

Werewolf Legends. Edited by Willem de Blécourt and Mirjam Mencej.

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Bence K. Rácz 

Doctoral School of History, Eötvös Loránd University; 6–8 Múzeum körút, 1088 Budapest, Hungary; racz.k.bence33@gmail.com

Although folkloristic belief research, and within it the tradition of the werewolf, continues to generate unresolved questions, scholarly publications are scattered across the international journal network and conference volumes: due to the specificity of the topic, a limited number of journals and book series address the folkloric or historical dimensions of the topic. One of the few academic forums is Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, founded in 2008, which spotlights on lesser-known aspects of the history of witchcraft and magic, such as werewolf beliefs, an ambition reinforced by the appearance of three volumes on the topic to date. Among the goals of Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic is a commitment to provide a publication venue for research that does not focus primarily on the familiar Western European areas but instead on regions that have received little attention. This goal is neatly fulfilled by volume 42, edited by Willem de Blécourt and Mirjam Mencej. *Werewolf Legends* fits seamlessly into the series as the twelve contributing scholars, representing the same number of European countries, examine primarily the peripheral zones of European werewolf lore: the Nordic region (Sweden, Finland), different Mediterranean localities (Southern part of Portugal and Italy), the belief traditions of the Baltic states (Lithuania), and the rich Slavic tradition (Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Czech, and Bosnian-Herzegovian beliefs). At the same time, the editors ensure that the more thoroughly studied Western European regions—such as the Dutch territories, the Western Alps, Romania, and German-speaking areas—or the British Isles are also represented.

The volume's methodological rigor is anticipated in the introductory chapter of Willem de Blécourt. His principal argument is that the werewolf tradition is partly a historiographical construct. According to the Dutch folklorist, scholars still have much to do if they truly wish to understand werewolf beliefs: as he writes, significant

results may be expected from comparative analyses. He argues that the Western European image of the werewolf is largely a product of the compilation techniques of nineteenth-century writers. Drawing on mainly literary and demonological texts, he demonstrates that so-called werewolf legends were constructed by the early scholars of a nascent ethnology—essentially armchair anthropologists—rather than by collectors doing actual fieldwork. This creative work involved researchers such as the Grimm brothers—regarded more as librarians than ethnographers—the medievalist-germanist Wilhelm Hertz, and Sabine Baring-Gould, who, under the influence of Jules Michelet, committed numerous methodological errors, Blécourt argues, and confronts us with the shortcomings of previous research. He notes that only fragmentary findings based on scattered evidence exist. Belief in werewolves was more widespread in Northern and Eastern Europe than in those Southern European regions where wolves did not live. Blécourt also examines southern Swedish *varulv* memorates studied by Odstedt and fabulates catalogued by Klintberg. Drawing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections, he conducts a comparative analysis of motifs and spatial distribution. He argues that Lutheran moral sensibilities are clearly discernible within the Swedish werewolf tradition. The two most common legends here, he claims, are *The Werewolf Husband* and *Naming the Werewolf*. The former is a migratory legend, with variants known around the North Sea countries and, unexpectedly, in Romania. He identifies the narrative type's centre in German-speaking regions, from where it spread to several European countries, but he believes the legend originated in northern France or Flanders. For the *Naming the Werewolf* tradition, he identifies Baltic parallels. As he concludes, Swedish werewolf legends fall into two principal groups, and while the fabulates examined originate from outside Sweden, the memorates have Swedish roots. He suspects Lutheran influences behind the particularities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Swedish collections, although he does not elaborate on this in detail. Petra Himstedt-Vaid analyses Lower Saxon and Mecklenburg werewolf narratives, detailing the distinctive use of liminal auxiliary implements in human-animal metamorphosis. Richard Wossidlo's nineteenth- and twentieth-century fieldwork notes provide a rich source base. According to the beliefs, transformation into a werewolf could occur with the help of objects made of wolf or human skin or through magical ointments. Himstedt-Vaid argues that everyday social conflicts are reflected in northern German werewolf beliefs; thus, the narratives she analyses should be understood as representations of neighbourly conflicts within local belief systems. She convincingly shows that envy is a key motif in these narratives, rooted in farmers' genuine fear of wolves in forested areas. She suggests that rural crimes such as cattle theft on pastures or roadside robbery contributed to the persistence of werewolf beliefs into the early twentieth century. Kaarina Koski and Pasi Enges examine the Finnish werewolf tradition. Their central concerns are how werewolf

