

# Livonian Werewolves: Assessing Their Historical Significance Through the Case of Old Thiess

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Received: October 19, 2022 Accepted: November 23, 2022 Online Published: November 30, 2022

doi:10.5539/res.v14n4p61

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v14n4p61>

## Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the phenomenon of Livonian werewolves from the early modern era (1500-1700s). Noting their uniqueness in comparison to contemporaneous werewolves hailing from other geographic areas, the paper suggests that the Livonian werewolf is a metaphor for Livonian society at that time, one which was characterized by social turmoil and strict class hierarchy. This metaphor was utilized by different classes to establish their own interests in society, and thus the paper concludes that the werewolf is a mutable artifact whose value is contingent on its social context. This is demonstrated with the particular case of Old Thiess—a poor, elderly Livonian peasant who gave an unorthodox and anomalous testimony when accused of being a werewolf. In his court statement, it is shown how Thiess was in fact alluding to social tensions by lambasting the rich German elite and establishing the righteousness of the peasantry, of which he was a member of. A close reading method was utilized on the trial transcript of Old Thiess, translated from Hermann von Bruning's *Der Werwolf in Livland*. Through a contextual reading of Livonia's social atmosphere, the paper draws connections between the content of the trial to wider societal disturbances happening at the time.

**Keywords:** early-modern baltic, livonia, old thiess, social history, werewolves, cultural history, microhistory

## 1. Introduction

It was April 1691, in the district of Wenden, some 90 kilometers northeast of Riga, the capital of Latvia. A trial was being conducted on a village thief named Pirsen Tönis. An unexpected turn of events happened when one of the witnesses, the local innkeeper Peter, smiled (Ginzburg et al., 2020; Bruiningk, 1962). This inappropriate gesture—so at odds with the solemnity of the circumstance—merited an explanation to the judges. When asked "why did he do that?", the answer was illuminating—Peter found it funny that his tenant, an old, poor, and "thoroughly powerless" individual named Thiess (a nickname for Mātiss, the Latvian equivalent for Matthew) had to swear the prerequisite oath of honesty for testifying at the trial (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Thiess had a notorious reputation of "going around with the devil and was a werewolf" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Peter knew that Thiess, being the stubborn, inveterate zealot he was, would say things that would irritate, or even shock the judges. The embedded humor thus lay in the oath's ineffectuality: swearing on God might spur other people to tell the truth, but certainly not Thiess, whose warped beliefs had made him fearless of such measures. With their interest piqued, the judges shifted their attention from Tönis to this octogenarian, potentially seeking a more meaningful target to indict and validate the authority of law. Little did they know that this attempt would backfire, and instead of tacitly submitting to their narrative that he partook in crime as a werewolf, Thiess vehemently argued that he was in no wrong while transformed.

The elderly peasant narrated with detail his experience as a werewolf much unlike the stereotypical man-beast we today and the piously German, Christian judges of high social status associate with. Replacing the bloodthirsty man-eater who transforms with each full moon and dies by silver ordnance was a lupine Robin Hood who hunted witches, eradicated evil, and distributed stolen food to the common folk (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Rather than pleading guilty to making a pact with the devil as a werewolf, Thiess argued his clear conscience; in fact, he went further, professing that the "devil was an enemy", and he was doing good for society (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Faced with a barrage of unrelenting questions that sought to prove his culpability, Thiess stood firmly on his own and rejected everything as misinterpretation or slander, claiming that "he understood these things (implications of being a werewolf) far better" than the court (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Underneath his decrepit exterior lay a powerful, spirited personality that opposed everything the judges stood for. His unique portrayal of the werewolf isn't just a frivolous concoction to be dismissed; it reveals social, ethnic, and to a lesser extent—religious—tensions in early modern (approximate time frame of 1500-1700s) Livonia, a historical region encompassing the majority of the modern-day nations of Latvia and Estonia. Particularly, we can decipher ancient,

simmering animosities the ethnically Livonian peasants of low social status directed towards the wealthy German aristocracy who had colonized the area since the early 1200s through the lens of Thiess' werewolf.

In comparison to Bruce Lincoln's argument in *Old Thiess, a Livonian werewolf: a classic case in comparative perspective*, which saw the werewolf as a discourse solely utilized by the poor, this paper argues that the metaphor is bi-directional—the German Elite can use it as well. This is demonstrated by contemporaneous lycanthropic accounts with different messages from Thiess' case. Another contribution to previous literature is the paper's attempt to illustrate and clarify the different types of tensions and their individual contributions to the construction of Thiess' werewolf. A more in-depth account of how these tensions came about and their particular relation to the phenomena of werewolves—and particularly, the case of Thiess—is carried out with a detailed historical analysis following the first section. The paper also undertakes a comprehensive treatment of the wolves' cultural significance in Livonia to flesh out the feasibility of this micro-historical approach. Most importantly, instead of suggesting morphological and anthropological commonalities with lycanthropic phenomena from other geographic locales as Ginzburg, Höfler, and Eliade did, this paper stresses the importance that the phenomena of Baltic lycanthropy in the early modern era can only be understood in its unique spatial, cultural, and temporal environment.

