Oromë and the Wild Hunt:

the development of a myth

Michael Burgess

In the histories of the Elder Days of Arda, as transcribed and interpreted by the late Professor Tolkien, certain peoples, events and characters can be discerned of whom a memory has survived in one form or another, and entered into the mythologies and traditions of subsequent cultures. Though distorted by the vagaries of oral transmission — the written histories, we must assume, having lain undiscovered from the post-Fourth Age period until their retrieval by Professor Tolkien — plausible identifications are nonetheless possible, and indeed, many such have already been made by observant scholars. The Onodrim, the Drû-folk and the Periannath, for example, are all well-evidenced in later Mannish traditions. Major events such as the whelming of Númenor and the ruin of Beleriand obviously provided the genesis of the legends of Atlantis, and of the various Celtic 'lost lands' — Lyonesse, Ker-Ys, Cantref Gwaelod, Tyno Helig etc. Parallels between the 'Seven Sleepers' of Ephesus and the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, and between Túrin and both Kullervo and Sigurd the Volsung have also been noted.

There is one character present in the 'Quenta Silmarillion' whose actions and attributes have permeated European mythology over many centuries, have diffused in variant forms to most parts of the world — and the echoes of which are even now being adapted into modern urban folklore. This figure is Oromë the great, Oromë the huntsman, 'tamer of beasts', a mighty lord of the Valar; and the myth which has evolved from his appearances on Middle-earth is that of the 'Wild Hunt'.

The motif of the Wild Hunt, though not universal, is very widespread, and in the Germanic lands is probably best expressed as:

> "the terrifying concourse of lost souls riding through the air led by a demonic leader on his great horse, which could be heard passing in the storm". (Davidson, p. 148.)

The Hunt has always favoured the dark nights of Winter, the howling winds

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and the crash of thunder, in which might be heard the baying of hounds, the rumble of horses' hooves, the shouting of huntsmen, and the sound of whips cracking like lightning. Some versions of the Wild Hunt or 'furious host' are not only heard but seen: as a brief flash of white above the tree-tops, as a swirl of shadowy shapes obscuring the stars — or as a dark rider with his band of huntsmen and unearthly dogs pursuing or confronting some lone wayfarer on a country road.

Rider on the Storm

Images of the storm and the gale are evoked also in the extant passages that describe the ridings of Oromë to Beleriand and beyond:

> "passing like a wind over the mountains, and the sound of his horn came down the leagues of the starlight, and the Elves feared him for the splendour of his countenance and the great noise of the onrush of Nahar ..."
> (Tolkien, QS, p. 95.)

And again, it is told how

> "Oromë tamer of beasts would ride too at whiles in the darkness of the unlit forests; as a mighty hunter he came with spear and bow, pursuing to the death the monsters and fell creatures of the kingdom of Melkor, and his white horse Nahar shone like silver in the shadows. Then the sleeping earth trembled at the beat of his golden hooves, and in the twilight of the world Oromë would sound the Valaróma his great horn upon the plains of Arda; whereat the mountains echoed, and the shadows of evil fled away ..."
> (Tolkien, QS, p. 41.)

The voice of the Valaróma itself displays an aspect of storm, for its sound is said to be "like the upgoing of the Sun in scarlet, or the sheer lightning cleaving the clouds" (QS, p. 29).

It is the deceits and traps of Melkor which make the newly-woken Elves fear the coming of Oromë, for he sends 'shadows and evil spirits' to waylay and spy upon them, so that

> "if any of the Elves strayed far abroad, alone or few together, they woulld often vanish, and never return; and the Quendi said that the Hunter had caught them, and they were afraid. And indeed the most ancient songs of the Elves, of which echoes are remembered still in the West, tell of the shadow-shapes that walked the hills above Cuiviénen, or would pass suddenly over the stars; and of the dark Rider upon his wild horse that pursued those that wandered to take them and devour them".
> (Tolkien, QS, pp. 49-50.)

