



BNN Newsletter, October 2018.

Dear members of Belief Narrative Network,

October's issue of BNN Newsletter is for your reading, sharing the information and networking. Thank you all who have sent their contributions!

The Newsletter includes

1. BNN annual report. Mirjam Mencej
2. A book by Paulo Correia (University of Algarve): *Aux Origines du Monde: Contes et Légendes du Portugal*.
3. List of recent publications. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir
4. List of recent publications. Terry Gunnell
5. List of recent publications. Anders Gustavsson
6. List of recent publications. Mirjam Mencej
7. List of recent publications. Tok Thompson
8. Annual conference of European Association of the Study of Religion. "Religion – Continuations and disruptions", Tartu 25.-29.06. 2018.
9. Call for contributions for the special issue of *Folkloristika*.
10. "The Witch's Familiar", a research article by Willem de Blécourt.

Sincerely,
Kristel Kivari

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On behalf of the BNN Committee:

Mirjam Mencej, Willem de Blécourt, Terry Gunnell, Anders Gustavsson, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Fumihiko Kobayashi, Mare Kõiva, Kaarina Koski, Dilip Kumar Kalita, Mirjam Mencej, Maria Ines Palleiro, Tok Thompson and Ülo Valk.

BNN Annual Report 2017/2018

Mirjam Mencej
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Dear BNN members

In accordance with the rules of the BNN, it is the duty of the chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, to submit an annual report on the activities of the BNN over the previous year to the other members of the BNN. The following is the report for 2017-2018.

First of all, I am happy to inform you that since my last report in September 2017, **the number of BNN members** has once again increased, now reaching a total of **124 members**. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to welcome all of our new members!

1. Publications:

We are still awaiting the publication of the conference papers presented at the conference on *Sacrifice and Divination* organised in cooperation with the BNN by Éva Pócs of the University of Pécs, which took place in Pécs, Hungary, in 2014, and in which many of our members participated; it is assumed that the publication will be published (in Hungarian) by the end 2018 or in early 2019.

The publication of proceedings from the joint BNN and Charms, Charmers and Charming Committees' conference *Verbal Charms and Narrative Genres* which took place in Budapest, 8-10 December 2017, is planned for publication in *Studia Mythologica Slavica Supplementa* in Ljubljana 2019 (edited by Éva Pócs and Maria Ines Palleiro / Monika Kropej, series editor).

We are currently in the process of gathering papers presented at the BNN conference on *Human-Animal Relationships in Belief Narratives* held as part of the ISFNR interim conference in Ragusa, 12-16 June 2018. The papers will be published in a special edition of *Folklore. Electronic journal of Folklore* (Tartu) (ed. Mare Kõiva; Mirjam Mencej, guest editor) and possibly partly in *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 22 (Ljubljana) (ed. Monika Kropej) in August-October 2019.

2. Conferences:

Over the course of this and the last year, the BNN Committee members have been actively involved in organising the BNN conference *Human-Animal Relationships in Belief Narratives* held as part of the ISFNR interim conference in Ragusa, 12-16 June 2018. Altogether 22 papers were presented over the course of eight sessions. During the course of the BNN conference, the BNN meeting took place as well. Reet Hiimäe wrote a report on

the conference in Ragusa which was published in Estonian in the journal *Mäetagused* 71: 212-214 (<http://www.folklore.ee/tagused/nr71/>) and in English in *Folklore, EFJF* 72 (available online). Kaarina Koski also wrote the report on the BNN conference which Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, the editor-in-chief of *Fabula*, was happy to receive and promised to publish in the next issue of *Fabula*.

The BNN Committee has launched the Call for Papers for the BNN conference *Belief Narratives in Folklore Studies: Narrating the Supernatural*, which will be organised by the Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture in Guwahati and the BNN, and will be held in Guwahati, Assam, India, on 6th-8th February 2019. The deadline for submissions is already over and we hope to get further information from Dilip Kumar Kalita, the main organiser, very soon.

The BNN Committee is currently also commencing work on the Call for Papers for the BNN conference which will be held in the frame of the next ISFNR congress which will take place in Zagreb, Croatia, in 2020. We have already decided about the general title for our conference (*Performing Beliefs*) and you should receive the Call for papers in the beginning of 2019.

