Chapter Two

Indo-European conceptions of wild animals, and names for them

2.1. Animals of the Middle World

2.1.1. Wolf

2.1.1.1. The earliest Indo-European words for ‘wolf’

The semantic unit ‘wolf’ is represented by several lexemes in Indo-European. One of the earliest ones, showing variations correlated with different chronological levels of Indo-European, is *wlkʰo-: Skt. vrkhaḥ, Avest. vaḥra-, Gk. λύκος, OCS vlǐkǔ, Lith. vilkas, Alb. ulk. A feminine stem meaning ‘she-wolf’ arises independently in some dialects: Skt. vrkīḥ, Russ. volč-i-ca, Olcel. ylgr; Lith. vilke; Gk. λύκαινα (Meillet 1937 [1938:395]). There is also a phonetic variant in *-pʰ-, *wlpʰ-, in individual dialects: Hitt. ulippana-, Goth. wulfis, Lat. lupus; also Arm. gayl, with regular absence of final *-pʰ-.

Parallel to this root, another Indo-European base meaning ‘wolf’ can be reconstructed, *weit’-(n)-: Hitt. wetana-, Olcel. vitnir, Slovene vedanec, vedemec, vedavec, Ukr. viščun ‘werewolf’, OCz. vědi ‘she-werewolves’ (Jakobson 1966a:346-50).

The fact that there are several words for ‘wolf’ of Common Indo-European date shows that the wolf was widespread throughout the Indo-European territory. It also indicates its cultic and ritual significance, which is clearly attested in the oldest Indo-European traditions.

2.1.1.2. The ritual role of wolves in ancient Indo-European traditions

In Old Hittite tradition the wolf plays a special role, functioning as the embodiment of sacral qualities. In particular, wolves and wolf packs serve as an

image of unity and omniscience. Thus King Hattusilis I (who reigned in the
seventeenth century B.C.), addressing his council, urges his warrior subjects to
unite ‘like a wolf pack’: ū-e-it-na-āš ma-a-an pa-an-gur. Dressing in wolf skins
(cf. Hitt. LÚMEŠ UR.BAR.RA ‘wolf people’, i.e. people dressed in wolf skins,
KBo XVI 68 I 13; 78 IV 9 et al.) conveys magical power, evidently conferring
omniscience on the wearer, and may have been symbolic of a special juridical
status. The formula for people turning into wolves, attested in zik-wa
UR.BAR.RA-āš kišat ‘you have turned into a wolf’ of the Hittite Laws (§37),
resembles Skt. vṛkho hi sāh ‘he is a wolf’, referring to a special juridical status
in the wedding ritual of kidnapping the bride (Watkins 1970a).2

Parallels to these Hittite formulas and rituals can be found in a number of
other early Indo-European traditions, which testifies to their Proto-Indo-
European character and reconstructibility. In ancient Greek tradition, a person
‘becomes a wolf’ (lúkoi genésthai, Plato: Republic) in connection with a special
ritual form of killing. This corresponds exactly to a Germanic formula: in an
Old Icelandic peacemaking oath a murderer ‘shall be called a wolf’ (skal svá

There is a striking parallel to the Old Hittite ritual of putting on wolf skins,
and to dances of ‘wolf people’ (LÚMEŚ UR.BAR.RA), i.e. those dressed in wolf
skins, in an ancient Germanic tradition where warriors are depicted as wearing
wolf skins and referred to as wolves (OE heoruwulfas, wælwulfas ‘wolf war-
riors’). The custom is also found in Gothic: in Byzantium, Christmas was
marked by ritual dances of Gothic warriors in wolf skins down to the end of the
Byzantine period (see Kraus 1895). It is also noteworthy that the word ‘wolf’
was frequently used in Germanic personal names such as Goth. Ulfilas (see Kock
1924), OICel. Ulf-bjǫrn, Bjǫrn-olfr, OHG Wulf-bero, OE Bēo-wulf; also
relevant is the Frankish term werwulf ‘werewolf’, lit. ‘person wolf’.

Ancient Slavic and Baltic traditions exhibit an especially clear corre-
respondence with the Hittite and Germanic ones in a ritual transformation of a human
into a wolf, which confers supernatural strength and the special status of vatic or
all-knowing person (Jakobson 1966a, Ridley 1976). The omniscient Wolf King
of the Slavs had wolf hair growing on his head, thus Slovene vočja dláka ‘wolf
hair, wolf locks’ (cf. OICel. vargshár, id.); the same expression subsequently
provides the name for werewolves: Russ. vurdalak, Bulg. velkolak, etc. A
distinctive characteristic of ‘wolfskin people’ and werewolves was their omnis-
cience. This must reflect an ancient tradition, going back to Proto-Indo-
European, of omniscient humans in wolf form (cf. Ukr. viščun, OCz. vědi,
etc.), reflected in the evident link of *weit’-(n) ‘wolf’ and *weit’- ‘know’
(Gk. oída, Skt. védá, Russ. vedat’).

