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# The Wild Hunt and the Witches' Sabbath

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## ***Abstract***

Recent writing on the medieval origins of the concept of the witches' sabbath have emphasized the importance to them of beliefs in nocturnal processions or cavalcades of spirits, known in modern times by the umbrella term of the 'Wild Hunt'. This article suggests that the modern notion of the 'Hunt' was created by Jacob Grimm, who conflated different medieval traditions with modern folklore. It further argues that a different approach to the study of medieval spirit processions, which confines itself to medieval and early modern sources and distinguishes between the types of procession described in them, results in different conclusions, with regard both to the character of the 'Hunt' and to its relationship with the sabbath.

## ***Introduction***

'In German and Celtic legend, the Wild Hunt consisted of a band of ghosts or spirits who would ride through the night. The hunt was usually led by a divine or semi-divine figure, either female . . . or male, often called Herne the Hunter. In Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, authorities often transformed the female leader of the Wild Hunt into the classical goddess Diana . . . In addition, the belief developed that groups of women, instead of the spirits of the dead, would ride with Diana . . . This belief was an important basis for the later notions of night flight and the witches' sabbath' (Durrant and Bailey 2003, 204).

Thus reads the entry on 'Wild Hunt' in a relatively recent scholarly dictionary of historic witchcraft beliefs. It economically sums up the current widespread impression of the concept, and with it one conclusion of an important idea in recent witchcraft research, found more often among Continental European than English-speaking scholars: that nocturnal processions of spirits, of the sort described, underlay the early modern stereotype of witches' revels. A rare, and recent, example of an English-speaking author to make use of it is Emma Wilby (2010, 209-14). Both historians and folklorists have often characterized those processions as essentially made up of dead humans. To choose just one prominent example, in 1967 the leading British expert in fairy folklore, Katharine Briggs, could declare that 'the great cavalcade of the dead rides in various forms all over Europe . . . The Wild Hunt is one of the commonest' (1967, 48). A year before she published those words, the author who was going to be most influential in emphasizing the importance of ancient folk beliefs in creating key images of early modern witch-trials, Carlo Ginzburg, had already drawn attention to the Wild Hunt in that context, calling it a night ride of prematurely dead humans led by a fertility goddess (Ginzburg 1983, 40-48). In 1989 he repeated this view, concluding that the 'folkloric nucleus of the stereotype of the Sabbath' lay in 'a very ancient theme: the ecstatic journey of the living into the realm of the dead' (1992, 101).

A decade later, agreement with this idea was provided by Éva Pócs, perhaps the second most influential of the scholars to make the linkage between popular beliefs with pre-Christian origins and early modern ideas concerning witchcraft. Her formulation was that all across Europe 'the outlines of a common Indo-European inheritance seem to emerge. This is connected to the cult of the dead, the dead bringing fertility, to sorcery and shamanism in relation to the different gods of the dead, who are linked to a shamanism that ensured fertility by way of the dead' (1999, 25). Belief in such a reconstructed inheritance was restated in full force in 2011 by Claude Lecouteux, as part of his comprehensive survey of traditions concerning nocturnal spirit processions held by medieval and early modern Europeans. He informed readers that 'the Wild Hunt is a band of the dead' and that 'the Wild Hunt fell into the

vast complex of ancestor worship, the cult of the dead, who are the go-betweens between men and things' (2011, 2 and 199).

There is therefore a powerful and well-established international scholarly tradition concerning both the nature of the Wild Hunt and its relevance to the development of the construct of the witches' sabbath. That construct was in turn central to early modern concepts of witchcraft and witchcraft prosecution, as well as to modern assessments of the transactions between popular and elite cosmologies which produced it. It is a tradition which, however, may be fundamentally challenged. No suggestions to be made here should undermine the consensus that existing popular beliefs, probably of ancient origin, were of importance to the formulation of early modern concepts of witchcraft, especially in certain areas. There is likewise no intention of diminishing the importance to the field of the particular scholars who have just been cited. What will be offered is a questioning of some key aspects of the recent construct of medieval beliefs in nocturnal spirit processions: those that characterize such processions as essentially concerned with the dead, AS BEING DIRECT SURVIVALS FROM ANCIENT PAGANISM, AND OF HAVING A STRAIGHTFORWARD RELEVANCE TO THE EARLY MODERN TRIALS FOR WITCHCRAFT. In doing so, doubts will be raised concerning the basic methodology upon which those aspects of traditional scholarship have been founded.

### *Traditional Historiography*

Behind the whole concept of the Wild Hunt, as articulated above, ultimately lies a single book, Jacob Grimm's *German Mythology* (TRANSLATED BY THE VICTORIANS IN ENGLISH AS *TEUTONIC MYTHOLOGY*) published in 1835. It was this, an impressive example of pioneering scholarly industry, which assembled the basic body of material on which that concept was erected and identified the original mythology which inspired it as one of a nocturnal ride of dead heroes, led by a pagan god and his female consort. It popularized the term 'Wild Hunt', the German *Wilde Jagd*, as a name for this phenomenon, and (for good measure) seems to have been the first work to suggest that pagan traditions lay behind early modern images of witches' revels (Grimm 1882, vol. 1, 267-88 and vol. 3, 918-52). Over the years since, aspects of Grimm's interpretation have worn away, so that his emphasis on race as the basis of nationalism has become understandably unfashionable, and so has his identification of the presiding god as the Germanic Wotan, and his interest in the more militaristic aspects of the spectral host (Behringer 1998, 74-77; Lecouteux 2011, 202-208 [1]).