3. BNN e-Newsletter

Based on an inquiry amongst BNN members, we have decided to change the frequency of the **BNN e-Newsletter**. Starting in January 2018, the BNN e-Newsletters will only be issued four times a year (in January, April, June, and October), rather than once a month as used to be the case. While some of you who responded to our inquiry liked the regular monthly e-Newsletter, most of you opted for a 3-month issue and we plan to stick to this frequency. Once again, we would like to thank to all of you who sent us feedback and thus helped us make the decision. As always, we would also like to thank Kristel Kivari who is kindly taking care of the distribution of the Newsletter! Please continue to promptly send information to Kristel (kristel.kivari@ut.ee; kristelkivari@hotmail.com) on: Calls for papers that might be of interest to the BNN members; reports from conferences (local conferences included!); reports on new books and publications that may be of interest to the BNN scholars; news related to belief narratives; and above all, information on your own current publications in the field of belief narratives!

4. Student Award for the Best Paper in the Field of Belief Narratives

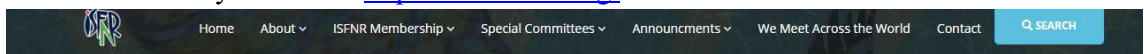
In 2018, the Committee has for the first time granted an award for the best student paper in the field of belief narratives. The winner of the first award is Kikee D Bhutia for her paper “I Exist Therefore You Exist, We Exist Therefore They Exist”: Narratives of Mutuality between Deities (yul lha gzhi bdag) and lhopo (Bhutia) Villagers in Sikkim. Our sincere congratulations to Kikee! She will present her winning paper at the conference in Guwahati in February 2019.



The Committee has also decided to slightly change the rules of the next competition for the best student paper award. Every second year (at the ISFNR congress and at the ISFNR interim conference) two awards (rather than one) will be granted: one for the best paper written by a PhD student, and one for the best paper written by an undergraduate (BA) or graduate (MA) student. The next awards will be presented at the next ISFNR congress which will place in Zagreb in 2020. The Call for Applications, along with details about the award (that is regarding the requirements, criteria, profile of the students involved, the nature of the award, and so on) can be found at the ISFNR/BNN website, under no. 4: (<http://www.isfnr.org/files/beliefnarrativenetwork.html>). We would appreciate it if you could encourage your students to submit their papers related to belief narratives, for evaluation. Please note that the next deadline is 30 June 2019!

5. BNN Web Site

We have continued with updating the **BNN page of the ISFNR website** and the Committee would like to thank Nidhi Mathur for all her help in regularly putting the required updates onto the BNN/ ISFNR website. The ISFNR president, Sadhana Naithani, has been putting efforts into making the ISFNR website more interesting and appealing to scholars and the results can already be seen at <http://www.isfnr.org/> .



BELIEF NARRATIVE NETWORK

The **Belief Narrative Network (BNN)** is a voluntary association and forms part of the ISFNR. There are at present 105 members of the BNN who come from all over the world, and share the common feature that they are all involved in working on belief narratives. If you are interested in joining the BNN, please contact mirjam.mencej@ff.uni-lj.si for further information about all the activities for the BNN.

As before, we encourage all of those who still have not yet sent in data to send us their CVs (including names and surnames; degrees; present professional status and affiliations; e-mail addresses and contact details – as long as you are happy for these to be published on the Internet), along with *a list of main research interests* (in the form of key words – please add such information at the end of your CV) and a *personal bibliography*, including works related to belief narratives (that is books written in one of the major languages or with a summary in one of these languages; and papers written in one of the major languages). The data should be sent to Kaarina Koski (kaakos@utu.fi) until the end of September to be put on the website in 2018. She is updating the list of belief narrative scholars' CVs regularly, that is once a year.

Update your CV and personal bibliography and send it to Kaarina Koski kaakos@utu.fi

As usual, we encourage all members to continue to share information about the BNN with their colleagues: Everyone interested in belief narratives of any kind is welcome to join the Network! If you are aware of any scholar who is interested in belief narratives and wishes to become a member of BNN, please remind them that they should contact the chairperson (mirjam.mencej@ff.uni-lj.si or mirjam.mencej@guest.arnes.si) in order to receive information about all future BNN activities. Potential members should be informed that they need to join both the ISFNR and

the BNN. If any of you has not yet become a member of the ISFNR, please bear in mind that in accordance with our statute, the BNN forms part of the ISFNR and that official membership is only open and free to those who are members of the ISFNR. If you are not yet a member of ISFNR, you can nonetheless receive information about our activities, and participate in our conferences and meetings. However, you will not have the right to vote for members of the BNN Committee or be able to become a BNN Committee member yourself. Everyone is therefore encouraged to join the ISFNR. Should anyone wish to cease being a BNN member, and receive no further information about our activities, please let us know and we will delete you from our list.

As always, all BNN members are most welcome to suggest their own ideas about the future activities of the BNN and to comment on the decisions taken by the BNN Committee members. We will be happy to hear from you!

We are looking forward to meeting you in Guwahati soon!

