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THE BOOK OF WERE-WOLVES

An Account of a Terrible Superstition

Sabine Baring-Gould, M.A.

MODERN ENGLISH ANNOTATED EDITION

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Modern English Annotated Edition Note

This edition presents a modern-English reading layer for Sabine Baring-Gould's *The Book of Were-Wolves*, based on the 1865 text. Baring-Gould's arguments, examples, quotations, narrative sequence, historical judgments, and meaningful period terminology remain his own.

Modernization reduces unnecessary friction in spelling, punctuation, syntax, and ordinary wording without smoothing away distinctions that matter to the historical text. Quotations, inherited translations, source discrepancies, and unusual readings are not silently recast as new translations or modern conclusions; where they require explanation, the issue is handled separately.

Fox & Webb notes are used where source history, terminology, textual problems, chronology, or later scholarship materially improves the reading. They provide context without absorbing Baring-Gould's voice into modern editorial commentary.

We modernize the language, not the ideas.

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Chronology

A brief history of the werewolf in text, trial, and folklore

430 BCE	<p>ANCIENT REPORT</p> <p>Herodotus reports the Neuri</p> <p>Herodotus 4.105 records a claim that the Neuri become wolves for several days each year while indicating disbelief.</p>
8 CE	<p>MYTH/LITERATURE</p> <p>Ovid's <i>Lycaon</i> becomes a wolf</p> <p>*<i>Metamorphoses</i>* gives the Arcadian king's punishment narrative its most influential literary form.</p>
60 CE	<p>LITERATURE</p> <p>Petronius tells <i>Niceros's</i> werewolf story</p> <p>The *<i>Satyricon</i>* preserves one of antiquity's most vivid narrative werewolves.</p>
1010	<p>PENITENTIAL</p> <p>Burchard of Worms condemns metamorphosis belief</p> <p>The *<i>Corrector</i>* treats belief in bodily animal transformation as superstition requiring penance.</p>
1170	<p>LITERATURE</p> <p>Marie de France writes <i>Bisclavret</i></p> <p>A rational courtly werewolf enters one of the tradition's most durable medieval narratives.</p>
1430	<p>JUDICIAL HISTORY</p> <p>Gilles de Rais is tried and executed at Nantes</p> <p>Not a werewolf trial, but central to Baring-Gould's theory of cruelty and blood-madness.</p>
1517	<p>SERMON/PRINT</p> <p>Geiler's <i>Die Emeis</i> prints a werewolf sermon</p> <p>The sermon classifies wolf attacks through natural, demonic, and providential causes and is accompanied by a woodcut.</p>
1521	<p>TRIAL TRADITION</p> <p>Poligny prosecutions enter werewolf demonology</p> <p>Later demonological texts transmit the cases associated with Pierre Bourgot and Michel Verdung.</p>
1574	<p>TRIAL/PROSECUTION</p> <p>Gilles Garnier is prosecuted at Dole</p> <p>A surviving printed judgment documents a major Franche-Comté werewolf prosecution.</p>

Chronology - Continued



1580	DEMONOLOGY Jean Bodin publishes De la démonomanie des sorciers Werewolf anecdotes circulate within an influential prosecutorial demonology.
1598	JUDICIAL HISTORY Jacques Roulet receives appellate mitigation The Parlement of Paris reportedly replaces a death sentence with confinement and religious instruction.
1603	TRIAL/MEDICAL-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION Jean Grenier's case is heard in Guyenne The adolescent's transformation claims become one of Baring-Gould's major case studies.
1849	MEDICO-LEGAL CASE Sergeant François Bertrand is tried in Paris The grave-violation case becomes a debate about criminal responsibility and psychiatric classification.
1865	PUBLICATION Baring-Gould publishes The Book of Were-Wolves The volume gathers myth, literature, demonology, trials, folklore, and Victorian explanatory theory into a single study.

The Geography of the Werewolf Tradition



Selected places in Baring-Gould's literary, folkloric, judicial, and documentary world.

Symbols indicate source type; present-day borders are included only for orientation, not as historical boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

The Human Shape, the Animal Shadow

A werewolf story begins with a simple impossibility: the human boundary gives way. A person becomes a wolf, wears a wolf-skin, sends the soul abroad in animal form, is accused of hunting as a beast, or behaves with such violence that the language of the beast seems to fit. Sabine Baring-Gould follows all of these paths. The result is less a single theory of the werewolf than a crowded doorway into myth, saga, witchcraft, law, folklore, medicine, and the occult imagination.

That breadth is the pleasure of *The Book of Were-Wolves*. Baring-Gould was a Victorian antiquary rather than a modern folklorist or historian of psychiatry. He places Ovid beside Norse saga, demonological compilations beside court records, village tales beside medical cases. The materials do not all make the same kind of claim, but together they show how many different traditions could gather around the figure of the human being who crosses into animality.

The wolf that emerges from these pages is therefore unstable by design. At one moment it is a literal transformed body; at another, an ecstatic double, a cursed skin, a demonological accusation, a legal problem, a medical analogy, or an image of appetite and violence. The most rewarding way into the book is to let those meanings remain distinct long enough to see where they touch.

