

The Wild Hunt

The following article looks at the origins of the Wild Hunt in folklore and some of the variations around Europe, including the idea of the black dogs, which tend to have a separate section of folk tales.

The Saxon and Heathen traditions

First stop is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is one of the earliest histories of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. It sets out the history of the Saxon kings and other notable events, such as Danish raids along the Saxon Shore in the ninth century. And so, in 1127 CE, the following entry can be found.

"Let no one be surprised at what we are about to relate, for it was common gossip up and down the countryside that after February 6th many people both saw and heard a whole pack of huntsmen in full cry. They straddled black horses and black bucks while their hounds were pitch black with staring hideous eyes. This was seen in the very deer park of Peterborough town, and in all the woods stretching from that same spot as far as Stamford. All through the night monks heard them sounding and winding their horns. Reliable witnesses who kept watch in the night declared that there might well have been twenty or even thirty of them in this wild tantivy as near as they could tell."

This account was one of the earliest recorded versions of the Wild Hunt, a ghostly pack of huntsmen, which has been duplicated in many folk tales throughout ancient, medieval, and even early modern Europe. It was particularly prevalent in Scandinavia, where it was called the *Terrifying Ride* ([Oskoreia](#)) or *Odin's Hunt* ([Odensjakt](#)).

In the northern areas of Germany, the Wild Hunt ([Wilde Jagd](#)) was known also as *Odin's Army* (*Wütende Heer*). Supposedly, it swept through the forests in midwinter, ie the coldest, darkest part of the year, when ferocious winds and storms howled over the land. Anyone out of doors at night during this time might spot this ghostly procession (or be spotted by it, which might involve being carried away and dropped miles from where the unfortunate person had been taken up).

Odin, in his guise of wind-god, was thought to rush through the night sky, riding his eight-legged steed, *Sleipnir*. As it was believed that the souls of the dead were wafted away on the winds of a storm, Odin was seen as the leader of all disembodied spirits or collector of the dead. In this role he was known as the Wild Huntsman. Followed by the ghosts of the dead, he would roam the skies, accompanied by furious winds, lightning and thunder. To the believers, the storm was evidence of the god's journey.



The Wild Hunt across European folklore

Across Europe, the Wild Hunt appeared at various times of the year, but most commonly over Samhain or Yule. This is not surprising as Samhain (or Yule) were regarded as the seasons in which ghostly visitations were most common. This idea shows that the hunt was represented as a procession of the dead.

Orkney had its own variant of the Wild Hunt, in which the fairies (*trows*), were seen out on midnight rides, galloping furiously through the air on white horses (*bulwands*). They were often said to be seen driving a stolen cow before them. These trows were seen as

undead spirits, ie ghosts and tales of these trows were often set at Samhain, Yule or New Year's Eve.

Other practitioners of various forms of magic joined in the Wild Hunt voluntarily, eg their souls flew with the Hunt while their bodies lay in their beds as if sleeping normally. Sometimes, the members of the Hunt entered towns and houses, causing havoc and stealing food and drink.

The actual forms of the *Wilde Jagd* varied across each country in which the tradition was found, but there are several common factors:

- a) There was a ghostly leader of the Hunt.
- b) There was a pack of howling black hounds.
- c) There were varying numbers of huntsmen.
- d) The Hunt flew through the night sky, their passing marked by a loud noise of pounding hooves and raging winds.
- e) The Hunt was seen as a precursor to bad luck, war or death.

The quarry of the Hunt varies between countries. Sometimes the quarry was a boar, a wild horse or magical maidens. Later Christian influences had the Wild Hunt summoning the souls of evildoers, sinners and unbaptised infants.

Over the centuries, legends about the Wild Hunt were adapted around other folklore themes, eg the lead huntsman could be the Devil, Herne, Charlemagne or King Arthur. A later folk tale states that the leader was Hans von Hackelnberg, a semi-historical figure who died in either 1521 or 1581. It was said he had slain a boar and was then injured on the foot by the boar's tusk and died of poisoning. As he died, he declared that he had no wish to enter heaven, but instead wanted to hunt. His wish was granted and he was allowed to hunt in the night sky. Another version of the tale has it that he was condemned to lead the Wild Hunt as punishment for his sins.