Best wishes,

Mirjam, on behalf of the BNN Committee (2016-2020):

Willem de Blécourt, Terry Gunnell, Anders Gustavsson, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Fumihiko Kobayashi, Mare Kõiva, Kaarina Koski, Dilip Kumar Kalita, Mirjam Mencej (chair), Maria Ines Palleiro, Tok Thompson and Ülo Valk.

A book by Paulo Correia (University of Algarve): *Aux Origines du Monde: Contes et Légendes du Portugal*. Paris: Flies France, 2018.

Paulo Correia
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Abstract: this book is the first ever published compilation exclusively (and exhaustively) dedicated to portuguese etiological narrative folklore. The folk narratives are grouped in six different categories: 1. Sky and earth; 2. Man and society; 3. Animals; 4. Trees and plants; 5. Cultural inventions; 6. Calendar events. Many of these narratives were classified with ATU system and with Aarne's system created specifically to classify etiological legends of this kind (Ursprungsgen).



Publications: Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir

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2017 Rominu Werth. Glitvoðir genginna alda: Um framlag kvenna til söfnunar þjóðsagna á Austurlandi. *Gripla* 28: 7–38.

2017 Under the cloak, between the lines: Trolls and the symbolism of their clothing in Old Norse tradition. *European journal of Scandinavian studies* 47/2: 327–350.

2016 Tales of Generations: A comparison between some Icelandic and Geatish narrative motifs. *Scripta Islandica* 67: 5–36.

2016 Ævintýragrunnur. Sagnagrunnur.com/aevintyri

Publications: Terry Adrian Gunnell

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2018 The Power in the Place Icelandic Álagablettir Legends in a Comparative Context. *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*. Ülo Valk, Daniel Sävborg (eds.). Studia Fennica Folkloristica 23. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society/ SKS.

2018 Individuals: Jón Árnason. *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Joep Leerssen, 2 vols. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 368-370

2018 Individuals: Ólafur Davíðsson. *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Joep Leerssen. 2 vols, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 467

2018 Individuals: Magnús Grímsson. *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Joep Leerssen, 2. vols, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 425

2017 Sigurður Guðmundsson og þjóðsögurnar. *Málarinn og meningsköpun: Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið*, ed. Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell. Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn and Opna, 415-433.

2017 On the Border: The Liminality of the Seashore in Icelandic Folk Legends. *Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea: Seascapes and Dreamscapes*, ed. Andrew Jennings, Silke Reeploeg and Angela Watt. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 10-31.

2016 *Sagnagrunnur*. En kartlagt database over de islandske folkesagn. *Saga och sed*, 15-40.

2014 Nordic Folk Legends, Folk Traditions and Grave Mounds: The Value of Folkloristics for the Study of Old Nordic Religions. *New Focus on Retrospective Methods: Resuming Methodological Discussions: Case Studies from Northern Europe*. Ed. Eldar Heide and Karen Bek-Pedersen. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/ Academica Scientiarum Fennica, 17-41.

2014 The Vampire Returns to Britain: Considering the Images of Vampires, Werewolves and Ghosts in BBC's *Being Human*. *Þjóðarspejillinn: Rannsóknir í Félagsvísindum XV: Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2014*, ed. Helga Ólafs and Thamar M. Heijstra, Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1-9.

2014 Modern Legends in Iceland. *Narratives Across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptions: Proceedings of the 15th Congress of the International Society For Folk Narrative Research (June 21-June 27 Athens)*, Vol I. Athens: Academy of Athens, Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, 337-351.

Publications: Anders Karl Gustaf Gustavsson

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2017 Folk Culture at the Interface between Emerging Public Health Care and Older Forms of Healing. Health and Illness in a Coastal District of Western Sweden in the Nineteenth Century. In: *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore 2017*, 51-90

2017 *Folkloristic studies in Scandinavia. Personal research experiences and reflections*. Novus Press, 186 p.

2016 A Nineteenth-Century Peasant and Intra-Church Revivalistic Movements in Bohuslän, Sweden. In: *Experiencing religion. New approaches to personal religiosity*. LIT Verlag, 203-219

2016 Rediscovery and transformation of traditional rituals within a New religious movement in Sweden: The oasis movement. *Revista română de sociologie*; Volume 1-2, 55-88

Publications: Mirjam Mencej

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Mirjam Mencej 2018: Something Came Over Him. Narratives on Being “Carried by Witches” and Altered States of Consciousness. *Preternature. Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* Vol. 7, No. 1: 50-87.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/38130>

Abstract: The paper discusses experiences of being “carried by witches” (alternatively: being “led”, “chased”, “mixed up”, or “driven” by witches) recorded during field research on witchcraft in eastern Slovenia in 2000-2001. The experiences, which were ascribed to the agency of (night) witches, occurred at night, most often in the forest, and typically implied disorientation (sometimes in the form of walking in circles or being lifted and transported through the air), a shift of consciousness, and sometimes, but not necessarily, the seeing of light(s) which people followed or were drawn to. The author argues that these experiences, which show striking similarities with experiences discussed in comparable narratives from various cultures, in past and contemporary accounts alike, also show remarkable similarities with typical features of extra-corporeal experiences, more precisely, out-of-body experiences and/or near-death experiences.

