

Milk-stealing Hares

Hares were known to suck milk from cows, but a line runs through northern Europe, dividing two basically different concepts. To the south, in Denmark, Germany and further, the hare is a shape-changing witch.¹ Sometimes she steals milk in that shape but mostly she uses other techniques (and the hare is just shot). In Germany the witch applied a different technique to steal the milk: still manipulating it at a distance, she was thought to use a knife or an axe struck into a doorpost to milk cows not her own.² To the north, the witch can also change her shape but she can fabricate the hare and send it out to do its tasks; this creature is also known as a troll cat. To the west, in the British Isles, both concepts occur, too.

This reflects a basic difference in the relation between the woman and the hare. In the German case she *is* the hare; in Scandinavia (at least in parts of it) she *makes* the hare. As it was told around 1900 in Sweden:

Magnus Tilda's mother was certainly an Easter-hag, she was. And she had two milk-hares, a big one and a little one. People said she had made them out of knitting-needles and heddle-withes and rags. They would milk other people's cows and then run home and spit up the milk. She had a kettle in the barn and every morning it was full.

This is part of a story (the rest is about shooting the hares, which turns out to be surprisingly easy), collected at the beginning of the twentieth century, or even somewhat earlier in Småland in Sweden and translated into English by John Lindow.³ My own Swedish is non-existent, thus I have to rely on English translations and overviews. A very similar legend was published in the late nineteenth-century *Scandinavian Folk-Lore*, by the Scotsman William Craigie (1867-1957).

Some people speak of milk-hares as if these belonged to the fallen angels, but this is not at all the case, for they are made by the witches for the occasion, whenever they wish to employ them. The milk-hare consists merely of a few wooden pegs and a stocking-leg. The witches pour a drop of milk, which they have taken from other people's cows, into a stocking-leg, and tell it to go and suck the cows, and then come home and cast up the milk into the witch's milk dish.

This hare was shot as well and the hunter found the remains, that is: 'some pegs and a stocking leg', with a splash of milk on the field.⁴ This tale was taken from the collection of Eva Wigström (1832-1901).⁵ In both cases the making of the hare is somewhat subdued, because a vital ingredient is missing, a drop of blood of the witch. At least this is the case in northern Sweden when a ball of yarn made from threads in nine different colours 'comes to life when the witch drips her blood onto

1 See also: Bodil Nildin-Wall & Jan Wall, "The Witch as Hare or the Witch's Hare: Popular Legends and Beliefs in Nordic Tradition", *Folklore* 104 (1993), p. 67-76.

2 F. Eckstein, "Milchhexe", in: *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 6 (Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1935), col. 293-352.

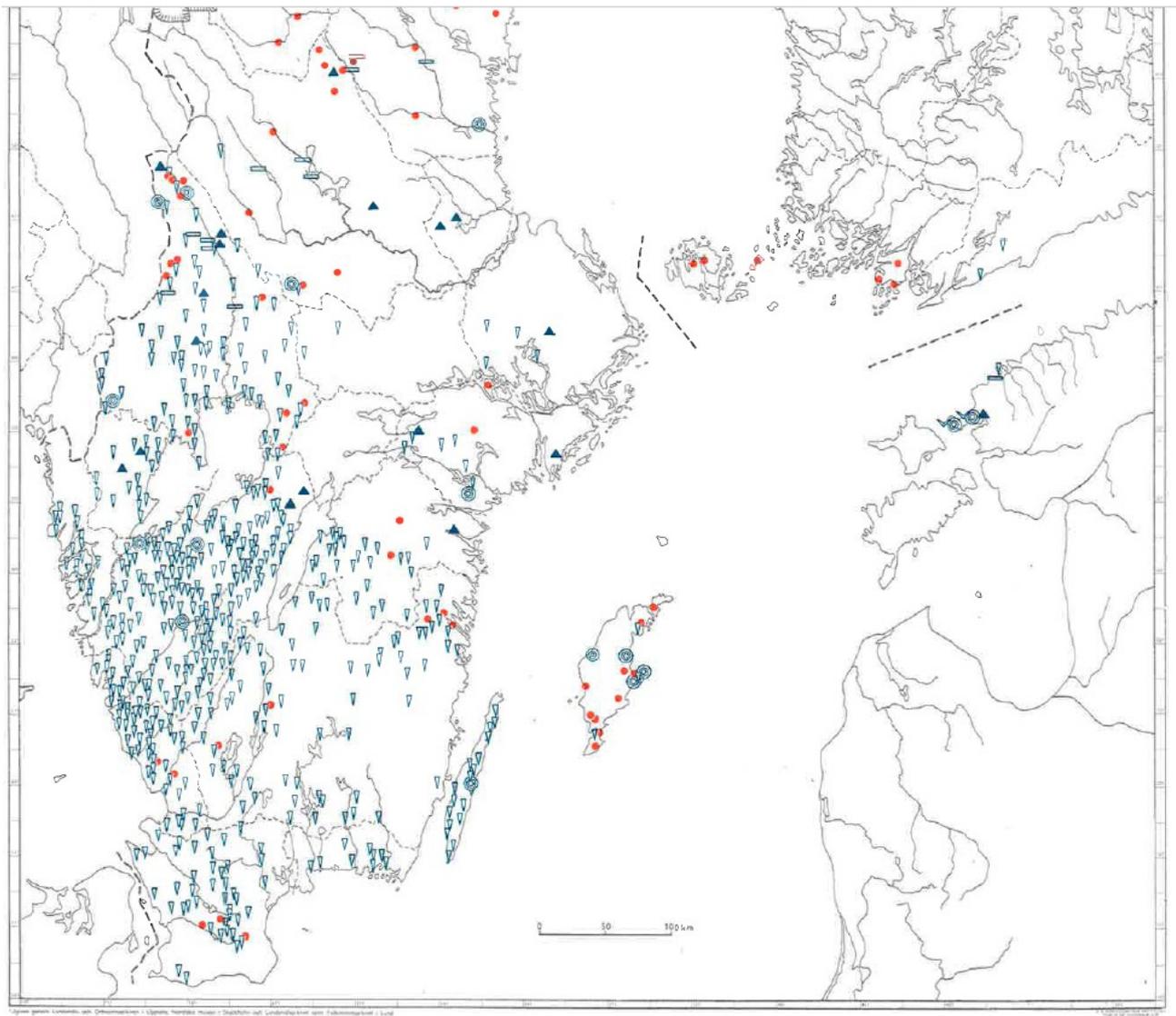
3 *Swedish Legends and Folktales* (Berkeley 1978), p. 170.