Two major aspects of his methodology, however, have remained current, and informed recent studies of the subject. One is the assumption that the variant forms of a particular belief recorded in historical times must be proliferations or degenerations of an original, simpler, and more unified ancient myth. The other is the use of folklore recorded in relatively modern times to augment and interpret information provided by ancient, medieval, and early modern sources. It is certainly true that nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklore collections can be of value to specialists in early modern history. Least controversially, they can show how rites, customs, and beliefs that are recorded in earlier centuries were continued as part of particular local cultures during the later period; how former court entertainments and official religious ceremonies were transmuted into the recreations and rituals of commoners; and how ideas produced or shared by early modern elites could be assimilated and perpetuated by the populace (e.g. Hutton 1995; Walsham 2011).

With more argument, it is possible to use later folklore collections to fill out details of beliefs and activities which are recorded more sketchily in early modern sources, or to bridge gaps in the record where identical beliefs and customs are found in medieval texts and modern folklore, but no relevant sources exist for the centuries between. Grimm's approach was, however, different from these. It was based on the premise that common people, and especially

rural people, unthinkingly practised and believed things inherited from earlier epochs, which they no longer understood and were incapable of altering. Thus folklore functioned as a collection of living fossils, survivals from remote time which could provide historians with insights into periods from which no written sources survived. As such, he treated the folk beliefs of his own age as possessing an antiquity equal to or greater than medieval and early modern texts, and constructed his portraits of ancient mythology from a melange of both, in which the folklore collections were actually paramount in the formulation of his conclusions.

In both respects, he was only operating within the norms of the attitude to the 'folk' formulated by the Romantic movement of which he was a product, pioneered by German authors but adopted all across Europe and forming one of the intellectual foundations of modern nationalism. Since the mid twentieth century, folklorists themselves have abandoned this methodology wholesale, but it still informs works of history such as those cited above. In the 1990s, a few prominent scholars of early modern witchcraft expressed unease about its perpetuation in studies of their subject. In particular, Gustav Henningsen warned that modern folklore often shows features of witchcraft beliefs not found in early modern sources, while Wolfgang Behringer noted that both bodies of evidence reveal traditions of very different kinds of nocturnal spirit procession which suggested 'distinct mythical concepts', and advised that a quest for the ultimate origins of such beliefs may be fruitless (Henningsen 1992; Behringer 1998, 32-33, 80-81 and 146). Henningsen did not, however, make a more general application of his stricture, while Behringer continued to employ modern lore to interpret and flesh out early modern material. Furthermore, he reaffirmed that the 'bricolage' of ideas which he skilfully reconstructed in sixteenth-century Vorarlberg must include 'surviving fragments of myth' from pre-Christian times (Behringer 1998, 137-39 and 145). Likewise, when Jean-Claude Schmitt produced his justly-famed study of medieval ghosts in 1994, he commented on how little evidence seemed to survive for an ancient origin for the Wild Hunt, but then added that such an origin should not be doubted, and later fully restated Grimm's formulation of it (Schmitt 1994, 100 and 119).

The methodology proposed in the present essay has two aspects, both in self-conscious counterpoint to Grimm's. First, it will examine medieval and early modern accounts of nocturnal spirit processions, without any assumption that a unified system of older beliefs lay behind them. Second, it will confine itself entirely to sources compiled before 1600: the date concerned is chosen because by then the stereotype of the witches' sabbath, to which such older traditions of spectral TROOPS are said to have given rise, is generally reckoned to have been fully formed.

Such a process of deconstruction immediately yields certain results, before the present study even proceeds beyond the work of former scholars. It disposes of the figure of Herne the Hunter, prominent in the modern view of the Wild Hunt summed up at the opening of this article. He is first recorded as a solitary ghost, in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, either appropriated or actually invented by Shakespeare himself. Nobody associated him with the Hunt until Grimm suggested that he might have been an English version of its leader (because of his name). This idea was promptly represented as fact in a popular novel by Harrison Ainsworth, following which Margaret Murray proposed that he had been a pagan nature deity (Harte 1996). More fundamentally, the methodology adopted here also renders the very term 'Wild Hunt' as irrelevant as Herne, because its adoption by scholars was entirely due to its prominence in modern German folklore. As Lecouteux has shown, medieval and early modern sources refer to three different kinds of spectral huntsman: a demon, chasing sinners; a sinful human huntsman, condemned to roam without rest as a penance; and a wild man who chases otherworldly prey and sometimes human livestock (Lecouteux 2011, 56-84). None usually has a retinue, of the living or the dead, and so are not aspects of what the Wild Hunt was

later taken to be. In addition, the ghosts of heroes (especially King Arthur) and their followers, were sometimes seen by medieval witnesses on a hunt, but this seems to have been viewed as a straightforward aristocratic pursuit rather than having any cosmic significance (Schmitt 1994, 118-19).

The modern concept of the Hunt is primarily a conflation of two different kinds of nocturnal procession or cavalcade. One was composed mainly of female spirits and travelled about, often visiting human homes to bless them if the inhabitants were clean and hospitable. Living people frequently claimed to have joined it, sometimes explicitly in spirit form while their bodies remained in their beds. In many areas it was believed to be led by a supernatural female, whom clerical writers tended to call Diana or Herodias, but who was also known as Holda, Abundia, Satia, Percht, and by other local names. The other sort of procession was mostly or wholly made up of dead human beings, and was rarely regarded as attractive or benevolent. Historians such as Ginzburg and Lecouteux were aware of the apparent distinction between the two, but chose to believe that the two were once different aspects of the same primeval myth (Lecouteux 2011; Ginzburg 1983, 33-55 and 68; Ginzburg 1992, 102). Behringer was far more worried about the apparent differences between them, at least in the eastern Alps, and yet, rather than characterize them as different phenomena, preferred the less radical approach of talking about a set of conceptual building blocks combined in different ways; and this certainly seems appropriate to the way in which they feature in the modern folklore that he cites (Behringer 1998, 26-28, 139-40).