Keywords: Altered state of consciousness; extra-corporeal experience; out-of-body experience; near-death experience; neuropsychology; witchcraft; narratives; folklore; Slovenia.

Mirjam Mencej 2018: Magic and counter-magic in the 21th-century Bosnia. In: *Cultures of Witchcraft in Europe: Middle Ages to the Present*. Jonathan Berry, Owen Davies and Cornelia Osborne, eds. London: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer. Pp. 249-268.

<https://www.palgrave.com/la/book/9783319637839>

Keywords: Bosnia, magic, counter-magic, ethnic & religious identity

Mirjam Mencej 2017: How and Why to Talk about Witchcraft? Discourses on Witchcraft and Uses of Bewitchment Narratives in 21st Century Rural Eastern Slovenia. *Temenos* 53/1: 143-179. <https://journal.fi/temenos/article/view/65139>

Abstract: The article, based on fieldwork conducted in rural Eastern Slovenian region, discusses specifics of various discourses – Christian, rational, New Age, and, in particular, witchcraft discourse – that the inhabitants of the region use in discussing witchcraft. It shows the occasions in everyday life in which the witchcraft discourse may be mobilised and strategically used by people for their own benefit. Later, it compares the discourse used by traditional magic specialists in the unwitching procedure, performed when misfortune is ascribed to bewitchment, with the discourse used by a contemporary New Age therapist in therapy performed for the

same reason. The author argues that in basic elements they resemble each other, the main difference being that the key underlying premise of the traditional unwitcher, i.e. that the source of misfortune threatens from the outside, loses its importance in the New Age therapy. In this, the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

Keywords: discourse, witchcraft, magic, New Age, Slovenia

Mirjam Mencej 2017: *Styrian Witches in European Perspective. Ethnographic Fieldwork.* London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer.

<https://www.palgrave.com/in/book/9781137372499>

Abstract: The book provides a comprehensive exploration of witchcraft beliefs and practices in the rural region of Eastern Slovenia. Based on field research conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it examines witchcraft in the region from folkloristic, anthropological, as well as historical, perspectives. Witchcraft is presented as part of social reality, strongly related to misfortune and involved in social relationships. The reality of the ascribed bewitching deeds, psychological mechanisms that may help bewitchment to work, circumstances in which bewitchment narratives can be mobilised, reasons for a person to acquire a reputation of the witch in the entire community, and the role that unwitchers fulfilled in the community, are but a few of the many topics discussed. In addition, the intertwinement of social witchcraft with narratives of supernatural experiences, closely associated with supernatural beings of European folklore, forming part of the overall witchcraft discourse in the area, is explored.

Keywords: witchcraft, counterwitchcraft, Slovenia, supernatural

Mirjam Mencej 2016: Discourses on witchcraft and uses of witchcraft discourse, *Fabula* 57 (3-4): 248-262

Abstract: Based on field research, this article discusses various discourses that the inhabitants of the Eastern Slovenian region could use when discussing witchcraft. Further on it focuses on various possible uses of the witchcraft discourse: as long as witchcraft discourse had enough open support in the region, it constituted the context in which witchcraft narratives were "shared with licence", which enabled people to draw upon and mobilize them for various purposes and with various intentions. This paper gives examples of how bewitchment narratives served as a strategy that individuals could appropriate and use to their benefit in everyday life.

Keywords: discourses, witchcraft, magic, Slovenia

Publications: Tok Thompson

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2018 What Does it Mean to Be a Human? Green-Skinned Troublemakers and Us. *Narrative Culture* 4, 185-200.

2018 Folklore Beyond the Human: Towards a Trans-Special Understanding of Culture, Communication, and Aesthetics. *Journal of Folklore Research* 55:69-82.

2017 Trolls, Aliens, and other Others in the Cyber World. *Race and Ethnicity in Digital Culture: Our Changing Traditions, Impressions, and Expressions in a Mediated World*. Anthony Buccitelli, ed. 2 Volumes, Praeger.

