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Wolves in a cultural landscape

Sample translation

Contents

An ash tree towers at the edge of the clearing. At its base, a serpent lies gnawing at the roots. An eagle is perched at the top, gazing out across the fields, while a squirrel scampers up and down the trunk, spreading gossip from one side to the other, and four red deer browse on the foliage in the crown of the immense tree. Its bark is furrowed and fissured, blotched with moss. Some branches are beginning to rot, but water continues to seep from the depths of the sacred well below, and dew still drips onto the ground from the branches each morning. Water flows forth from the hollows, streams that become rivers, rejuvenating distant places.

It seems that nothing can ever break this tree. It is the core of the cosmos, the center that upholds the ecological order. When we are gone, it will still stand there upright and proud, but unease is carried on the wind. Dark shadows obscure the sun as two ravens approach in the middle distance: Huginn and Muninn, "Thought" and "Memory", Odin's messengers. And what's that hanging from the lower branch, who's that figure dangling in the wind?

Preface

It's been raining all day, most of the night too. It's early July, the best time of year to be out in the woods, but if I had checked the weather report I might have stayed home this time. As I approach a lake, the view opens, a break from the undulating, densely wooded terrain I've been hiking through. Out on the bridge, a wind blows steadily from the south, funnelled through the valley, stirring up the water reflecting pale grey cloud cover. I'm half-expecting an Arctic loon in the distance, perhaps a beaver, at least a common sandpiper or two, but all is quiet except for the rain; the wildlife seems to have taken cover. I cross the bridge and continue into the forest; it's evening but still broad daylight, mid-summer in Østmarka at the edge of Oslo.

At a fork in the trail, I stop to look at the signpost nailed to the trunk of a spruce; as I turn back, about to start walking again, I spot a large canine, yellowish grey-brown, wide eyes fixed on me as it crouches for a moment, springs smoothly onto the trail and disappears silently up a slope and out of sight. It takes me a few seconds to realize it's a wolf and run after, hoping to catch another glimpse, no matter how fleeting; I scramble up the slope and continue for another two hundred yards or so, but it's gone.

I'm well aware that there are wolves in Østmarka, have seen trail camera photos, but never imagined I would see one in the flesh. Walking back down, I stop to study the scene. The forest floor is carpeted in bilberry shrub, but in a patch of mud strewn with pine needles and decomposing leaf litter at the edge of the trail, I can make out its pawprints. As the rain has stopped, I pack my camera out, place a pen beside the tracks for scale, and take some photos; I find four or five them, large and elongated, each approaching the length of the pen, but they quickly disappear into the undergrowth.

A massive boulder rests against the side of the slope, and walking over for a closer look, I find an open space beneath the overhanging rock face, a dry and comfy little rock shelter, even with some dried-out spruce boughs on the floor making for a soft surface, perhaps carried there by the wind. The wolf must have been taking shelter there, maybe resting there through the day, when I unwittingly disturbed it; it probably decided to make its escape when I turned my back to look at the sign. If it hadn't run out into the open, I could easily have walked straight past without even seeing it, and if it wasn't for the rain, it would probably have heard or smelt me coming. There are often hikers, joggers and cyclists passing through this area, but I see no human tracks and suddenly realize I haven't seen any other

people all day, that the weather has kept them home.

Wolves had been absent from Østmarka for well over a century, having been hunted out, when a pair wandered in from separate localities in Sweden and established their territory here in early 2013. Researchers called them V408 and V439, but as a popular poll was organized, they came to be known as Fenris and Frøya.[1] In Norse mythology, Fenrir is a monstrous wolf associated with chaos and destruction, while Freyja is, among other things, a goddess of fertility, love, and war.

Fenris and Frøya had at least two pups, but a few months after the pups were born, Frøya vanished without a trace, probably killed. Their son wandered out, but their daughter stayed and ended up mating with her father. These things can happen when there are no other wolves around; Fenris and his daughter had a litter, but in October 2015, his daughter was shot by a hunter in self-defence when she attacked an elkhound. Like her mother, Frøya, she had just begun taking her pups on exploratory trips around the territory when she suddenly died. The necropsy revealed she had also been poisoned.

Soon after, in January 2016, Fenris was found severely ill with mange at the edge of the rural settlements in Enebakk on the east side of Østmarka. He had lost much of his fur – his hindquarters, hindlegs and tail almost bare – and was put down, six years old. Like his daughter, he had been poisoned, and this had weakened his immune system. Considering that he had ingested three types of rat poison in large quantities, it seems that he had been feeding on poisoned rodents, but poisoned bait is sometimes found in Norwegian and Swedish wolf territories alike.[2]

What made Fenris approach human settlements when he was close to death? Instead of crawling into a hole to die, as many animals would have done in his situation, he left his own domain behind and entered that of humans. Was he hoping for a *coup de grâce*, a quick and painless death, or could he have been seeking help? Ill as he was, and on the verge of freezing to death in the January cold, he could hardly have been thinking clearly, but seeing that his daughter was killed by a hunter, he is unlikely to have had a positive impression of humans. Perhaps he was delirious, driven to the edge of madness by pain, cold and hunger, but consciously or unconsciously, something must have led him to crawl towards the human settlements.

[1] All ID numbers are from Rovbase 2021. The poll was organized by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) in collaboration with the newspaper VG and the Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature (Naturvernforbundet). 'Fenris' and 'Frøya' are Norwegian names for the Old Norse 'Fenrir' and 'Freyja'.
[2] Liberg et al. 2008, 24.