A more radical approach will be adopted here, of treating the two belief systems as potentially, at least, different. Attention will be concentrated on processions of the dead, because it is they which have been characterized, by the scholars quoted above, as the more important and essential of the two, and fundamental to the primeval myth upon which medieval and later traditions of nocturnal parades and flights, and so the witches' sabbath, are held to have been based. This analysis will be based on the medieval and early modern primary source material relating to the subject upon which those scholars have themselves depended, especially that edited in Karl Meisen's *Die Sagen vom wüttenden Heer und wilden Jäger* (1935), which augmented the texts quoted at length by Grimm. It will also draw on the further publication of primary texts made in Lecouteux's *Phantom Armies of the Night*, which appeared in 2011 and underpinned the restatement that he made of the traditional reconstruction of archaic belief. It will therefore concentrate upon the actual evidence used to perpetuate the construct, and consider other ways in which it may be read.

### ***Ancient and Early Medieval Texts***

Such an analysis might best start with the ancient evidence, and authors working in the tradition of Grimm have sometimes claimed to have found a significant amount (Meisen 1935, 19-27). Greek and Roman literature certainly provides ample testimony that the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean regarded the night, often at least, as a creepy and dangerous place in which ghosts, witches, and evil spirits were loose. A few battlefields were thought to be haunted, and phantom armies were occasionally seen or heard at the time of, or as a premonition of, great events [2]. What is missing is any clear reference to companies of the dead roaming the earth. Tertullian condemned a belief that the prematurely dead had to wander it for a term, but did not say that they were supposed to do so in groups (Tertullian 1870, chap. 56). The goddess Hekate was regarded as the guide of souls to the land of the dead, and of newborn babies into this world, but, again, it seems hard to find her described clearly as the leader of a retinue of earthbound spirits; and none is portrayed in her iconography (as opposed to A RETINUE of dogs) (Farnell 1992). The *Orphic Hymn* to her describes her as 'mystery-raving with the souls of the dead', which may be a reference to her role as an escort

for them to Hades (Athanassakis and Wolkow 2013, line 13). A possible reference to a permanent entourage for her is found in a fragment of Greek tragedy which runs, 'if a night-time vision should frighten you, or you have received a visit from chthonic Hekate's *komos*'. The last word probably best translates as 'TROOP', which could signify a retinue for the goddess, but could simply be a jesting reference to ghosts in general (Snell 1986, 115). Ginzburg himself concluded from all this that the image of a nocturnal cavalcade was basically alien to Greek and Roman mythology (1992, 104). In ancient northern Europe, such enquiries are stymied by an almost complete lack of contemporary evidence. Tacitus described the warriors of one German tribe as painting themselves black in the hope that their opponents would mistake them for an army of 'deadly' or 'funereal' 'spectres' or 'ghosts' (*umbra feralis*) (Tacitus 1999, chap. 43). If accurate, this report might suggest that some pagan Germans, at least, believed that armies of the dead roamed the earth; or it might not. Otherwise, attempts to find nocturnal processions of spirits in the ancient north depend completely on back-projection from later sources.

In the early Middle Ages the occasional reports of phantom armies at particular places and moments continued, and Christianity added hosts of demons to the other terrors of the night (Lecouteux 2011, 25-29, 45 and 136-37; Schmitt 1994, 100-101). In the sixth century the Byzantine historian Procopius reported a myth found on the north-west coast of Gaul that invisible companies of the dead were shipped by local people across the channel to Britain on certain nights, en route to the next world (Procopius 1914, bk 4, chap. 48). If the report is accurate (and like Tacitus, Procopius was discussing a land into which he had never ventured), it still does not resemble a tradition of visible companies of the dead travelling the earth. The turning point in the making of such a tradition came in the eleventh century, when a greatly enhanced interest in the fate of the Christian dead becomes obvious in literary sources: as both Jean-Claude Schmitt and Jean Verdon have noted, accounts of ghosts in general become both more common and more detailed, and the trend continued into the twelfth (Schmitt 1994, 191; Verdon 2002, 54-56). As part of it, the dead were more often represented as gathering in groups. In the early eleventh century, Rodulfus Glaber of Cluny told a story of how a living monk met a throng of Christians martyred by Muslims, preparing to journey to heaven together (Duby 1967, 77). From the middle of the century comes a tale of two brothers who saw a crowd of people passing through the air, one of whom identified himself as their father, doomed to roam until they made good a wrong that he had committed (Otloh, *Book of Visions*, quoted in Lecouteux 2011, 34). In the same period an archdeacon of Toul recorded how a vast company in white was seen near the city of Narni, one of whom explained to a citizen that they were souls not yet fit for heaven, doing penance by visiting holy places (Wipert 1923).

This new concept of moving groups of penitential dead forms the backdrop to the celebrated account by the Anglo-Norman monk Ordericus Vitalis, from the 1130s, of how a Norman priest to whom he himself had spoken claimed to have seen a long and noisy procession of the dead on New Year's Night 1091 or 1092 (Ordericus 1973, bk 8, chap. 17). It was made up of people from all divisions of society, on foot or horse and in varieties of dress in accordance with their former station, and all were being tormented in a manner appropriate to their sins during life: most attention in the account was paid to the armoured knights. Demons were active in it, and a giant, the nature of whom is never discussed, preceded it. The story emphasized the point that masses and prayers offered by the living for those tortured in the procession could shorten their sufferings and eventually release them. The priest who told it added that he had been left ill for a week by the encounter. Although Ordericus presented the story as an individual and original vision, he did note that his informant had recognized the phenomenon as the *familia Herlechini*, something of which the man had heard but thought a myth; though neither he nor Ordericus explains of what this myth consisted or who reported it,

or indeed who 'Herlechin' was supposed to be. For well over a century, philologists have debated the meaning of the name, without final result: the Old French *herle*, 'tumult'; the Germanic *Heer*, 'army', and *Thing*, 'assembly', or *König*, 'king'; and the Anglo-Saxon *helle-cynn*, 'hell-kin', have all had their partisans (Anon. 1902; Lot, 1903; Grisward, 1981, 183-228; Rey-Flaud 1985, 89).