4 William A. Craigie, *Scandinavian Folk-Lore: Illustrations of the Traditional Beliefs of the Northern Peoples* (Paisley and London 1896), p. 377, from: Eva Wigström, *Folkdiktning, visor, sägner, sagor, gåtor, ordspråk, ringdansar, lekar och barnvisor, samlad och upptecknad i Skaane* (Copenhagen 1880), p. 139.

5 See the Swedish wikipedia article: https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eva_Wigström.

it'. She also needs to recite the charm: 'I give you blood, the Devil gives you courage. You shall run for me on earth, I shall burn for you in hell'.⁶ About a Norwegian witch it was told:

(...) She had the Black Book and a troll cat. A troll cat is gray and round like a ball of wool, and it rolls along the ground. It sucks milk from the cows and sneaks into the homes to steal cream. When the troll cat sucks itself too full, it slobbers all over, and the spilled cream turns to gray paw butter, which people also call troll cat vomit and troll cat butter. One can see it on the ground in the morning after a foggy night; it covers planks and logs in the fields where the troll cat has run during the night.⁷



*Swedish Folklore Atlas: Map of Southern Sweden.*⁸ The blue upside-down triangles represent the places where a hare is recorded as a milk-stealing creature. The red dots indicate a ball of wool. The adjacent map of Northern Sweden is almost entirely covered in red dots.

In the section 'Tools of witches and sorcerers' of the Swedish legend catalogue, a number of legend

6 Bengt af Klintberg, *The Types of the Swedish Folk Legends* (Helsinki 2010), p. ... See also: Af Klintberg, *Svenska trollformler* (Stockholm 1965), p. 87.

7 Reimund Kvideland & Henning K. Sehmsdorf (eds), *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis/London, 1988), p. 177.

8 See also: *Arv. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 35 (1979), p. 114-115.

types related to milk-stealing creatures are listed.⁹ The central legend is the one in which the milk-hare vomits milk into bowls and is observed, or when visitors turn all the bowls and barrels upside down so that the milk ends up over the floor. Then there are the legends when the making of the *bjära* goes wrong, or when an onlooker tries to repeat the process, and the *bjära* brings nothing but shit. Or the one in which the maid of a neighbouring farm traps the *bjära* by lifting her skirt and biting in the hem. When the owner of a milk hare is buried, the hare follows her in the coffin or grave. Measurements against the creature consist of boiling its excrement, or locking it up, or pushing it into a drill hole. The creature's owner will then come and can be dealt with. One can also hammer a nail through the excrement; the 'wound' will then transfer to the woman who sent it. Witches also get hurt when cream (of a cow suckled by a milk hare) is burned or when the creature itself is beaten. And when butter is cut that is churned from stolen milk, it will bleed. Finally, milk hares can also be shot with different consequences. In Sweden the legend is considered in the vein of Christiansen's *migratory legend* or Von Sydow's *fabulate* and thus as more than just the notion of the milk-hare or any other milk-stealing creature.

It is clear that these legends do not occur everywhere in Sweden in the same combination. *Bjära* legends can be contrasted to the widely known legend that tells how a young girl milks cows at a distance by drawing their milk from her garter or from a knife. Such is also Norwegian and more the German and Austrian way.¹⁰

Scandinavian legends are restricted to witches using their creatures to steal milk; they seem to have little other uses for them, in contrast to the English legends. Yet the principle is similar: in both areas the witch utilizes a creature to perform her craft at a distance. The affinity between the witch and the *bjära* is extremely close. The Walls theorized that the two are linked by blood and that blood is the seat of the soul. Yet they admitted that the stories do not show this in so many words.¹¹



A modern impression of the troll hare by Chricko (Christian Löfwall)

⁹ Bengt af Klintberg, *The Types of the Swedish Folk Legends* (Helsinki 2010) (FFC 300), P.

¹⁰ Included in the legend of The Daughter of the Witch, see: Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1958), p. 41-44.

¹¹ Wall & Wall, *The Witch as Hare*, p. 74.