In the Middle Ages, the concept of death in Western culture was as enigmatic as it is in present time. Emotional and psychological reactions regarding death varied, according to the folklore and culture of the people involved; both scholarly and popular beliefs formed to help facilitate the mourning process for individuals and communities alike. One of the most interesting popular stories that arose, spanning a wide variety of different regions and time periods and retold for various purposes, is the legend of the Wild Hunt. While aspects of this legend vary, the central theme is the same. It is always a procession of the dead, occurring four weeks out of the year, more specifically called the Ember Nights.

The leader of the Hunt varies according to region. Kveldulf Hagen Gundarsson describes a Scandinavian version of the hunt in a lecture he gave at the Cambridge Folklore Society in 1992: “A great noise of barking and shouting is heard; then a black rider on a black, white, or gray horse, storming through the air with his hounds, followed by a host of strange spirits, is seen” (Gundarsson, 1992). The “dark rider” stays the same across the different folktales. In some regions a pagan goddess, such as Diana, Holda, or Perchta, led the Hunt.

Following their leader was a gathering of the undead. Common across folklore is the idea that the horde is consistently in battle formation, and that spirits sighted in this battalion have all been victims of violent or untimely death. Soldiers, murder victims, and children were reported in this procession. There are two important variations of the Wild Hunt, which can be seen across regions and occasionally across time, especially as the countryside became more Christianized. Earlier Hunts tended to be associated with Pagan rituals or dates in which the souls of the dead were “closer” to the world of the living whatever the circumstances of their death. Later versions included Satanic overtones, where the dead, instead of being merely cursed to wander the earth until their proper death date arrives, are either tormented by demons, as reported in the Ecclesiastical History in 1091, or they were stuck in Purgatory.

Ginzburg and Gundarsson both cite a story that was written down by Orderic Vitalis in his Ecclesiastical History as an example of the “host of the sinful” as a source in their works. Gundarsson describes in his lecture a priest named Walchelin that runs into the Hunt:

coming back from visiting a sick person, [he] saw a swarm led by an enormous warrior swinging a mighty club in his hand. The shapes that followed wept and moaned over their sins; then came a horde of corpse-bearers with coffins in their shoulders—the priest counted some 50 coffins. Then women on horseback, seated on saddles with glowing nails stuck into them; then a host of ecclesiastical on horseback. (Gundarsson, 1992)

Orderic Vitalis took oral accounts of the Norman conquest from those who fought in battle and from nobles and members of the clergy, in other words, from those that would have been privileged enough to receive an education. Jean-Claude Schmitt describes in more detail, in Ghosts in the Middle Ages, what Walchelin sees and as reported by Orderic Vitalis. Walchelin is ordered to observe after the leader of the procession of the dead catches him in the woods spying. Walchelin notices the spirits are apparently arranged in a hierarchical order. He then describes the troupes by specific groupings.

The third group had a specially reserved place in the narrative; interestingly enough this received the bulk of the priest’s “privileged attention.” Orderic “simultaneously stresses the knights’ crimes and punishments and also the conditions of their redemption” (Schmidt, 98). Walchelin reported there were thousands of members of this band. It was the actual battalion and the most shocking to see. They wore black armor and spit fire, and the priest said “corresponds to the first order of society” contained members of the clergy who lived less than devout lives. Walchelin, and thereby Orderic Vitalis, didn’t spend much time on this group, perhaps for personal reasons. It was perhaps difficult for the priest to recognize one of his own order in the division of the damned.

The first group is attached to material possessions and the physicality of their bodies: this party “formed a great crowd on foot, with beasts of burden laden with clothing and every kind of furnishing and household goods, like robbers bending under the weight of their plunder” (Schmidt, 94). There is also a man tied to a tree trunk that carried by “two Ethiopians” or what the priest identifies as two demons. Walchelin identifies the man tied to this tree trunk as a criminal who murdered a member of the clergy and perished before he completed his penance. The second group, which “corresponds to the first order of society” contained members of the clergy who lived less than devout lives. Walchelin, and thereby Orderic Vitalis, didn’t spend much time on this group, perhaps for personal reasons. It was perhaps difficult for the priest to recognize one of his own order in the division of the damned.

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indescribably cold” (Schmidt, 96). This might have meant that this particular priest was clean of sin, as it seems that this Horde has an educational purpose. Instead of being merely a parade of the dead, its purpose is to warn people what will happen if they commit sin in any form. Oddly enough, Walchelin recognized most of the people in the Hunt, and included the names of very prominent people in his vicinity.

The Hunt, as mentioned previously, was not all bloody portents and negativity. In some instances, the processions were seen to be quite peaceful and the dead would sometimes even grant gifts to those that would offer assistance to them. Ginzburg reports that in Italy, beliefs in the Wild Hunt particularly diverged from the terrifying descriptions common to other regions. Ginzburg mentions the case of Anna la Rossa, who prepared a special place for the dead by making the beds in her house early on Fridays and Saturdays “because on those days the dead would return exhausted and throw themselves on the beds in their own houses” (Gundarsson, 1992). More frequently, households would leave food out for the dead to give them strength in their journey. This tradition of leaving gifts for the dead still persists: on All Souls’ Day, “the deceased pass through their former homes where the charity of the living has placed food, drink and clean beds at their disposal” (Ginzburg, 41). Of course in many cultures today these offerings are highly ritualized and part of a grander celebration of the mysteries of death and dying.

There is even a tradition of Wild Hunt which has a deeply gynocentric aspect. Norman Cohn describes the cult of Diana or Holde. She is motherly and caring to her loyal procession, and when she ventures out at night “she is accompanied by a train of followers. They are the souls of the dead, including the souls of children and of babies who have died unbaptized (but here one must remember that often the soul itself is imagined as a child)” (Cohn, 213). In some accounts, the souls wandering with Diana are serving time in Purgatory or they died before their appointed time. This is an interesting blend of the pagan and Christian, with a goddess attending to the souls of both pagan and Christianized people; it would seem that the band would grow very large, indeed. Rose suggests that “Primitive and uneducated people frequently do fail to distinguish between dream and actuality” (Rose. 110), He also suggests the ride might have “originated in some ceremony, but it must in that case have lost its factual basis and survived only as a popular belief”, as handed down information via oral tradition (Rose, 110).

Death is an enigma that is feared more than any other unknowable mystery, and all cultures feel the need to explain or rationalize its behavior and methods in order to better anticipate and deal with its results. The Wild Hunt is part of the resulting pattern, as it occurs on nights when the “veil” which separates the living from the dead is supposed to be at its most penetrable. Modern society, studying these rituals and beliefs, appears scientifically curious on the surface, but perhaps we hope for truths to reveal themselves as well; we are still at the mercy of the dead and their mystery.


