

The Wild Hunt

By Evelyn C. Rysdyk

Tales of The Wild Hunt are told in stories all across Northern Europe. A common thread in all the stories is that the hunt is carried out by a group of fearsome beings flying through the sky. They ride at some point during the cold nights of Autumn.

In alpine Germany it was believed that The Wild Hunt was led by *Perchta*. Her name means "The Shining One." (The words *peraht*, *berht* and *brecht* mean bright, light and/or white.) She was the Winter Goddess and "The Lady of the Beasts" and was a guardian of the animals and nature in ancient Germanic hunting cultures. She also has a fierce aspect known as the, *Schiachperchta* ("Ugly Perchta") and it is in that form that she drives out "bad spirits" from the community.



An amulet of Freyja pulling her braids in a battle frenzy found in Tissø, Denmark.

Perchta has a counterpart in, *Frau Holda* (also *Holde*, *Hulda*, *Hulle*, *Holl*, *Holle*) the supernatural matron of spinning, childbirth and domestic animals, who is associated with the dark time of the year, witches, and The Wild Hunt. Frau Holda's name is related to Scandinavian beings known as the *Huldra*, the faerie women with animal tails who live in the forests of Scandinavia.

In some tales, it is the sky God *Oðinn* (*Wotan*, *Woden*) who leads The Wild Hunt -flying out from his home in heavenly *Asgard*. However, it is the golden "shining goddess" *Freyja* who will lead our Wild Hunt.

Freyja is honored as the guardian of animals and Nature— as well as the Goddess of War, Battle, Death, Magic, Prophecy, and Wealth. This diverse collection of skills fits well with "job description" of the Old European Great Goddess and has parallels to the Germanic Goddesses, Perchta and Holda.

Although equal in power with *Oðinn*, Freyja did not live in his sky realm of *Asgard*. Instead, Freyja lived in her own realm, *Vanaheim*, at the western edge of *Midgard* or Middle World. There she reigns over the spirits of nature, the elves, the dwarves, and the creatures which inhabit the land and ocean. She is petitioned by humans wishing her to intercede on their behalf for everything from a good harvest, or a successful hunt, or to having healthy children. In other words, she is petitioned for all forms of good fortune.

As goddess of war, wherever Freyja rides to battle, she gets half the slain. She is also chief of the Valkyries, the demi-goddesses who select the noble and heroic dead and carry them to the Realms of the Gods. Freyja chooses first and brings half of the valiant dead to her palace

Fólkvangr in Vanahiem to feast in her hall *Sessrúmnir*. While the other half go to Oðinn's hall, *Valhalla*.

Freyja is also patroness of women who attain wisdom, status, and power. This derives from the fact that the Valkyries were ordinary women, who became priestesses, then demigoddesses. After being Valkyr they also became lesser norns, capable of participating in the fates of people and of nations. Since Freyja leads the Valkyries/lesser norns, she is considered patroness of those women who carried on the role of *völva* or seer/shaman.

Indeed, one of her most unique roles is that she is the Goddess of Prophecy. When flying through the spirit realms, cloaked in falcon feathers, she would visit the place where the Norns lived and it was she who could read the threads of Life that they were spinning. That is to say that Freyja had the ability to divine the future and it is she who a human shaman/*völva* emulates in their journeys down into the roots of the World Tree. (It is also from Freyja that *Oðinn* learned the arts of *seiðr*.)

When Freyja leads the hunt, she is joined by all manner of Nature spirits. This includes transcendent beings like greenmen and women, the *huldra*, the elves, and others. Some *jötnar* or giants also ride with Freyja as her kin, as do some trolls. Even though trolls are usually not helpful, they are heavily invested in preserving the robust, wildness of nature and so may accompany Freyja. Of course, wild animals of every description fill out Freyja's Wild Hunt retinue as do human shamans, who join to support harmony, balance and healing.

All of the participants in the Wild Hunt are focused on supporting the health and wellbeing of the world by clearing away any energy that weakens it. Riding, flying and dashing along; these spirits clear away residual energies from conflict, from terror, from hatred, and also remove the spirits those who have died and are still lingering in our world.