We know of a case in Sweden where a mangy, dying female wolf made her way to a remote farm, ate the cat food on the porch, and then curled up under the porch stairway. After a while, she found a more sheltered spot beneath the barn floor. The farmer didn't seem too worried about it, and kept leaving cat food out, even though he knew the wolf ate it, but eventually the wildlife management authorities were called in and the scrawny, almost bare-naked wolf was euthanized to end her suffering. She had recently left the Hasselfors pack, which would also spend some time hiding out in an old barn that fall; over the course of the winter, four of the wolves in the area were found dead of mange or in such a bad state that they could barely move and were euthanized.[3] It could well be that Fenris, like these other wolves, approached human settlements because he was freezing and desperately hungry.

The pups in Østmarka also showed symptoms of mange, but eventually made a full recovery.[4] While the rest wandered out, one female, V572, stayed behind. Then, in 2017, a male appeared in Østmarka, having wandered south from the Slettås territory in Trysil near the Swedish border. He mated with the female but disappeared mysteriously soon after their pups were born. Once again, there was only one adult wolf remaining in the territory, a female who had to raise the pups on her own, provide them with food, teach them how to hunt and protect them from danger.

When she came into heat again in winter 2018, she wound up mating with one of her own sons from the litter of the year before. He was only ten months old at the time, exceptionally young, but they had five pups. One of the pups, who was born weak and sickly, was bullied by the other wolves and eventually died of starvation, while another disappeared. The rest dispersed from the territory once they had learned the necessary survival skills. A year later, the female had pups again, and her son turned out to have fathered these too, but he then moved south to join the Hobøl pack, while an unfamiliar wolf from Hobøl wandered in to Østmarka. This newcomer appeared to have taken over the role as breeding male, but vanished without a trace, probably shot, before the pair had a chance to breed. The one female wolf who has persisted in Østmarka appears to be almost unique in her ability to stay out of rifle range.

The wolves in Østmarka have mostly subsisted on roe deer, perhaps because the pack has never become large or stable enough to hunt moose cooperatively, but there are plenty of roe deer in Østmarka, not to mention beavers and other small game, so prey has been readily available. The main reason why the pack hasn't grown large and stable is probably that

[3] Ekman 2010, 80–84.
[4] Holm 2018.

breeding individuals have been shot or poisoned, which has also led to an exceptionally high level of inbreeding.

Østmarka is the smallest wolf territory in Norway, but the breeding female has been resident there for six years now. In contrast to her siblings, as well as the males from the Slettås and Hobøl packs who showed up there only to vanish mysteriously – probably killed – and the pups who wandered out, she has spent her entire life in Østmarka. In February 2021 she was observed at Sloråsen in Enebakk with one of her daughters from the litter of 2019, but this potential heir left for Indre Østfold towards the end of March. Once again, the breeding female is alone.[5]

I've only seen a wolf that one time, but since then I've found tracks, heard howling, and submitted droppings for genetic analysis to determine which individual was on the scene. Many are fascinated by wolves, or value them for ethical and ecological reasons, but there are also those who fear them, and even though wolves tend to be shy, there is reason for caution, especially if one is accompanied by a dog. Others are out to kill wolves, for sport, for pelts, to protect game or livestock, or simply because they hate wolves and consider them vermin. Wolves trigger a spectrum of reactions from identification, empathy and fascination to fear, aversion and hatred, and our attitudes to wolves say more about us as humans than our attitudes to almost any other wild animal species.

[5] Rovbase 2021.

1 Staking out the territory

Wolves are loved and hated, feared and admired, appearing in myth and folklore wherever they occur. Hunter-gatherers have seen the wolf as a kindred spirit, but once humans domesticated and claimed ownership to livestock, their relationship to wolves turned competitive. Wolf stories from ancient times and into the early Middle Ages tend to be ambiguous, but from the late medieval period to the mid-twentieth century, wolves were demonized and persecuted. In Europe and the United States, they were driven to the brink of extinction, but in recent decades, wolves have returned to some of their former haunts, this time as a keystone and flagship species, a symbol of ecological integrity.

Varg, from the Old Norse *vargr*, has been a term for 'wolf' in several Germanic languages, including Norwegian, and is still in common usage in Swedish, but in centuries past it was also synonymous with criminal, outlaw. It has functioned as a metaphor for misfortune, for all that is dangerous and uncontrollable, such as disease and harsh winters.[6] Conversely, ancient Rome was said to have been founded by two brothers who were suckled by a wolf,[7] while the Tlingit people of Alaska claim to be descended from two wolves who became human by shedding their skins.[8] In medieval France, the wolf was a considered a benevolent spirit that guarded the crops, and was honoured with a series of rituals through the summer.[9] This is probably linked to the fact that wolves can control populations of crop-raiding wildlife; in Japan, wolves were worshipped at shrines throughout the country until agriculture was modernized and wolf hunting intensified during the late nineteenth century.[10]

We have evolved side by side with wolves, at times in close association with them. It is unclear when the first wolf domestication events occurred, but humans and wolves would have had mutually beneficial relationships during the later stages of the Pleistocene, after which their domesticated forms – as dogs – diversified and spread as human influence became pervasive.[11] It is widely believed that humans and wolves alike first arrived in Norway by following reindeer herds as the ice retreated, but the discovery of wolf bones over 30 000

[6] Dirke 2015, 115.
[7] Unsgård and Vigerstøl 1998, 157.
[8] Jones 2015, 175–176.
[9] Lopez 1978, 220.
[10] Müller 2018, 193, 282; Fritts et al. 2003, 293.
[11] Schleidt and Shalter 2003, 59.

years old suggests that wolves survived in isolated ice-free pockets on the northern coast during the last glaciation and may have been in Norway long before humans.[12]

Wolves that cooperated with humans became "man's best friend" while the less cooperative became our enemies. Then again, dogs too have widely been considered lowly, ravenous, cowardly and dangerous, at least in Europe. Only during the nineteenth century did Europeans begin to appreciate the dog as a friendly and faithful animal. Past prevalence of rabies probably played a major role in social constructions of wolves and dogs alike,[13] but indigenous peoples appear to have had strong bonds with their dogs throughout history. In Israel, archaeologists have found a 12 000-year-old skeleton of an elderly person buried alongside a puppy.[14] Through the ages, humans have probably treated their dogs as differently as they have treated each other. In some circumstances they have oppressed and abused them; in others, they have bonded with them, and immortalized them in art and literature. The archetypal dog or wolf is as intangible, as difficult to identify or trace, as the archetypal human. The history of canids is so closely intertwined with ours that we are unable to place ourselves outside it.

