

# HERCOTOP FANTASMA



Few of the simple pleasures of life are as satisfying as taking a walk through the woods. We can enjoy the subtle interplay of light and shadow, the calls of myriad unseen birds, the occasional glimpse of wildlife...but these sensory pleasures soon turn terrifying in the dark of night. Sounds are magnified, the breaking of a twig underfoot jars our nerves, and "the fear of being caught and eaten," in the words of sociologist Enrico Canetti, becomes all too real.

## The Herlethingi

Walter Map, the 13th-century archdeacon of Oxford and author of *De nugis curialium*, a compendium of medieval odds and ends, and even more important work on the Crusades, made the following reference in one of his works to the *Herlethingi*, the "company of the undead" named after King Herla. According to Map, the peasantry of Brittany was accustomed to seeing the frightening nightly procession of "long trains of soldiers in dead silence," making their way through the night with wagon trains of spoils, beasts of burden, war horses, and even camp followers. It was even possible, writes the archdeacon, to steal living horses and other ani-

mals from the unholy company and keep them, at the risk, however, of facing sudden, unexplained death.

No description is given of the Herlethingi's arms or armor, so it is impossible to ascertain if they were the undead forms of ancient Celtic warriors, Roman legionaries, or Germanic invaders. Map informs his readers that the phantom soldiery was active in the first year of Henry II Plantagenet, going "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."

On one occasion, the undead were seen marching in broad daylight, causing locals to arm themselves and make ready for war if the strange army did not lay down its arms. As the peasants, accustomed to all manner of roving bandits and marauding foreigners, fired arrows and hurled spears at the Herlethingi, the entire procession dissolved into thin air. "From that day, this mysterious company has never been seen by man."

On this count, the archdeacon was wrong. Very wrong, for the *Chronicle of Peterborough* records the return of these

ghostly nocturnal wanderers in A.D. 1127: "Then soon thereafter many men saw and heard hunters hunting. The hunters were black and large and loathly, and their hounds all black...and they rode on black horses and black bucks. This was seen in the same way in the town Burch and in all the woods from that town to Stanford, and the monks heard the horns blowing, that they blew at night. Trustworthy men who watched at night said that they thought that there may well have been about twenty or thirty horn-blowers. This was seen and heard from when they came thither all that Lenten-tide to Easter. This was its incoming; of its outgoing we cannot yet say."

## The Wild Hunt

Germanic folklore gives us an even more sinister group of nocturnal wanderers: the Wild Hunt.

The Hunt's arrival is preceded by the sound of wind rustling through the trees, even though the weather itself may be calm and still. A nightmarish apparition then occurs as the Wild Hunt, with its baying hounds, sweeps down from the dark sky: black, fire-breathing dogs spurred on by ghostly hunters on horses having two or

three legs command the road. The hapless traveler making his or her way across the land has two courses of action at their disposal—either to fall to the ground and feel the icy paws and hooves of the Hunt's animals on their back, or be swept away by the Hunt, running the risk of being deposited far from home in the Hunt's maddened gallop or else slain during the sudden onrush of malevolent figures. Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85), author of numerous romantic poems and songs, composed his "Hymn of the Demons" (1556) based on an alleged encounter with the Wild Hunt during which he was almost swept away by the supernatural force.

The Master of the Hunt, also known as the Hunter, rides a black or gray stallion as it leads its army of the deceased, which includes those slain in battle or by misadventure, as well as the recently dead known to the unfortunate onlooker. Like Washington Irving's famous horseman, the Master of the Hunt may also appear as a headless rider.

This terrifying nocturnal procession struck fear into the hearts of northern Europeans, becoming an integral part of Scandinavian, German, and Swiss lore. Much like Walter Map's Herlethingi, the Wild Hunt was first seen in the 13th century, only a few years before the First Crusade, perhaps heralding the carnage of said military enterprise.