Ginzburg and Lecouteux both regarded Ordericus's text as the moment at which the pagan tradition of a host of the dead got Christianized; but, as seen, there is no secure evidence of such a tradition (Lecouteux 2011, 86-120; Ginzburg 1983, 47-48). It may be more profitable instead to note that an interest in such hosts was considerable when Ordericus wrote. In the same decade, Hugh of Mans had a ghost tell a living family that he had travelled with a host of sinners and needed a mass to free him (Lecouteux and Marq 1990, 113); Peter of Cluny narrated an anecdote of an army of phantom knights, atoning for their sins by wandering, and another of a message delivered by one of a huge troop of the dead, filling up roads (Peter of Cluny 1988, bk 1, chaps 23 and 28); and a history of the monastery of Marmoutier included the appearance of a procession of dead monks, come to foretell the death of the current abbot (*De rebus gestis* 1853, bk 1, chap. 17). Around the same time, the German chronicler Ekkehard von Aura recorded under the year 1123 a host of dead knights roaming the province of Worms, tortured for their sins by red-hot arms and armour, and needing prayers and alms to deliver them (Meisen 1935, 38); while a monastic text from Alsace told of the apparition of two hordes of the dead, one destined for heaven but wandering awhile to atone for sins, and another bound for hell because they were knights who had died without penance (Holder-Egger 1888, 996-1000). Clearly a fear and resentment of aristocratic violence, as well as speculation about the fate of the soul, is apparent in these sources; and all that is unusual about Ordericus's account is its length and detail, and the appearance of the name Herlechin, suggesting a tradition and genre attached to what is being described.

By the late twelfth century such a tradition had certainly developed, as in 1175 an archbishop of Canterbury could wryly suggest in his *Letters* that the worldly clerics of the royal court would go on death to join the *milites Herlewini* (Herlewin's army) (Peter of Blois 1855), while soon after, the French poet Chrétien de Troyes spoke in passing in his romance *Philomena* of the *Mesniée Hellequin* (Hellequin's army or retinue) (lines 191-93). Neither felt a need to explain the reference. In the 1190s the English author Walter Map published the legend of an ancient British king called Herla, who was doomed to roam with his mounted retinue, for centuries, never ageing, because of a spell placed on them by a demonic dwarf (Map 1983, bk 1, chap. 11). This story, however, appears nowhere else, and seems to be at odds with Ordericus Vitalis's and Peter of Cluny's concept of such apparitions as the sinful dead. Elsewhere, Map comes close to restating their view, by speaking of different bands of phantom soldiers, called *herlethings* by the English, who were seen wandering at night with their camp-followers in Brittany and England, who sometimes afflicted illness on observers. One of these was supposed to be that of King Herla (Map 1983, bk 4, chap. 13)<sup>[3]</sup>. Around 1200 a Cistercian monk, Helinand of Froidmont, provided a story from the Beauvais area that the *militia* or *familia Hellequini* had completed its penance and no longer rode, and also a different origin legend for its name, that it was derived from a sinful former king of France, Charles V ('Karlequinus'), who led it. He also, however, repeated an account from his own uncle, of encountering an army of dead humans and demons at night, the humans weighed down as a penance by the weapons that they had to bear. He took care to emphasize that the belief in Hellequin's host was by then firmly held by ordinary people (Helinand 1855).

In the course of the twelfth century, therefore, the concept of a procession of the dead, doomed to wander the earth, and often to suffer specific torments, until they had atoned for their sins in life, became established both as a literary trope and (apparently) as a popular

tradition as well. Different storytellers perceived different figures in these processions according to their own class, but armed men were the most commonly recorded. No evidence survives to show how or where the image originated, or the derivation and meaning of the name Herlechin (and its variants); it seems that the medieval writers were no better informed than we are today, and that by the 1190s different stories were being made up to solve these problems. It is also notable that in almost none of the various descriptions do these armies of the dead seem to have an undoubted leader, who commands, orders, or speaks for them. The single apparent exception is Walter Map's totally anomalous story of Herla, which proves the rule as, uniquely, he emphasizes that the members of the cavalcade are enchanted rather than dead. In all the accounts of the parades of wandering souls, Herlechin himself is always invisible, or not to be securely identified among the characters in the procession. This makes it the more likely that the name was originally a descriptive one for the procession itself, and not for any individual being in it, and that this fact was confused and forgotten by the authors whose records of the phenomenon are the earliest to survive, and never realized or recalled thereafter.

Its twelfth-century distribution seems to have been from England across northern France to the Rhineland. During the thirteenth it spread further into the German-speaking lands, where the spectral warriors acquired a distinctive local name, *das wütende heer*, the 'furious army', which appears first in poetry. By 1300 one author had already found in the word for 'furious' the suggestion of a leader for the host called 'Wutan', making an easy later link to Grimm's pagan god, Wotan (Meisen 1935, 53-57). The original idea of a procession of the penitential dead remained present, but there were some developments. The social makeup of those involved varied more to suit that of the reporter: thus, when the familia Herlequini allegedly appeared to a young man in the Yonne district of France, it did so as a troop of artisans, each carrying a tool to signify his craft in life (Herbert of Clairvaux, *Libri tres de miraculis*, in Lecouteux 2011, 127-28). Heroes from other traditions were brought into that of ghostly companies, above all Arthur, whose popularity in legend had burgeoned from the mid twelfth century onward. By the early thirteenth, commoners in both Britain and France were reported as seeing spectral courtiers or knights, by both day and night, who claimed, or were claimed, to be his followers (Schmitt 1994, 118-19).

Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued that the concept of ghostly processions and cavalcades was diabolized in the thirteenth century, as part of a wider shift away from the greater open-mindedness of the twelfth, and seems to be correct; though such a change was a shift of degree, as the hordes of the penitential dead had often been reported as attended by demons. A few churchmen began to worry about their theological significance, especially as they seemed by then to have become a very widespread aspect of popular belief. William of Auvergne noted that the nocturnal apparitions of ghostly knights were now generally known to French commoners as *hellequin*, or *coupées par le fer* (those killed in battle), and to the Spanish as the *exercitus antiquus* (old army). He thought that some of them were indeed suffering souls seeking the prayers of the living, as the common people thought, but feared that others were demons, deceiving gullible humans (William of Auvergne 1674, bk 3, chap. 12). [see query at note 4] Writing a little later, another French cleric had no doubt that the *familia Allequini* was a diabolical illusion (Stephen of Bourbon 1877, no. 365), while the Norman romance of *Luque la maudite* portrayed the retinue of 'Hellequin' as devils who could inflict on a district the physical damage of a hurricane (Meisen 1935, 62-69). The French poetry of the century also contained a succession of disparaging references in passing to Hellequin's followers, as unruly, uncouth, dishonest, noisy, and generally badly behaved (Lecouteux 2011, 181-82). The most significant aspect of this change is that in the twelfth century authors who wrote of hosts of the dead tended to do so as exemplary tales designed to inculcate piety and virtue in those who heard



them; while those who did so in the next century behaved as if they were now dealing with a popular belief, which they were struggling to control and regulate.

It therefore remains possible that the high medieval Western European descriptions of armies or parades of the dead were rooted in ancient tradition, but there is no actual evidence of this, other than in the broadest sense that Europeans had always believed in ghosts and menacing nocturnal spirits. According to the actual data, those high medieval descriptions work much better as one aspect of a more acute interest in the fate of the soul, manifested in Western Christianity after the year 1000 and taking its place in the ferment of intellectual culture which was a feature of that Christianity in the following three centuries. What is less easy to propose from the extant sources is how much these images began as clerical and literary constructs, and how much as popular tradition. As suggested, the earliest accounts of them never emphasize that they were familiar to common people, while those of the thirteenth century do, and those later texts also credit the populace with a belief in the significance of the apparitions which was propagated in earlier clerical writings, but from which churchmen were by then starting to depart. Furthermore, the geographical range of the reports seems to broaden with time, from an original epicentre in northern France, which again suggests a novel, and distinctively high medieval, phenomenon.

It is also noteworthy that all through the Middle Ages, writers continued to report phantom armies of the kind found in the Greek and Roman, and early medieval, texts. These phantasms commemorated the sites of former real battles, or acted as omens of bloody events yet to come (Lecouteux 2011, 45-54 and 139). They were usually distinguished from the phenomena which are the main subject of this study, because they were either tied to particular places or appeared only at unique moments; they did not roam; they had no apparent penitential aspect and they appeared to have no messages about the nature of life and death to convey to the living. They were, moreover, never associated with Herlechin (under any variant of the name), or the 'furious army'. As a genuine extension of ancient tradition, they seem to highlight all the more strongly the apparently novel and distinctively high and late medieval character of the wandering hosts of dead. All these proposals are tentative, but they are arguably better based on the historical record than prevailing assumptions about these medieval phantoms have been.

### ***Later Medieval and Early Modern Texts***

During the later Middle Ages the tradition of the marching dead continued, with little new development. More accounts appeared, from Germany to England, of cavalcades of knights killed in battle, who gave advice or pleas to living people who met them, or processions of penitential dead, who sometimes included unbaptized children (Kleinschmidt 1972; James 1922). The variant notion also persisted that the leader of the phantom knights was a former French king, Charles V, who was doomed to wander with his followers until their sins were expiated: that monarch now sometimes featured in person in accounts such as the *Romant de Richart fitz de Robert le Diable* and the *Chronique de Normandie* (Meisen 1935, 77-79 and 85-94). At the same time some French, German, and English writers, of poetry as well as clerical homilies and exhortations, kept up the tradition of condemning the *Mesnie Hellequin* as composed of devils who assumed human shape to lead the living astray (Ruhe 1993, 115; Meisen 1935, 80; Baumann 1975, 83). The hostile attitude to the ghostly parades also continued to be manifested in mockery and proverb. In late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, *Hurlewaynes meyne* or *kinne* functioned as a poetic metaphor for boorishness, disorder, and irresponsibility; as in *The Tale of Beryn* (lines 7-9), and *Mum and the Soothsegger* (book 1, lines 90-91) (Paul 1909; Dean 2000). As for the French, an interpolation added to a romance in 1316, *Le Roman de Flauvel*, portrays a charivari staged to mock a

wedding by townsmen, led by a giant and claiming to BE 'EN HELLEQUIN' (Meisen 1935, 73-76). French poets and chroniclers used 'Hellequins' as a by-word for scoundrels, and German poets 'furious army' as one for noisiness (Lecouteux 2011, 181-83). The two themes, of a divinely legitimized parade of penitential dead and of an evil and unpleasant host, were combined in a late medieval German charm, which called for protection against a variety of menacing spirits, including 'Wutanes her and all its members'. In doing so it introduced a new element into depictions of these nocturnal parades, by declaring that the army was made up entirely of executed criminals, who carried symbols of the means by which they had been put to death (Lecouteux 2011, 241-44). The notion of it as a phenomenon which carried physical risks to the living persisted in places: in 1343 the *familia HERQUINI* was seen fighting in the sky with fiery weapons on the border of Carinthia and Carniola, at the south-eastern extreme of the German language area; it terrified, wounded, and blighted with illness people who saw it (Schneider 1910).