The belief that wolves were possessed of demons, and the associated ritual hanging of wolves, persisted into the eighteenth century in parts of Europe. Wolves and suspected werewolves were hung so their feet didn't touch the ground, so that Odin's ravens could carry the demon back to the land of the dead when they picked the bones clean.[15] As early as the ninth century, in the Old Saxon epic poem *Heliand*, an early attempt at rendering Germanic warrior culture compatible with the Christian ideal of piety, the gallows were known as *varagtreo*, 'the wolf tree'.[16] In Denmark, wolves and thieves were hung side by side to show that thieves were no better than wild predators.[17]

Hanging was also a widespread method of killing dogs,[18] but death by hanging was not necessarily dishonourable. On the contrary, it could be reserved for animals that were granted a special status. The Sami had a tradition of hanging dogs, not as punishment but as a humane way to put them down. According to Sami myth, dog approached Sami and offered his services on condition that he would be fed meat broth and that when he became too old to

[12] Unsgård and Vigerstøl 1998, 155.
[13] Paton 2017.
[14] Ekman 2010, 165.
[15] Rheinheimer 2015, 39, 43–44.
[16] Smith 1894, 27.
[17] Tømmeraas 2017, 23.
[18] Paton 2017.

follow the reindeer, he would be killed by no other means than hanging.[19] The practice of hanging dogs and wolves, whether as punishment or euthanasia, reflects a degree of anthropomorphism, assigning animals moral agency or moral value that was otherwise reserved for humans.

Wolves' potential to become dogs goes some way towards explaining why they evoke such strong emotional reactions. Since they have a unique ability to cooperate with humans, and can be domesticated as pets, guard dogs or hunting dogs, wolves are, in a sense, our next of kin. Like humans, wolves are loyal to family and friends, willing to risk their lives to protect the pack. In their psychology and social organization, humans arguably have more in common with wolves than with non-human primates,[20] and the loyalty, empathy and care that comes into play among wolves is almost morally exemplary by human standards.[21] Wolves can be even more humane than humans, more considerate of each other, but as in human society, there is brutality, and violent crime does occur.

Most Norwegians have never seen a free-ranging wolf, much less lost livestock or pets to one, but wolves play a prominent role in Norwegian politics. Even though a clear majority of Norwegians like wolves and want to see their numbers increased to a viable level, opposition is strong in certain segments of the population, usually motivated by hunting interests or attachment to traditional land use practices, but also by fear. Attitudes to wolves are often based on cultural assumptions, and real wolves may be overshadowed by myths and prejudices. While wolf opponents tend to consider wolves a burden, a threat to their livelihoods or hunting opportunities, wolf proponents feel that wolves enrich their lives, enlivening the landscape, triggering ecological interactions, adding an invaluable dimension to the outdoors experience.

Conflict also occurs in other countries where livestock and wolves share their living space, but in Norway the sheep population is exceptionally high, the wolf population exceptionally low. While two million sheep are released on pasture in Norway each summer, the number of wolves has rarely exceeded one hundred individuals, and yet, these few wolves are construed as a threat to sheep. The southern Scandinavian wolf population is shared between Norway and Sweden, with the bulk of the population in Sweden, and is dependent on dispersing individuals from Russia or Finland to maintain a minimum of genetic variation. Since the turn of the century, poaching has been the leading cause of death among wolves in

[19] Turi 2012, 123; Fønhus 1986a, 109.
[20] Derr 2011, 125; Schleidt and Shalter 2003, 57, 59.
[21] Dutcher and Dutcher 2013, 24–25, 29.

Norway, Sweden and Finland alike, constituting approximately fifty percent of total mortality in all three countries. In addition to this, there is legal hunting, where wolves are culled by licensed hunters according to set quota.[22]

Narratives about wolves can provide insight into the attitudes that drive the conflicts around them, and contribute towards explaining why wolves continue to fascinate, even though we recently drove them to the brink of extinction. By taking a close look at a selection of Norwegian wolf stories – from Norse myth to medieval superstition, from Christian parables to contemporary popular culture – we can learn something about what wolves have signified through the ages, and what they signify today.

Part of the wolf debate in Norway and other Western countries revolves around the question of whether or not wolves are a threat to people, with wolf opponents deeming them dangerous and proponents denying it. Considering that wolves have been known to attack humans in certain unusual circumstances, it is understandable that the fear of wolves persists, but attacks on humans are extremely rare, and feelings of fear are strongly influenced by social and cultural context.[23] The fear of wolves is often linked to fear of the unknown, which intensifies as the actual threat decreases and the fear becomes more abstract.[24] Irrational fear may also be reinforced by the image of the wolf as a demonic monster generated by films and literature and by the media. Representations of wolves are based not only on experience with full-blooded wolves, but also with their closest relatives – dogs and wolf-dog hybrids – as well as their fictional variants: werewolves. Wolves are often depicted as the enemies of dogs, hybridization and the risk of it are used as arguments against wolf conservation, and belief in werewolves has contributed to legitimizing wolf persecution.