belief functions among the mechanisms of social othering, and to what extent werewolf status can be interpreted as an indicator of social marginality. To explore this, they draw on more than 350 early twentieth-century werewolf legends preserved in manuscripts in the folklore archive of the Finnish Literature Society, recorded mostly in the 1930s from both male and female narrators. Most describe involuntary metamorphosis—when sorcerers transform humans into wolves—, only about thirty legends concern sorcerers who themselves undergo voluntary metamorphosis into wolves or bears. While the former survived in narratives from western and eastern regions, the latter largely occurred in Lapland. They note that these beliefs characteristically belong to densely populated regions. Prominent motifs include theft, wedding rituals as rites of passage, and acts of magical vengeance, each of which the authors decode through compelling socio-ethnographic explanations. Koski and Enges argue convincingly that early twentieth-century Finnish rural communities responded to problematic or deviant social behaviour through the construction of werewolf beliefs. They see Finnish werewolf legends as narrative models, both a violation of community norms and of the possibility of moral reintegration: the transformations of thieves, rapists, and moral offenders, and the application of the werewolf stigma, represent a mental coping strategy for communities confronted with transgressions. In their interpretation, reversion itself functioned symbolically as a process of moral restoration, through which social order can be reestablished. Jūratė Šlekonytė examines Lithuanian werewolf narratives against the backdrop of agrarian modernisation. Drawing on roughly 350 narratives recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, complemented by her own fieldwork, she demonstrates the hybrid nature of Lithuanian werewolf legends, at once folk beliefs, religious allegories, and moral didactic tales rooted in lived experiences of human–animal coexistence. Providing extensive historical context, she reviews key historiographical landmarks, creates a five-piece thematic classification and identifies Slavic connections. As she shows, informants firmly believed in the truth of their accounts and sought to support them with evidence: one said werewolves can be distinguished from ordinary wolves by a white patch on the neck and paw shapes resembling human limbs; voluntarily transforming dual beings sometimes bore bite marks on their faces. Although the study claims a continuity of five centuries, further research is clearly needed to substantiate such a claim. Marina Valentsova, using the collections of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Slavic Studies, presents Slavic werewolf traditions based on the spatial distribution and dissemination of *vlkolak* beliefs noted mostly in the second half of the twentieth century among Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. She identifies the epicentre in the Polesia region of Belarus and Ukraine. She classifies werewolf legends into seven groups, highlighting the wide-ranging manifestations of shapeshifting. A distinctive feature of Slavic tradition is precisely the frequency and particular character of these transformations:

informants describe metamorphosis typically occurring through somersaults and leaps, sometimes by jumping over objects marking a magical boundary—with reversal of the movement enabling return to human form. A key detail in the Carpathian Ukrainian region, that werewolf lore incorporates demonological traits, including the phenomenon of the werewolf assembly, which strongly resembles beliefs about the witches' sabbath. Petr Janeček demonstrates through an examination of eighteenth- to twentieth-century Czech intellectual writings—primarily via linguistic analysis—that the Czech term for werewolf, *vkodlak*, is a constructed neologism not used in the vernacular or elite culture prior to the mid-nineteenth century. The word was likely 'imported' from Polish or Slovak areas of the Slavic tradition; its adoption was motivated by the nationalism-driven search for mythology. The neighbouring regions possess far richer werewolf traditions than the Czech lands: as he shows, there is no coincidence that werewolf beliefs were collected almost exclusively in northeastern Czech regions bordering Poland (Silesia), and only a single legend is known from North Bohemia near Saxony. The only Czech vernacular expression used for werewolves also functioned as an insult. Its origin is uncertain: some argue it was the invention of a nineteenth-century antiquarian, Vincent Prasek. Despite twentieth-century elite cultural experiments and Nazi organisational interventions, the Czech werewolf tradition remains shaky; national romantic myth-making, amateur folklore collecting, and antiquarian enthusiasm could not establish a genuinely local werewolf figure. Mirjam Mencej examines the social functions of werewolf beliefs and werewolf lore itself in contemporary Bosnian village culture based on fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2018. She argues that in the ethnically and religiously diverse regions Croatian population conflates the werewolf figure with the vampire, whereas Bosniaks and Serbs distinguish them. According to her research, werewolves in Bosnia and Herzegovina are either people trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead, or norm-breakers still alive. Beliefs hold that the dead often transform into werewolves because they violated family or community expectations. The most common explanation for transformation is that the deceased lived a sinful life—for instance, cursed others, stole, practiced magic, or performed abortions. Explanations for transformations among the living are similar: malicious or duplicitous behaviour, sarcasm, or coarse speech could result in werewolf accusations. Laura Jiga Iliescu uses late twentieth-century Romanian documentaries, ethnological reports, and fieldwork to analyse how certain Romanian individuals together with their communities, constructed werewolf identities. She characterises this process as fictionalisation, whereby individuals gradually adopt and internalise roles ascribed to them by their surroundings. Rather than focusing on the historical background of Romanian werewolf lore, she centers attention on terminology and self-definition, distinguishing between *pricolici*, *lupar*, and *valva lupilor*. Based on the degree of agency over transformation, she proposes