Nowhere is it stated explicitly that Oromë took with him any of his Maiar to hunt in Middle-earth. But one passage certainly implies this, for it is noted that, in his woods in Valinor, "there Oromë would train his folk and his beasts for the pursuit of the evil creatures of Melkor" (QS, p. 29).

Theories

Here then is the origin of the myth of the Wild Hunt: an echo of the oldest songs of the Elves, engendered by the lies and malice of the Enemy. Until Tolkien's translations, of course, very different ideas were put forward to account for it. One theory, obviously derivative of the above, was that the Hunt was a weather-myth, "the personification of Winter and its storms" (Funk & Wagnall, Vol. 1, p. 77), and the primitive notion that "in the wind were the souls of the dead" (Baring-Gould, p. 119) contributed to this. Certain tale-types from the cycle of the Wild Hunt were held to represent a mingling of ancestor cults and the worship of vegetal deities, such as the Asgardsreid or Gandreid ('Spirits' Ride') of Norse folklore:

> "the survival of an ancient feast of the dead commemorating all who died during the previous year and [which] comes during the Epiphany. The wilder the rush of spirits, the better the crop in the ensuing year. Whatever fields they fly over will bear especially well".
> (Funk & Wagnall, Vol. 1, p. 440.)

Reverence for, and fear of, the dead led to the belief in Germanic regions that

> "the souls of the dead gathered together in places far removed from human habitation. This was how the idea of the 'Savage Hunt' originated. Thousands of phantoms — who were the souls of the dead — on aerial mounts would in a wild chase follow their leader ... It was their furious ride which could sometimes be perceived among storm clouds".
> (Larousse, p. 277.)

It is only now that we are able to discern the vast shape of Oromë the 'Great Rider' at the head of the host, and the hand of Melkor behind the first terrors of the Elves.

Mythic Variants

In the earliest historical versions of the Wild Hunt theme, the leader of the host was a generically anonymous chthonic power about whom the spirits of the dead gathered in a procession, after the manner of the Norwegian Oskorei, or 'terrible host'. Subsequent mythologies endowed this leader with a name, making of him a 'psychopompic' functionary with similar attributes to such deities as Hermes and Anubis, both 'conductors of souls'.

It has long been held that, in Scandinavian and Germanic lands, Odin/Woden as Lord of the Dead was the prototypical Wild Huntsman, but this is improbable. Far more likely is the contention that Odin and his soul-choosing Valkyries were drawn into the Hunt personnel only after Christianity had reduced them to the status of devils. In parts of England and Germany, Woden still rides at the head of the Hunt, but his virtual interchangeability with the Christian Devil detracts from the validity of the survival.

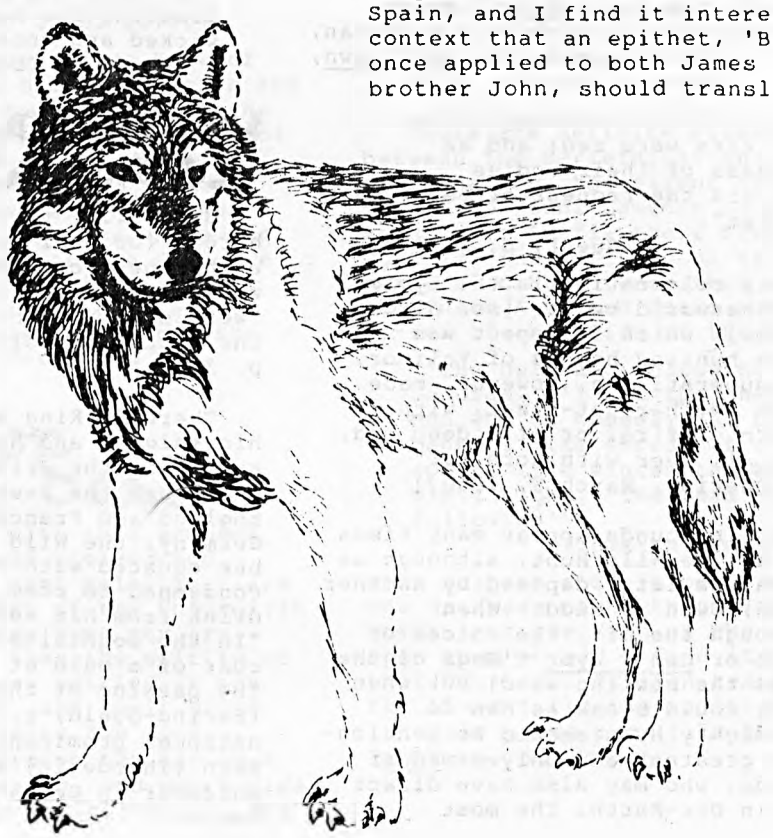
The Vedic king of heaven, Indra, seems to head a similar host, some passages recalling the awesome passing of Oromë quite vividly. Indra traverses the sky in a golden chariot, and about him are gathered the Maruts, who are