In interpreting narratives about wolves, it can be a challenge to separate real wolves from the fictional and symbolic. When fiction is mistaken for reality, misconceptions arise, often with damaging consequences, and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that generalizations about wolves can be misleading: wolves cannot be reduced to a uniform type but need to be considered as individuals from distinct wolf cultures. Where fictional accounts are obviously at odds with science, I use biology and ecology as correctives in order to point out inconsistencies.[25]

[22] Kaltenborn and Brainerd 2016, 179; Suutarinen and Kojola 2017, 15; Liberg et al. 2008, 16–17.
[23] Linnell and Bjerke 2002, 8.
[24] Dirke 2015, 107.
[25] See S. K. Robisch 2009, 16.

Wolves have been cultural icons throughout Norwegian history, but their role has shifted radically at a handful of junctures. Norwegian wolf representations can be said to have passed through three key stages: a pagan stage, when wolves played a prominent role in mythology and were associated with power; a stage dominated by Christianity and superstition, when belief in werewolves and witchcraft led to the demonization of wolves; and a post-Enlightenment, capitalist, pragmatic stage, beginning around the early to mid-nineteenth century, when the human population increased dramatically, superstition waned, religion lost much of its influence, and material concerns came to the forefront. Wolves have become icons of wildness, for better or worse, an ambiguous role that leads to both romanticization and demonization.

In light of the ongoing extinction event, as species and their habitats continue to disappear, it is increasingly evident that the time has come for a shift towards ecosystem-based wildlife management, to a new paradigm where ecosystems and wildlife are valued for their own sake. Here, the wolf can play a central role, as a top predator and keystone species. Long ago, before the extinction campaigns, wolves were taken for granted as an integral part of the landscape, but today they are intentionally kept endangered. To understand what brought us here, we may do well to start at the beginning, with the mythical Fenrir.

2 Wolves in Norse mythology

In Norse mythology, wolves were dangerous and destructive, but in a warrior culture such as that of the Vikings, warlike qualities fostered respect and admiration. The status of wolves was ambiguous, and stories of individual wolves were not necessarily intended as statements about wolves in general. In contrast to the God of Christianity, Norse gods possessed all manner of weaknesses and failings: they were strong and mighty, but also ambitious and vain, and their relations were characterized by conflicts and intrigue in a manner that can perhaps best be described as human. Wolves were not gods, but dangerous creatures that the gods had to deal with.

Fenrir, a monstrous wolf, was son of the trickster god Loki and the female *jötunn* Angrboða.[26] Born in Jötunheimr, he grew up with his two siblings: Hel, goddess of the underworld, and Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent. Fenrir grew at an alarming pace, visibly bigger by the day. The Æsir, the mightiest and most well-known group of Norse gods, feared great harm from him, so when he was still a puppy, they took him to their home, Asgard, in the hope that he could be rendered tractable if they treated him well, but with the exception of Týr, who fed him, the Æsir were afraid of the enormous wolf. It seemed dangerous to have him around, but killing him could not be permitted in the inviolable sanctuary of Asgard, so they decided to put him in chains.

Fenrir easily broke the first chain they bound him in, which they called Leyding, and when they made a stronger chain, Dromi, he broke that, too. Odin then sent the servant Skírnir to seek help from the dwarves in Svartálfaheimr, who used magic to make a thin binding, Gleipnir, which was said to be unbreakable and only get stronger the more it was tested. Gleipnir was made of mountain roots, bear sinews, bird spittle, fish breath, a woman's beard, and the sound of a cat's footsteps. The reason why these things can no longer be found is supposedly that they were all used to make Gleipnir.

Fenrir, suspecting foul play, refused to let them bind him again unless one of them simultaneously placed their hand in his mouth as a gesture of good faith. Týr volunteered, and when Fenrir realized he couldn't break free, he bit off his hand. The Æsir then fastened

[26] In Norwegian, female *jötnar* are referred to as *jotunkvinner*, 'jötunn women', but this usage has not crossed over into English. The status of the *jötnar* is ambiguous, as they resemble humans but can be likened to gods, and have also been described as trolls, ogres and giants. In Norwegian, female *jötnar* with grotesque or monstrous traits are generally referred to as *gygrer*.

Gleipnir to a stone slab which they buried deep in the ground and secured with a large rock. When Fenrir snapped at them, they thrust a sword into his mouth with the hilt against the lower jaw and the point against the upper so that his mouth was jammed wide open. Fenrir then began to howl, and the slimy saliva that came streaming out of him became the river Ván. Later, during Ragnarök, he would break loose and take revenge.[27]

Odin, the mightiest of the Æsir, kept the company of the wolves Geri and Freki, 'the greedy' and 'the ravenous', in Valhalla. He gave them all his food, while he subsisted on wine alone.[28] The hellhound Garmr had been given the task of guarding the entrance to Hel, the land of the dead, over which the goddess of the same name presided, while the Æsir had Fenrir under control, at least for the time being. It is striking how all these wolves or hounds were at once both prisoner and guard, that the Æsir used them as guards in order to gain control over them. This can be interpreted as reflecting a desire for mastery over wild nature broadly defined, an urge to tame the beast, but the Æsir knew full well that their power over the wolves was tenuous, that they had to watch them closely, beware of them. Ragnarök was inevitable, and then the wolves would be released, all hell break loose.

In Norse thinking, life was a continuous battle between darkness and light. The bravest warriors, the *einherjar*, who died in battle, were rewarded with a stay in Valhalla, the hall of the slain, where Odin ruled. Here, they fought each other and were reborn daily, always prepared for war, awaiting the end times. For the Vikings, war was more than a state of crisis demanding strategy and discipline – it was a fundamental aspect of their worldview and religious symbolism.[29] A state of eternal battle was embraced, even sought, and relations were cheerfully adversarial, but keeping the wolves in line was a challenge, even for gods.

In addition to the two wolves, Odin kept the company of two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, who sat perched on his shoulders and flew out each morning to return with news of the outside world. While wolves are predators, ravens are scavengers that follow them, and it can be considered fitting that a warrior god such as Odin would surround himself with these species.

Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, life tree, or tree of destiny, stands at the center of the world, in the middle of Asgard. It can be perceived as the core of a cosmic ecosystem, elemental to nature's life-sustaining cycles. The rain that falls to the ground, the rivers that run to the sea,

[27] Snorre 2008, 52–55, 84.
[28] Steinsland 2005, 180; Snorre 2008, 60.
[29] Steinsland 2005, 177–179.

begin with dew that drips from Yggdrasil's branches as the tree absorbs water from the sacred well beneath it, which is attended by the Norns, female deities of destiny. Yggdrasil radiates divine energy, but dark forces are ever-lurking in the outer reaches of the cosmos, threatening the world order.[30] The system is unstable and can only persist as long as equilibrium is maintained; it is dynamic yet sensitive to change, and there is little reason to believe that the current world order will last.

Yggdrasil means 'Odin's steed', as Odin hung himself in the tree, 'rode the gallows', to gain access to the arts of writing and reading. He sacrificed himself, suffered and died, crossed over to the land of the dead in order to access the sacred runes, knowledge that formerly belonged to the *jötnar*. Odin hung for nine nights in 'the windcold tree', without food or drink, when he 'picked up runes […] with a scream' and fell to the ground. He rode the world tree, acquired wisdom by exploring the mysteries of death, but this was a demanding task, requiring much suffering and renunciation.[31]

Odin could also sit beneath the gallows and communicate with those who were dead by hanging. One might be led to compare Odin in the tree with Jesus on the cross, but the context is quite different: where Jesus suffered for the sins of humankind, Odin suffered to gain access to knowledge. In Christianity, knowledge is linked to the fall, but in Old Norse religion, the crossing of boundaries was considered a necessary step in the quest for knowledge.[32]

Fenrir's sons, Sköll and Hati, were raised by a female *jötunn* in Járnvid, the Ironwood, and were predestined to swallow the sun and moon. Sköll pursued the sun, Hati the moon, while the two celestial bodies were pulled along by a horse-drawn chariot each, driven by Sól and Máni, Mundilfari's children, who were in turn named after the sun and moon, respectively. They had been assigned this task as punishment for their father's arrogance when he had the nerve to give his children these flattering names.[33] In John Charles Dollman's print from 1909, Sól and Máni are depicted standing upright with swirling capes on their fiery-wheeled chariots as they tug at the reins, silhouetted against the two radiant orbs, while the two gigantic wolves, black as coke but with glowing eyes, close in for the kill. Sköll is of devilish demeanor and Hati looks every bit as hateful as his name suggests.

[30] Steinsland 2005, 98–104.
[31] Steinsland 2005, 100–103, 182–183, my translation.
[32] Steinsland 2005, 182, 446.
[33] Snorre 2008, 35–36.

[Black-and-white illustration across half a page: *The Wolves pursuing Sol and Mani* by John Charles Dollman (1909)]

When Sköll and Hati finally catch up with the sun and moon and swallow them, bad years will follow. The sun will go black in summer, and all weather will be miserable. According to Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, written during the first half of the thirteenth century, there will first be three winters when great wars rage across the world, while brothers, fathers and sons cut one another other down for gain; this will be followed by the *Fimbulvetr* or "Fimbulwinter", when three years will pass without summer: 'axe-time, sword-time […] wind-time, wolf-time / until the world falls'.[34]

The Swedish archeologist Bo Gräslund at Uppsala University has shown that the story of the Fimbulwinter is probably based on earlier accounts of a climate crisis that occurred during the sixth century, towards the end of the Migration Period. According to Snorri, there are three winters with no summer between them; hence, two summers are missing, and based on archeological evidence it seems that the years without summer may have been 536 and 537. Studies of annual growth rings show that conditions were particularly bad during the years that followed 536, and layers of sulphate recorded in ice cores from Greenland and the Antarctic suggest this may have been due to a volcanic eruption or, possibly, a comet impact. The eruption or impact appears to have occurred somewhere in the tropics but had global consequences. No written sources from the period in question are available from the Nordic countries, but according to sources from the Mediterranean region, the sun and moon were darkened or eclipsed through the year 536, leading to crop failure and famine. This lasted for at least close to a year, perhaps for eighteen months, from spring 536 and well into the summer of 537. The ensuing cool period lasted for over a century, and additional volcanic eruptions in 540 and 547 may have made matters worse. In the Nordic countries, the human population declined drastically, farms were abandoned, and the cultural landscape was overgrown. Artisanal and metallurgical skills were lost, and it would take several centuries to regain the technical expertise and craftsmanship that had circulated before the onset of the crisis.[35]

When bad years follow upon one another, end to end, when crops fail and livestock starve, hunger, desperation and competition for remaining resources can easily lead to violence – to robbery, murder or war. In Snorri's narrative, however, war comes first, then hunger, and he does not pinpoint any causal relationship, apart from the two mythological

[34] Snorre 2008, 36, 83–84, my translation.
[35] Gräslund 2007, 102–110. See Büntgen et al. 2016, 1 on possible eruptions in 540 and 547.

wolves swallowing the celestial bodies. Neither is Snorri consistent about what triggers the catastrophe – Sköll or Hati, the devouring of the sun or the moon – but his narrative is based on earlier sources, and it could be that the sequence of events has been confused as the story has been passed down and embroidered upon. It may seem unlikely that war came before hunger and not the other way around, but then again, it could also be that the bad years were interpreted as punishment for war, murder and betrayal.[36] From an ecological perspective, violence and unrest follow logically from famine, but in religious contexts, natural disasters are generally interpreted as punishment for human transgressions, and the Fimbulwinter may have been seen in the light of ongoing armed conflicts. During the sixth century, one knew nothing of comet impacts or volcanic eruptions on distant continents, and faced with a lack of natural explanations, one resorted to metaphysics. If one was looking for possible causes in the immediate past, and tragic conflicts were alive in recent memory, these would be obvious candidates. As the situation grew increasingly desperate, people would have asked themselves why disaster had befallen them, and in crises such as this, people from most cultures have tended to conclude that it must either be punishment inflicted by the gods or something predetermined, if they couldn't find grounds for blaming foreigners or other ethnic groups.