In the sixteenth century references grow slightly more detailed and some give a better sense of local belief systems [5]. The original concept of the penitential dead persisted, though armoured knights were less conspicuous among them, as they were in society. Johann Geiler von Kaisersberg, preaching at Strasbourg in 1508, summed up the common people's view of the furious army as that it consisted of those who had suffered violent deaths and were doomed to wander till judgement, each with the dress of their rank during life and the marks of how they died. He said that it was seen mostly in the four sets of Ember Days each year, known across much of Europe as times when spirits were abroad (Meisen 1935, 96-97). The German Protestant theologian Johannes Agricola recorded how a priest near Eisleben had told him that the furious army was seen annually by his parishioners at the beginning of Lent. It was now said to include some people yet living, for whom inclusion was a prediction of their fate on death, because all in the procession were in postures of torment, and most lacked legs or heads (Agricola 1534, no. 667). A Swabian annalist, Martin Crusius, stated that unscrupulous priests had taught peasants that the army comprised all who died in battle, all unbaptized children, and all whose souls wandered from their bodies in the night and could not return. It was visible in the Christmas season, the time of greatest darkness, and during the Ember Days (Meisen 1935, 121). This new theme of seasonality is not found earlier.

Another chronicler, Jakob Trausch, reported that the furious army had been active in Alsace in 1516, by both night and day. It roved in parties of fifty to two hundred, and entered towns after dark, carrying lights and shouting. One of its members, killed in battle, recognized his wife and asked for masses for his soul (*Strassburger Chronik*, in Meisen 1935, 98-99). Yet another chronicle claimed that the army entered the town of Veringen in 1550, its members including a former inhabitant killed in war, so that his head was horribly cleft by the blow that killed him. A living watchman who spoke to him was ill for weeks after. Another entry in the same text recounted a story from Franconia, of a nobleman who saw the furious army pass in a forest at dawn, composed of dead soldiers with dreadful wounds and mutilations, and realized that its leader was himself, and the vision a prophesy of his own imminent and violent end (*Zimmerische Chronik*, in Meisen 1935, 109-11). Alongside the old tradition which populated the host with dead warriors continued the more recent and rarer one which made it up of executed criminals. The great poet Hans Sachs claimed to have met it in a forest near Osnabrück, and found that it consisted of hanged men, nooses still around their necks, including one who had died that morning ('Das Wütend Heer', in Meisen 1935, 101-103). It does seem that by the early modern period the belief in the roaming horde of dead was contracting into the German-speaking lands. In England all mention of 'Hurlawayne' disappears in the course of the fifteenth century, long before the Reformation, while actual reports of the belief in Hellequin apparently vanish from France in the same period. Use of it as an occasion

for literary references lasted a little longer in French-speaking areas, so that in 1568 the scholar Gabriel Murier could comment dismissively that ‘the Mesnie of the Hennequins’ were ‘more madmen than scoundrels’ (*Receuil des sentences*, quoted in Lecouteux 2011, 181-82). By then, however, any mention of the ghostly parade in French seems to have been a rarity.

### *Nocturnal Processions and the Sabbath*

It is time now to examine the relationship between the army of the dead, the nocturnal visits and rides by benevolent female spirits and their human adherents, often led by a goddess-figure, and the witches’ sabbath. On the whole, the host of the dead does not seem often to have been blended or confused with other kinds of nocturnal apparition. Lecouteux, to support the view that the benevolent roving female and the army of the dead were originally one, assembled a few medieval authors who seemed to suggest that they were the same phenomenon. These, however, turn out to mention the two together (usually to condemn popular belief in them), which is not the same thing as an indication that they were regarded as the same by the authors concerned, let alone the populace whom they were rebuking: this is equally true of Guillaume de Guillerville and the *Roman de Confession* in the thirteenth century and Raoul de Presles in the fourteenth (Lecouteux 2011, 153). The thirteenth-century poet Adam de la Halle did blend what he called the *maisnie Hierlekin* with the belief in benevolent female spirits who visited homes. He did so by merging both with a third contemporary tradition of belief; this time the literary one in superhuman beings, or humans with extraordinary magical powers, called fays, who are a feature of high medieval romances, helping, seducing, and sometimes attacking human heroes or heroines. In this case he turned the *maisnie* into the heralds of three lovely fays, who call at human homes on particular dates. None of their names seem to be known from references to the visiting female spirits found in accounts of popular belief, and Adam added another character apparently unique to his work, a wild-haired male called Crokesou, who comes before the *maisnie* to announce it, with a ringing of bells (Dufournet 1974, 139-68). This looks like an individual reworking of traditional material by a talented creative writer, rather than a reflection of wider belief.

After this there seem to be no more cases of literary sources in which the two kinds of apparition are found together until the seventeenth century, when Renward Cysat, a citizen of Lucerne, wrote up his chronicle of the town’s affairs, which relied heavily on his own memory of them, stretching far back into the previous century. He recorded that local people spoke of the *Guott jns Heer* or ‘good army’, also called the *Säligen Lütt* or ‘blessed people’, which visited favoured and deserving individuals. In his account of it, however, he made clear that among its members were supposed to be the souls of prematurely and violently dead people, who had despite their tragic ends been essentially good and pious in life and now had to wander until the natural term of their lives was expired, seeking hospitality from the living. The host also included people who were yet alive, and who were given the special privilege, which won admiration from their neighbours, of being able to join it at times upon its wanderings: generally a feature of the benevolent processions of night-flying and house-visiting spirits in medieval tradition. This suggests that in this part of German-speaking Switzerland the medieval traditions had become mingled, although Cysat’s own account is complicated by his hostility to the tradition, so that he commented that the ‘good’ spectral visitors should properly be termed the evil *Wuot jns Heer*. Moreover, he also recorded local belief in apparitions which created frightening noises in the night, without making clear how local people related these to the good spirits (Meisen 1935, 111-20).