a typology dividing werewolves into those capable of controlling metamorphosis and those who are not. Vito Carrassi examines Southern Italian werewolf narratives collected during his own fieldwork, supplemented by earlier collections. He explores regional beliefs, attitudes toward the creature, and the strategies employed against it. The typically nocturnal, bloodthirsty werewolves' periodic transformations result primarily in psychological changes. He argues that the Southern Italian werewolf does not entirely lose its humanity: according to narratives, it is more like a diseased person who imagines himself to be a wolf—an animalistic crawler with long ears and long hair, but a human face. Fabio Armand, drawing on Alpine fieldwork and the work of Charles Joisten, challenges the Van Gennep school's assertion that werewolf beliefs are absent from the Western Alps; he also points out similar inaccuracies regarding Western France. He argues that in Western Alpine werewolf metamorphoses, the key motif is revelation by injury: wounds inflicted on the werewolf remain visible when it returns to human form. He identifies a regionally characteristic folktale concerning demorphosis. Releasing the dual being through the offering of food—bread or dairy products—is a lesser-known method of demorphosis, notable for its nonviolent nature. Armand interprets this as a folkloric reflection of Christian *caritas*. In Lower Dauphiné, a number of narratives express deep-seated resentment toward both secular and ecclesiastical authority. In the Aosta Valley and Piedmont Waldensian communities, Armand also identifies the motifs of revelation by injury and anticlerical sentiment, along with the *loup ravart*, a nocturnal patrolling creature, and a beggar disguised in sheepskin. Examining the werewolf traditions of the Auvergne–Rhône–Alpes villages, he distinguishes the 'Nuiton werewolf,' a one-eyed vegetarian living in attic spaces and abducting women, from the High Alpine *daruc*, a dual being that dons sheepskin to infiltrate herds and steal food from shepherds. Paulo Correia analyses unpublished Algarve student collections alongside other folklorists' materials: by examining 235 memorates and fables told by seventy-six southern Portuguese informants, he concludes that transformations in the region's werewolf figure are unintentional. Although some motifs differ from Galician werewolf beliefs, Correia argues that the two are related. He shows that the real breakthrough in the research happened in 1980s, when students of Coimbra and Lisbon Universities published their linguistic and folkloristic results. Foundings of Algarve students' of the 1990s remained unpublished. The southern Portuguese werewolf is a nocturnal double being, seldom a wolf: in the north, it is more often a horse, in the south, a donkey, dog, pig, or goat. Transformations occur in muddy places or crossroads, usually at midnight, at full moon. Correia associates the werewolf figure with that of the devil. As he writes, "in Portuguese folk legends, the role of the witch is structurally attributed to women and that of the werewolf to men"—a statement that, given the gender analyses presented, seems reductive. Key motifs, such as the encounter between the creature and the informant, where

