that folk tales pairing young women and lupines reflected, at least in part, wolf ecology in early modern, south-eastern France. Moreover glancing at the other region where folklorists have recorded a large number of versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* – northern Italy – it is interesting to note the comparable wolf depredations on predominantly children, in the 17th-19th centuries in similar socio-ecological circumstances, although nothing approaching the Gévaudan episodes. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two is suggestive and contrasts with other regions in early modern Europe where wolf depredations on human beings were relatively limited (Linnell *et al.* 2002:20-1). Within this ecological framework, such stories, with their consistent pairing of wolves and young women, expressed facets of peasant culture – notably “sexuality and actual dangers in the woods” (Zipes 1993:34). The responses from religious authors, royal hunters and publishers to the depredations in Gévaudan created a mythology that persists to this day, but it must be situated within this conceptual framework in which women met their destiny with wolves with both tragic and happy consequences (Vellay-Vallantin 1998).

It is likely that the French nobility and peasantry shared elements of their respective mental worlds, but their responses to wolves, and other wild fauna, encompassed differences. Although the royal *louveteurs* had been destroying lupines on and off since their formation in the 9th century, and wolf-hunting had been actively encouraged by the Crown from the turn of the 17th century, it had been regarded as an aristocratic sport since the Middle Ages and wolves continued to be pursued *par force* into the early modern period (Cummins 1988:140-1) enshrined in paintings and decorated hunting equipment. Families in western France included the animal’s head in their heraldic achievements (Pastoureaux 1993:146), whilst live specimens were kept in menageries; the 14th century counts of Artois had tolerated, perhaps even indulged the attacks of their tame wolf on local livestock (Vale 2001:181). During the depredations of the 18th century, the aristocracy united with the peasantry against the wolf; in fact, at a time when the lower classes were discouraged from possessing firearms for fear of civil unrest (Thompson 1991:255) these trained hunters provided an essential buffer to depredations on livestock, but their experience of this animal – the perspective of the mounted hunter juxtaposed with the shepherd – remained very different. In early modern France then, fear of wolves had a specific context. Expressed in folk tales and mushrooming around episodes such as “the beast of Gévaudan”, it reflected particularly difficult relations between wolves and people in the lowest strata of society.

CONCLUSION: THE TYRANNY OF FAIRY TALES?

Despite the best efforts of biologists and conservationists, the “fairy tale wolf” is unlikely to disappear in the near future. Within the academic polemic, folklorists have warned against removing individual tales from their precise historical context (e.g. Ellis 1983, Petersen 1995, Zipes 1988) and those interested in combining

the study of folklore with archaeology have taken this on board (Gazin-Schwartz & Holtorf 1999). Outside this pedantic minority, the “fairy tale wolf” continues to be appropriated today by various groups and in the process its character changes accordingly; after all, the fairy tale is “the arena where beliefs struggle for ascendancy” (Warner 1995:412). If wolves are reintroduced into Scotland or if their numbers are allowed to build up again across continental Europe or the Scandinavian Peninsula, they will stimulate new perceptions as well as revive old ones but ultimately these responses will be a product of their specific ecological and cultural contexts. On one level, wolves were envisaged in medieval Britain and Scandinavia, early modern France and contemporary western society in similar ways: as threatening, uncontrollable and inhabiting a dangerous yet familiar environment. Moreover anxieties regarding the ecological status of human beings, conceptualised through the language of predation, have endured in one form or another throughout the Middle Ages into the present day (Quammen 2004). But these were combined with other responses generating narratives and material culture varying from one spatial and chronological context to the next and set against very different cultural backgrounds – compare for example ideas regarding religion and gender from the 8th century through to the present day. The fear of wolves – or any other predatory animals for that matter – cannot be removed from its context and opponents of the “fairy tale wolf” may take some comfort from the fact that, whilst this lupine will not go away, he (or perhaps she) will not remain unchanged.

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