

# Λύκοι, 狼, & Amaguk: The Enduring Global Saga of Wolflore

Turner Burchard

Wolves in Yellowstone

Dr. John Winnie Jr.

12/8/2023

## I. Introduction

If there is one animal that has ignited the passions of people from all backgrounds, time periods, and cultures, it is the wolf. Its mystique seems to transcend its physical existence, appearing as a recurring motif in every corner of the globe and era of history. For largely unexplained reasons, wolves are present in the mythologies of almost every continent, and often play a central role in these beliefs. These enigmatic creatures have left a permanent mark on the human psyche, capturing our imagination across diverse societies. In mythologies of ancient tribal societies, the imagery of wolves is particularly prominent, passed down orally through many millennia. At times, the animal represented a feared monster, a mysterious creature of the night used as a bogeyman to scare children, or an evil spiritual entity, keeping societies in check as an instrument of intimidation. But more often, it appeared in tales of heroism, representing the great leaders and warriors of their societies. Soldiers and hunters across the globe would howl, emulate the wolf's tactics, and even wear wolf heads as they charged at their foes. Today, these same tropes remain in modern versions of stories with just as wide of a range of representations, in the most playful of children's books and in terrifying films. Even in spirituality, they remain an important figure in similar ways as they have for thousands of years. This broad spectrum of stories and traditions stand as a testament to the wolf's enduring significance in the collective human consciousness.

When examining this vast tapestry of stories and traditions, there are obvious threads connecting them. As humanity has travelled across the world, they have carried these mythologies with them, spreading and modifying them over the centuries. Beginning in Africa and the Near East, humans contended with the opposition of budding civilizations and domestic animals against the Arabian Wolf. Soon after, the Western mythologies in Greece and Rome were developing, with European wolves playing a vital role. Asian religions, just as complex and even more varied, formed with an array of perspectives on the animal, with those earlier themes

emerging in the most unexpected places. These cultures then expanded into the New World with the crossing of the Atlantic, where their belief systems inevitably clashed with the indigenous cultures of North America. Here, the native inhabitants had known the wolf intimately as a brother for as long as thirty thousand years (Becerra-Valdivia, 2020).

The underlying question, then, is why? Why do we have such strong urges to focus on our canine counterparts, regardless of culture? What makes wolves so uniquely powerful in the human mind? Part of the answer lies in the similarities between ourselves and wolves. They are vast, and can teach us as much about ourselves as the world we live in. The wolf pack resembles a small human community in many ways, formed of distinct roles representing one's status, age, and gender. Their interactions, whether raising a pup or hunting prey, mirror our own in similar situations. This goes as deep as their language, a mixture of the vocal (their famous howl) and the physical, which is present as an intricate language of nonverbal cues where imperceptible differences can mean the difference between life and death (Lopez, 1978). These congruities alternatively scare us and fascinate us, showing us both our deepest flaws and our greatest strengths. Clearly, there is something fundamental about the wolf, deeper layers of a human-wolf connection that goes beyond mere proximity or threat. This enduring fascination reflects a deeper psychological and cultural resonance that transcends time and borders. Only by exploring the many perspectives, stories, and traditions involving wolves can we begin to gain an understanding of what forms this mysterious bond.

They are known by all as an enduring face of nature, refusing to change even as their perception fluctuates, caring not for others' expectations or behaviors. It is said that to look into a wolf's eyes is to feel the force and wildness of nature — despite the world evolving around them, that experience remains. This is the power of the wolf. Feeling their gaze is to feel how a tribal hunter felt looking into those same eyes thousands of years ago. Like looking into a mirror, it instills terror in the fearful, and awakens curiosity and courage in the self-confident. Those feelings have undoubtedly influenced humanity's utilization of wolves as symbols, shaping the perceptions of those who have never experienced that power. By studying our primal connection with wolves through humanity's rich history of mythologies, we unveil the deepest aspects of human nature, with its complex and intimate relationship to the wild.

## II. Near East

Some of the oldest examples of wolves in mythology come from the cradle of civilization, in the Near East region. This area encapsulates the modern Middle East area, where the extremely fertile Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile have run for the entirety of human history. Unfortunately, the extreme age of the area tends to create significant difficulties for historians, as even the most well-documented mythologies are pieced together from roughly translated stone tablets (Fisher, 2022). Still, some fascinating stories have persisted, providing invaluable insights into our ancestors' minds.

