

# Wolves in folklore, religion and mythology

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The wolf is a common motif in the foundational mythologies and cosmologies of peoples throughout Eurasia and North America (corresponding to the historical extent of the habitat of the gray wolf). The obvious attribute of the wolf is its nature of a predator, and correspondingly it is strongly associated with danger, destruction, making it the symbol of the warrior on one hand, and that of the devil on the other. The modern trope of the Big Bad Wolf is a development of this. The wolf holds great importance in the cultures and religions of the nomadic peoples, both of the Eurasian steppe and of the North American Plains. In many cultures, the identification of the warrior with the wolf (totemism) gave rise to the notion of Lycanthropy, the mythical or ritual identification of man and wolf.

## Indo-European

In Proto-Indo-European mythology, the wolf was presumably associated with the warrior class, who would "transform into wolves" (or dogs) upon their initiation. This is reflected in Iron Age Europe in the Tierkrieger depictions from the Germanic sphere, among others. The standard comparative overview of this aspect of Indo-European mythology is McCone (1987)<sup>[1]</sup>

## Greco-Roman

Further information: Lycaon (Arcadia)

Mount Lykaion (Λύκαιον ὄρος) is a mountain in Arcadia where an altar of Zeus was located. *Zeus Lykaios* was said to have been born and brought up on it, and was the home of Pelagus and his son Lycaon, who is said to have founded the ritual of Zeus practiced on its summit. This seems to have involved a human sacrifice, and a feast in which the man who received the portion of a human victim was changed to a wolf, as Lycaon had been after sacrificing a child. The sanctuary of Zeus played host to athletic games held every four years, the Lykaia.

According to some, the modern name of the mountain is Diaforti (Gell gives "Dioforti" or "Dioforte"<sup>[2]</sup>), which is presumed to consist of two Greek words: "Dias", the name of Zeus in modern Greek, and "fero," a verb meaning "I bring," thus meaning that Mount Lykaion is a mountain that brings Zeus.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> According to Kourouniotes, however, the southern peak has never been called Diaforti, only "Ayios

Ilias" after the chapel of St. Elijah below the summit.<sup>[3]</sup> Cook distinguishes three summits, the highest *Stephani*, the next *Ae Lias* (=Ayios Elias), and *Diaphorti*.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Capitoline Wolf with Romulus and Remus.Musei Capitolini, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.

According to the Roman tradition, a wolf was responsible for the childhood survival of the future founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. The twin babies were ordered to be killed by their great uncle Amulius. The servant ordered to kill them, however, relented and placed the two on the banks of the Tiber river. The river, which was in flood, rose and gently carried the cradle and the twins downstream, where under the protection of the river deity Tiberinus, they would be adopted by a she-wolf known as *Lupa* in Latin, an animal sacred to Mars. As a consequence, the Italian Wolf is the national animal of the modern Italian Republic.

The comedian Plautus used the image of wolves to ponder the cruelty of man as a wolf unto man.

## **Germanic]**

Further information: Wulf, Werewolf, and Wolfsegen

Fenrir, bound by the gods.

Norse mythology prominently includes three malevolent wolves, in particular: the giant Fenrisulfr or Fenrir, eldest child of Loki and Angrboda who was feared and hated by the Æsir, and Fenrisulfr's children, Sköll and Hati. Fenrir is bound by the gods, but is ultimately destined to grow too large for his bonds and devour Odin during the course of Ragnarök. At that time, he will have grown so large that his upper jaw touches the sky while his lower touches the earth when he gapes. He will be slain by Odin's son, Viðarr, who will either stab him in the heart or rip his jaws asunder according to different accounts.<sup>[5]</sup> Fenrir's two offspring will according to legend, devour the sun and moon at Ragnarök. On the other hand, however, the wolves Geri and Freki were the Norse god Odin's faithful pets who were reputed to be "of good omen."<sup>[6]</sup>

In the Hervarar saga, king Heidrek is asked by Gestumblindi (Odin),

*What is that lamp  
which lights up men,  
but flame engulfs it,  
and wargs grasp after it always.*

Heidrek knows the answer is the Sun, explaining

*She lights up every land and shines over all men, and Skoll and Hatti are called wargs. Those are wolves, one going before the sun, the other after the moon.*

But wolves also served as mounts for more or less dangerous humanoid creatures. For instance, Gunnr's horse was a kenning for "wolf" on the Rök Runestone, in the Lay of Hyndla, the völva (witch) Hyndla rides a wolf, and to Baldr's funeral, the giantess Hyrrokin arrived on a wolf.