17th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) “Religion – Continuations and Disruptions” Tartu (June 25-29, 2019)

<https://easr2019.org/>

Religions are works in progress. New ideas, doctrines and practices have appeared time and again and often spread across cultural and confessional boundaries. Some of the changes have been intentional, introduced by powerful individuals and institutions, others have emerged more spontaneously as vernacular reactions to innovations imposed from ‘above’. Some elements in religions have persisted for centuries, some have disappeared and some reappeared in completely new forms or acquired new meanings. Similar processes can be observed around us in contemporary societies as well.

Deadlines:

**Call for session proposal ends
31.10.2018**

**Call for individual papers will
open in November**

Yet, oftentimes scholars of religion have struggled with studying such constantly changing and transforming phenomena. This leads us to ask how many disruptions or interruptions can a tradition adapt or even embrace, while still maintaining its identity. At the same time studying change (or the lack thereof) arises several conceptual and methodological problems. First of all, how does one conceptualize change without implying a static research object? This is also a problem of evaluation and rhetorical power – who has the authority to claim that something is extinct or that a new tradition has been established? What is the scholar’s responsibility for the

field of studies? When and to what extent do scholars have to take into account the views of insiders in reflecting upon religious traditions or in drawing boundaries between them?

Aside from 'conventional' religion and religiosity, considering various 'spiritualities' and the rise of the numbers of people with no clear religious affiliation, how does one study a phenomenon which has lost its visibility or moved into the private sphere? Or how does one make sense of the continuities and disruptions in a world where more and more people simultaneously participate in several traditions, either religious or secular?

The conference will focus on these and related questions, examining religious traditions worldwide. In addition, it calls for reflecting upon continuities and disruptions in the history of religious studies. Our conceptual tools, theoretical frameworks, methodologies and even the category of religion have been changing. Is it necessary to strive for unity in the discipline or rather celebrate the pluralism in the study of religions? And how to depict change, so that the complicated dynamic of religious transformation is also reflected through the conceptual tools we use?

Call for contributions: Folkloristika. Journal of the Serbian Folklore Association.

Sonja Petrovic
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Thematic Issue: Folklore of the Borderland: Fieldwork and Study The Editorial board of Folkloristika, the Journal of the Serbian Folklore Association, invites contributors to submit original scientific papers, and unpublished field material concerning the topic of Folklore of the Borderland: Fieldwork and Study.

The Issue editor is Andrey Moroz (Institute of Philology and History, Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow). Contributors are expected to submit original papers fieldwork material related to the problems of ethno-cultural, confessional, linguistic and other aspects of the borderland regions.

Proposed topics: 1. Borders of the borderland: what are the criteria and scientific instruments that make it possible (if it is possible) to demarcate the borderland territory and the borderline culture; 2. Problems of ethno-dialectical division of traditional culture of an ethnic group; 3. Internal borders: problems of interaction between traditional culture of enclaves and metropolis; 4. Borderland as a special ethno-cultural zone. Formation of new and preservation of old ethno-cultural forms in border regions; 5. Borderland identity: the shaping/the formation of a

particular ethno-cultural phenomenon of borderline identity, whose bearers define themselves through the concepts of ours, from here, or by opposition, not that one, not him.

The deadline for submission of abstracts is the 31st of December 2018. It should be sent to the e-mail address: folkloristika.ufs@gmail.com.

Please see the full CFP from [here](#)

Call for papers: Witches and Animals. The Animal Turn in Witchcraft Studies? Conference of Study Group for Interdisciplinary Witchcraft Studies

Willem de Blécourt
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In early modern art witches are often depicted with an animal as their attribute, a depiction which remains open to multiple interpretations. Metamorphosis into animals is well-known; with or without the help of the devil witches changed, or confessed to changing, into wolves, dogs, cats, frogs, birds, or even whales.

It is often overlooked that the topic of Witches and Animals is much broader than this. Apart from changing into animals it can entail, amongst others: genuine animals as witches' companions, ghosts or demons in animal shape (for instance the German drakes), familiars and other animalistic house demons, animal spirits, animal doubles (such as the Mesoamerican naguals), animals and animal disguises in shamanism, maleficent magic in the form of vermin, and the conjuring of animals (particularly mice) in the late witch trials and subsequent folklore. This topic can also include mysteriously observed animals or the noises they were supposed to have made, devils in animal form or magical animals. Last but not least, it also includes the animals who were the victims of malicious witchcraft and those animals who were executed in cases of sodomy, together with the human perpetrators.

Moreover, by way of the enigmatic abilities ascribed to them, animals played a big part in popular customs and in learned rituals, both with a magical character. The examples of gods and wizards in animal shape can be traced back to the origin of religion and literature. Christian theology is familiar with the adoration of the golden calf, Beelzebub as Lord of the Flies, animals as the abode of demons after an exorcism (Mat. 8:32), the Lamb of God and the depiction of the Holy Ghost as a dove.