Written around 2100 B.C., the Epic of Gilgamesh contains one of the earliest examples of wolves in mythology. This story generally falls into the category of werewolf mythology, a theme that has surfaced intermittently across the eras of human history, possibly the result of the similarities between men and wolves. In the story, the goddess Ishtar is in love with the hero Gilgamesh, who rejects her advances. His reasoning is said to be partially due to her past suitors, whom include a young shepherd who left offerings at her shrine in the mountains. Ishtar played along, until she grew tired of him, and turned him into a wolf. His own dogs, unaware, then mauled him to death (Carr, 2019). Though information about the Epic of Gilgamesh does not extend far beyond this, Ishtar continued to be associated with wolves. Many of her depictions include her alongside a lion and a wolf, and many stories include her with wolves in similar ways (Fisher, 2022). Clearly, even in civilization's earliest days, humans faced the same struggles with wolves as today. The shepherd in the story used dogs that, as protectors of his herd, were clearly trained to kill wolves, creating the story's irony. However, the people of Mesopotamia viewed wolves with some degree of admiration as well, closely associating one of their most important gods with wolves. This makes sense, as it was the tribes of the region which likely domesticated wolves for the first time (Comunale, 2023). Those dogs referenced in the story were genetically much closer to wolves than the carefully bred dogs of today, clearly influencing the Mesopotamian's perceptions of the animals. In fact, some of the references to one animal or the other may have been confused, and Ishtar could have been more associated with dogs instead (Fisher, 2022). Unfortunately, there is currently no certain way to know how dogs were domesticated from wolves, or when exactly they became distinct species (Comunale, 2023).

While some regional stories exhibit ambiguity in their sentiments toward wolves, Christianity, in particular, stands out for its pronounced animosity, evident in numerous

references within the Bible. Unlike other ancient cultures, the Bible, due to its extensive influence and reach, provides historians with a distinct understanding of the prevailing cultural ideas of its time. During early Biblical periods, wolves were consistently depicted as vicious or even evil, reflecting the mindset of a budding human civilization that feared the wilderness and sought to conquer it. The Book of Genesis further emphasized the idea of subduing the earth, characterizing the wilderness as dark, unhallowed, and in need of improvement by human hands (Genesis 1:28, New International Version). Acts 20:29 warns of "savage wolves" that will come among the faithful, linking wolves with threats to the Christian flock. This metaphor became more specific as Jesus, often depicted as a shepherd protecting his flock, intensified the symbolism, considering the wolf as a symbol of pagan Rome's founding culture. Consequently, wolves became associated with evil, perceived as a menace to Christ's followers and hunted extensively as symbols of a hostile wilderness. Saint Matthew 7:15 cautions about false prophets being "ravening wolves," further reinforcing this negative perception. However, a more positive Christian view emerges in the story of St. Francis of Assisi during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Known for his dedication to Christian virtues, Francis defended a hungry lone wolf in Gubbio, Italy, encouraging mercy and charity (Wolf Song of Alaska). Nevertheless, the overarching themes in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, undeniably showcase the negative sentiments toward wolves in the pre-Christian era of civilization. As the Bible's influence has endured for thousands of years globally, it has left an unmistakable imprint on how wolves are perceived across subsequent cultures. Unfortunately, this has likely contributed to the historically inaccurate negative perceptions of wolves that have intermittently surfaced throughout history. When it comes to their prolonged persecution by humans, the Bible's language may, in part, be accountable.

Several other societies also had mythologies with wolves playing a minor part. Ancient Persia's Zoroastrian religion featured wolves as a symbolic representation of malevolence. To them, wolves were considered pests, a species deemed necessary to be killed to ensure the success of the Persians. It was literally the embodiment of Ahriman, the destructive force in Zoroastrianism. Beyond that, the wolf appeared in various Persian folk tales and epics, such as the Shahnameh where its cunning and resourceful nature were highlighted (Azarnouche, 2016). Egypt is the last culture with extensive contemporary research, but wolves played a relatively minor role in their mythologies. However, jackals and dogs appeared often, leading some

researchers to wonder if modern interpretations are confusing the species (Häussler, 2016). The god Anubis had a jackal head (or perhaps wolf), the god of the afterlife. Wepwawet also had a canine head, linked to war and the funerary aspects of Egyptian religion (Mark, 2013). Albeit less clear, their culture still linked canines to war and death, just as so many others did. These are certainly not the last of the Far East's representations of the wolf, but after thousands of years in the desert, few specific records of mythologies remain. If there were more positive representations in their cultures, they are lost to history.

Overall, the Near East presents some of the oldest and thus most challenging examples of wolves in mythologies. Despite the few primary sources, examining the dispositions toward wolves and the reasons behind them provides a powerful insight into the earliest human minds. Humanity's continuous struggle with reconciling the wild and the civilized happened first there, and we face the same challenges today. Perhaps most surprising of all, though, is the prevalence of wolves in the region's cultures. After all, it's hard to imagine wolves in the modern deserts of Syria, Egypt, and the rest of the region. However, the Arabian Wolf, one of the smallest wolf subspecies, was once found commonly throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East region. Now, though, it is likely extinct in the wild (Benson, 2009). With human resentment existing for thousands of years, it has been difficult for them to survive. The Arabian Wolf, therefore, is a perfect case study of the importance of understanding historical mythologies and cultures when considering conservation. In the context of the Bible's "savage" wolves and the Persian animosity, it becomes obvious why conserving the species presents such an arduous challenge.