> "probably the bright ones, gods of storm and lightnings. When their host begins to move, the earth trembles under their deer-yoked chariots and the forests bow their heads on the mountains. As they pass, men see the flashing of their arms and hear the sound of the flute-music and songs, with their challenge-calls and the cracking of whips".
>
> (Barth, pp. 13-14.)

The Hindu surname of Indra, Parjanya, derives from a root meaning 'thunder', as does the name of the Slavonic god Pyerun, who also rode a mighty war chariot above the earth. The diminishment of Pyerun after the victory of Christianity led to the inheritance of some of his attributes by two lesser characters. One was the hero Ilya-Muromyets, who flew through the sky on a miraculous horse; the other, at least among Orthodox Slavs, was the prophet Elijah, whom they knew as Saint Ilya, and about whom was told the superstition, that

> "when a Slav peasant hears thunder he says that it is the Prophet Elijah rolling across the sky in his fiery chariot".
>
> (Larousse, p. 298.)

This brings to mind a similar reaction to thunder of Spanish children, who would cry out: 'There goes Santiago's horse!' Santiago, or St. James the Great, was the subject of a considerable cultus in Spain, and I find it interesting in this context that an epithet, 'Boanerges', once applied to both James and his brother John, should translate as 'sons



of thunder'.

Another possible candidate for a mythic variant of the Wild Huntsman might be the Phoenician divinity Aleyin, 'he who rode the clouds'. He was always accompanied on his aerial forays by "seven companions and a troop of eight wild boars" (Larousse, p. 76).

Arawn of Annwn

The basic names of the huntsman of the Valar — Qu. Oromë, Sind. Araw, Roh. Béma — refer to the 'sound of horns', and thus to his great horn the Valaroma (although an entry in the 'Quenya Lexicon' to the recently-published early variants of the tales in QS extends to him the further name of Raustar: 'The Hunter') (BoLT I, p. 260). Since the style and form of the Sindarin tongue would seem to have persisted to some extent into the phonology of Welsh, a correspondence might well be adduced between the Sindarin Araw, and the deity Arawn present in Welsh tradition.

Arawn — whose name Robert Graves tells us signifies 'Eloquence' (Graves, p. 50)— was the King of Annwn, the subterranean Celtic Otherworld, and is an infrequent visitor to early Welsh literature.[1] Apart from his involvement in the Câd Goddeu or 'Battle of the Trees', his major appearance (though still brief) is in the Romance of Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, the first Branch of the Mabinogion. Arawn appears to Pwyll in the garb of a huntsman, and with him are his hounds, the Cwn Annwn, whose hair

> "was of a brilliant shining white, and their ears were red; and as the whiteness of their bodies shone, so did the redness of their ears glisten".
>
> (Guest, p. 13.)