Ordericus Vitalis (c. 1075–1143), a Norman monk from Saint-Evroul who authored the four-volume *Ecclesiastical History*, tells the story of a priest returning home after having administered extreme unction to a parishioner. He beheld a procession of slow-moving, weeping, and moaning shapes led by a giant warrior. Following the shapes were pallbearers carrying coffins, and even more unsettling, women riding horses whose studded saddles glowed in the dark. The priest, according to the chronicler, had never believed in the Herlethingi, but after having seen people among them whom he knew to be dead, he changed his opinion completely.

## The Barking of Hounds

Known by different names according to the country in which the manifestation occurs, the Wild Hunt appears to have had a standard *modus operandi*, which consisted of disturbing the peace of the night with either the barking of hounds, the blowing of horns and beating of drums, or strange lights seen in the woods as the procession approached—some characteristics shared by other paranormal wanderers in southern Europe and even in the Americas.

In the 16th century, German chronicles mentioned that the Wild Hunt, or *wuetten-hor*, was now also being seen by day in all of the European lands, and consisted of soldiers who had died before their time. "Those who die before the time which God has set for them," writes Johann Geiler von Keiserberg, "and who enlist in the army and were stabbed or hanged or drowned, must therefore walk long after their death till that end comes," a belief that foreshadows sailors' tales about lost ships manned by ghostly crews who can never seek rest from wandering. Alas for the unhappy dead doomed to wander in such a way, but who was the



Painting by Franz von Stuck, 1899, Musée d'Orsay

The Wild Hunt.

strange warrior leading them? Some suggested that the armored figure was none other than the devil, and that the hounds were fallen angels; others claimed it was the old Norse god Wotan, whose power was still strong even in Christian days, and accounts for the Hunt were known as the *wuottes-her* or *odinjagt*. Other regions suggested that the Master of the Hunt was no less than King Arthur, which accounts for the Wild Hunt being known as *le chasse Artus* in the Auvergne region of France. Others have assigned the leadership of the Hunt to Sigurd (Norway, where the mad procession is known as the *jolerei*), or King Valdemar (Denmark) and even to Frederick the Great (Germany) and the Emperor Charlemagne. In Austrian tradition, the Hunt has the additional distinction of being led by a woman, Perchta, whose name is derived from that of a Teutonic goddess.

Other French traditions involving the Hunt say that a one-eyed giant warrior leads the dead, who must wander the Earth for a 12-day period from Christmas Day to Epiphany, during which time the gates to the netherworld are open. Sir James Frazier's *The Golden Bough* adds that during this period of time, "the Wild Huntsman sweeps through the air," causing the people of Silesia (modern southern Poland) to burn pine resin to keep these negative forces at bay. Latvian tradition adds that the devil and his cohorts wander the earth in wolf-shape during this 12-day period.



A Galician *cruceiro* marks the site of *Santa Compañía* apparitions.

The Church had its say in the distressing matter of the supernatural encounters with the Hunt and promptly made an effort to explain the Hunt as being part of the “cycle of the punishment of sin,” teaching that the Hunt consisted of infants who died unbaptized, suicides, murder victims and their murderers, adulterers, “those who have disturbed a religious ritual or not fasted during Lent.” Medieval teachings on the punishment of the souls of the damned here on earth prior to extra-terrene damnation added another unpleasant detail—the bodies of those in the mad procession were mutilated and deformed by the demons and hellhounds that accompanied them (*European Mythology*. NY: Bedrick, 1987).

### A Haunted Land

Scholars tell us that Julius Caesar, appointed governor of farther Spain by the Roman Senate in 60 B.C., did not hesitate to initiate a military campaign against the little-known lands between the borders of his province and the sea. The conquest of Galicia was not as profitable as Caesar had hoped, since he expected to obtain treasure to satisfy both his creditors in Rome and the greed of his soldiery. But what the famous Roman overlooked was that he had just given the senate and the people of Rome control over what was possibly the most enigmatic and sacred corner of Europe. Steeped in the aura of mystery that envelops all of the Celtic lands, Galicia rep-

resents a challenge to researchers, having paranormal mysteries that range from haunted caves (see “The Caves of Fear,” *FATE*, March 2002) to unidentified flying objects.