In times of crisis, people soon cast about for a scapegoat, preferably someone outside their own circle, someone they can exclude with a clear conscience. The wolf has often filled this role, and this also holds true of the story of the Fimbulwinter. Of course it had to be the wolf – in the form of Sköll and Hati – who devoured the sun and moon, who darkened the world, blackened existence so that inhibitions were eclipsed and people turned on each without mercy, maddened by gnawing hunger. Nevertheless, in Snorri's narrative, Sköll and Hati appear more as a natural phenomenon, almost as a symptom of mounting unrest, personifications of danger and chaos, than as autonomous agents. They are symbols of pain, and the disaster is presented as inevitable.

Wolves could again have presented a challenge in the darkness of Fimbulwinter. As the vegetation thinned out for lack of sunlight, herbivores would have starved to death, and wolves would have had easy access to carcasses for a short period before they too were struck by hunger, which would have led to dramatic fluctuations in the wolf population. The plague of Justinian may have been a direct consequence of this climate crisis, as a colder climate probably led to a decline in the population of rats so that the fleas which carried the plague had to find new hosts to parasitize.[37] While fleas hopped over onto people as rats became

[36] Snorre 2008, 83.
[37] Gräslund 2007, 109.

fewer, wolves would have turned their attention to domestic animals as wild game grew scarce. When farms were abandoned, while carcasses were left to rot, wolves would have realized that approaching human settlements was no longer all that dangerous. Among the people who starved to death or were murdered, there must have been many who did not receive a proper burial, and wolves would have fed on the corpses, as they have been known to do during wars and epidemics. It is by no means unthinkable that cannibalism may have occurred, among wolves and humans alike; the crisis of the sixth century was a natural disaster of epic proportions, of a magnitude that has not been known since. In Norway, countless humans and other animals perished, while the environment became cold and damp, poorer in both biodiversity and biomass.

After three years of war and three years of Fimbulwinter, Ragnarök began, according to Snorri. Yggdrasil and all the earth shook and trembled, trees fell, rock faces thundered to the ground, and Fenrir broke free of the binding. As he stormed out onto the battlefield, his jaws spanned from the sky to the ground, and when Odin came riding towards him in ring armour and golden helmet, armed with his spear Gungnir, Fenrir swallowed him whole. Meanwhile, Garmr and Týr killed each other, while Thor slew the Midgard Serpent but was himself killed by the venom the dying serpent spewed at him. This was doomed to happen, predetermined by destiny, but Víðarr, a strong and silent god of the forest, one of Odin's sons, possessed a special shoe made of leather pieces that had been cut off and discarded by shoemakers. Stepping on Fenrir's lower jaw with the shoe, he grabbed the upper jaw in his hands and tore the wolf apart.[38]

Fenrir, Sköll and Hati have supernatural qualities and are exceedingly large and powerful. If they are to be seen as representatives of wolfishness, their key characteristic must be their muzzles: enormous mouth, projecting snout, massive jaws, deadly canines, colossal gape that can consume most anything. What they do, is bite and swallow. Sköll and Hati's lot in life is to devour the sun and moon, and once the Æsir have provoked Fenrir into biting off Týr's hand, they stuff his jaws wide open with a sword; when Fenrir breaks loose, his jaws reach from the sky to the ground before he swallows Odin, and Víðarr eventually kills him precisely by ripping his jaws apart.

Did the Æsir do the right thing in binding Fenrir, or was it a mistake? The whole idea in bringing him to Asgard was to treat him well and thereby render him tractable, but instead

[38] Snorre 2008, 84–85.

of giving him their trust and respect, they feared him. The Æsir expected him to do them harm, so they tied him up, but eventually he broke loose anyway, and they knew this was bound to happen sooner or later. Would Fenrir have proven himself more amenable if they hadn't bound him in chains? Could Odin's life have been spared? In other respects, the Æsir give the impression of being brave and fearless, but they were afraid of Fenrir. Týr was not as fainthearted as the rest of them, but then he lost his hand, and this kind of daring is perhaps more akin to foolhardiness than bravery. Either way, Týr was complicit with the rest of the Æsir in tricking Fenrir, abusing his good faith. They gained the upper hand through deceit, not force. Perhaps Fenrir was the only thing they feared, and this was their weakness, almost their Achilles' heel. The way the Æsir comported themselves when confronted with Fenrir, was unbefitting of gods, and this flaw can be linked to the way Ragnarök would play out. When the Æsir resorted to trickery, and did not even succeed in their deceitful scheme, they may not have been fit to rule over Midgard any longer. The reason why Fenrir allowed the Æsir to bind him with Gleipnir, was specifically so that they should not be able to claim that he 'lacks courage'.[39] Fenrir thereby lived up to the Vikings' warrior ideal; the Æsir did not.

Fenrir thus appears as both demonic and heroic; the Old Norse sources are characterized by an ambivalence that is not unusual in polytheistic religions. Fenrir is obviously a destructive force, but not necessarily evil, and despite his being extremely dangerous, we can empathize with him. Even though he is doomed to swallow Odin during Ragnarök, this does not mean that he hates Odin. He does what he is destined to do, and in the Norse imaginary, one does not challenge destiny, unless one is a mischievous, shapeshifting trickster like Loki, Fenrir's father. In Snorri's telling of the story, we are not presented with Fenrir's perspective, and it is unclear whether or not he reflects on his role. It could be that he is driven by primitive instincts, but he can also be seen as a tool of satanic forces. Either way, the myth of Fenrir served to reinforce the Viking worldview: in an unstable world where nothing can be taken for granted and the future looks grim, one can at least try to face one's fate with valor and fortitude.