One example amongst many, the peculiar phenomenon of lycanthropy—the transformation into werewolves—was a recurring motif in Livonia from the 1500s to the 1700s (Donecker, 2012). As Stefan Donecker explains, “throughout the seventeenth century, the werewolf was one of the focal points of Baltic ethnography” (Donecker, 2012). Indicative of deviousness and barbarity, these creatures were looked upon negatively. Yet, surprising cases such as the one of Thiess curiously portrayed these werewolves in a gentle, even positive light. This paper uncovers the significance of this mythical creature, arguing that it is a fantastic metaphor for the milieu in early-modern Livonia—one which was heavily characterized by ethnic, social, and religious stratifications. Rather than being a corporeal entity, the werewolf is a literary figure that unveils relevant, pertinent conversations on major social issues. It is *utilized* by both the wealthy aristocratic Germans and the poor Livonian peasantry, including Thiess, to further class interests and exert control in society. Connecting the mystical figure to wider circumstances of external war, internal conflicts, and long-standing ethnic hostilities between the Germans and the Livonians, the werewolf provides us a rare, unadulterated glimpse of early modern Livonian society

## 2. Old to Early Modern Livonia: A History of Discord and Turbulence

Livonia has always had a turbulent history. Situated far away from the metropolitan influences of the dominant civilizations of Rome or Greece, it is on the periphery of classical *mappa mundi*—medieval maps. The strong connotations of paganism and “backwardness” thus invited numerous religio-military expeditions ever since the 12th century to appease the voracious Christian appetite for evangelization. In 1193, Pope Celestine III called for a military conversion of Northern Europe, and German warrior-priests such as Berthold of Hanover and Albert of Riga fought a “perpetual crusade” to establish ecclesiastical states following the Catholic faith (Plakans, 1995). Direct resistance was fierce: Berthold, a German warrior-monk and the first major figure in such continuous takeovers of Livonia, saw an untimely death by the pagans who opposed him. Even after agreeing to a truce, hostility still resumed whenever Christians stepped across their fortifications into pagan territory, and scuffles would ensue. The struggle seemed irreconcilable, and to fight fire with fire, Pope Celestine's successor, Pope Innocent III, called for a formal crusade with much greater organizational scale than its previous unofficial incarnations. To avenge Berthold, Albert of Riga founded the Livonian Brothers of the Sword in Riga (also known as the Livonian Brotherhood), and equipped it with sufficient manpower to permanently settle after conquering the region (Plakans, 1995).

Concurrently, Albert saw the trade potential of Livonia, being a nexus between Slavic Russia, Scandinavia, and Germany, and induced the development of the established Hansa presence in Riga (Dollinger, 1970). The Hanseatic league—a loose confederation of German city-states that shared a common legal body of protection on trade and commerce—had made forays into the less developed Baltics to economically exploit the untouched woodlands rich in fur, resin, wood and other commodities (Raun, 1991). The enduring success of the Hansa provided impetus for sustained migration, and “Germany had not ceased to send the flower of its aristocracy, the élite of its burghers, its monks and its priests, its merchants and citizens, its landsknechte and mercenaries to these northern coasts” (Zimmern, 2015). While never large in numbers—foreigners constituted roughly 5-6% of the Livonian population—an insidious German colonization more subdued and continuous than its military counterpart had begun to take root in the Baltics since Lübeck traders affirmed a presence in Riga in the 1160s (Henricus, 1961). The Baltic German merchants were xenophobically exclusive, which was reflected in severe restrictions to non-German traders. Within the same walls, native Livonians and Russian traders were barred entry to direct trade with other Hansa ports, and guilds rejected apprentices of non-German ethnic stock since the mid-14th century (Henricus, 1229/1961). Wealthy and thus powerful, Hansa merchants monopolized the economy in Livonia. Already, we see a noticeable racial divide manifested through differences in wealth, status, and privilege, which can also be gleaned from a reading of Thiess' case.

While military advances had been made by Albert and the vast territory was nominally controlled after the last untamed region, Courland, was titularly incorporated in 1230, relationships between the natives and the foreign conquerors remained rocky (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). Notably, the Livonian Brotherhood was nearly decimated in a disastrous defeat in the Battle of Saule in 1236 by a band of indigenous Semigallians and Samogitians. Worse still was the reaction: prompted by the victory, fellow subjugated ethnic groups rekindled the flame for independence. 30 years' worth of conquest left of the Daugava River evaporated within years (Raun, 1991). The defeat was so complete that the Brotherhood had to be subsumed under a larger chivalric order—the Teutonic Order—to survive, eventually becoming an autonomous branch named the Livonian Order. At least in the early stages of Livonian history, the relationship between the foreign conqueror and the local peoples never constituted a unilateral projection of power, but can instead be figuratively described as a pendulum that oscillated temporally, with neither side claiming complete dominance. Until the consolidation of the Livonian Order in the 1300s, when there was a gradual but definite subjugation of the local populace, direct resistance in the form of uprisings were still a recent memory in the time of Thiess. Even as late as 1341 on St George's night (April 23), battle cries such as “kill all the Germans along with their wives and children” ringed throughout the Duchy of Estonia, where a massive peasant revolt took 2 years to suppress and ended up being so ruinous that the region was sold for 19000 marks to the Teutonic Order. (Raun, 1991) Through an understanding of early Livonia's society, the portrayal of Thiess' werewolf as the antithetical image of the judges' preconception finds justification in the history of bad blood between the poor Livonian masses—of which Thiess was a part of—and the aristocratic Germans—of which the judges represented.