A different category of source suggests that even in the later Middle Ages the characteristics of the two kinds of spirit host were not always as clear-cut among ordinary people as they were in the accounts by clerics, chroniclers, and (mostly) poets. This consists of

the legal records left by inquisitors responsible for the policing of religious orthodoxy among local populations. Two apparent examples of such hybridization of ideas survive, both from the fourteenth century, but from an impressively widely separated pair of geographical locations. One is in the French Pyrenees, in 1319, taken from the now famous register of Nicholas Fournier and consisting of the examination of a sacristan who functioned as a local magician or cunning man, consulted by clients. He claimed to have gained his knowledge by travelling in spirit form 'with the good ladies or the souls of the dead' (Duvernoy 1965, vol. 1, 137-39). The 'good ladies' was a common medieval and early modern expression for the supernatural female beings who made night rides, often joined by privileged living humans, and were generally regarded as benevolent. The phrase seems to distinguish them from the dead, but the examinee apparently went on to describe journeys with the latter which avoided 'dirty' places and 'untidy' human homes, in the usual style of the ladies' nocturnal visits. The other example is taken from a now equally celebrated source, the trial of two other popular magicians, a pair of women at Milan in 1370. They confessed that they had gained their specialist knowledge from a supernatural female figure, leader of a company which roamed between human homes on certain nights and blessed them. This was a classic expression of the benign, woman-centred sort of spirit-procession, but one of the accused added that the company included deceased people, some of whom were executed criminals, though these were a minority and the criminals were more ashamed than the other members; thus blending in a characteristic that had begun to be attached in this period, in some accounts, to the processions of the dead (Behringer 1998, 54-55 and 173-74).

The use of terms such as 'blending' and 'hybridization' for such cases is justified by their context: their comparative rarity. Where the two kinds of spectral procession feature together in trials for witchcraft and magic—and this is in itself rare—they are usually clearly distinguished. Behringer's careful study of the 1586 trial of a cunning man from Vorarlberg, Chonrad Stoeckhlin, shows how one of the women whom Stoeckhlin identified as a witch struck back at him by accusing him of travelling with 'Wuetten's army'. This was clearly intended to be damning, and Stoeckhlin himself claimed to have roamed with the *nachtschar* (without defining them) instead, interpreted by Behringer from modern folklore as signifying fairy-like and attractive wandering spirits who gave benefits to chosen humans in the classic manner of the alternative tradition of nocturnal company. As part of his education by these journeys, he claimed to have visited the realm of the dead, but he distinguished human souls en route to heaven or purgatory from his spectral companions (Behringer 1998, 22-67 and 72-81). Likewise, a group of women from the Dolomites tried for witchcraft in 1506-10 confessed to roving at night as followers of a supernatural woman, and one carefully contrasted this 'good game' with 'the game of the devil' and that 'of incubi and of night fears', which included dead humans (Behringer 1998, 55-60).

It was, indeed, very unusual for people accused of witchcraft to speak of taking part in the processions of the dead. Possible references to this activity tend too often to be ambiguous, such as that of a fortune-teller and witch-detector from the Entlebuch Valley, tried at Lucerne in 1499-1500, who claimed to have learned his skills from the dead, among whom he 'travelled' (Hoffman-Kreyer 1899). In Éva Pócs's survey of Hungarian witch-trials, the accused were sometimes denounced by others for appearing in nocturnal troops of evil spirits, which could include the ghosts of witches, while magicians serving the common folk were at times recorded as claiming to be able to see the dead (Pócs 1999, 37-42 and 149-58). Neither phenomenon constituted a claim by individuals themselves to take part in processions of souls or ghosts. Such a claim did sometimes occur, however, being found in another set of trials, those in the Italian province of Friuli, which formed the basis for Ginzburg's famous study of the *benandanti* (1983). These were local magicians who, in addition to the usual services of cunning folk, such

as healing and witch-detecting, sometimes believed that their spirits went out at night, on certain days or dates, to fight those of witches for the fertility of the land. As such, they formed part of a third tradition of night-travelling in addition to those of the good women and the army of the dead, and one found only in a distinctive zone from north-east Italy through the Balkans to Hungary. It involved particular individuals, usually born with a caul, whose spirits were thought to go out at night while their owners were in sleep or trance, to do battle with evil forces for the good of their communities (Ginzburg 1992, 160-89; Pócs 1999, 72-164; Klaniczay 1984). Ginzburg found that a few of the *benandanti* interrogated by the Inquisition claimed to have dealings with the dead. Most of these did so by conversing with the deceased relatives of clients and carrying back messages from them, or gaining knowledge of the destination of their souls. One, however, said that she went in procession with the dead once each week, while another said that her husband had done so. It was thus possible for magicians to claim to do this, but as Ginzburg himself concluded, such processions formed a marginal element in the folklore of Friuli, and therefore in the activities of the *benandanti* as a whole (Ginzburg 1983, 33-39 and 62-68).