### III. Europe

Of all the wolf mythologies which have persisted around the globe, Europe perhaps contains the most varied and deeply studied examples. The European obsession has not been a short one; wolves have been dogmatically central for as long as records have been kept in the region. These beliefs have varied widely, ranging from gods taking the form of wolves to claims of canine ancestry, and everything between (Tennant, 1988). The Greeks formed some of the earliest versions of these traditions, first orally, then later written. Rome's founding then created one of the world's most famous myths involving wolves: the story of Romulus and Remus. As

the European culture progressed, so did their connection with wolves, mutating into medieval legends, and then slowly into a more truthful picture as the third millennium grew near.

Chronologically, the Mediterranean region was in all likelihood the origin of the earliest mythologies involving wolves. Both the Roman and Greek societies of antiquity had wolves holding god-like levels of import, but in different ways. Of course, much of ancient Roman culture bore direct influences from their predecessors in Greece. One of the earliest, and most important, Greek myths that directly involves the wolf is the story of Lycaon. After feeding Zeus raw human meat, Lycaon, the king of Arcadia, undergoes a transformation into a wolf as a divine punishment (Cartwright, 2013). While some argue that the king deserved this consequence for his cruel actions and disregard of cultural prohibitions against cannibalism, the choice of a wolf as the form of punishment provides intriguing insight into Greek perceptions of wolves. The transformation implies a belief among the Greeks that wolves shared cannibalistic tendencies, a misconception likely influenced by the wolf's reputation as a voracious predator that consumes various prey, coupled with its perceived ferocity and solitary nature.

Echoing the pattern observed across their respective mythologies, the Roman myths concerning wolves exhibited parallels with those of the Greeks, thanks to the complex mutual cultural influence. Romulus and Remus became both the most important Roman myth, as well as the one most closely associated with wolves. In the story, Amulius, the king of Alba Longa, orders the twins to be abandoned by the river Tiber due to a prophecy that they would overthrow him. The infants are placed in a basket and left to the elements. Miraculously, they are discovered and nursed by a she-wolf (Lupa) in a cave, forming the iconic imagery of the she-wolf suckling the twins. Many believe Lupa originated from the Greek Lycaon, though the evidence does not extend far past the similar roots. The twins grow up in the wilderness, nurtured by the she-wolf. As they mature, they learn of their royal heritage. Eventually, they decide to overthrow Amulius and restore their grandfather Numitor, the rightful king, to the throne. The brothers succeed in their mission, and instead of returning to Alba Longa, they decide to found their own city. A disagreement arises between them about the location of the new city, causing Romulus to kill Remus. He then goes on to establish the city on the Palatine Hill, naming it Rome after himself and becoming its first king.

This fascinating story led to the perpetuation of lupine imagery throughout Latin Italy. A she-wolf and twins were important symbols of Rome for its entire history, depicted in art,

literature, and even on the city's official emblem. The 'wolf-mother' motif from the area is conclusively documented in the initial decades of the 4th century B.C., as evidenced by a stele discovered in Bologna. This artifact portrays a she-wolf nurturing a solitary child. Bologna is not close enough to Rome to incontrovertibly show the link, but experts believe it, along with other artifacts, illustrate the pre-Christian nature of the story. The historian Alcimus spoke of 'Rhomylos' and 'Alba' around the same time period, which presumably morphed into the modern version of Romulus and Remus. Mars, the Roman god of war, is the main other influential component which cannot be ignored. He was closely associated with wolves, and was an influential part of Italian culture by the 8th century B.C. at the latest (Cartwright, 2014). And of course, the term "lupine" in the English language can be traced back to its Latin origins, providing a link to the source of wolves into Roman mythology. Lupercalia, an annual ancient Roman festival, was dedicated to both the Roman god Faunus and the she-wolf Lupa. It is highly probable that the Latin root contributing to the term "lupine" finds its origins in the traditions of this historic celebration (Tennant, 1988). Many centuries later, these themes continued to perpetuate in the Italian peninsula. One of the most important pieces of literature in history, Dante's *Inferno*, utilizes wolves as powerful symbols.

“Then suddenly a she-wolf showed herself,  
 Bedeviled in her craving, rabid, gaunt  
 The source of misery to many souls.  
 The sight of her so paralyzed my will,  
 I lost all hope of making the ascent . . .  
 For on she came at me, relentlessly,  
 And down she drove me, down into the dark,  
 And down I fled to where the sun is silent.” (Alighieri, 1321)

Though the she-wolf in Dante's *Inferno* is not a direct reference to the Greek myth of Lycaon, there are some thematic parallels. Both involve encounters with wolf-like figures that represent obstacles or threats. In Dante's case, the she-wolf serves as a symbolic representation of various sins and vices that hinder spiritual ascent. She serves as the gatekeeper to hell, used as a metaphor for the moral struggles toward spiritual enlightenment. It is rooted in the time's strong

Christian nature, using the Bible's ideas of "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15) and false prophets represented by wolves.