2. Cf. the wolf (vṛkah) as the image of a thief or robber (aghásavīsa-) in the Rigveda, I,
42, 2-4.
2.1.1.3. The ritual status of the wolf, and dialect terms for ‘wolf’

The special cultic and ritual status of wolves in Indo-European traditions, and their complex of sacred properties, give rise to the descriptive word for ‘wolf’, cognate to *weit‘- ‘know’, which coexists with original *wlikho- ~ *wlph-. These two roots are distributed throughout the Indo-European dialects, variously in the ritually marked sense and as the basic word for ‘wolf’. The heavy functional load of the semantic element ‘wolf’ and the tendency to taboo certain original animal names may explain the appearance of new, sometimes euphemistic, formations meaning ‘wolf’ in various dialects (Zelenin 1929-1930). For instance, in Latvian we find ancient euphemisms such as dieva suns, lit. ‘god’s dog’, meža suns ‘forest dog’.

The wolf as a predatory animal is designated with a new term cognate to the root *deu- ‘smother’, ‘crush’, ‘kill’, attested in OCS daviti ‘smother’, ‘crush’, Goth. afdaup ‘tormented’ (causative participle), pata diwanō ‘mortal’ (tō thnētōn), undiwanēi ‘immortal’ (athanatia) (see above for the term for ‘mortal; human’ from this root). Also formed from this root are ancient Balkan Indo-European words: the name of the Maionian god Kandaulus, which according to Hipponax means ‘dog-strangler’ (kunāgkhēs), interpreted as one of the incarnations of an Indo-European wolf god to whom dogs were sacrificed (O. Masson 1962:106). Such words are attested with the meaning ‘wolf’ (etymologically ‘killer, smoother’) in forms like Phrygian dáos (Hesychius) and Illyrian Daunos (cf. also thaïnon · therion in Hesychius).

2.1.1.4. Ethnonyms and toponyms connected with ‘wolf’

Wolves were important in Indo-European tradition throughout its entire history, from Proto-Indo-European to historical times, as is testified by widespread

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3. This could also be the explanation for the Germanic designation of the wolf as ‘criminal’: Olcel. vargr, OHG warg, OE wearg (Jacoby 1974), cf. Goth. ga-warg-jan ‘condemn, sentence’, cognate to Hitt. ħur- ‘repulsive crime’ (Puhvel 1971), cf. also LÜMÉŠ ħuriklaš ‘people of crime’ as the name of mythological beings who capture a wolf in their hands (in KUB XII 63 I 21 ff.). The pan-Germanic term vargré ‘wolf tree’ mentioned above (II.1.4.4) can be compared to Hitt. ḫurki- ‘wheel’ (§198 of the Hittite Laws, Sumeroogram G5DUBBIN, DUBBIN ‘divine wheel’ in the Autobiography of Hattusilis, I.36, in a context concerning the punishment of a criminal). Cf. the ritual meanings of the same root in Slavic: ORuss. varožiti ‘foretell’, vorožia ‘witch’, vorog ‘enemy’, voroža ‘witchcraft’, Russ. dial. vorožejka, a weathervane consisting of a pole stuck in the ground and a horizontal stick at the top with a bundle of tow at the end (Filin 1965–5.109) (cf. the meaning of Olcel. vargré, referring to a ritual pillar).

4. *wlikho- and *wlph- had essentially the same original meaning; cf. Homeric lusá ‘warrior’s rage’ (lit. ‘rage of wolf’) from lúkos ‘wolf’: lúsá dé hoi kér aiēn ekhe krateřh his (Achilles’) heart was forever ruled by a powerful wolf’s rage’, Iliad 21.542–43 (see Lincoln 1975). However, this original meaning of ‘wolf’ could subsequently have been lost, which made possible the rise of new terms for ‘wolf’ based on the same characteristic.
ethnonyms and toponyms containing the root ‘wolf’. Whole peoples and
countries were named for the wolf, due to the place given to wolves in the
cultural traditions, probably of totemic origin, of various Indo-European tribes.
The following examples are listed in order from west to east.

Ancient Italy: the tribe names Lukani (transmitted via Greek), Hirpini from
*hirpus ‘wolf’ (cf. the oracular prophecies reported by Servius, according to
which Hirpi Sorani ‘lupos imitarentur’, ‘imitate wolves’), the Illyrian tribe
Daúnioi.

The ancient Balkans: Strabo’s name for the Dacians, dáoi ‘wolves’ (Eliade
1959); north Balkan Daúnion teíkhos ‘wolf wall’ (in Stephanus Byzantinus).