In this mist-enshrouded corner of the Iberian Peninsula, the Wild Hunt acquired unique characteristics that endure to this very day. While it is possible that the Hunt has been forgotten elsewhere in Europe, the *Santa Compañía* (literally, the “Holy Company”) remains a clear and present terror to many—one that keeps people from roaming the countryside at night even in our time.

The *Compañía* appears as a procession of hooded figures, at some times in single file, at others in two rows led by another hooded entity bearing a cross. The silent figures often carry long tapers and are surrounded by otherworldly lights (some of these lights, it must be noted, have often led to their misidentification as UFO cases). Other traditions hold that a child leads the procession, and that looking into the child’s empty eye sockets will spell death for the person who encounters the otherworldly procession. Some popular beliefs state that this procession of the dead is led by a person known to be among the living, doomed to accompany the deceased, usually carrying the cross or a bucket of holy water, which it must bear until it comes across another unfortunate mortal to whom it can transfer these burdens. Otherwise, the cross-bearer will eventually become ill and waste away until his or her death.

This procession of the damned receives a variety of names within the same region, much as the Wild Hunt has elicited different names throughout Europe. In southern Galicia, especially in mountainous Orense, it is known as a *procesión das nimas* (the procession of souls) and in others as the *hueste* (host), the *hostilla*, (the enemy, derived from Latin) or the *estatinga* (a Latinized version of “Herlethingi”? ). The folklore of these mountainous regions is clear as to the reasons for the procession’s appearance: it wants the living to hold masses for their salvation, it wants to reproach the living for their sins or other offenses, or it wants to claim the soul of someone who is

alive but will die soon. And like all popular traditions, there are myriad fascinating ways of warding off the Santa Compañía, such as carrying a black cat to throw against the leader of the grim procession, or to quickly draw the Circle of Solomon on the ground and step into it until the Compañía has vanished, or else make use of simple hand gestures, like the sign of the horns or else the *figa* (thumb inserted between index and middle fingers).

Scholar Elisardo Becoña Iglesias writes that not everyone is able to see this procession of the damned, and makes specific mention of a group endowed with the dubious talent: children whom a priest has mistakenly baptized using the oils reserved for extreme unction will be able to see the Santa Compañía when they are older. Others will merely be able to feel the macabre presence, often by detecting the smell of burning candle wax in the middle of the wilderness, while others may perhaps rely on the sudden fright experienced by dogs, cats, and horses.

### An Ancient Phenomenon

The procession of the damned, according to experts, is far older than medieval lore. Javier Alonso Rebollo, a Galician psychologist, has summarized it thus: "This myth encapsulates the classic characteristics of ghost stories in spite of having been influenced by other aspects of Galician folklore. One of the greatest legacies of the Neolithic era in this region is the belief in life beyond the grave, and the diverse cultural and heretical trends that reached Galicia brought the belief that communication with the netherworld was possible. This could also link up with given spiritistic beliefs. But the Santa Compañía has a precognitive feature by heralding the death of the person who encounters this procession, as well as allusions to the ensnarement of the unlucky witness's 'astral body,' forcing him or her to lead the procession without any hope of escape or a place to hide. Until the witness is able to transfer the cross to another living person, he or she will leave their physical body at night in their sleep to wander once more with the dead."

While other experts believe that the coming of electricity to the rural areas has understandably resulted in a reduction of Santa Compañía encounters, eyewitness accounts would suggest otherwise.

In March 1982, Bruno Alabau witnessed the procession of the dead in the vicinity of Gísamo, in the province of La Coruña. "I was a Boy Scout and was camping with my friends for the weekend. After dinner, at night, me and my friends played a game of *acecho*, which is a kind of hide-and-seek. I decided to skirt round the campsite through the forest and go downhill toward the trail, when I noticed some lights. I thought it might be one of my companions, so I hid behind one of the trees to give them a fright. But I turned out to be the frightened one. Don't ask me what it was, but I saw seven people in two rows of three led by another figure. All of them were dressed the same, wearing tunics that ended in hoods, like the ones worn during Holy Week. The first figure carried a large cross that seemed to be made of two flat boards, while the leaders of each row carried large tapers; the others were empty-handed. I just stood there, paralyzed, until they passed right in front of me and became lost among the trees. I ran back to the camp but didn't dare tell anyone about what had happened, since they'd only say I was crazy."