The northern chapters are especially important in this respect. Old Norse terms such as *hamr* and *hamrammr*, tales of wolf-skins and bear-skins,

berserker fury, and stories of souls or shapes moving beyond the ordinary body sit near later werewolf traditions, but they are not simply interchangeable with them. Read them as a vocabulary of unstable identity and altered power, preserved in literature with its own conventions and purposes.

The early-modern chapters move into a harsher world. Demonologists and courts turn transformation into accusation, confession, evidence, and punishment. Pierre Bourgot, Michel Verdung, Gilles Garnier, Jacques Roulet, and Jean Grenier enter the book through records shaped by theology and law. Their stories can be read both as werewolf narratives and as documents of institutions deciding what counted as a possible crime.

Gilles de Rais belongs to a different thread. He was not tried as a werewolf. Baring-Gould brings him into the book while developing a theory of monstrous appetite: the wolf gradually moves from supernatural transformation toward an image of human cruelty. The Galician case and the account of Sergeant François Bertrand continue that shift, carrying the book toward nineteenth-century attempts to describe extreme behavior through medicine and criminal responsibility.

The sequence matters. What begins as metamorphosis does not end in one explanation. It passes through story, belief, prosecution, folklore, myth-making, and medical interpretation, with each form changing what the word *werewolf* can mean.

Three distinctions help keep that movement clear. A myth may preserve a symbolic pattern without recording an event. A saga may shape inherited material according to literary convention. A trial record can preserve testimony while also preserving the pressures of interrogation, theology, and law. A medical case can reject supernatural transformation while still describing human experience in categories that belong to its own century.

Baring-Gould often places those sources beside one another because resemblance interests him more than strict disciplinary boundaries. That

habit produces some of the book's most suggestive correspondences, but it also asks the reader to notice changes of register. A story told for wonder, a legal accusation, and an antiquarian explanation may share an image without sharing an evidentiary status.

Read slowly enough for those differences to remain visible. The werewolf here is at once pagan survival, literary creature, accused witch, outlaw, legal problem, medical analogy, and animal shadow. The pleasure of the book lies in watching those identities overlap — and in noticing how often a question about wolves turns back into a question about human beings.

Preface

This book is a study of a peculiar form of popular superstition found among all nations and in every age.

I do not claim that it is an exhaustive treatment. I have enough material at hand to have doubled its length, but doing so would not have clarified the subject any further.

Several interesting subjects are connected with lycanthropy — including metempsychosis, innate cruelty, hallucination, and others — but in the following pages I can do little more than touch on them. A thorough investigation would have expanded the book enormously. This may give the work a somewhat fragmentary character, but I believe that was unavoidable within its present limits. The arrangement I have followed is outlined at the end of the introductory chapter. The chapter on a Galician cannibal has already appeared in print in *Once a Week*.

✦ NOTE

Metempsychosis is the transmigration of a soul from one body into another. Baring-Gould uses the term as part of his wider discussion of transformation traditions.

I intend this to be the first in a series on Popular Superstitions, followed by studies of marine monsters such as mermaids and sea-serpents, vampires, the Wild Huntsman, the Wandering Jew, and related subjects.

The subject of this first instalment is horrible, but it is nevertheless both interesting and important because it helps illuminate a very obscure and mysterious chapter in the history of the human mind. When a form of superstition appears everywhere and in every age, it must, I believe, rest on some foundation of fact. What that foundation actually is, I hope I have proved conclusively in the pages that follow.

Chapter I. Introductory

I shall never forget a walk I took one night in Vienne, after examining an unfamiliar Druidical relic, the Pierre labie, at La Rondelle near Champigni. I had learned of this cromlech only after arriving at Champigni that afternoon, and I set out to see it without calculating how long the journey there and back would take. I found the venerable pile of grey stones just as the sun was setting and spent the last light of evening making a plan and sketches. Then I turned back. The walk of about ten miles had already tired me after a long day travelling by post, and I was limping after scrambling over stones around the Gaulish relic.

✦ NOTE

Baring-Gould's archaeological and scientific terms here are Victorian. *Cromlech* was then used loosely for prehistoric stone monuments; *charrue* means a plough; *loup-garoux* means werewolves; and *Labyrinthodon* was a nineteenth-century fossil-amphibian name. The historically specific terms are retained where they matter to the scene or argument.

A small hamlet lay not far away, so I went there hoping to hire a small carriage to take me to the posting-house. I was disappointed. Few people there spoke French, and when I appealed to the priest, he told me that the best conveyance in the village was probably a common *charrue* with solid wooden wheels; no riding horse could be found either. The good man offered me lodging for the night, but I had to refuse because my family planned to leave early the next morning.

Then the mayor spoke up. "Monsieur cannot go back tonight across the flats, because of the — the —" His voice dropped. "The *loup-garoux*."

"He says he must return!" the priest replied in patois. "But who will go with him?"

“Ah, M. le Curé! It is all very well for one of us to accompany him, but think of having to come back alone!”