identification occurs, and the possibility of liberation arises, the use of identification or capturing tools, like the werewolf's belt or the handkerchief, are unique. Such as motifs of werewolf as 'guardian angel' or beliefs which intermingle witches and werewolves. In his third study, Willem de Blécourt uses cluster analysis to compare nineteenth- and twentieth-century northern and southern Dutch werewolf legends. Comparative analysis is warranted, as the contrast between the regions is primarily shaped by differing religious contexts—specifically, Catholic–Protestant distinctions. Generally, he argues that the Dutch werewolf is an anthropomorphic being, a 'back-rider'; that the term werewolf serves as criticism of someone's human appearance; and that there are overlaps with the Bogeyman, a child-frightening creature. Examined from an evolutionist perspective, Dutch legend research went through three phases, according to Blécourt. A methodological advance is his definition of the legend cluster: the totality of differing motifs and narratives attached to a particular legendary figure in a given place and time, including memorates and fabulates. As he highlights, Dutch werewolf narratives form an incoherent, fragmented sample, which are more common in the southern areas of the region. Blécourt argues that werewolf status in some regions was considered worse than bewitchment—an un-Christian crime, and states that Dutch werewolf beliefs were interwoven with the moral regimes of local societies—specifically with sexual morality as regulated differently by various confessional cultures. In northern Protestant regions, he connects the werewolf label with sodomy, seeing it as a stigma of sexual deviancy. Through the werewolf label, discussions of sexual deviance became possible within a framework otherwise bordered by strict taboos. Deborah Hyde, through the werewolf myth of Hull in Eastern England can episode that attracted major local media attention in the 2010s—demonstrates the folklore-generating mechanisms of contemporary media environments. Drawing on ethnographic and psychological literature, she contextualises witness accounts presented in the work of local historian Mike Covell and journalist Charles Christian, both amateur werewolf researchers. She concludes that the Hull werewolf is primarily the product of human imagination and guilt, the virality of social media environments, and the interplay with the Black Dog tradition of English folklore.

Such analyses in *Werewolf Legends*, and the beliefs they amplify, offer promising opportunities for structuralist and comparative research. Due to constraints of length and genre, I can contribute only a handful of reflections from the perspective of the social historian. An important achievement of the volume is that it showcases local terminologies of werewolf folklore. By analysing semantic fields comparatively, the volume acquires a lexicon-like quality, while the contextual social-historical analysis enriches the studies with sociolinguistic dimensions. Another merit lies in its accessibility: it brings to light regional research that, though known locally, may have been overlooked by international scholarship. The volume's

major contribution to the scientific research of werewolves is that this information is gaining international accessibility—an issue highlighted by Blécourt in his study of Swedish werewolf beliefs, where he notes that despite the high quality of Swedish belief research, the international community knows little about it due to the lack of translations. It also assembles body of knowledge from local contexts, reflecting important research questions and directions. Exemplary are topics in social history, such as lived experiences of human–animal coexistence, everyday norm violations and their moral interpretations. The contributors skilfully mobilise critical turning points—birth, wedding, and death as a rite of passage—for analysing werewolf metamorphoses. The connections between these transitions and werewolf beliefs invite further international comparative research. Also important are the processes of constructing werewolf legends, and the problem of agency in metamorphosis, the question whether werewolf status can be controlled or not—both of which deserve further study. A notable contribution of the volume is its survey of everyday magical objects involved in werewolf metamorphosis, reversion, or repulsion, including various garments (wolf belt, wolf skin, or clothing) magical ointments; or everyday utensils—silver bullets and coins, metal tools, axes or knives—as well as the wolf tooth as an apotropaic amulet, tablecloths, and ritual objects such as rosaries, prayer books, and crosses. Stories of werewolf reversion may feature well-known ritual uses of religious items or popular practices such as throwing a pitchfork or dung over the werewolf—an entertaining detail. The spatial analyses also proved invigorating: although current research cannot yet determine the spatial structure of beliefs with microscopic precision, these studies suggest that with further research it is able to identify patterns of belief currents.

The nature of the volume reflects both the central problem and the charm of werewolf belief research: legends are mosaic-like, and forming a unified picture is a major challenge involving methodological pitfalls. Thus, although a comprehensive synthesis on werewolf beliefs remains for now an unlikely goal, monographic treatment of subtopics and the rigorous application of comparative methods—as demonstrated in this volume—are realistic aims. Such studies, however, require a thorough scholarly foundation, for which high-quality collections like *Werewolf Legends* are indispensable.