The theme also pertains to theological and art historical aspects, such as animals as symbols, metamorphoses in literature, art, film and the virtual worlds of the World Wide Web. Animals

even turn up as symbols in modern celebrations such as Hallowe'en. Animals are not often what they seem.

The interdisciplinary and international conference of the AKIH at the conference venue Weingarten of the Catholic Academy Stuttgart not only welcomes leading researchers, but also invites Ph.D. students to engage with the divergent and ambivalent dimensions of magical and demonical animals and the ways they were seen and comprehended. In addition the lecturers, conference participants will consist of interested members of the public. Each lecture will be followed by an active discussion.

Applications for papers will be received until the 28th of February 2019. Registration for the conference without a paper is possible until the 25th of August 2019.

Please send suggestions for papers to: AKIH/ Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Behringer, Universität des Saarlandes

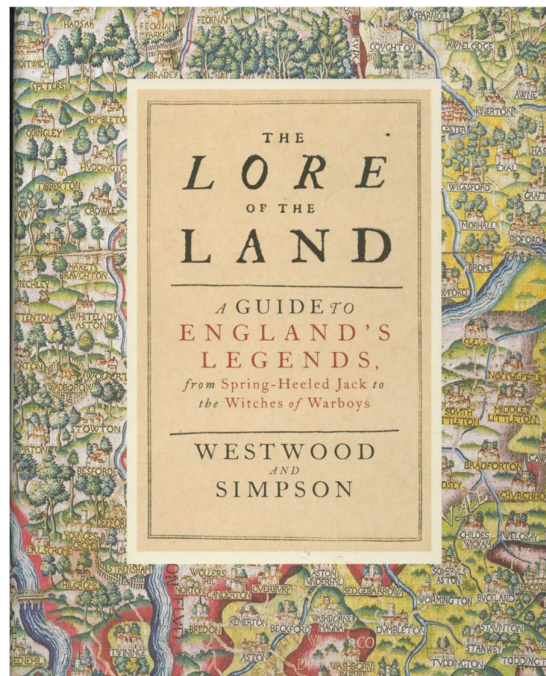
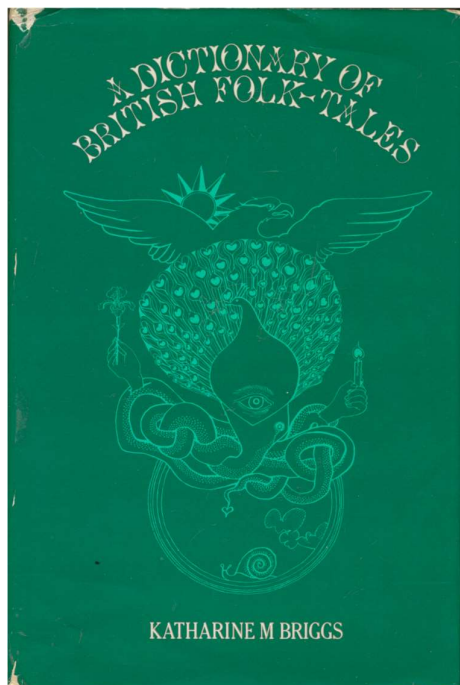
behringer@mx.uni-saarland .de; or to: Rita Voltmer: voltmer@uni-trier.de;

Please see the full CFP from [HERE](#)

The Witch's Familiar

Research article by Willem de Blécourt

Willem de Blécourt
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In her *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* Jacqueline Simpson refers to the English story of the earthenware goose. It is one of the very few (if not the only) instances of a creature in England similar to the *carrier*, or *tilberi* as it is called in Icelandic.¹ The story about this creature was found in Lancashire. Again, it becomes necessary to carefully compare texts, because Katharine Briggs (1898-1980), who Simpson refers to, only published a summary of the story. As Briggs wrote: “At one time there was a great scarcity of milk in the neighbourhood, and as usual, Mag was blamed for it.” Local farmers watched her cottage and when she came out with her goose and her cat, one of the farmers

hit the goose on the head, whereupon it vanished, leaving in its place a large broken pitcher, with milk war from the cow streaming from it.²

¹Jacqueline Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1972), 174

²Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, part B, volume 2 (London 1970), 641.