Around the same time, though generally before, the Nordic legends of wolf gods were formed. These appeared first by the 11th century, just as the viking era grew to its heights. Their most well known myth relating to wolves is the famous story of Fenrir, a massive god-like wolf, who was the offspring of the trickster god Loki and the giantess Angrboða. Prophecies foretold that Fenrir would bring great destruction, prompting the gods to take precautions. As Fenrir grew in size and strength, the gods attempted to bind him, but he broke every chain. Finally, the dwarven-crafted ribbon Gleipnir, made from seemingly inconspicuous materials like the sound of a cat's footsteps, the beard of a woman, and other elusive elements, was used to restrain him. Fenrir, suspicious of the gods' intentions, agreed to be bound only if one of them placed their hand in his mouth as a gesture of trust. The god of war, Tyr, did so, and when Fenrir realized he had been deceived, he bit off Tyr's hand. Fenrir's binding is seen as a pivotal event leading up to Ragnarok, the apocalyptic battle in Norse mythology, during which he is destined to play a significant role (Mark, 2021). The size and power of Fenrir in the story is clear evidence to the Norse feeling toward wolves' similar attributes. There, they were respected, but perhaps not feared in the same way they had been in other times and places. The binding of Fenrir reflects a theme of attempting to control the untamable wildness of nature, which is how wolves are still talked about today (McIntyre, 2019). His deception and subsequent violence upon realizing it suggest cautionary elements about the consequences of attempting to manipulate or control powerful forces. These motifs echo the myths of so many other cultures, where wolves symbolize both the protective and unpredictable aspects of the natural world. This is just one of many examples of important wolves in Norse mythology, such as Sköll & Hati, and Geri & Freki, which contain many related themes (Häussler, 2016).

As Europe shifted into the Middle Ages, the importance of religion remained. It was this that defined the wolf. According to Lopez (1978), "The medieval mind, more than any other midland in history, was obsessed with images of wolves." Werewolves featured prominently in their stories, with people believed to be related to wolves, and any perceived threat was labeled as "the wolf." It was then that the now-famous Aesopian fairy tales were formed, such as Little Red Riding Hood, in which a wolf plays a pivotal role embodying deception and danger. Christian leaders of the time used these heightened fears to represent the wolf as the physical



form of the devil, allowing them to create an easy straw man, which helped them exert their control by persecuting werewolves. It was these same clergymen who refused to allow the period's growing scientific understanding to extend to wolves, ensuring that it remained a symbol of satanism and man's evil nature (Lopez, 1978). When viewed through the lens of global wolfling, this choice makes complete sense, and it is one that has been made repeatedly. The power of the canine straw man cannot be overstated, and has been used consistently to hold power and persecute the weak. One example of the heavily edited scientific representation of the wolf comes from the time's bestiaries, in which wolves "plunder a man's goods" and strike a man dumb "by a mere look or glance from the eyes" (Lopez, 1978). This medieval period, which exhibited the true potential for the strangeness of human minds, displayed perhaps the most hatred toward wolves of any era.

Since then, wolves have continued to hold importance in European culture. They appeared intermittently in writing and art through the renaissance period, though mythical creatures began to take precedence over them. Writers like Shakespeare used wolves as meaningful symbols, and werewolves captured the fears of many. Now, conservation of wolves has become a significant focus in Europe. Conflicts with humans continue, but the cultural influence of wolves has progressed beyond fear and predation, especially as their ecological role becomes understood (*Conservation of Wolves in Europe*). Despite the centuries of misinformation, wolves have returned to their ancient place of respect in the region, thanks to the impact of modern science.

#### IV. Asia

Throughout Asian cultures, particularly in antiquity, wolves held important places as symbols and spiritual figures. Much of the historical literature focuses on several of the largest cultures where wolves were most essential, especially in Turkey and Mongolia. There, as in many cultures, wolves represented the aspirations of great warriors: fierce beasts to be imitated in battle. However, the wolf's territory extends well into East Asia as well, where they are native species as far as Japan. These cultures have focused less on its prowess in combat, and more on its ability to represent the wildness of nature. Throughout the region's history, though, wolves were consistently recognized as powerful creatures, and more often respected and imitated than feared and killed.

Constructed around 735 C.E., the monuments dedicated to Kiil Tegin and his brother Bilgä Qaghan both symbolize Turkish dominance with wolves using this language: "Because Heaven gave them strength, the soldiers of my father, the qaghan, were like wolves and his enemies were like sheep" (Tekin, 1968). These Turkish empires ruled the majority of Inner Asia for several century-long periods in the second half of the first millennium, extending all the way from the Mediterranean Sea to the Korean peninsula. Monuments like these are scattered across the region, commemorating the success of the Turks in this period, and exemplify their feeling toward wolves at the time. This quote in particular shows that they were viewed as powerful warriors, true to their nature as effective hunters. Apart from that, much of the period's language gives them the impression of being agents of the gods, spiritual symbols sent to support their success. In fact, the Turks have a similar mythology of their beginnings to the Romans. A ten-year-old boy was said to have escaped an ambush, becoming the sole Turk remaining of his people. He was saved by a lone female wolf, who raised him in a mystical cave. There, she gave birth to the boy's sons, who were the ancestors of the Turkish and eventually came to dominate Asia (Drompp, 2011).

