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 March 15, 2021
 This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria
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Who was Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Wolves in the Culture, Mythology, and Religion of Ancient Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia



FENRIR ON THE TULLSTORP RUNESTONE

INTRODUCTION

MY MAIN TOPIC IS THE RECEPTION OF WOLVES BY THE GREEKS, THE ROMANS, AND THE SCANDINAVIAN PEOPLES. I HAVE INCLUDED A SECTION ON WEREWOLVES IN THE THREE CULTURES, SINCE WEREWOLVES ARE THE MOST FASCINATING AND POPULAR USES OF WOLVES IN FOLKLORE. THE PERIODS UNDER DISCUSSION ARE: THE GRECIAN ARCHAIC THROUGH CLASSICAL PERIOD CIRCA 800-300 BC, THE ROMAN FOUNDATION UNTIL THE LATE REPUBLIC AND EARLY EMPIRE 753 BC-200 AD, AND THE VIKING AGE OF SCANDINAVIA 793 AD-1086 AD. ALL OF THE TIME PERIODS UNDER STUDY WERE POLYTHEISTIC. THE MODERN BIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF WOLVES IS FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT TO HOW THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN PERCEIVED WOLVES DURING THESE ERAS. THE MODERN CONCEPTION IS PURELY FIXED IN SCIENCE WHILE THE ANCIENT CULTURES STILL UNDERSTOOD THAT THEY WERE ANIMALS AND THEREFORE ENTIRELY DIFFERENT TO HUMANS BUT WITHOUT THE RIGID CATEGORIZATION IN MODERN TIMES.



Lupa Capitolina 13th Century AD

RESULTS

GREEK PERCEPTION OF WOLVES WAS THAT THEY WERE DULL CREATURES WHO THOUGHT MORE WITH THEIR STOMACH AND WERE PRONE TO VIOLENCE ROMAN PERCEPTION OF WOLVES WAS VERY SIMILAR WITH LITTLE DEVIATION, HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN STUDIES THAT POINT IN THE DIRECTION OF WOLVES BEING TABOO TO KILL IN ROMAN CULTURE. THIS IS DUE TO THEIR ABSENCE FROM FOLK MEDICINE AND GLADIATOR SHOWS. SCANDINAVIAN WRITTEN SOURCES ARE SO SCARCE THAT ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE IS NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY THOUGHT OF WOLVES AND THAT EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT WOLVES APPEAR FREQUENTLY ON AMULETS. THIS MEANS THAT THEY WERE RESPECTED AND ACKNOWLEDGED ENOUGH TO BE CULTURALLY IMPORTANT.

GREEK RELIGION DOES NOT HAVE THE WOLF AS A CENTRAL FIGURE, HOWEVER THE LAND OF ARCADIA (A LAND IN GREECE NEAR SPARTA) HAD A SPECIAL FESTIVAL CALLED THE LYKAIA. THE LYKAIA CELEBRATES THE STORY OF KING LYKAON, WHO FED HUMAN FLESH TO ZEUS AS A TEST TO THE GOD AND WAS TRANSFORMED INTO A WOLF FOR HIS TREACHERY. THE FESTIVAL FEATURES HUMAN SACRIFICE AND CONSUMPTION WITH YOUNG MEN IN ATTENDANCE. THOSE WHO CONSUME THE HUMAN ENTRAILS SPIRITUALLY TRANSFORMED INTO WOLVES THEMSELVES AND BEING EXILED FROM THE CITY TO THE WILD. THEY WERE PERMITTED TO RETURN TO THE CITY AFTER THEY HAD COME OF AGE. IT WAS A COMING OF AGE CEREMONY.

ROMAN RELIGION HAD A SEPARATE FESTIVAL CALLED LUPERCALIA DEDICATED TO THE STORY OF ROMULUS, REMUS AND THE SHE-WOLF (LUPA). THE TWIN BOYS WHO WOULD HELP FOUND ROME WERE LEFT IN A BASKET TO FLOAT DOWN THE RIVER WHERE A SHE-WOLF FOUND AND SUCKLED THEM. LUPERCALIA CELEBRATED THIS STORY IN A FESTIVAL OF PURIFICATION. PRIESTS OF LUPERCALIA RAN THROUGH THE CITY AND STRUCK CITIZENS WITH THONGS MADE OF ANIMAL SKINS TO REMOVE SPIRITUAL POLLUTION. IT TOOK PLACE AT THE END OF THE ROMAN YEAR AND WAS A FRESH START FOR THE NEW YEAR.

