The History of the Werewolf Legend

By Shelly Barclay in http://www.historicmysteries.com/history-of-the-werewolf-legend/
March 12, 2011

Image: Invented by the Dutch artist and printmaker Hendrik Goltzius and produced by his workshop, this image is one of a large series of prints which illustrate Ovid's Metamorphoses. This print shows the start of Jupiter's revenge on the devious Lycaon, turning him into a wolf as punishment for the ghastly deed of serving the god human flesh to test his divinity.

Source: http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/slavonic/exhibitions/iconotheca.html

Werewolves, also known as lycanthropes, are legendary shape-shifting humans. As the name suggests, the shape these creatures take on is that of a wolf. The history of the werewolf legend has sprung up independently or spread to virtually every area of the Earth. It is also one of the oldest legends of human monsters in recorded history. Where the legend originated can only be guessed by what humans have taken care to record. Their other name, lycanthrope, may also be a hint at the origin of this myth.

Throughout history there are records of the trials of confessed or accused werewolves. In fact, they were hunted, questioned and executed in much the same way witches were, because often witches were accused of also being werewolves. These so-called “werewolf trials” give us a
historical glimpse at rampant human belief in werewolves. Some of the accused were arrested because villagers needed someone to blame for dead livestock or some other explainable occurrence, but others were accused because of actions far more sinister and less likely to be contrived.

In 1521, a Pierre Burgot and Michel Verdun were executed as werewolves. Historical records indicate that they were a serial killer team. In 1573, again in France, another “werewolf” was executed. His name was Gilles Garnier, otherwise known as the “Werewolf of Dole.” He was a confessed serial killer. There are numerous accounts such as these, mostly in Europe. Interestingly, real wolves were plentiful in Europe at this time. Could people have simply been associating the carnivorous animal with people who behaved like animals?

A more infamous case of werewolf execution is that of a German man named Peter Stumpp (or Stubbe). Peter was supposedly caught by his neighbors in his wolf form. They witnessed him taking off his “wolf girdle” (more on that later) when they closed in on him. At which time, he reassumed his human form. Peter confessed to murder, rape and cannibalism. His mistress and daughter were tortuously executed immediately after he was. The reason they were executed? For having knowledge of his crimes and sex with him. Yes, his daughter was executed for being raped by her father. What is worse? Her father had killed her brother and eaten his brains before he was captured.

While all of these instances are proof of a long-standing belief in werewolves, they are not the first descriptions of werewolves in history. What appears to be the oldest story of a werewolf is not a gruesome group of serial killings followed by an execution, but an Ancient Roman myth. Ovid wrote the Metamorphoses in 1 A.D. In it, he told the tale of King Lycaon (the origin of the word Lycanthrope) who offended the gods by serving human meat to them at dinner. Jupiter punished this transgression by transforming Lycaon into a werewolf. In his werewolf form, he could continue his abomination of eating human flesh with less offense.

We know from Ovid that legends of werewolves go back to at least 1 A.D. We also know that since that time, the legend of the werewolf has evolved. There are werewolf legends that are obviously separate from one another and others that seem to build off the original concept. For example, the full moon had nothing to do with Ovid’s werewolf and other early werewolf legends. Werewolves changed shape at whim. Other legends associate werewolves with a sort of belt or “wolf girdle” that, upon donning, would transform them.

Religion has had an obvious impact on the werewolf myth. In areas where Christianity was prevalent, being a werewolf was associated with witchcraft and the devil. Even the wolf girdle found a place in this Christian belief in werewolves. They believed that the belt was furnished by the devil for use by his minions. Even Ovid’s tale was based on religion in the sense that his form was a punishment from the gods. Does this mean that religion is the source of the werewolf myth? It probably is not. It is more likely that religion has simply influenced a belief that manifested in human history for one of two reasons. Either werewolves were thought up to explain something horrible or they are real.
Several reasons for the appearance of the werewolf myth have been postulated. It is possible that real wolf attacks were the cause and superstition led people to fear the worst. Suspects were subsequently tortured into confession and voila, you have “proof” cementing the belief in werewolves. There is also the possibility that the werewolf myth was created to explain rabies. Humans do get rabies from being bitten by rabid animals, after all.

One possible cause for the werewolf myth aligns very well with historical werewolf hunts and that is that people were trying to explain serial killers. The vampire myth can be traced back to royals who had a particular taste for bloodshed, like Vlad the Impaler. However, the vampire myth only explains a lust for blood, not human flesh. History tells us that cannibalism is a trait that not all serial killers possess, but some do. Therefore, another explanation may have been needed – enter the werewolf myth. Wolves eat humans (not so much nowadays, but if they could get to us, they would more often). There is no denying that serial killers like Albert Fish and Jeffrey Dahmer do behave like animals.

How the werewolf myth came to be will never be known. Ovid could very well be the originator, but it may also have existed in oral history before Ovid. Any of the above causes is plausible. However, we cannot possibly know unless we find conclusive evidence that werewolves have or have never existed. If we find one, that answers the question. We are much less likely to find an answer if there were no werewolves. It is doubtful that we will find a little postscript from Ovid reading, “I made it all up.” However, one might say that could be assumed.

Sources