### A Procession Presages Death

An even more startling tale comes from the town of Budiño, where Mrs. Sofía Pérez, 42, told researcher Manuel Carballal of an experience she'd had as a child. "I was eight years old when this happened. My mother and I had gone out to visit a friend and we were walking down a trail behind my house, near the graveyard. It wasn't very late in the day, but since it was winter, it became dark very early. Just as we reached the crossroads, I heard a strong sound of footsteps, as though many people were approaching. I asked my mother if she could hear it, and she said yes."

Mrs. Pérez described how a numerous procession came down the road, dressed exactly the same in long black tunics and hoods. "[My mother and I] were paralyzed.



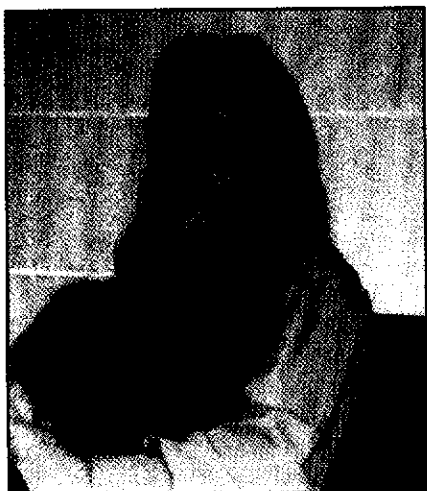
Elena Bermúdez, eyewitness to the armies of darkness.

I was very young and didn't quite understand what I was seeing, but my mother was terrified. She held me close and told me not to make a sound... at the end of the long procession of the Compañía we saw a woman: 'Tía Preciosa,' one of our neighbors! She lived a few houses up from ours, and I recognized her way of walking, since she limped. We saw her clearly, though. She carried something like a stick in her hand and a kind of stone that looked like marble, but was very, very bright. She walked past us like a ghost and went off with the Santa Compañía."

When asked if she was able to see the woman again in the world of the living, or even ask her what she was doing in the procession that dark winter evening, Mrs. Pérez shook her head. "We didn't have enough time. Four days after this happened, Tía Preciosa died. She was in her kitchen and a lightning bolt [ball lightning?] came in through the chimney and killed her. I think the whole thing was a warning... we all give warning before we die."

In August 1990, a brush with the supernatural was the very last thing on the mind of pharmacy student Elena Bermúdez, who had gone on a camping trip to the region of Cabourne (Pontevedra) with several classmates. At four o'clock in the morning, while they all slept in their tent, Elena awoke with a start. Unable to go back to sleep, she began picking up some odds and ends the group had scattered on the grass. As she looked toward a nearby hill, she saw a group of shadows approach-

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Researcher Fernando Magdalena.

ing, followed by a dancing assortment of dim spherical lights. "The shadows," she explained, "were slender and appeared to be clad in the garb worn by monks, made of thick brown cloth. They came within fifty meters of where I stood, continuing down the hillside."

That was too much for Bermúdez. Gripped by bone-chilling fear, she ran toward her sleeping companions and admits having woken them up by raining blows on them. But after her fellow campers were awake, they could find no trace of the row of eight tall shadows. "It chilled our blood, and that very same night we decided to flee the area. I still remember the moments of hysteria as we tried to pack our gear, thinking that those sinister beings could come this way again."

## Land of the Bearwalkers

The Americas have been home to much paranormal lore, but there is nothing that exactly matches the "armies of the night" that swept across Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern age, and the persistent Santa Compaña. There are aspects of these European phenomena which have appeared on our shores, however. The most recent involves a mention in John A. Keel's *Disneyland of the Gods* of processions of cars driven by people who appear to be in a "somnambulistic state"—a condition similar, perhaps, to that of the living who must march with the hooded figures until another unfortunate can rid them of their sad condition.

Again, even though the details do not jibe exactly with European lore, in North America, the belief in swarms of individual lights or large fireballs moving through the woods at night is accorded to the belief in "bearwalkers" by certain tribes. To see one of these luminous swarms, or to witness the passage of a bearwalker, heralds the death of the experiencer or that of a third party.