## **Baltic and Slavic]**

According to legend, the establishment of the Lithuanian capital Vilnius began when the grand duke Gediminas dreamt of an iron wolf howling near the hill.

The Slavic languages share a term for "werewolf" derived from a Common Slavic *vlko-dlak* "wolf-skin" (loaned into modern Greek as vrykolakas.)

The wolf as a mythological creature is greatly linked to Balkan and Serbian mythology and cults.<sup>[7]</sup> It has an important part in Serbian mythology.<sup>[8]</sup> In the Slavic, old Serbian religion and mythology, the wolf was used as atotem.<sup>[9]</sup> In the Serbian epic poetry, the wolf is a symbol of fearlessness.<sup>[10]</sup> Vuk Karadžić, 19th-century Serbian philologist and ethnographer, explained the traditional, apotropaic use of the name Vuk (*wolf*): a woman who had lost several babies in succession, would name her newborn son Vuk, because it was believed that the witches, who "ate" the babies, were afraid to attack the wolves.<sup>[11]</sup>

## **Indic]**

In the Rig Veda, Rijrsava is blinded by his father as punishment for having given 101 of his family's sheep to a she-wolf, who in turn prays to the Ashvins to restore his sight.<sup>[12]</sup> Wolves are occasionally mentioned in Hindu mythology. In the Harivamsa, Krishna, to convince the people of Vraja to migrate to Vrindavan, creates hundreds of wolves from his hairs, which frighten the inhabitants of Vraja into making the journey.<sup>[13]</sup> Bhima, the voracious son of the god Vayu, is described as Vrikodara, meaning "wolf-stomached".<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Altaic**

### **Turkic and Mongolian**

Further information: Asena

In the mythology of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples, the wolf is a revered animal. The shamanic Turkic peoples even believed they were descendants of wolves. The legend of Asena is an old Turkic myth that tells of how the Turkic people were created. In Northern China a small Turkic village was raided by Chinese soldiers, but one small baby was left behind. An old she-wolf with a sky-blue mane named Asena found the baby and nursed him, then the she-wolf gave birth to half-wolf, half-human cubs, from whom the Turkic people were born. Also in Turkic mythology it is believed that a gray wolf showed the Turks the way out of their legendary homeland Ergenekon, which allowed them to spread and conquer their neighbours.<sup>[15][16]</sup> In modern Turkey this myth inspired extreme-right nationalist groups known as "Grey Wolves". As with most ancient peoples' beliefs, the wolf was thought to possess spiritual powers, and that parts of its body retained specific powers that could be used by people for various needs.

In the Secret History of the Mongols, the Mongol peoples are said to have descended from the mating of a doe (*Gua maral*) and a wolf ('Boerte chino').<sup>[17]</sup> In Modern Mongolia, the wolf is still seen as a good luck symbol, especially for males. In Mongolian folk medicine, eating the intestines of a wolf is said to alleviate chronic indigestion, while sprinkling food with powdered wolf rectum is said to cure hemorrhoids.<sup>[18]</sup> Mongol mythology explains the wolf's occasional habit of surplus killing by pointing to their traditional creation story. It states that when God explained to the wolf what it should and should not eat, he told it that it may eat one sheep out of 1,000. The wolf however misunderstood and thought God said kill 1,000 sheep and eat one.<sup>[19]</sup>

## **Japanese**

In Japan, grain farmers once worshiped wolves at shrines and left food offerings near their dens, beseeching them to protect their crops from wild boars and deer. Talismans and charms adorned with images of wolves were thought to protect against fire, disease, and other calamities and brought fertility to agrarian communities and to couples hoping to have children. The Ainu people believed that they were born from the union of a wolflike creature and a goddess.<sup>[20]</sup>

## **Finno-Ugric**

### **Finnic**

Unlike fox and bear, the wolf has always been feared and hated in Finland, and wolf has been the symbol of destruction and desolation, to the extent that the very name of wolf in Finnish language, *susi*, means also "a useless thing" and the by-

name *hukka* means perdition and annihilation. While bear has been the sacred animal of Finns, wolves have always been hunted and killed mercilessly. The wolf has been represented as implacable and malicious predator, killing more than it manages to eat.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## ARCTIC AND NORTH AMERICA

### Arctic

Helmet and collar representing a wolf, at the Museum of the Americas in Madrid. Made of wood, shell and made in the 18th century by Tlingit indigenous people, from the North American Pacific Northwest Coast. Tlingit people admired and feared wolves because of their strength and violence.

