

WEREWOLVES - EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW...

By Dr. Bob Curran

Since earliest times, legends of were-creatures – humans who could alternate between their own and animal shape – have formed a significant part of our folklore and mythology. One of the best known of such beings is, arguably, the werewolf. Indeed, it has appeared in medieval legends, in fairy tales and latterly in books and films. It is arguably the wolf which has dominated the stories and perceptions of the werewolf.

The wolf has been Mankind's oldest adversary. It was with wolves that our early ancestors competed for food and it was against the rivalry of the wolf that they hunted. Arguably, Man has always feared the creature and yet he has always admired its hunting prowess, strength and swiftness. They also may have envied its hunting prowess and the ease with which it caught its prey, much more skilfully perhaps than the shambling hominids who were our forebears. In a world where good hunting was essential for survival of both the individual and the community, they wished they could be like it. And so the desire probably took on a form of reality. Our ancestors began to look for ways in which they could supernaturally *be* the animal (and not just wolves, but other animals they admire – the bull, the horse etc.) and so acquire these skills. At first, it may have been no more than *pretending* to be these creatures – dressing in skins, adopting certain postures – but in a world which was filled with spirits and supernatural forces, an element of *possession* by the animal spirit soon became paramount. Shamans and perhaps hunters themselves were “taken over” by the wolf spirit and began to exhibit lupine behaviour and possibly perceived lupine attributes. The idea of the man-wolf had already taken root in the developing human mind.

That idea persisted down the ages but as civilisations began to consolidate and develop it became less to do with hunting and more to do with prowess – physical, sexual – and ferocity. It appeared as the attribute of a warrior in battle, a man who created terror amongst his enemies. The idea of the wolf-warrior appears in a number of ancient cultures, particularly Viking, where certain warriors donned both wolf and bear skins in order to emphasise their

fierceness and skill in warfare. These were the berserkers who, through the medium of their animal pelt garments seemed to acquire certain strengths and skills which seemed to make them invulnerable in any conflict. Ancient heroes amongst other races – for example the Celts – had similar attributes which might be attributed to their contact with animals such as wolves. Allied to this was a fascination with travellers' tails. Although travel was perhaps more frequent than we suspect in these early times, it was only certain people who in fact, journeyed any distance. They returned with wonderful tales of countries which they had seen and explored and of the wonderful beings that they had seen there. These stories, tall as they were, were readily accepted as fact in places like Christian Europe and it was readily believed that astonishing races lived in other lands – men who looked curious and who behaved in a curious fashion. Amongst these descriptions was that of a dog-headed race of men who lived somewhere in the East – some of whom were primitive and others who were relatively advanced. Stories of the “dog-heads” readily fell into the perceptions of the man-wolf in popular imagination and it was thought that if these people mated amongst human kind they might produce offspring who could alternate shape at will.

There was one other element in the cultural and imaginative mix concerning werewolves– cannibalism. It has been suggested that cannibalism was probably much more widespread in earlier societies than we care to acknowledge, particularly in remote areas of the developing world. In remote areas during harsh seasons, poverty-stricken individuals may well have resorted to eating each other in order to survive. From time to time tales of cannibals surfaced into mainstream folklore – the tale of Sawney Bean, “the Man-Eater of Midlothian” in Scotland for instance during the 14th or 15th centuries (it is not clear however, that Bean existed in the way that the legends say that he did). The idea of individuals using their fellow humans for food and even hunting them down, held overtones of the wild wolves of the forest and, as some of these individuals lived in remote areas, the connection seemed all the more obvious. It was not hard then to imagine that the human predators transformed themselves into their animal counterparts, perhaps by diabolical means.

As Christianity began to assert itself in the West, the idea of the man-wolf took on a slightly different aspect. Now this creature was the agent of the Devil and it was the Enemy of All Mankind who gave him or her their powers. The victim of the werewolf then became the Godly or the innocent – the old woman living alone or the small child. These themes were central to many of the werewolf trials, particularly in France in the 16th century – Giles Garnier, the Hermit of Dole, the Werewolves of Poligny, Jacques Roulet. Some

of these alleged occurrences were brought about by the Devil, others were accidental in which the moon (a pagan symbol) played a part. And so it has continued down to the present – the idea of the man-wolf (a figure from many cultures) appearing in literature and film. Although it has perhaps never enjoyed as much fame as the vampire or Frankenstein, the prowling beast still lurks somewhere in the depths of the human psyche, a potent reminder perhaps that we are not as cultured or civilised as we often profess to be.

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Dr. Bob Curran is the author of the new book *Werewolves- A Field Guide to Shapeshifters, Lycanthropes, and Man-Beasts* to be released in September, 2009 by New Page Books (ISBN 978-1-60163-089-6).