This motif extends past just these societies, and seems to be present everywhere. A Chinese people from modern Kazakhstan, the Wu-Sun had a tale of a King's son who survived a similar attack, and was left for dead in the wilderness. However, a lone female wolf once again saved him, raising him until he could become the ruler of the civilization (Jila, 2006). The parallels between these stories are undeniable. What this highlights, though, is some of the uniqueness within the Turkish version. That story includes a claim of ancestry from wolves, with the story's hero impregnating the savior wolf. Analyses of that theme conflict, but it certainly shows the people's reverence of the wolf, claiming to be direct descendants of one (Drompp, 2011). Such extreme reverence is exactly what makes the Turkish case interesting in the context of wolf mythology. Warriors not only symbolically embodied the essence of wolves but also genuinely believed in their literal identity as wolves. Still, this component is also not unique. The Mongols, a similar culture from the time period in inner Asia, claimed canine ancestry as well. They believed the Khans, specifically Chinggis Khan, to have come from an ancient mating of a doe and a wolf. These animals gave birth to the first Mongol, Batachikan (Drompp, 2011). Modern scholars understand this mythology primarily from a fascinating poem translated into English:

“There came into the world a blue-gray wolf  
 whose destiny was Heaven's will.  
 His wife was a fallow deer.  
 They travelled across the inland sea  
 and when they were camped near the source of the Onon River  
 in sight of Mount Burkhan Khaldun  
 their first son was born, named Batachikan.  
 The seventh generation after Batachikan was Kharchu.  
 Kharchu's son was named Borjigidai the Clever,  
 and Mongoljin the Fair was his wife.  
 Their grandsons were the two brothers,  
 Duua the one-eyed and Dobun the Clever.  
 In the middle of Duua's forehead there was one great eye.  
 With this eye Duua could see a place so far away  
 it could take three days to reach it.” (Wolf Song of Alaska)

This poem gives us powerful insight into the culture of the Mongols. Though the wolf appears in just one line of the poem, its coupling with the deer is the crux, becoming the ancestral pair of all Mongols.

Part of the answer as to why these themes are so common in Asia comes from the complexity of early empires' politics and economics. Both the Turks and the Mongols struggled to maintain their power over subordinate peoples, especially when it came to occasions like tax collection. The Mongol Empire's initial downfall was not from wartime failures, but struggles to maintain union across an empire that stretched fully across the world's largest continent (Cartwright, 2019). Conquest was less important than re-conquest, and rebellions and civil wars were a constant factor. Legitimacy and cohesion thus became essential goals for rulers, though near impossible ones. They needed ways to bolster these traits, which could be done through meaningful religious symbolism. Here enters the wolf. By presenting themselves as direct progeny of wolves, the Mongol and Turkish conquerors gained legitimacy backed up by local tradition and religion (Drompp, 2011). Perhaps the reasoning was not quite so purposeful, but at the least, it was a factor in the conquering nations' successes. If your village was taken over by

strange foreigners claiming to be literal descendants of your gods, it becomes much harder to justify an uprising.

On the confined island of Japan, with its tumultuous history of internal conflicts and changes in governance, a diverse array of perspectives on wolves emerged. This relatively small geographic region reflects a range of attitudes toward them, influenced by the complexities of Japan's historical narrative. The Ainu people knew wolves to be friendly with people, including stories where the landscape was alive with wolves, aiding people and descending from the heavens to inhabit sacred regions. In one, a wolf saved an elderly woman from an evil bear god. They apparently raised wolf cubs as hunting companions, and believed that the ancestors of the Ainu people came from a white wolf mating with a goddess (Walker, 2009). Shinto, the dominant religion in Japan, knew wolves as divine messengers or even a God. As many as 30,000 shrines dedicated to Inari Ōkami, a canine deity, can be found all over the country (Haussler, 2016). In fact, the Japanese word for wolf, ōkami, is the same word as “great god,” reflecting their deep level of reverence for them. In 1164, the samurai Okubo Samanosuke, was said to have undertaken a pilgrimage to Mount Mitoku, praying for the revival of his house and country. Along the way, he encountered an old white wolf, believed to be a divine messenger of the god Myoken Daibosatsu. Despite initially raising his bow to shoot the wolf, Samanosuke chose to aid the distressed creature and allowing it to go free. That night, Myoken appeared in his dream, disclosing the location of a sacred spring near the roots of an old camphor tree as a gesture of gratitude for sparing the wolf's life. The next day, following the god's guidance, Okubo discovered the hot spring, whose waters proved to have healing properties for various ailments afflicting the local villagers (Haussler, 2016). These mythologies reflect the profound intersection of Japanese beliefs with their diverse natural landscape. Unlike many cultures, they recognized wolves' willingness to coexist with humans when given space, showing the unique innate compassion of their culture. Sadly, though, Western influence in the 19th century led to strychnine poisoning campaigns, causing the rapid extinction of wolves on the island by 1889 (Haussler, 2016).