However, it has been suggested that even this 16th century person was based upon the original Norse myths. The name, *Hackelnberg*, is simply a corruption of *Hakolberand*: a Saxon term for Odin. Other Wild Hunt traditions also existed in areas far from Norse influence:

- a) In Wales, the leader of the Hunt was *Gwynn ap Nudd*, the Lord of the Dead, was followed by his pack of white hounds with blood-red ears.
- b) In northern England, these hounds with red ears were known as *Gabriel Hounds*.

- c) In Devon, the Hunt dogs were known as [Wisht Hounds](#) (see below).
- d) In southern England, the leader of the Hunt was [Herne](#).

King Herla

Sometimes, the Hunt leader is referred to as [Herlathing](#), from the tale of King Herla (see below). According to the 12th century writer, [Walter Map](#):

"This household of Herlethingus was last seen in the marches of Wales and Hereford in the first year of the reign of Henry II, about noonday: they travelled as we do, with carts and sumpter horses, pack-saddles and panniers, hawks and hounds, and a concourse of men and women. Those who saw them first raised the whole country against them with horns and shouts, and . . . because they were unable to wring a word from them by addressing them, made ready to extort an answer with their weapons. They, however, rose up into the air and vanished on a sudden."

The tale of King Herla (or Herle), which is shown below, has some connection to Odin, because one of Odin's names was Herian, leader of the dead heroes in Valhalla. However, here is a shortened version of the tale of King Herla.

Herla was the King of the Britons in the Dark Ages: this story dates from the Middle Ages, but older variations are common. One afternoon, after a hard day's riding, King Herla rested for a while in an ancient glade, part of the great forest that had stood in his kingdom for millennia. As he was dozing, he was awoken by the rustling of something in the trees.

He readied his sword, but was greeted by a strange sight. Into the glade came a large well-groomed goat, upon which sat a tiny old man no bigger than a child. He had a stocky upper body and cloven feet, red-faced and sporting a huge shaggy beard. He smiled at King Herla and said, "I have heard of your wisdom as king, I am king of my own realm and I would strike a bargain with you. If you give me the pleasure of attending your wedding day, you can attend mine." With that he offered the king a bronze horn of intricate workmanship and asked him to drink. The king hesitated for a moment, but grasped the horn and drank deep of its contents. With that the dwarf nodded to him and promptly disappeared.

Within a year the king had taken decided to marry. On their wedding day, all the guests were assembled in the king's great hall, ready for the feast, when there was a knock at the great oak doors. In came a host of dwarfs bearing precious gifts, such as golden cups of exquisite workmanship and carved wooden chairs with intricate patterns. The feast was tremendous: the food and wine the dwarf host brought never ran dry. At the end of the night, the dwarves left and the dwarf king reminded Herla of the bargain.

After another year, King Herla received a summons from his dwarf friend, so he gathered his best men and a host of wedding gifts. They set off into a wild country where few men ventured and travelled for days, through twisting forest paths until reaching a solid sandstone cliff. Suddenly, there was a sound like the peal of a bell and a doorway opened in the cliff face; the company rode through the opening and found themselves in a large cavern, lit by flaming brands hung at intervals on the sandy walls. There was a passage, which led from the cavern into the depths of the earth.

They followed the passage, until they could hear the sound of laughter and merrymaking. At the end of the tunnel, they found themselves in a gigantic cavern lit by thousands of torches, which seemed to burn without fuel. In the centre of this cavern stood a huge oak table, and a great gathering of dwarfs. The king offered his wedding gifts to the dwarf king and the feast commenced.

Time seemed to pass in an instant and the feast continued for three whole days. At last, King Herla and his men were ready to leave and the dwarf king gave many precious gifts. One of these was a small bloodhound. He took King Herla aside and explained that he was no longer safe in his kingdom and begged him to stay. He explained that neither Herla nor his men should dismount until the hound jumps to the ground.

The king thanked him for his advice and continued on his way. When the king and his men rode out of the doorway in the cliff, they saw that the countryside had changed. Fields had replaced the great forests and small villages stood in the valleys, where before there had only been trees. Soon they met an old shepherd who stood watching over his flock of sheep: King Herla asked if he knew where the Kingdom of Herla lay – there was a long pause as the old man stared at them.

Eventually, he answered in a broken form of their language. He explained that the kingdom of Herla was part of ancient legend, because it was over 300 years ago and the Saxons had now taken over the lands. The legend described how a king had disappeared and how his wife had pined away and died from her lost love.