Greece and the Greek part of Asia Minor: Lykaonia, related to the name of
the mythic king Lykaon; the city name Lukósoura; possibly Lukka-, a name in
Hittite texts for a region of Asia Minor; the tribe name Orka (Orkoi) in Phrygia
(Eisler 1951:137).

Iranian: the Sarmatian tribe Oûrgoi ‘wolves’ (Strabo); Old Iranian forma-
tions like *Vrkāna- (in Elamite transmission mi-ir-ka-na-ya-ip ‘inhabitants of
Hyrcania’ beside the Hyrkanoi of classical authors); Hyrkania, located on the
southeastern shore of the Caspian Sea and in the Transcaucasia (Cereteli 1963).

2.1.1.5. Typological and areal parallels to the status of wolves among the
ancient Indo-Europeans

Striking parallels to the Indo-European wolf cult are to be found in South
Caucasian (Kartvelian) culture. A wolf cult occupies a special place in the
earliest traditions. The depiction of people in wolf masks is a basic motif of
ritual art. Traces of the wolf cult are especially clear in Svan traditions, where
as in ancient Indo-European wolves are a symbol of a certain type of social
organization (Bardavelidze 1957:37ff.). Moreover, Svan tradition equates the
mobility of wolf packs with that of human groups: the organization of wolves is
a reflection in nature of human social organization (Charachidzé 1968:482).

In Old Georgian tradition the significance of the wolf cult is reflected in the
names of the rulers of Iberia, which contained Iranian words meaning ‘wolf’,
for example the epithet of the Old Georgian king Vakhtang Gorgasala ‘Vakhtang
Wolfhead’; the very name Vakhtang may be Iranian, from *warx-tang =
vahrka-tanû- ‘wolf-bodied’ (cf. the Ossetic hero’s name in the Nart epic,
Wærxæg, from ‘wolf’ according to Abaev 1949:I.187, 1965:95). The name of
ancient Iberia itself, *Vrkān- = Hyrkania, goes back to the same Iranian word
for ‘wolf’ (Cereteli 1963). As a result of the cultic status of wolves, the original
Kartvelian word for ‘wolf’ undergoes taboo and is replaced by borrowings from
other languages. Georgian mgel-i, Mingrelian ger-i are probably taken from
Armenian (cf. Arm. gayl ‘wolf’); Svan txer ‘wolf’ is obviously connected to Gk.
ther ‘wild animal’. Similarly, in Ossetic, where the wolf was an ancient totemic animal and the mythic ancestor of the tribe, the original Indo-European word was tabooed and is preserved only in mythic names. It is replaced by a word of apparent Turkic origin, būrağ/berağ (Abaev 1958:1.262-63, 1949:1.48-49).

The wolf cult plays a special role in the South Caucasus, and many traits of the tradition connected with ritual status of wolves coincide in their essential elements right down to striking details with the ancient Indo-European traditions. The coincidence of this entire complex unites the Indo-European and South Caucasian traditions with a wider circle of mythic conceptions characteristic of a much broader area which extended far to the east (see Alfeldi 1974:32, 150ff. for the wolf cult in this area).

According to the most recent archeological data, the earliest evidence of wolves is observed at the turn of the eighth and seventh millennia B.C. in a broad area of Southwest Asia, including continental Greece: Thessaly, eastern Asia Minor, the Iranian plateau, and Palestine, as well as some regions of western Europe and England (Berger and Protsch 1973:223).

2.1.2. Bear

2.1.2.1. The Indo-European word for ‘bear’

Another Proto-Indo-European word denoting a large predator is *Hrthkʰ-, with regular correspondences across the early Indo-European dialects: Hitt. ḫartagga-5, Skt. ḍkṣah, Avest. arōṣ, Gk. ἀρκτός, Arm. արջ, Lat. ursus, MIR. art.6 That the bear was well established in the ecological environment of the ancient Indo-Europeans can be inferred from the presence of this word in Proto-Indo-European and its reflexes in the basic dialect groups.

2.1.2.2. The cultic role of the bear in Hittite and other ancient Indo-European traditions

Although the bear has a role in ancient Indo-European tradition, its ritual significance is less than that of the wolf, with which it is often associated in

5. Contrary to Otten’s suggestion (see Neu 1974:32, 103) that ḫartagga- should be translated ‘wolf’ rather than ‘bear’, ‘bear’ is the more probable translation and in accord with the word’s etymology (see Watkins 1975). In addition, the contextual interpretations of the word indicate ‘bear’, not ‘wolf’; for instance, Hittite texts (KUB XXIX 1 1 30 and others) mention the ability of the ḫartagga- to climb trees. Furthermore, at least two words for ‘wolf’ are attested in Hittite: ūlippana- and weina- (see 2.1.1.1 above).

6. This Celtic word is borrowed from Celtiberian into Basque as well, in the form hartz ‘bear’ (Sesmero 1941:19).