In ancient China, people worshiped the wolf deity of Khotan, a spirit guardian known to protect health. Since then, its symbolism has remained through various fables and proverbs, such as the Zhongshan Wolf who betrays the kindness of a scholar, or “ravenous wolves rule the road” (Haussler, 2016). However, in 1949, their government viewed them as a threat to growing

agriculture, and attempted the eradication of wolves. As the industrial era has given way to the information era in the 21st century, wolves have begun to be conserved again, helped by a reshaped image of wolves in contemporary Chinese media (Mitts-Smith, 2021). The same story has played out across the continent with mixed results, as attitudes toward wolves have had to contend with shifting ideals. In Japan, reintroduction has become a divisive topic, with ecologists arguing that their presence would help balance the populations of prey animals like deer and boar (Sakurai, 2020). Indian wolves remain extremely endangered, subsisting mostly on livestock and scavenged remains (Fair, 2000). Although many ancient Asian beliefs about wolves were extreme, we can only hope that some of the reverence and positivity associated with them remains, and that it will help to bring back their diverse and powerful presence on the continent.

## V. America

The recent colonization of the American continent created a fascinating struggle between beliefs and mythologies on wolves. For thousands of years, the indigenous Native Americans had lived alone in America, practicing traditions which honored the natural world and wolves in particular. On the other hand, the settlers from Europe were Christian, carrying with them the ideals of modern civilization, seeking to conquer the continent. As a result, the story of wolf mythology in America contains a sharp transition, and exemplifies the broad gradient of beliefs over the course of human history.

Native Americans had perhaps the most intimate relationship with wolves of those cultures that have been studied. Though Native America encompassed a broad stroke of societies, ranging from Indigenous Mexicans to the Eskimos, wolves were specific to the mythologies of almost every one of them. These included a healthy level of fear at times, but often it was closer to exclusively worship and admiration. In *Of Wolves and Men*, Lopez recites fascinating stories of his time in the far North, learning from the Nunamiuts' knowledge of wolves. They had to truly understand and coexist with wolves, seeing them often on hunts through the tundra. Although wolf packs seem to resemble all human societies in important aspects, it is difficult to find ways in which wolves do not mirror Native Americans. Even as recently as the authorship of Lopez' book, the Nunamiut appeared to have a more complete understanding of the wolf than the prevailing scientific knowledge, recognizing the animal as the apex predator, and emulating their habits whenever possible. The people called them *Amaguk*,

and believed them to be smarter than themselves. As such, it is no wonder that the wolf became an essential part of their values and culture. Like the Nunamiut, most hunting Native tribes respected the wolf's prowess. It became associated with the rising of the sun in the East, with the Summer, and as a traveler and messenger.

An important distinction in Native perceptions of wolves, in contrast to much of the rest of the world, lies in their reverence for the wolf's abilities within a pack. Lone wolves seldom found mention in Native mythologies, reflecting their understanding that solitary individuals, whether human or wolf, would struggle to survive alone. In their narratives, the emphasis lies on the collaboration and cooperation of the wolf pack. A great example of this is the Cheyenne tribe's story of the two wolf brothers. In this myth, two orphaned brothers are found by a wolf pack and subsequently adopted by them. They become a part of the pack, learning the ways of the wolves, who teach them about their language, hunting tactics, and community (Mech, 2010). Among the Ojibwe people, there is a story that centers on Ma'iingan, the wolf. In this narrative, Ma'iingan is portrayed as a wise and loyal companion to the Ojibwe community. He serves as a guide and a protector to the tribe, becoming an integral part of their community (Hermes, 2005). Both these stories emphasize the positive, cooperative nature of wolves, and their willingness to help each other. In fact, they are somewhat scientifically accurate, as wolves in the wild have repeatedly been seen adopting other wolves' orphans, and protecting other packs in danger (McIntyre, 2019).

Their stories shared themes with the greater world of antiquity as well. Within the Dena'ina tribe's mythology, wolves are perceived as having once been men, having been transformed by spirits. The Dena'ina's beliefs established a fraternal relationship with wolves, seeing them as true brothers (Mech, 2010). These similarities to the stories of other regions show that the root cause is not just the physical proximity of the societies, but something deeper. If the stories do share a common origin, it is one that has been passed down for tens of thousands of years, before Native Americans crossed from Eurasia.

As the second half of the 20th century progressed, the colonization of America inevitably caused violent clashes between the ideas of European settlers and the indigenous populations. The fear and hatred of wolves, deeply rooted in historic European attitudes, were carried over the Atlantic by these settlers — they left their homes to move to the other side of the planet, only to find the villain of their childhood folktales killing their invaluable livestock in their new home.