Wolves were generally revered by tribes that survived by hunting, but were thought little of by those that survived through agriculture. Some tribes, such as the Nunamiut of northern and northwestern Alaska and the Naskapi of Labrador respected the wolf's hunting skill and tried to emulate the wolf in order to hunt successfully. Others see the wolf as a guide.<sup>[21]</sup> The Tanaina of Alaska believed that wolves were once men, and viewed them as brothers.<sup>[22]</sup>

### Plains

In the Cardinal directions of the Plains Indians, the wolf represented the west, while for the Pawnee, it represented the southeast. According to the Pawnee creation myth, the wolf was the first creature to experience death. The Wolf Star, enraged at not having been invited to attend a council on how the Earth should be made, sent a wolf to steal the whirlwind bag of The Storm that Comes out of the West, which contained the first humans. Upon being freed from the bag, the humans killed the wolf, thus bringing death into the world. The Pawnee, being both an agricultural and hunting people, associated the wolf with both corn and the bison; the "birth" and "death" of the Wolf Star (Sirius) was to them a reflection of the wolf's coming and going down the path of the Milky Way known as Wolf Road.<sup>[21]</sup>

Wolves were not always portrayed positively in Native American cultures. The Netsilik Inuit and Takanaluk-arnaluk believed that the sea-woman Nuliayuk's home was guarded by wolves. The Naskapi's believed that the caribou afterlife is guarded by giant wolves that kill careless hunters who venture too near. The Navajo people feared witches in wolf's clothing called "Mai-cob".<sup>[21]</sup> Wolves were feared by the Tsilhqot'in, who believed that contact with wolves would result in nervous illness or death.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Caucasian

See also: Chechen wolf

In Chechen (and generally also Ingush) lore, wolves are almost always portrayed in a positive light, either as an equivalent for the nation, or as the loving "Wolf Mother". The Chechen people are symbolically said to be variously related to wolves (not in a serious way, but in an either symbolic or joking manner), probably in relation to the "Wolf Mother" legend. Hence, characteristics of the wolf are also frequently compared to the Chechen people in a poetic sense, including the most famous line that members of the Chechen nation are "free and equal like wolves".<sup>[23][24][25]</sup> Given this reverence for the wolf, it is easily the most common symbol used by Chechen nationalists.

Wolf clans are often equated to Chechen teips. The wolf for Chechens is not only the national animal, but also the national embodiment, and the wolf is frequently used to show pride. It is notable that the equation of "wolves = Chechens" also in some ways relates to the Chechen character, as it reflects the way Chechens see themselves (and to a degree, how others see them): intelligent, organized in clans, loyal, and brave.

The point of Chechens being "related" to wolves even goes to the point of the national founding myth- Turpalo-Noxchuo, the "founder" of the Chechen nation in legend, was raised by the Wolf Mother. It is also said that Chechens are descended from Turpalo-Noxchuo and the Wolf Mother like "sparks off steel".

## Abrahamic traditions

### Christianity

A mosaic on the entrance of a Church in Denmark depicting the Good Shepherd protecting a lamb from a wolf

The Bible contains 13 references to wolves, usually as metaphors for greed and destructiveness. In the New Testament, Jesus is quoted to have used wolves as illustrations to the dangers His followers would have faced should they follow him (Matthew 10:16, Acts 10:29, Matthew 7:15)<sup>[26]</sup>

Virgil leads Dante away from the She-Wolf in *Inferno* Canto 1 lines 87-88 as drawn by Gustave Doré for the elephant folio edition in early 1861

The Book of Genesis was interpreted in Medieval Europe as stating that nature exists solely to support man (Genesis 1:29), who must cultivate it (Genesis 2:15), and that

animals are made for his own purposes (Genesis 2:18-20). By this perspective, nature was only acceptable if controlled by man. The wolf is repeatedly mentioned in the scriptures as an enemy of flocks: a metaphor for evil men with a lust for power and dishonest gain, as well as a metaphor for Satan preying on innocent God-fearing Christians, contrasted with the shepherd Jesus who keeps his flock safe.<sup>[27]</sup> The Roman Catholic Church often used the negative imagery of wolves to create a sense of real devils prowling the real world.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Quoting from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the *Malleus Maleficarum* states that wolves are either agents of God sent to punish sinners, or agents of the Devil sent with God's blessing to harass true believers to test their faith.<sup>[21]</sup>