The full text of the story can be found in a nineteenth-century book, still in print today. Among others, it features the witch's familiars, “a parched fiend or perspiring imp”, which did not make it into Brigg's summary. The original lines of the above quotation run as follows:

'We want no hissin' hear,' said the leader of the band, as he lifted a heavy stick and struck the sibilant fowl a sharp rap on its head. No sooner had the sound of the blow fallen upon the ears of the assembled rustics than the goose vanished, not a soliray feather being left behind, and in its place there stood a large broken pitcher, from which milk, warm from the cow, was streaming. Here was proof to satisfy even the most credulous (...).³

This is an example of how “folklore” is simplified. The author of this story, James Bowker was not so much a folklorist and more a writer of fancy stories such as *Phoebe Carew*, *A North Coast Story* and *Nat Holt's Fortune*, who does not seem to have published much more.⁴ If he talked to people in Lancashire,⁵ he completely reworked their tales. In England, there is also no similar tale recorded and Bowker may as well have had a Scandinavian acquaintance. It is still difficult to call one tale 'folklore', especially when it is only transmitted through one text. The earthenware goose can thus only be seen as a curiosity, although today Mag (or Meg) Shelton, the woman Shelton wrote about, is celebrated as “Another Lancashire witch” and a plaque with her name can be seen at the graveyard in Woodplumpton.⁶



photo Brian Young, at Wikimedia Commons.

*

³James Bowker, *Goblin Tales of Lancashire* (London [1878]), 167-173, quotation at p. 173.

⁴There is also his children's book *Birds of the Bible*, published in 1884.

⁵Cf. Bowker's report of his meeting with 'an old farm-larourer', *Goblin Tales*, 260.

⁶<https://kitperriman.wordpress.com/2017/01/19/another-lancashire-witch-meg-shelton/>;
http://www.bbc.co.uk/lancashire/content/articles/2005/10/06/spooky_woodplumpton_witch_feature.shtml.

The tale of The Earthenware Goose may be unique, but it can be reinserted into “folklore” by joining it to the English stories about the witch's familiar. In this way a single tale may become slightly more common by association. An example from Yorkshire goes as follows:

At last a neighbour's cow dries up altogether. At this the good man was so exasperated, that he went to Ann's and boldly accused her of milking the cows. Words ran high, till in the end he seized a three-legged stool, intended to hurl it at Ann's head, when, lo! A curious thing happened – as he gripped the leg of the stool, a stream of milk ran from it. The neighbours, who by this time had flocked round the door, cried out with one voice: `Thoo's gitten 't; that's what sha milks wer coos wi'.⁷

According to Ronald Hutton “the idea of the animal familiar [...] does not seem to have put down deep roots in popular folklore, because by the nineteenth century it had mostly contracted into East Anglia, to become a distinctive regional tradition there.” In the rest of England, the concept had in large part disappeared.⁸ Hutton's view is linked to his prioritising the demonological origin of the creature, although he was also not completely satisfied with it, nor with the then current attitude to pet animals, for which there was no “solid comparative evidence.”⁹ English folklore is difficult to assess, certainly in comparison to, for instance, Flanders or Sweden, given the amateur state of research over the last two centuries; there has been no systematic survey of witchcraft covering the whole of England, not even in particular counties. One has to make do with insufficiently overlapping collections gathered by individual researchers in the field or in libraries, and these collections still contain quite a few references to late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch trials as recorded in pamphlets.¹⁰ In the modern period, East Anglia stands out,¹¹ but so does Somerset, as it “was widely believed in Somerset that witches kept toads as familiars, sending them out to cause trouble to anybody they wanted to harm.”¹² Neither was Yorkshire without familiars, nor Shropshire and Cornwall. If the concept of the familiar still seems local, it is mostly because it is comprised of competing notions, such as the witch's metamorphosis into an animal in a Yorkshire case.

One Nancy Newgill, a Broughton witch, used to set hedgehogs to milk the cows of those she had spite against, and it was commonly believed that at times she used to turn herself into one, and then `neeabody's coos had onny chance'; anyway, there was one hedgehog which could run as fast as a hare, and never was caught, `ner killed ner nowt'.¹³

On the other hand, one could argue that the way that certain witch motifs attached themselves

⁷Richard Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (London 1898), 181-182.

⁸Hutton, *The Witch*, 277.

⁹Hutton, *The Witch*, 278.

¹⁰Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague 1966); Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, 4 volumes (London 1970-1971); Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A Guide to England's Legends* (London 2005).

¹¹Westwood and Simpson, *Lore of the Land*, 488.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 640. See also: Ruth L. Tongue, *Somerset Folklore* (London 1965), 74-75.

¹³Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore*, 198.

to the familiar actually bolsters the strength of the concept, making the familiar more available as an idea of the source of the witches' powers and perhaps at the same time as a plausible bridge to the demonic. For example the idea that a witch cannot die before her familiars, or before she has passed them on, by locating the "craft" in the figure of the familiar, lends coherence to the notion from both perspectives.¹⁴ It should be remembered, however, that it is often far from certain whether the label "familiar" was used by the informant or inserted by the reporting folklorist.