Unlike Native Americans, they had little regard for the natural ways of the world, and instead sought to shape the New World into a docile land which only existed to provide for them. Wolves were seen as the embodiment of their Puritanical conception of evil, a plague on the fertility of the land. Wolf killing went far beyond predator control, though it began that way, progressing to goals of complete extermination. And they were successful in these aims. By the late 1800s, as many as 3 million wolves had been removed from the continent, through campaigns of trapping, poisoning, and hunting. Beliefs of the time were purely utilitarian, and considered wilderness as a villain, standing in the way of human progress and Manifest Destiny. Being a Christian nation, early Americans used its hateful language toward wolves as divine cause for killing wolves. Even naturalists participated in their extermination, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who called them “the beast of waste and desolation” (Lopez, 1978). This treatment of wolves only underscores the similarities between them and Native Americans, as the same language was used to justify both genocides. As this continued, it went far beyond the hatred of their European culture and Biblical ideals, where the value of nature was at least understood on some small degree.

This hatred has not slowed or changed for many Americans. In the West, where some of the world’s best remaining wolf habitats exist, wolves are generally not considered endangered, and are classified as “‘shoot on sight’ vermin” (Hurt, 2021). Fears stemming from popular culture continue to perpetuate, where wolves are seen as evil and nefarious far more often than not (Langlois, 2021). And while the United States is not officially Christian, Biblical ideals continue to inform both policy and sentiment, in the same ways mythology has always altered our actions toward wolves. Still, the collective attitudes may be slowly changing for the positive. In Yellowstone National Park, wolves have enjoyed a remarkable success story as one of the world’s best cases of species reintroduction. That struggle to bring wolves back into their historic territories of the American West has helped people from around the globe see wolves for what they truly are: a valuable asset to ecosystems, playing a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity (Smith, 2003). Beyond that, reintroduction’s influence has extended to popular culture, the modern version of mythologies, by helping introduce works like McIntyre’s *Wolf 8* and *The Alpha Wolves of Yellowstone* (Grobar, 2023). Fully overcoming the disastrous beliefs of early colonialism will take far more than that, though, and returning to the indigenous perspectives on wolves may be entirely impossible.





## VI. Conclusion

As wolflore has transformed through human history, it has remained an ever-important facet of our lives, representing our deepest fears and greatest ideals. It emerged during the earliest stages of civilization in the Near East, reflecting our first encounters with the wild as large societies. As humanity expanded into Europe and Asia, the mythologies did too, growing into as complex representations of reality. Wolves all at once became ancestors, deities, and villains. These varied understandings coexisted for centuries, until the two extreme ends of the spectrum met in the colonization of America, creating a war of ideologies. Whether viewed as symbols of danger, resilience, or guardianship, wolves have certainly left an enduring mark on our collective consciousness. Navigating the layers of wolf mythology uncovers a rich mosaic of stories, speaking to the power of these fascinating creatures to shape our understanding of the world.

Though completely understanding the reasons beyond many of these stories may be impossible, a thorough examination of their varied intricacies does provide some insight. With so many global examples of wolf-based beliefs, it's almost worth wondering if there is a piece of truth to them. Perhaps, in some way, we really are here thanks to wolves. If there is any truth to a story of a wolf saving a common human ancestor, it would only survive today as mythologies and traditions. Unfortunately, we can never know for sure. A more likely explanation may be the dog, humanity's companion so closely linked to wolves. The common themes of wolves protecting humans and becoming part of their societies may be influenced by the closeness of dogs to almost every human society. Or, it may be entirely thanks to the inherent similarities between the two species. Both humans and wolves tend toward small, tight-knit groups which protect each other, using their intelligence and social capacity to thrive in every environment. But of course, there is no single reason why we are captivated by wolves. It is the result of countless factors, stemming from their innate ability to fascinate us.

When one looks at a wolf, they might see a beautiful animal, a keystone species in its ecosystem, and an important symbol. Or, they might see a humanlike predator, with strong social bonds and remarkable intelligence. But to this day, they are just as likely to see a villain wearing grandma's nightgown and bonnet. Just as they have throughout human history, our stories and traditions continue to shape our reality, especially as human impact on the world reaches modern

extremes. If we hope to preserve the last bit of wildness in the world, it will become more important than ever to ensure our mythologies reflect the realities of our world.