“Then two must go with him,” said the priest, “and you can look after each other on the way back.”

“Picou tells me he saw the werewolf just a week ago,” said a peasant. “He was down by the hedge of his buckwheat field. The sun had set, and he was thinking of coming home when he heard a rustle on the far side of the hedge. He looked over, and there stood the wolf against the horizon, as big as a calf, its tongue hanging out and its eyes glaring like marsh-fires. *Mon Dieu!* You will not catch me crossing the marshes tonight. What could two men do if that wolf-fiend attacked them?”

“It is tempting Providence,” said one of the village elders. “No man can expect God’s help if he deliberately puts himself in danger. Is that not so, M. le Curé? I heard you say as much from the pulpit on the first Sunday in Lent, when you preached from the Gospel.”

“That is true,” several others agreed, shaking their heads.

“His tongue hanging out, and his eyes glaring like marsh-fires!” repeated Picou’s confidant.

“*Mon Dieu!* If I met the monster, I would run,” said another.

“I quite believe you, Cortrez. I can answer for that,” said the mayor.

“As big as a calf,” Picou’s friend added.

“If the *loup-garou* were only an ordinary wolf, then, you see” — the mayor cleared his throat — “we should think nothing of it. But, M. le Curé, it is a fiend — worse than a fiend, a man-fiend — worse than a man-fiend, a man-wolf-fiend.”

“But what is the young monsieur to do?” asked the priest, looking from one man to another.

“Never mind,” I said. I had been quietly listening to their patois, which I understood. “Never mind. I will walk back by myself, and if I meet the *loup-garou*, I will crop his ears and tail and send them to M. le Maire with my compliments.”

The whole company sighed with relief when they saw themselves freed from the difficulty.

“*Il est Anglais*,” said the mayor, shaking his head, as though an Englishman might face the devil with impunity.

✦ NOTE

Il est Anglais means “He is English.” Baring-Gould presents the mayor’s remark as a comic explanation for the narrator’s willingness to cross the marsh alone.

The marsh was a melancholy flat, desolate enough by day and ten times more desolate in the twilight. The sky was perfectly clear and a soft blue-grey, lit by the new moon, a curve of light sinking toward the western horizon. The fen stretched away to the horizon, dark with pools of stagnant water from which frogs kept up an endless trill through the summer night. Heath and fern covered the ground. Near the water grew dense masses of flag and bulrush, through which the light wind sighed wearily. Here and there stood a sandy knoll topped with firs, black splashes against the grey sky. There was no sign of habitation anywhere. The only trace of human presence was the straight white road running for miles across the fen.

It is quite possible that wolves lived in this district, and I admit that at the first clump of trees the road entered, I armed myself with a stout stick.

This was my first introduction to werewolves. Finding the superstition still so widespread first gave me the idea of investigating the history and habits of these mythical creatures.

I must admit that I have completely failed to obtain a specimen of the animal, but I have found its traces in every direction. Just as the palaeontologist has reconstructed *Labyrinthodon* from its footprints in marl and a single splinter of bone, so this study may still be complete and accurate even though I have no chained werewolf before me to sketch and describe from life.

The traces are certainly numerous enough. Though the werewolf, like the dodo or the *Dinormis*, may perhaps have become extinct in our age, he has left his mark on classical antiquity, trodden deep into the

northern snows, ridden roughshod through the Middle Ages, and howled among Eastern tombs. He belonged to a bad breed, and we may be quite content to be rid of him and his relatives, the vampire and the ghoul. Yet who knows? We may be a little too quick to conclude that he is extinct. He may still prowl through Abyssinian forests, range across the steppes of Asia, or be found howling dismally in a padded room at Hanwell or Bedlam.

✦ TEXTUAL NOTE

The 1865 text prints “Dinormis,” almost certainly an error for *Dinornis*, the giant moa genus. The historical reading is retained rather than silently corrected.

In the following pages I intend to examine accounts of werewolves in the writers of classical antiquity, in the Northern sagas, and, finally, in the many accounts provided by medieval authors. Alongside these, I shall sketch modern folklore relating to lycanthropy.

It will then be seen that beneath the veil of mythology lies a solid reality: that a floating superstition holds a positive truth in solution.

I shall show that this truth is an innate craving for blood implanted in certain natures. Under ordinary circumstances it is restrained, but at times it breaks out, accompanied by hallucination and in most cases leading to cannibalism. I shall then give examples of people so affected who were believed by others, and believed themselves, to be transformed into beasts; in episodes of madness, they committed many murders and devoured their victims.

✦ HISTORICAL NOTE

Baring-Gould's “innate craving for blood” is his nineteenth-century theory, not a modern diagnosis. Modern clinical lycanthropy refers much more narrowly to the rare belief or experience of becoming a wolf.

Next I shall give examples of people driven by the same passion for blood who murdered simply to gratify their natural cruelty, but who experienced no hallucinations and did not practise cannibalism.

I shall also give examples of people with the same propensities who murdered and ate their victims but were entirely free from hallucination.