SCANDINAVIAN MYTHOLOGY HAD A FEW MAJOR CHARACTERS IN THE FORM OF WOLVES. FENRIR IS THE ICONIC GIANT WOLF WHO IS CHAINED UP TO PREVENT THE END OF THE WORLD, IN WHICH HE WILL DEVOUR ODIN KING OF THE GODS. HIS CHILDREN WHO ARE ALSO WOLVES WILL DEVOUR BOTH THE SUN AND THE MOON DURING RAGNAROK. WOLVES IN THIS RELIGION ARE SEEN AS MORE OF A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE WHO WILL BRING ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD. WEREWOLVES IN ALL THREE CULTURES ARE CREATURES WHO COMMIT TERRIBLE ACTS. SOME ARE TURNED INTO WOLVES AS A PUNISHMENT, SUCH AS LYKAON IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, WHILE OTHERS IN SCANDINAVIAN MYTH ARE HEROES WHO FIND WOLF SKINS THAT TURN THEM INTO WOLVES. UNIVERSALLY THE HUMAN IN WOLF FORM IS VORACIOUS AND MURDEROUS.

CONCLUSION

THE WOLF WHILE BEING ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT PREDATORS IN GREEK, ROMAN, AND SCANDINAVIAN CULTURES, STILL WAS PERCEIVED IN QUITE A FEW DIFFERENT WAYS.

THE WOLF WAS IMPORTANT TO THE GREEKS WHO, CELEBRATED A WOLF FESTIVAL, BUT WAS OTHERWISE DISREGARDED.

FOR THE ROMANS, WOLVES HAVE MORE POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS BUT THEY MAINTAIN THEIR REPUTATIONS REPUTATION OF FEROCITY.

THE SCANDINAVIANS PLACE THE WOLF FRONT AND CENTRE AS A TERRIBLE FORCE WHO WILL HELP BRING THE END OF THE WORLD. WEREWOLVES IN ALL THREE CULTURES ARE EVIL CREATURES WHO DO NOT FIT WITH SOCIETY AND ALWAYS HAVE NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS SURROUNDING THEM.

WHILE THE ANCIENT'S PERCEPTION OF THE WOLF SEEMS TO BE ENTIRELY NEGATIVE, THERE IS SOME BEAUTY TO BE FOUND IN THE NEW PERSPECTIVE. THE WOLF WAS MUCH MORE NEGATIVELY RELEVANT TO HUMAN LIFE IN THE PAST WHICH WOULD BREED RESENTMENT WHICH DOES NOT EXIST NOW. THE MODERN READER SHOULD REVEL IN UNDERSTANDING A COMMON SUBJECT IN A NEW WAY.



Fenrir Bound Manuscript 1680 AD

CITATIONS
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IMAGES
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 LUPA CAPITOLINA (JASTROW, 2006) IN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
 LYCAON TRANSFORMED INTO A WOLF (BARTSCH, 1978) IN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.
 ROMA, REPUBBLICA, MONETA DI P. SATRIENUS (SAILKO, 2014) IN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
 TULLSTORP STENEN (ROSBORN, 2014) IN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



LYKAION BEING TRANSFORMED INTO A WOLF BY ZEUS 1589

RESEARCH METHODS

FOR THIS PROJECT THE MAIN SOURCES ARE PRIMARY SOURCES FROM GREEK, ROMAN, AND SCANDINAVIAN AUTHORS.

THE GREEK SOURCES INCLUDE FAMOUS PHILOSOPHERS AND HISTORIANS SUCH AS ARISTOTLE AND HERODOTUS BUT ALSO MANY OTHER LESSER KNOWN AUTHORS. THE GREEK ACCOUNTS DRAWN FROM AROUND 300 BC TO 200 AD.

THE ROMAN SOURCES FOLLOW SUIT WITH THE GREEKS, WITH MANY FAMOUS ROMAN AUTHORS LIKE PLUTARCH, LIVY, AND OVID BEING THE MAIN SOURCES ON WOLVES IN ROME. THESE THREE AUTHORS ALL WROTE AROUND THE LATE REPUBLIC AND EARLY EMPIRE.

THE SCANDINAVIAN AUTHORS ALL WROTE THEIR WORKS AROUND 200 YEARS AFTER THE END OF THE VIKING AGE, AFTER THEY HAD CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY. THIS CHANGE ACCEPTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SCANDINAVIAN TEXTS.

SECONDARY SOURCES WERE CONSULTED TO PROVIDE HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT IN ADDITION TO A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE. WHERE THE PRIMARY SOURCES COULD NOT AND WERE ESSENTIAL IN A FEW AREAS, SUCH AS WOLVES IN GREEK RELIGION, WHERE THERE WAS SCATTERED EVIDENCE THROUGHOUT THE PRIMARY SOURCES WHICH NEEDED TO BE COLLECTED AND ORGANIZED.