## VII. References

- Alighieri, D. (1321). *The Divine Comedy, Vol. 1 (Inferno)* (English trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Azarnouche, S. (2016). The wolf in ancient Iran: Between myth, reality, and Zoroastrian exegesis. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 11(1), 1-19.
- Becerra-Valdivia, L., & Higham, T. (2020). The timing and effect of the earliest human arrivals in North America. *Nature*, 584(7819), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2491-6>
- Benson, S. (2009). The Arabian or Desert Wolf. UK Wolf Conservation Trust. Retrieved December 5, 2023, from [https://ukwct.org.uk/files/education/WP\\_Ed38\\_Arabian-Wolf.pdf](https://ukwct.org.uk/files/education/WP_Ed38_Arabian-Wolf.pdf)
- Bukowick, K. E. (2004). *Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow* (Unpublished master's thesis).
- Canid Specialist Group. (n.d.). *Grey Wolf*. Canids. <https://www.canids.org/species/view/PREKLD895731>
- Carr, K. (2019, September 4). *Shepherd story - Epic of Gilgamesh - Mesopotamia - Quatr.us Study Guides*. Quatr.us Study Guides. <https://quatr.us/west-asia/shepherd-story-epic-gilgamesh-mesopotamia.htm>
- Cartwright, M. (2013, May 25). Zeus. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/zeus/>
- Cartwright, M. (2014, January 16). Mars. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/Mars/>
- Cartwright, M. (2019, November 11). Mongol Empire. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from [https://www.worldhistory.org/Mongol\\_Empire/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Mongol_Empire/)
- Comunale, J., & Cheprasov, A. (2023, November 21). Mesopotamia Animals. Study.com. Retrieved December 5, 2023, from <https://study.com/learn/lesson/mesopotamia-animals-overview-facts-first-domesticated-animal.html>
- Conservation of wolves in Europe | Wolves and Humans*. (n.d.). Wolves and Humans. <https://www.wolvesandhumans.org/conservation-of-wolves-in-europe>
- Drompp, M. R. (2011). The Lone Wolf in Inner Asia. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 131(4), 515–526. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41440510>
- Fair, J. H., & Jhala, Y. (2000). J. Henry Fair: Yadvendradev Jhala, IUCN Wolf Specialist, India. Presented at the Beyond 2000 Symposium, 2/2000. Yadvendradev Jhala, Wildlife Institute of India, Chandrabani, PO Box 18, Dehradun 248001, India.
- Fisher, M. (2022, March 28). *Ancient stories of werewolves*. Martini Fisher. <https://martinifisher.com/2022/03/28/ancient-stories-of-werewolves/>

- Grobar, M. (2023, November 22). Deadline. *Deadline*.  
<https://deadline.com/2023/11/the-alpha-wolves-of-yellowstone-movie-stampede-ventures-1235630237/>
- Häussler, R. (2016). Wolf & Mythology. Retrieved from  
<https://ralphhaussler.weebly.com/wolf-mythology.html>
- Hermes, M. (2005). “Ma’iingan Is Just a Misspelling of the Word Wolf”: A Case for Teaching Culture through Language. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 36(1), 43–56.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651308>
- Holy Bible: New International Version. (1978). Genesis 1:28. Biblica.
- Hurt, A. (2021, June 3). *Why do so many humans hate wolves?* Discover Magazine.  
<https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/why-do-so-many-humans-hate-wolves>
- Jila, N. (2006). Myths and Traditional Beliefs about the Wolf and the Crow in Central Asia: Examples from the Turkic Wu-Sun and the Mongols. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 65(2), 161–177.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030397>
- Langlois, K., & Langlois, K. (2021, December 30). *Wolves are still the bad guys in children’s media. let’s change that.* Outside Online.  
<https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/active-families/childrens-books-films-wolves-predators-bad-guys/>
- Lopez, B. (1978). *Of wolves and men*. Simon and Schuster.
- Mark, J. J. (2013, January 17). Ancient Egyptian Mythology. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from [https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian\\_Mythology/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian_Mythology/)
- Mark, J. J. (2021, August 25). Fenrir. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/Fenrir/>
- McIntyre, R. (2019). *The Rise of Wolf 8: Witnessing the Triumph of Yellowstone’s Underdog*. Greystone Books Ltd.
- Mech, L. D., & Boitani, L. (2010). *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mitts-Smith, D. (2021, Winter). The Wolf in China, from Reviled to Revered. *The International Wolf Center*. Retrieved December 8, 2023, from [https://wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IntWolf\\_winter21\\_wolfchina.pdf](https://wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IntWolf_winter21_wolfchina.pdf)
- Sakurai, R., Tsunoda, H., Enari, H., Siemer, W. F., Uehara, T., & Stedman, R. C. (2020). Factors affecting attitudes toward reintroduction of wolves in Japan. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, 22, e01036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2020.e01036>
- Smith, D. W., Peterson, R. O., & Houston, D. B. (2003). Yellowstone after Wolves. *BioScience*, 53(4), 330–340.
- Tekin, T. (1968). *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic* (265). Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Publications. Retrieved from [https://altaica.ru/LIBRARY/Tekin%20Talat/Tekin\\_A%20Grammar%20of%20Orkhon%20Turkic%201968.pdf](https://altaica.ru/LIBRARY/Tekin%20Talat/Tekin_A%20Grammar%20of%20Orkhon%20Turkic%201968.pdf)

- Tennant, P. M. W. (1988). The Lupercalia and the Romulus and Remus Legend. *Acta Classica*, 31, 81-93.
- Walker, B. L. (2009). *The Lost Wolves of Japan*. University of Washington Press.
- Wolf Song of Alaska. (n.d.). *The Heritage and Youth of Chingis Khan*.  
<https://www.wolfsongalaska.org/chorus/node/270>