However, legends surrounding Saint Francis of Assisi show him befriendng a wolf.<sup>[21]</sup> According to the *Fioretti*, the city of Gubbio was besieged by the Wolf of Gubbio, which devoured both livestock and men. Francis of Assisi, who was living in Gubbio at the time took pity on the townsfolk, and went up into the hills to find the wolf. Soon fear of the animal had caused all his companions to flee, but the saint pressed on and when he found the wolf he made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to come to him and hurt no one. Miraculously the wolf closed his jaws and lay down at the feet of St. Francis. *“Brother Wolf, you do much harm in these parts and you have done great evil...”* said Francis. *“All these people accuse you and curse you... But brother wolf, I would like to make peace between you and the people.”* Then Francis led the wolf into the town, and surrounded by startled citizens he made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had *“done evil out of hunger”* the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly, and in return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner Gubbio was freed from the menace of the predator. Francis, ever the lover of animals, even made a pact on behalf of the town dogs, that they would not bother the wolf again.

In Canto I of Dante's Inferno, the Pilgrim encounters a She-Wolf blocking the path to a hill bathed in light. The She-Wolf represents the sins of concupiscence and incontinence. She is prophesied by the shade of Virgil to one day be sent to Hell by a greyhound.

## **Islam**

Wolves are mentioned three times in the Qur'an, specifically in the Sura Yusuf.

12.13: *“He said: Surely it grieves me that you should take him off, and I fear lest the wolf devour him while you are heedless of him.”*

12.14: *“They said: Surely if the wolf should devour him notwithstanding that we are a (strong) company, we should then certainly be losers.”*

12.17: *"They said: O our father! Surely we went off racing and left Yusuf by our goods, so the wolf devoured him, and you will not believe us though we are truthful."*

## Modern folklore, literature and pop culture

Further information: Wolves in fiction

The popular image of the wolf is significantly influenced by the Big Bad Wolf stereotype from Aesop's Fables and Grimm's Fairy Tales. The Christian symbolism where the wolf represents the devil, or evil, being after the "sheep" who are the living faithful, is found frequently in western literature. In Milton's Lycidas the theological metaphor is made explicit:

*The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed / But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw / Rot inwardly and foul contagian spread: Besides what the grim Woolf with privy paw / Daily devours apace*

The wolf in the Scandinavian tradition as either representing the warrior or as a symbol of Odin, sometimes combined with the Christian symbolism as the wolf representing evil or the devil, came to be a popular attribute in the heavy metal music subculture, used by bands such as Sonata Arctica, Marduk, Watain, Wintersun, and Wolf.

## See also

- Big Bad Wolf
- Little Red Riding Hood
- Werewolf
- Wolf of Gubbio
- Wolves in fiction
- Wolves in heraldry

## References

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2. <sup>^</sup> Gell, William (1817) *Itinerary of the Morea: being a description of the routes of that peninsula*, 106
3. <sup>^</sup> Kourouniotes, K. (1904) *Archaiologike Ephemeris*, 159.
4. <sup>^</sup> Cook, A.B. (1914) *Zeus*, 81

5. ^ Pliny the Elder. "viii". *Historia Naturalis*. p. 81. 22/34
6. ^ Guerber, Hélène Adeline (1992) [1909]. "Odin's Personal Appearance, Greek and Northern Mythologies". *Myths of the Norsemen: from the eddas and the sagas* (Dover ed.). Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications. pp. 17, 347. ISBN 0-486-27348-2. "At his feet crouched two wolves or hunting hounds, Geri and Freki, animals therefore sacred to him, and of good omen if met by the way. Odin always fed these wolves with his own hands from meat set before him."
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9. ^ . "У старој српској ре- лигији и митологији вук је био табуирана и тотемска животиња." Missing or empty |title= (help)
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23. <sup>a</sup> Jaimoukha. *Chechens*. Page 83
24. <sup>a</sup> Gammer, Moshe. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*. London 2006. Page 4
25. <sup>a</sup> Wood, Tony. *Chechnya: The Case for Independence*. page 13.
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