Psychopomp

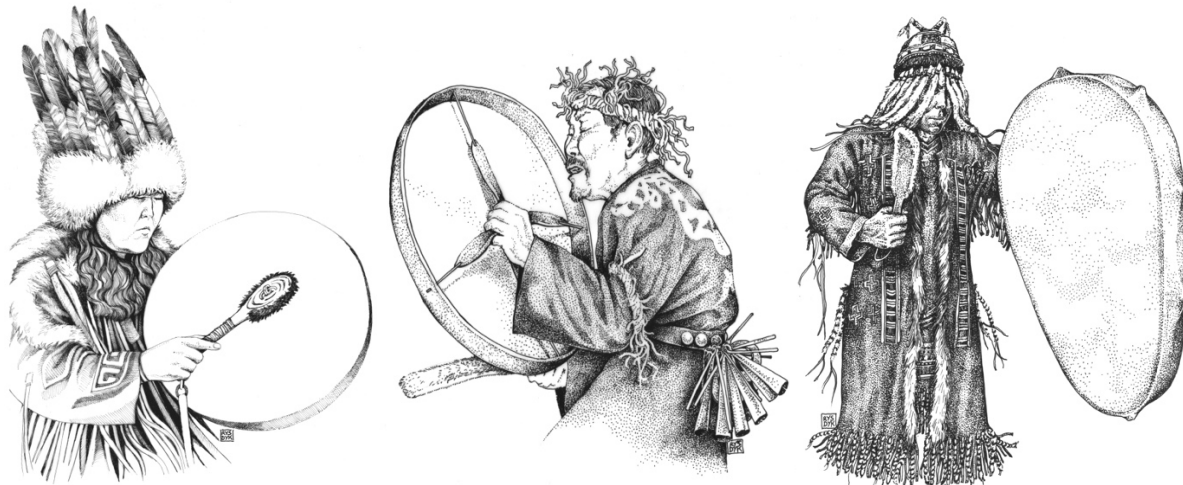
Throughout all the stories of The Wild Hunt, the characters are in search of something. Sometimes the tales say they swarm across the sky to gather the spirits of the dead and take them to the Other World. This is certainly consistent with the idea that the spirits of the dead can return during the darkest time of the year. During Autumn, it was thought that the "veils" between the realms of living and dead were "thin." This allowed spirits to step back and forth from one world into the other. Others, who were afraid to leave the world or were lost to accident or died while unconscious, may not even recognize they are deceased. When the dead do not leave this world for the Light, they are capable of causing mischief and illnesses among the living.

Whoever led the hunt and whoever the riders were, the purpose of the yearly ceremony was to unburden the community. The Wild Hunt removed those spirits who had lingered after death and provided relief from other negative influences or "bad luck." This is yet another parallel the work of the shaman. Typically, a shaman functions as a psychopomp--guiding the dying and

dead out of this world-and also petitions the spirits for good luck and bounty on behalf of their community.

Spirit Flight

Shamanic traditions across Eurasia tell stories of shamans who fly. The traditional shamans' costumes of this region are decorated with fringe that hangs from the arms like wings and dangles along the bottom of the tunic like tail feathers. When a shaman goes into trance and dances, the fringe provides the illusion of actual flight. This provides a tangible, visual metaphor for the shaman's "magical" ability. When a shaman performs a shamanic journey, her/his spirit takes flight into the invisible realms.



Shamans all across Eurasia have similar feather-like appendages on their garments. (Tuvan, Ulchi, Yukaghir)

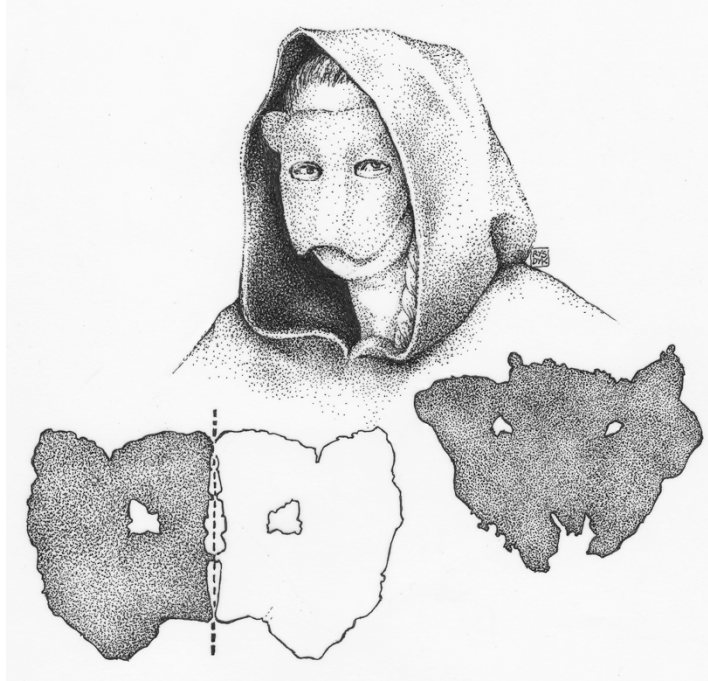
During the journey, shamans are in trance known as the "shamanic state of consciousness." During these trance states, some shamans may appear unresponsive or "asleep" to the ordinary world. While entranced, the shaman works closely with their helping spirits, often relying upon them for protection and/or "transportation." That is, the shaman may ride on or inside of their helping spirits in animal form as they take their spirit flights while being accompanied and by others of their spirit helpers.