In 1952, anthropologist Richard Dorson was the first to make the subject of skinwalkers known to the academic community. Dorson interviewed several Chippewa chiefs, who told the researcher that the skinwalker is almost always a sorcerer who receives the gift of assuming "shapes of power"—such as that of a bear—to commit all manner of misdeeds. However, the casual observer making his or her way through the darkened forest will see blinding lights through the trees as opposed to the shape assumed by the magic user. At times, the swarm of lights will coalesce into a single fireball able to light the forest for hundreds of feet around.

Dennis Morrison's *Secret Society of the Shamans* (Global Communications, 1993) features the experience of Alec Philemon, a member of the Chippewa tribe who recalled an event which occurred in 1918. When he was a teenager, he went to visit an ailing woman with his mother and sister. Around 11:00 P.M., the three walkers saw a fire approaching them on the main road. "My mother and sister fell right over. I caught my mother. She said: 'That must have been a bearwalk[er], it was too much for us.'" Philemon's mother prophesied that he would live the longest—a grim prophecy, since mother and daughter both died shortly after in the influenza epidemic that swept across the world. "That woman we visited—about half an hour after we got home, we heard the bell ring. That woman was dead."

As in all traditions involving death-related presences, and despite the awesome power irradiated by the bearwalkers, there are means of protection. One of them consists of letting the supernatural presence go past and then take a pinch of dirt upon which the entity has stepped and place it

on one's lips.

Morrison's work cites another case, that of Nancy Picard, who saw the lights of a bearwalker on the day of her father's death in 1914. When relatives went out to check, they were only able to see the bright light, but a wave of indescribable fear held them at bay (similar to the strange sensation described by witnesses of the Point Pleasant Mothman in 1967).

## Why Fewer Occurrences?

Seeing an unusual, perhaps even non-human creature at night is distressing enough; to see an entire troupe of strange figures, whether Spain's Santa Compaña or northern Europe's nocturnal armies, would scare even the hardest backwoodsman to death. While folklorists tell us that the belief in such things was largely founded on the Church doctrine of punishment on Earth, how do we account for the very physical encounters which have occurred over the ages?

Some popes and theologians would later dismiss the concept of terrestrial punishment in favor of the notion of purgatory in a place beyond the confines of the world but, as we shall see, the phenomenon did not easily yield to papal fiat, remaining as powerful and terrifying as ever in other parts of the world, especially Galicia, in Spain's northwestern corner. The religious explanation is further tempered by the fact that in Greek myth, the goddess Hecate would roam the night with packs of ghostly black dogs on moonless nights, claiming the souls of the unwary.

But the last word in this matter, perhaps, belongs to biophysical researcher Fernando Magdalena, speaking as to why these nocturnal apparitions aren't quite as frequent as they used to be: "For us, it is due to the increased lighting and paving of rural roads. For the true believers, the reason is that more prayers are now being said for dead."

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ples' accomplishments and beliefs. This mentality told us that "civilized" people were not ready to accept that we Native peoples have a brain, a heart, and a soul—which would mean that they would have to accept that we are people. When we tried to present this information in the past, we were branded as devil worshippers and burnt at the stake. We've been facing this since the Spanish Inquisition (which still exists to this day—the war in Chiapas is a continuation of that Holy War).

After reading Corrales's article, I think it's safe to speak up now and to let the world know that we are still here. This is also a response to a letter in one of your past issues about the California Petroglyphs, where a reader was claiming that we don't even understand our own ancient art—which I thought was amusing, considering that the other races don't even know how to read their own ancient art.

I am of the Quinault Nation of Washington state. I have been working with a very small group of people here in the Southwest called the Mimbrenos. We are not a New Age group, nor are we "Medicine Men" or "Shamans." We consider ourselves Ancient Scientists searching for the deeper truths of life. We not only know how to read our own ancient art, but the ancient art of other races as well.