This unearthly colouration is the typical hue of the Otherworld beasts [see also note (1) below], which I suspect was shared by the hunting hounds of Valinor. Later Welsh superstition, however, made the Cwn Annwn "either jet-black, with eyes and teeth of fire, or of a deep red, and dripping all over with gore ..." (Notes and Queries, March 9, 1850.)

Arawn and his hounds appear many times in folklore as the Wild Hunt, although as leader, Arawn was later deposed by another king of Annwn, Gwyn ap Nudd. When coursing through the air, the voices of the Cwn Annwn or Cwn y Wybr ('Dogs of the Sky') were as the howling wind; but when on earth they could speak as Men do. Perhaps the mighty Huan should be mentioned here, the greatest and only-named of Oromë's hounds, who may also have direct counterpart in Dor-Marth, the most formidable of the Underworld dogs. The Cwn Annwn usually wait to hunt a wicked spirit as soon as it leaves the body, or lead a procession of doomed souls to Hades. But sometimes the pack may be seen following a funeral cortège, when they are known as the Cwm Mamau, or 'Mother's Dogs'.

Sometimes the Hunt may consist of the hounds only, seeking out souls without a leader. Apart from the Cwm Annwn, in Britain we have such individual packs as the Wish Hounds, Yeth Hounds and Gabriel Ratchets, each with many variations of its own.[2] This latter form seems to have merged with the Seven Whistlers or Night-flyers, who may be either dogs, birds or simply 'spirits'. Their cry, like that of the hound-pack, is held to be a portent of death or disaster, and has been derived by some eerie sound made by migrating birds such as wild geese, curlews, or plovers. As Robert Graves states:

> "the northward migration of wild geese is connected in British legend with the conducting to the icy Northern hell of the souls of the damned, or of unbaptised infants ..."
>
> (Graves, p. 89.)

But here Patricia Dale-Green has made the salient point that

> "it is significant that in pagan myths everyone is pursued by death-hounds, and it is only in the Christianised versions that the moral element appears, limiting the hounding to the wicked and unbaptised".
>
> (Dale-Green, p. 186.)

National and Regional Forms

Gradually, various national culture heroes (or anti-heroes), and local figures either heroic, wicked or merely notable were drawn into the Hunt mythology: they "were put into the Pot, in fact got into the Soup", as Tolkien said (Tree and Leaf, p. 30).

There is King Arthur, who rides with his knights and hounds at South Cadbury, and along the Brittany coast; King Herod, who hunts the Jewish infants in both England and France; and in France and Germany, the Wild Huntsman has sometimes bee equated with the 'Wandering Jew', condemned to roam forever for denying Jesus a drink from his well. Says Baring-Gould: "In the mountains of France the sudden roar of a gale at night is identified as the passing of the Everlasting Jew" (Baring-Gould, p. 25). Other Huntsmen of national prominence include Dietrich von Bern (Theoderic) and the Danish King Waldemar in Germany, and Charlemagne in France.

In Scandinavian folklore, Odin has been displaced by the more localised character Jon, a figure somewhat like the Cornish priest Dando, who broke the tabu against hunting on a Sunday, and now hunts eternally with his dogs beside the river Tamar. Britain seems to have more individual Hunts than any other country, most of their leaders being of the Dando variety — characters such as Squire Lovelis of Boleigh, Cheney of St. Teath, Cabell of Buckfastleigh, Old Coker of Deverilll, and Winchcombe of Noke.

In the tale of 'Le Grand Veneur', the Huntsman of the forest of Fontainbleu is identified with St. Hubert, while Weber's opera Der Freischutz tells of Samiel, the evil Black Huntsman of the German forests [see also Amon Hen 52, pp, 12-13]. Basque lore speaks of a Dando-like abbot, doomed for hunting on a Sunday instead of saying Mass, while the ghost of an officer in the Duke of Wellington's army still roams the Sapnish countryside with his hounds, continuing his favourite pastime even beyond death.