A folk tale motif of a living person carried away by The Wild Hunt's flying horde is particularly common in Germany and in Scandinavia. A curious form of this theme which is unique to Norway has people undergoing a sort of involuntary separation from their bodies, which lie as if dead while their souls are traveling with The Wild Hunt. A folk ballad in Landstad's, *Norske Folkeviser*,¹ describes the fate of one such woman: "*She fell backwards and lay the whole night as if she were dead. It was of no profit to shake her, for the Asgardsreid*² *had made off with her.*" The woman

¹ Magnus Brostrup Landstad gathered folktales from Norway's Middle Ages dealing with the exploits of trolls, heroes, knights, and gods; which was published as, *Norske Folkeviser* in 1852/3. A supplement contains folk melodies collected by L.M. Lindeman.

² Literally, *Riders from Asgard*, the home of Odin and the other Sky Gods)

then awakes to tell how she had ridden across the sky. This story gives us yet another important clue about The Wild Hunt.



Examples of felted wool and leather animal masks have been uncovered in Viking Age graves.

What if, rather than a Germanic, Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon mythic tradition, The Wild Hunt is actually a tattered remnant linking the folk tales of Europe to a far older shamanic tradition?

Certainly, the riders' roles—as described in the folk tales—can be ascribed to the shaman.

Typically, a shaman functions as a healer and protector of the spirits of those on whose behalf she or he practices. In concert with their helpful spirits, shamans "do battle" with the spirits that cause strife and sickness, they guide the souls through the passages between life and death,

work with the weather and practice divination to foretell possible futures.

Whatever form their work takes, shamans bring gifts to the living. In some stories the riders of The Wild Hunt also bestow gifts. In Austria and Scandinavia, the seasonal female figure—who can either be the kindly gift-giver or the fearsome demon—is St. Lucia, who in an echo of Perchta and Holda is also associated with animal-masking. Holda – as the protectress of the animals – is depicted with a cow skin and horns in Schleswig-Holstein, while a cow's head or foot marks Lucy's Day on some Scandinavian rune calendars. This also bears a certain similarity to the Norwegian image of the Huldra, those forest spirits who appear as women with either cow or fox tails.

Even the confusion about leader of the hunt's gender harkens back to the shaman. Across Siberia, Central Asia, and the Arctic, the original shaman is remembered as a female. It is told that she is a powerful, primordial being who "taught" the skills to humankind. This is so pervasive a belief that most Siberian shamanic costumes mimic female clothing—whether they are worn by men or women.

The Wild Hunt Today

Among some contemporary Western shamanic practitioners, The Wild Hunt is reenacted each Autumn sometime between Halloween and Yule. This work usually takes the form of rituals that include long psychopomp journeys taken by groups of highly skilled shamans throughout a dark Autumn night. This work can sometimes be perilous as some spirits can be quite

convincing "opponents" when they struggle to stay here instead of gently leaving the world of the living. This is why shamans depend upon the relationships they have forged with their helping spirits to protect and guide them, and to be powerful collaborators in accomplishing the work.

Oftentimes, the groups that gather for this work dress for "battle" carrying weapons, staffs and shields into their journeys while wearing fearsome masks. They are guided and protected by their helper spirits and power animals-usually merging with them to keep their own spirits safe.

If one was gifted with spiritual "sight," this horde of shamans flying through the spirit world would certainly resemble those sixteenth century *Schiachperchten*, driving out the "bad spirits" in alpine villages!

Making a stand for all that is alive and vital, the contemporary shamans challenge those forces that seek to cause harm or ill fortune. Through the power of their helping spirits, they clear the Earth of those spirits that have lingered after death. In working on behalf of the forces of Light and Love, they contribute to loosening Winter's dark grasp and pave the way for the return of the Sun on the Winter Solstice.