Across Europe, indeed, the armies and parades of the dead rarely feature in witch-trials, and when they do it tends to be (as shown) in isolated cases in regions where the night-roving benevolent spirits, or the night-battles between good and bad spirits, are a much more prominent aspect of the cases. Hurler and his gang vanished from England long before the trials began there, and are equally absent from the less lethal offences regarding the practice of magic heard in late medieval English church courts; nor did they ever apparently travel into other parts of Britain. Interest in Hellequin and his troop died out in French-speaking lands just as the persecution of witchcraft gathered pace there. In Germanic areas, by contrast, belief in the furious army remained strong throughout the period of the trials of presumed witches, which were indeed more intense there than in any other part of Europe; and yet it does not seem to have been associated with them. Among recent studies of the records of German trials, that by Edward Bever stands out as one of the most determined to extract what can be recovered of genuine popular belief and experience from them, in his case those of Württemberg. As part of this, he refers in passing to the prominence of the Wild Hunt and Wild Army in the folk tradition of the time, as something in which historians believe; but they never crop up in any of his actual cases (Bever 2008, 96 and 240).

By contrast, the nocturnal journeying of the benevolent, largely female, spirits, which privileged individuals among live human beings could join, is frequently found in trial records as an experience which people accused of witchcraft claimed to have undergone, as well as one of which they were suspected by others (Cohn 1993, 167-80; Ginzburg 1992; Henningsen 2009; Behringer 1998, 50-67; Lecouteux 2011, 9-20). It is true that such cases are concentrated in the Alps and the neighbouring area of northern Italy, with an apparently isolated outpost in Sicily which lacked the dominant and leading female figure commonly found in the Alpine region. Nonetheless, their role may have been pivotal to the early modern image of witchcraft as a whole, because it was in the Alps and the lands bordering them that the stereotype of the witches' sabbath first developed, in the early fifteenth century. How important the myth of the night-roaming women and their followers was to this development may be disputed in detail, but it at present seems likely that it was critical to at least one particular and indispensable feature of the construct of the sabbath: the flight to and from it. It is also recorded relatively early in the Middle Ages, from the ninth century onward, as well as persisting strongly in popular belief over most of the German-speaking region of Europe and parts of Italy into modern times. It may indeed be of pagan origin, although this needs to be considered more closely, with more sustained and wide-ranging comparisons between the ancient and medieval evidence, than has been done hitherto. It is also worth emphasizing that

in many parts of early modern Europe, cunning folk (under their various different names) claimed to have gained their magical knowledge from local land spirits (again under many names and in different forms), who were sometimes mixed with dead humans (to take examples from opposite ends of the continent, see Pocs 1989 and 1992; Thomas 1971, 608-609; Henderson and Cowan 2001; Todd 2008). The concept of nocturnal spirit cavalcades, armies, and processions, however, formed a distinctive subset within a more general belief in such spirits and such relationships.

### *Conclusion*

It may be worth emphasizing again that images and ideas descended from the pre-Christian world are clearly of importance to the early modern European witch-trials, and that the latter cannot fully be understood without reference to the former. The image of the witch is itself one of those bequests from antiquity, and so are stereotypes of how deviant religious groups were supposed to behave, and a belief in forms of local spirit which have no clear place in the Christian cosmology of angels and demons. What has been argued here is that some of the reconstructions of those images and ideas made by modern scholars, and applied to the study of early modern witchcraft, deserve revision in major aspects. Specifically, it is suggested that belief in an ancient cult of the dead as the foundation of all of the medieval and early modern traditions of nocturnal armies and parades of spirits, human and superhuman, has little to support it. Instead of a single, unified, original Indo-European mythical and religious system, we may perhaps more profitably think in terms of different forms of such spectral hosts, with different points of origin, some probably ancient and some seemingly high medieval, which sometimes overlapped and converged, and tended to do both increasingly in particular places with time. As part of their distinctiveness, they had different relationships with the creation of the stereotype of the witches' sabbath, and with the trials that resulted, and national and regional variants in them, changing over time, were an important element in their composition. Such a shift in perception of them is made possible by the abandonment of the use of modern folklore to augment or interpret earlier textual evidence, which has hitherto been a key element in the manner in which historians have interpreted them.

A new working definition of the 'Wild Hunt' may therefore be proposed, based on the same sources which generated that with which this article opened: that it is essentially a modern construction, derived largely from the work of Grimm. It represents a combination of three older mythical components, all of which were said to be apparitions active by night: a procession of female spirits, often joined by privileged human beings and often led by a supernatural woman whom medieval clerics called Diana or Herodias and who was known by a range of local names; a lone spectral huntsman, regarded as demonic, accursed, or otherworldly; and a procession of the human dead, normally thought to be wandering to expiate their sins, often noisy and tumultuous, and usually consisting of those who had died prematurely and violently. The first of those may well have pre-Christian origins, and probably contributed directly to the formulation of the concept of the witches' sabbath. The last two seem to be medieval in their inception, and the third to be directly related to growing speculation about the fate of the dead in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The second seems to have no connection with the witch-trials, and the third only an occasional and minor one.

### *Notes*

[1] The twentieth-century German scholarly debate over the Wild Hunt is a self-contained matter, founded in German domestic politics and largely detached from the construct of the ancient cult of the dead and the witches' sabbath discussed here.

[2] Ogden 2001, 13-16, lists most of the references; see also Pliny, *Natural History*, bk 2, chap. 58; Virgil, *Georgics*, bk 1, lines 474-75; Plutarch, *Marius*, chap. 17.

[3] Watkins 2007, 215-18, classes a few other twelfth-century references to nocturnal cavalcades with those to Hellequin's; but they are to troops of demons, rather than of the human dead.

[4] However, they remain essentially literary, and visual material is not much help for this enquiry. The main relevant examples are the cavalcades in Lucas Cranach's 'Melancholia' paintings, sometimes taken as a straightforward representation of the 'furious army', which mix possible motifs from that with those of the witches' sabbath, and the latter predominate (see Zika 2003, 1-20).

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

*PL PATROLOGIA LATINA* [WRITINGS OF THE LATIN FATHERS]. 217 VOLS. EDITED BY J.-P. MIGNE, 2<sup>ND</sup> SER. PARIS: GARNIER, 1841-55.

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