Variations on the Hunt theme have spread far beyond the traditional north European focus, for according to Funk and Wagnall:

> "Malay folklore also has its phantom huntsman with the phantom dogs, the hantu si buru or hantu pemburu, an evil spirit of the Malay Peninsula who hunts the wild boar and the mouse deer during the full moon".
> (Funk & Wagnall, Vol. 2, p. 1177.)

The Tungus of the Russian taiga know of Ure Amaka, the lord of beasts, forests and the hunting culture, while in China, the War Lord Tsan acts as the 'huntsmaster of the Autumn hunt'.

The motif of the 'furious host' has even passed over into America, where the well-known 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' are a troop of cowboys, wicked in life, now condemned to spend eternity chasing a herd of unearthly cattle across the sky. Many more such cavalcades could be mentioned.[3]

The Ride of the Dead

Closely interwoven with this subject are the 'fairy hosts' of Ireland and Scotland, of whom the most malevolent are the Sluagh, or the 'Host of the Unforgiven Dead'. The Sluagh (whom some say are fallen angels, rather than the spirits of dead mortals) hold great battles in the sky on All Hallows Eve, and their blood is seen staining the rocks the next morning. They ride through the air in a vast host at midnight also, and woe betide any mortal who crosses their path: he may be injured, or slain, or carried off for great distances over land and sea. And they have their own pack of supernatural hounds, the Cu Sith.

But there are other, less hazardous 'Fairy Rades' also, like the Fair Folk and the Gancanagh, and the Gentry who might be seen passing 'like a blast of wind'.

One species of Wild Hunt intimately connected with the 'fairy host', and once common to both England and France, was that usually known as Herla's Rade, or the Herlethingi.[4] Although its home ground was the Welsh border, the Rade was seen in 1091 at Bonneval in Anjou, by a priest named Walchin, who observed

> "a black troop with black horses and banners, noble ladies, churchmen, all conditions of men, many of them known to Walchin in former times".
> (Briggs, 1977, p. 50.)

The term 'Herlethingi' was also used by Walter Map in his 12th century De Nugis Curialium to describe "long trains of soldiers who passed by in dead silence", often seen by the peasants of Brittany:

> "Companies of these troops of night-wanderers ... went to and fro without let or stay, hurrying hither and thither rambling about in the most mad vagrancy, all inceding in unbroken silence, and amongst the band there appeared alive many who were known to have been long since dead".
> (Map, quoted in Masters, p. 189.)

There are definite resemblances between the Herlethingi and the Dead Men of Dunharrow, the silent 'Shadow Host' doomed to haunt Lamedon until allowed by Aragorn to fulfil their broken oath. The Host is, indeed, a local variant of the basic Wild Hunt theme that survived into the Third Age, and bears many characteristics of the 'Ride of the Dead':

> "'The Dead are following', said Legolas. 'I see the shapes of Men and of horses, and pale banners like shreds of cloud, and spears like winter-thickets on a misty night. The Dead are following'".
> (Tolkien, RotK, p. 53.)

When Aragorn and his party hurtle out into the darkness of Morthond Vale, the people think that the King of the Dead has come upon them — and I find it interesting that Professor Tolkien translated one of the lines following as "the Grey Company in their haste rose like hunters ..." (RotK, p. 54).

Developments

Many different threads of lore make up the Wild Hunt mythos, all ultimately being spun from the original, distorted, Elvish vision of Oromë the Vala and his host in Middle-earth. Even the solitary phantom horsemen, often headless, that used to haunt our country lanes may be derived from the foundational Hunt motif.

But the 'Savage Hunt' in its traditional form is not yet dead. In the 1940s it was heard rushing through West Coker in Devon; King John's Pack was heard at Purse Caundle in 1959; the Hunt rode the streets of Stogumber, Somerset in 1960; and Herne the Hunter was seen in Windsor Great Park in 1976.