Leaving the last complication aside – for most modern English folklore is mediated by folklorists – the nineteenth- and twentieth-century witch's familiar is further characterised by the anecdotal character of the material, such as the Norfolk story about a farmer who had named his horses after the three familiars of a witch and was told that they would never thrive; only one did, and only after his name was changed.¹⁵ Or the story from the north of England about a hare shot by a silver bullet that made a witch die at a distance, her last words being: "They have shot my familiar spirit."¹⁶ Only a few stories appear more substantial; for instance, one about an old lady in Loddon (Norfolk) who kept her imps in a small wooden box, "and it was said that she made them bite the breasts of women who wanted to become witches."¹⁷ The same applies to the Somerset tale of an old witch who kept cats and toads and who would "send the toads after" whomever annoyed her.¹⁸

There was an old witch over to Broomfield used to keep cats and toads and if she didn't like you she'd send the toads after you. She lived in the cottages at Rose Hill – they've fallen down now, and if anyone did anything she didn't like she'd say, 'I'll toad 'ee', and people was all afraid I s'pose. I knew the carter who worked over to Ivytin Farm and he had to go to Bridgewater with the cart with a load of corn and she come to the door and asked him to bring her a couple of sacks of coals back. Well, he forgot and when he come to pass her cottage she came out for her coals, and she shook her fist at him and said, 'I'll set the toads on 'ee.'¹⁹

In the view of the compilers of *The Lore of the Land*, the toads derived from Revelation 16:13-14, which refers to unclean spirits coming like frogs "out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet." In Somerset the idea that witches cultivated toads was widespread, although "toad companions were never actually referred to as imps or familiars," and so Owen Davies concludes, "I have found no evidence that they were popularly thought to have any satanic associations."²⁰ Their role, however, was somewhat broader than just stealing milk. The Yorkshire story earlier in this section presents a mixture of a material familiar with the motif of milking at a distance; the stool *containing* the

¹⁴Westwood and Simpson, *The Lore of the Land*, 64, 640.

¹⁵Mark R. Taylor, 'Norfolk Folklore', *Folklore* 40 (1929), 113-133, esp. 128.

¹⁶William Henderson, *Notes on the folk-lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London 1866), 167. Cf. Kathryn C. Smith, 'The Role of Animals in Witchcraft and Popular Magic', in: J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russell, *Animals in Folklore* (Ipswich 1978), 96-110, esp. 103.

¹⁷Westwood and Simpson, *The Lore of the Land*, 507.

¹⁸Westwood and Simpson, *The Lore of the Land*, 638.

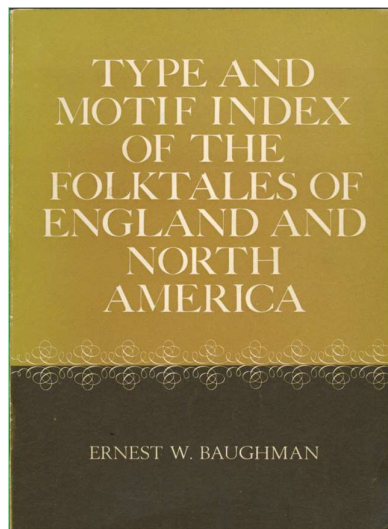
¹⁹Ruth L. Tongue, *Somerset Folklore* (London 1965), 74-75.

²⁰Owen Davies, *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (Bruton 1999), 138.

milk presents the connection with the familiar. The same applies to the goose. The notion of milk-sucking animals nevertheless did exist, although in a weak form. Thus a witch in Broughton “used to set hedgehogs to milk the cows of those she had a spite against,” which is immediately followed by “and it was commonly believed that at times she used to turn herself into one.”²¹

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Of course, witches' familiars feature with some abundance in early modern pamphlets. I will pay attention to them in a later contribution. Here, it needs to be remarked that the confusion of folklorists' notations with informants' accounts in early modern documents wrongly supposes a timelessness of the folklore records. Although they are no substitute for historical research, nineteenth-century folklorists' notations do tell the reader something about what nineteenth-century people thought, even if, as is the case in England, hardly anything is known about the popularity of a particular text. Comparison with folklore collections elsewhere in Europe, makes it abundantly clear how problematic the English records are; due to lack of material there is hardly any way to separate the individual story from more widely spread notions held among particular groups of people. But that is not to deny the value of the texts individually. Modern ideas did not appear out of the blue, and there is still the question of how particular features originated.



You can read the pdf of the article from [HERE](#)

²¹Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore*, 198.