And yet the wolves did not take over. The mythological wolves in Old Norse thinking were wild and rebellious, put spokes in the wheels, but they were forewarnings of chaos, not transfer of power. Odin's throne was overthrown, but the wolves were not concerned with laying claim to property. They can perhaps be seen as agents of entropy, harbingers of unrest, persistent threats with the potential to flatten arbitrary disparities. They achieved neither

[39] Snorre 2008, 54.

justice nor mastery but shattered the false sense of security, the illusion of control, that the Æsir had established for themselves. Some of the Æsir – Víðarr among them – would survive Ragnarök and live on in its aftermath, but the world they knew had ended. Later, a new age would dawn: the sun's daughter would shine in her mother's stead, and two people – Líf and Lífþrasir, who had lived on morning dew in the sheltered wood of Hoddmímis holt while the rest of the world burned – would step out into the light and form the beginnings of a new clan.[40]

The myth of Fenrir is often interpreted as an expression of reverence for the awesome powers of the wolf, but one might also consider that wolves were a threat to livestock even in pre-Christian times. The Vikings lived in a cultural landscape, with pasture and cultivated fields, and perhaps Fenrir was doomed to attack Odin analogously to how the wolf is bound to prey on the flocks sooner or later. Pasture grazing was not as important as it would later become, but people kept chickens, pigs, goats and horses, all of which were vulnerable to depredations by wolves. The key difference is that where pre-Christian Norwegians liked to imagine that they had wolves under control, there are now many who fear them.[41] There is a moral undercurrent to the Fenrir myth, but the moral stands at odds with that which would soon spread with Christianity.

From a more practical perspective, the myth of the Æsir trying to control Fenrir may reflect failed attempts at domestication. The Vikings must have come across wolf dens with pups every now and then, and tried to raise them in captivity, as still happens at times in countries such as Kazakhstan where wolves are common and legislation is less prohibitive than in the Nordic countries. Besides, the notion that Fenrir grew at an astounding pace is consistent with wolf biology: wolves attain adulthood, becoming fully grown, much faster than dogs do. Today, still, the typical experience of trying to keep wolves as pets is that they never become entirely tame, at least not in the same way as dogs, that they never quite submit to humans, and this comes across clearly in the myth of Fenrir.

In Norse mythology, female *jötnar*, *gygrer*, were often perceived as threatening; like mighty Æsir such as Odin and Thor, the stronger among the female *jötnar* were clearly associated with wolves. Dangerous, abnormally strong Hyrrokin, "she who is wrinkled by fire", rode her wolf using adders as reins; Hyndla, "little dog", a headstrong and

[40] Snorre 2008, 89.
[41] Tømmeraas 2017, 22.

knowledgeable female *jötunn*, was also known to ride a wolf.[42] Back then, consorting with wolves and achieving mastery over them was probably a sign of courage and strength.

The most feared warriors during the Viking Age were the berserkers, professional soldiers who had pledged allegiance to Odin, quite possibly organized warrior leagues, or what we today might refer to as mercenaries, who went to battle clad in wolf- or bearskins.[43] Scabbards and helmet plates pre-dating the Viking Age have been found decorated with images of figures with heads and skins like wolves and bears, but feet like humans. Perhaps the two carnivores symbolize different battle strategies: while the bear stands alone but is extremely strong, wolves attack in organized packs.[44] In the sagas, the *Úlfhéðnar*, "wolf coats", are either a specific type of berserker or warriors who fight alongside them. They wore wolfskins on the battlefield, where they howled, growled and bit at their shields while they flew into murderous rage, killing indiscriminately.[45] In battle, they were said to behave as raging madmen, indifferent to harm and insensitive to pain, but when the battle was over, they would slip into apathetic torpor.

It could be that these warriors achieved the state of *berserksgang*, of "going berserk", by falling into a kind of self-induced, collective, dissociative trance,[46] and it has been suggested that they were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.[47] Recent research, however, shows that the berserkers and *úlfhéðnar* probably didn't actually go berserk, that they were not raging madmen but brave, skilled warriors. The concept of going berserk seems to have been more of an image than a reality and may have been part of a ritual associated with a warrior league; 'berserker' may indeed have been synonymous with 'champion'. Graves that have been found to contain artifacts depicting the *úlfhéðnar* are exceptionally rich, suggesting that the *úlfhéðnar* were part of the social elite, celebrated heroes or leaders, not desperate mercenaries.[48] Like wolf packs, they would have been disciplined and well-coordinated, and even though they were dangerous and feared, their strategy was based on cooperation. More than a symbol of *berserksgang*, the wolf may have been their ideal.

When paganism was replaced by Christianity, with Jesus as moral exemplar, the wolf was no longer held in reverence. Jesus was at once the "Lamb of God" and the "Good Shepherd", leading his faithful flock of sheep, laying down his life for them. As Christians

[42] Steinsland 2005, 180, 212, 162, 253.
[43] Steinsland 2005, 179.
[44] Davidson 1986, 149–150.
[45] Høyersten 2004, 3248.
[46] Høyersten 2004, 3250.
[47] Shay 1994, 98.
[48] Dale 2014, 383–386.

demonized wolves for much the same reasons the Vikings respected them, veneration turned to intolerance. Where Vikings glorified and idealized a warlike existence, Christians sought to avoid war (at least in theory – in reality the Crusades were largely a continuation of the Viking raids); where Vikings took pride in their ability to deal with wild wolves, Christians met wolves with fear and contempt. Vikings could identify with the wolf as a cultural symbol, but this was out of the question for pious Christians. As warrior culture gradually yielded to peasant culture, *berserksgang* was banned, and from a position firmly on the inside of the dominant culture, wolves were relegated to the outside, like the outlaws they came to be associated with. Wolves suffered the same fate as Odin: they rode the gallows and were driven to the edge of extinction. Like Odin himself, they came to be seen as despicable remnants of a pagan past, opposers of God, instruments of the devil. One should love one's neighbor as oneself, but not wolves. Punishment should fit the crime, but wolves were guilty regardless. Demonization of wolves intensified with the witch hunts of the early modern period, and as populations of humans and livestock increased and transhumance became widespread from the seventeenth century onward, wolves became the enemies of farmers.