I have been doing research for the last 20-plus years. At the rising of the Morning Star on November 13, 1986, I received a special guest who I've been working closely with. (As a matter of fact, he is sitting in my front room as I'm sending this email). My special friend has been trying to contact other people of the world to see if they still know the original teachings—the ancient symbols. (You call them crop circles.) He searched the world over, with no luck. I'm worried that you "civilized" people are going to blow us all off the face of the Earth.

I would like to remind all people of the world to practice what they preach at all times, not just on holidays or Sundays: "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to ALL Mankind." To change this world is as easy as being nice to the person next to you regardless of race, religion, or sex. A new day is coming!—Roger Cultee, via email

## Angels, Aliens

The article on "Angels and Aliens" was quite informative. Angels have always been known to suppress the forces of evil.

As it is mentioned in the Bible on how Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by some kind of outer worldly blast (possibly nuclear?), the so-called angels were trying to correct a malfunctioning biological creation that they helped place on the planet. These defected humans were doing things that were not normal for human beings, as we know it. If one wants to call it evil, that's their choice of words.

My theory is that they were trying to create mankind in their own image, meaning that the humans are patterned to perform in the same way as angels do in heaven. We call it being "civilized." Uncivilized is someone like serial killer Ted Bundy. Because Ted couldn't maintain his quality of humanity, we of his own kind put him to death. The same with the angels and their dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah.

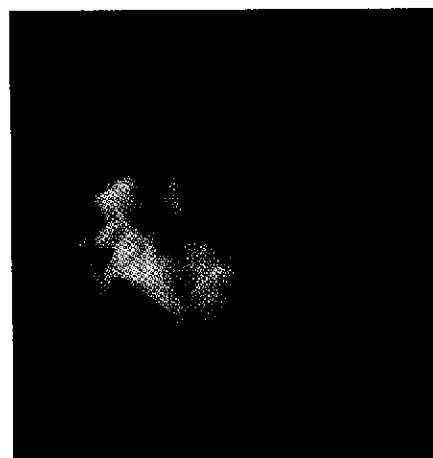
I believe Angels are pure energy entities from somewhere else. They are responsible in creating Earth and man. If angels are not from Earth, it automatically classifies them as "extraterrestrial."—Paul Dale Roberts, Elk Grove, Calif.

## Cloud Angel

I have enjoyed your magazine for many years now. Much information you provide supports many things I have experienced myself. It's always nice to know you are not "the only one."

I have been compiling my personal "spirit photography" collection for a few years. I emphasize no deviations of a photo, and always check an entire roll of prints and negatives for any obscuration, especially surrounding frames of a spirit photo upon review. I always shoot at least three or four photos of a spot or subject to get an after and before sequence of the spirit photo. I work mainly with nature and ever so close with my personal guide.

On this particular adventure to the mountains, my guide told me our exercise was to do a little "cloud work," and at various times during the hike the clouds would



form perfect animals, creatures, etc.

My guide is specific and precise as to when to take a photo—has been so precise in the past my camera actually clicks the photo without me touching the button. Regarding the enclosed photo, I hesitated to snap it because I was asking for a dragon; my guide assured me the photo was for my mom and would be an asset to my collection. As you can see, the universe gave me an angel!—Sunshine, Mukilteo, Wash.

## Demon Faces

Regarding the item from a reader on p. 45 of December 2000 FATE, on the "Ghost of Calgary": I suggest you invert the picture 180 degrees. You will find you have two demon faces appearing as apparitions. Inverted on left side of frame you see one half face with eye, with a second full face to right of it.

Mrs. Gillespie ["An Unusual Problem," p. 46] should try to remember if she had any dental work done before she experienced onset of electric noise. One of her fillings may be galvanic-sensitive to a house appliance's matching frequency (refrigerator or window AC unit as examples).—John Stewart, Bainbridge, Ga.

## Where is Audrey?

I am searching for a lady whose maiden name is Audrey Coones. In 1957, she and I were in the Women's Army Corps in Ft. McClellan, Alabama. Audrey was from Washington state, around Seattle I believe. Her father was the head of a large UFO organization on the West Coast and also associated with Col. Keyhoe.

Audrey knew all about me before we