Not yet dead, but certainly changing: adapting in form - but not in portent - to suit the prevailing culture. The process of adaptation is slow and erratic, with several forms existing simultaneously, but it is there. Many of our most persistent, and almost archetypal, apparitional figures are inevitably fading into legend - figures such as the Headless Horseman, the White Lady, and the Hooded Monk (though some, notably the ubiquitous Black Dog, survive and flourish).

Over the past 2-300 years, one of the most prolific of all spectral manifestations — now also diminishing in frequency — has been the Phantom Coach. This seems to be a major, direct descendant of the Wild Hunt in Europe, assuming many of its characteristics and functions.

A case in point would be that of the English national hero Sir Francis Drake. For invoking the aid of the Devil in building extensions to his home of Buckland Abbey, Drake has to drive a black hearse or coach furiously across Dartmoor, between Tavistock and Drake's Island in Plymouth Sound. Headless horses draw the hearse, headless black dogs either precede or follow it, and a pack of 'screaming devils' swarms about it. The baying of hounds is said to be fatal to any mortal dog that hears them, and any human who hears the procession approaching must throw himself to the ground and cover his eyes. If Drake was riding a horse instead of a carriage, there would be no major distinction between this and the classic passage of the Hunt.

Of a similar nature are the 'Night Coach' with its hound-pack which haunt the area of Ilmington in Oxfordshire, and the 'coach of bones' carrying Lady Howard from Tavistock to Okehampton, gathering the souls of the dying on the way. Undoubtedly related are the portentous 'Dead Cart' of Lincolnshire, the 'Death Coach' of Co. Roscommon, and the creaking cart of Britanny in which rode the Ankou, or King of the Dead.

In the majority of the surviving Phantom Coach stories, the accompanying host of dogs and demons has disappeared, leaving the Devil or some local celebrity holding the reins. A witness to the passing of the Wild Hunt, and later, to the spectral carriage, ran the risk of either being physically born away, or of losing his soul to the Hunter. These risks could often be countered by taking certain specified actions (as in the Drake legend above), or by observing it from a known 'safe' position — and now, these or similar 'ill-averting' conditions have been transferred to a more modern apparition of the highways: the phantom lorry.

Thus, we are able to discern the development of the Wild Hunt myth from the Melkor-inspired fear of Oromë, huntsman of the Valar, right down to the present day. In its simplest expression, little more than the vehicle of the myth has changed. When we speak of the 'thunder' of lorries through our streets, could it be that somewhere, deep down, there is a faint memory, just a dim echo, of something far, far older, and far more terrible?

FOOTNOTES

(1) Annwn = 'the abyss/depths/lowest regions'. In this seems to be echoed the Sind. word annûn: 'west, sunset', from a root ndu- 'down, descend'. The histories of Middle-earth mention the Kine of Araw, from whom were said to be descended the wild white cattle to be found near the Sea of Rhûn. These might also be a dim memory, of the Gwarteg y Llyn, the red-eared white kine of Welsh lore, who emerged from the lakes under which their supernatural owners dwelt in Annwn.

(2) E.g. the Wish/Whish/Whished/Wist/Wisht/Wisk/Wisked-hounds; Yeth/Yeff/Yell/Yesk/Heath-hounds; Gabriel Ratchets/Gabblerachets/Gabble Raches/Gabble-retchets/Gabble-rackets etc.

(3) Such as Hugh Capet & Hunt, France; the Chasse du Diable, Normandy; the Chasse Maccabei, Blois; Berchtold & Hunt, Germany; the Wild Troop of Rodenstein, Germany; the Yule Host, Iceland; Earl Gerald & Host, Ireland; the Devil & Harry-ca-nab, Worcestershire; and Wild Edric, Herefordshire.

(4) Also named Herla's Rout, the Band of Herla, Ride of Harlequin, Herlequin's Rout, Harlekin's Host, Chasse Hennequin, Maisne Hellequin, and the Ride of the Dead.

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