15 The wolf tree

Wolves have been persecuted throughout modern history, and remain extinct across much of their former range, but the process of recovery is well underway. Considering that the extinction campaigns had broad popular support, it comes as no surprise that this is controversial. The fate of wolves is closely bound up with human culture: who would have thought that a culture dead set on stamping them out would later welcome their return and take measures to adapt to their presence?

Today, there are many who not only tolerate, but like wolves. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that through most of Norway's history, attitudes towards wolves have been overwhelmingly negative, with some ambiguous exceptions. Traditionally, this has been because wolves were a threat to livestock, but today, opposition to wolf recovery is also linked to hunting interests. During the medieval and early modern periods, wolves were associated with witchcraft and the devil, but if we could live alongside wolves back then, we can surely live with them today, too, now that we've even developed advanced technology to monitor them with.

The main threat to Norwegian agriculture and rural living is not large carnivores, but market forces and international trade agreements that make it hard for small-scale farmers to compete. In blaming wolves for government decisions, we reduce them to a unit in a political game that has little to do with actual wolves, a self-defeating ploy that diverts attention from the real problems we are faced with in Norwegian wildlife management and rural policy. Wolves have become victims of human conflicts.

We have seen that many are concerned about overgrowth, and fear that thickets will reclaim ancestral farmland, but considering that much of this overgrowth happens not on outlying pastures but on enclosed fields, where sheep can be effectively protected with fencing, wolves can hardly be blamed for this either. Besides, in light of the extinction crisis and the climate crisis, overgrowth is not necessarily a problem.

Some hunters and private landowners are worried about the impact of wolves on moose and wild reindeer populations, but the biggest threat to these is without doubt CWD, and research suggests that wolves can help to prevent its spread. If anything, we need wolves to manage the ungulates, so that natural ecological processes can reassert themselves and selection once again favors the wild, the quick and adaptable. Yes, a larger wolf population

can entail reduced hunting quotas locally, but ecological integrity is a boon for all, far more valuable than affected landowners' hunting profits.

Since almost all the forests and mountains in Norway are used for either hunting or pasture, they can hardly be described as wilderness, but wolf recovery is a start, a small step towards making Norwegian ecosystems a little wilder. The cultural landscape can be wild enough, provided that biodiversity is maintained, but this has to include large carnivores. In Norway, where settlements are scattered and protected are areas tiny, wolf territories almost inevitably encompass both forests and villages, and we are compelled to find new ways to coexist with wildlife.

The chase for economic growth incentivizes us to disregard nature, especially predators, and though this might yield returns in the short term, in the long run it is neither ethically defensible nor ecologically sustainable. Wolves can put us in touch with the wild nature we have been alienated from and clean up where our technical solutions fall short. They are the ancestors of dogs, our loyal companions, the first animals we domesticated, and as such, the history of humans, too, is inextricably linked with that of wolves.

Without wolves, something fundamental is missing, a keystone. As it stands, large parts of Norway are ecologically diminished, biologically degraded, and we've gotten used to it. Our baseline has shifted in accordance with the damage we've done, but now that increasing numbers of people experience wolves – whether they see them, hear them, find tracks or simply know they're there – they once again become a part of our lifeworld. Driving wolves to extinction a second time would be a double tragedy, as we should know better by now. We have discovered how important they are for ecological functioning and realized that the extinction campaigns of the nineteenth century were based on misunderstandings and prejudices.

Intact ecosystems are more than seed banks, medicine chests and museums; they are our heritage, testament to the scenes that made us what we are today. To assume that we can dispose of them without suffering consequences – spiritual and material, for ourselves and for the earth as a whole – is not only arrogant but foolish, almost suicidal, symptomatic of a blunted and shortsighted worldview. Our dominion has been a story of wanton destruction; like deer overbrowsing their home range in the absence of predators, we have become too many and poorly adjusted to our altered living conditions. Our distribution range is overpopulated and impoverished.

The way we relate to wolves has consequences for other predators and for wild nature widely considered. Today we can identify and analyze the component parts of ecosystems and

acknowledge that the wild is now so scarce that it is fragile. During the Middle Ages, no one could have imagined that we would someday conquer the wilderness, but today it is by no means an unlikely scenario, and many fear that in so doing we will also obliterate ourselves. If we can learn to live with wolves, chances are that we can learn to live with all wild animals, and this opens for the possibility of restoring some of what has been lost.

The tree still stands, old as the world. Some branches are broken off, others have grown stronger with the years. The trunk holds steady against the west wind, though the mightiest gusts force creaks from the cracks, fissures that reach for the dried-out heartwood. Older than living memory, but reborn each year, shoots still burst from the limbs, buds still blossom, drawing nourishment, revitalizing each other, forming a fluttering wickerwork, furcated, divaricated, shading and sheltering life there below. Pruned, pollarded, worked over, the toughened tree has taken on other forms.

While new greenery springs forth on overgrazed plateaus, thickets close shut around deserted glades, reeds rise from silent ponds, and brooks chuckle through clefts in cragged mountain sides, the wolf tree still rises, a looming watchtower, a fount of memory, a shielding hand outstretched towards the skies. And what's that moving about down by the corpse in the gathering dawn?

Who's that figure, slender and sinewy, yellowish grey in the glistening grass, loping across the damp meadow?