At this, some of the king's men tried to dismount, but on touching the earth they crumbled to dust. King Herla ordered his men to stay in the saddle until the bloodhound jumped onto the ground. It is said that the king and his men still ride the countryside in limbo to this day, awaiting the time when the bloodhound will jump to the floor and restore them to their lands.

Wisht Hounds and Black Shuck

In Greek myth, the goddess Hecate roams the earth on moonless nights with a pack of ghostly, howling dogs. Similarly, the Old French term for the *Wilde Jagd* is *Mesnéé d'Hellequin*, derived from Hel, the Norse goddess of the dead.

The interesting thing about Hecate, in connection with the Norse Wild Hunt, is they both have a common link - the Black Dog. It was said that her followers would sacrifice black dogs (and lambs) to her. There are many legends surrounding Dartmoor and these hell-hounds with baleful red eyes are just one legend, but *Wisht Hounds* is a good tale and formed the basis of a much later story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.



One night, a farmer was riding home to his wife and young child over Hameldon Tor. He had sold some cattle at market and the coins jingled in his pocket as his pony trod the familiar path. He had drunk some ale and he dozed a little on the clear, moonlit night. As the pony reached the old granite ring of stones, a hoof clipped a boulder, waking the farmer and they headed on past the stone circle, when they suddenly heard a distant hunting horn.

In the distance, the farmer could see a huntsman and his pack of hounds, coming full tilt towards them, but no sign of any animal being chased. The farmer's pony was nervous and needed calming, but then a pack of huge black dogs rushed past, baying loudly with red eyes and red tongues. The tall huntsman was clothed in black on a huge black horse that had fiery eyes and sparks came from the horse's hooves.

The farmer called out to ask what sport they were chasing as no animal could be seen. The hunter threw a wrapped packet to the farmer, saying "Take that and think yourself lucky".

Once the hunt had gone past, the farmer's pony was calmer, but there was no light to examine the packet as clouds had come and covered the moon. Farmer and pony went on home, but the farmer continued to wonder what was in the packet – it was too small for a deer, but too big for a rabbit.

When he reached home, he told his wife what had happened and called for her to bring a lantern while he unwrapped the packet. Then he shrieked and dropped it, as a small form fell to the cobbles – it was the tattered remains of their child. The news went round the village that the farmer had seen the Dark Huntsman and his pack of Wisht Hounds, who were hunting unbaptised babies or children: local opinion was that the farmer and his wife should have had their child christened.

The legend of *Black Shuck* is another matter entirely. The name Shuck derives from the Saxon word, *scucca*, meaning *demon*. He is one of many ghostly black dogs recorded across the British Isles. Its alleged appearance during a storm on 4th August 1577 at the Holy Trinity Church, Blythburgh, is a particularly famous account of the beast, in which legend says that thunder caused the doors of the church to burst open and the snarling dog crashed in and ran through the congregation, killing a man and a boy, before it fled when the steeple collapsed. The encounter on the same day at St Mary's Church, Bungay was described in *A Straunge and Terrible Wunder* by the Reverend Abraham Fleming in 1577:

"This black dog, or the devil in such a likeness (God he knoweth all who worketh all,) running all along down the body of the church with great swiftness, and incredible haste, among the people, in a visible form and shape, passed between two persons, as they were kneeling upon their knees, and occupied in prayer as it seemed, wrung the necks of them both at one instant clean backward, in so much that even at a moment where they kneeled, they strangely died."

And so we have another legend involving a huge black dog, a storm and sudden deaths, which would seem to hark back to the Wild Hunt. There is just one problem though. On 16 May 2014, it was reported that archaeologists had discovered the skeleton of a massive dog that would have stood 7-8 feet tall on its hind legs, in the ruins of Leiston Abbey in Suffolk, England. The remains of the massive dog, which is estimated to have weighed 200 pounds, were found just a few miles from the two churches where Black Shuck killed the worshippers. It appears to have been buried in a shallow grave at precisely the same time as Shuck is said to have been on the loose, primarily around Suffolk and the East Anglia region.

Brendon Wilkins, projects director of archaeological group *Dig Ventures*, said: "Most of these legends about dogs may have some roots in reality." So, does the *Wilde Jagd* have roots in reality too?