Following the establishment of the order, a different kind of tumult took place: a multi-pronged conflict centered around the disagreeing interests of significant players such as the large city states, the Catholic church, the military elite, and external powers. These new social struggles were more complex than the previously binary tensions between conquered and conqueror. Most salient were the internal conflicts between the city states, the Church and the Monastic Order, as well as external conflicts prompted by nations such as Denmark, Russia, Poland-Lithuania and Sweden. From the outset, the Church and the Order were starkly different entities: Even though both nominally existed in the name of God, the Catholic Church heeded callings from Rome or Avignon, while the Livonian Order was an independent entity of chivalric knights premised on Christian virtues. Holding considerable political sway, the Catholic church were landowning nobility who had vassals, but so was the Livonian Order (Plakans, 1995). The two thus often engaged in direct conflict, coming into odds in civil war from 1297-1330. To worsen matters, city-states such as Riga, which have increased in prosperity due to trade, became both a target of contention by the two parties but also an independent actor due to the mighty leverage from the wealthy Hanseatic merchants and the urban elite. Hence, the city was gradually emerging to be of crucial importance in influencing the political climate of Livonia. The diversification of powers inevitably resulted in fault lines within Livonian society as the region “retains an increasingly archaic confederation character” (Plakans, 1995). Rather than being efficiently centralized, power was diffused among multiple players vying for control, engendering constant dissent and social turmoil. The ruling class often engaged in intrastate conflicts, and the peasants suffered collateral damage to their economic livelihood and security, with many moving to cities to ensure greater stability (Raun, 1991). Internal weakness thus allowed for dissatisfactory sentiments among the peasants targeting the feeble authorities, potentially conveyed in metaphors such as the werewolf. The burgeoning presence of friction within society can be seen in the introduction of the diet (*landtag*) in 1419, an initiative whereby representatives of multiple parties in society sought to reconcile arguments by holding occasional assemblies to discuss important questions (Raun, 1991). Yet, such measures were often ineffective due to deep-rooted vested interests which were often at odds with each other (Raun, 1991). Appealing to foreign powers for help had thus been a recurrent theme whenever internal disagreements became intractable. For example, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was called upon as allies in the Battle of Turaida in 1298 by the city-state of Riga to fight against the Order after an unsuccessful mediation of disputes by the archbishop (Urban, 1994). This instance of foreign intervention would only herald the start of many more in the next few centuries. Political impotence engendered by internal division invited land-hungry neighbors that sought to gain this commercially viable territory. An already deteriorating domestic climate was exacerbated by foreign incursions.

External interference from Muscovy under the reign of Ivan the Terrible culminated in the Livonian war (1558-1583), a grueling campaign that saw complicated alliances, unforeseen developments, and perennial changes in territory (Raun, 1991). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Denmark, Sweden, and Transylvania all partook in this protracted conflict. Ransacked by multiple invaders, Livonia changed from an order into a confederation into a duchy then into a kingdom in a short span of 30 years. Following yet another 30-year war fought between Poland and Sweden from 1600-1629, a climactic closure was finalized by transferring the Duchy of Livonia and Estonia—Polish territory at that time—to Sweden (Raun, 1991). Yet, even such peace was tenuous, as the “struggle for hegemony between these two powers remained unresolved” (Raun, 1991). In summary, as Toivo Raun put it, incessant warfare from the 16th and 17th centuries “devastated Baltic life” (Raun, 1991). Plague, famine, and poverty were widespread, especially in Northern Livonia, where contemporary Swedish records noted massive population outflows happening in coincidence with the most

geographically contested sub-region in the war (Raun, 1991). Warfare greatly weakened the already ineffective power centers of Livonia, allowing submerged historical tensions between the ethnic Livonians and Germans to resurface. In Harjumaa and Läänemaa, the most serious peasant revolt within 200 years happened in 1560 as 4000 farmers torched noble estates in a fit of anger. In a descent towards anarchy during the Livonian War, we once again note strong negative sentiments towards the elite manifested through direct confrontation, although that became increasingly rare with systemic changes to society as expounded below (Raun, 1991).

Meanwhile, structural changes were happening within the farms and villages as the different parties in Livonian society vied for control, furthering social divisions. Due to its recent incorporation into Europe civilization proper, institutions such as manorialism and feudalism held root very late in Livonia, which was often agreed to be around the 16th century and the 17th century (Raun, 1991). Before that, Livonia did have social stratification based on wealth and prestige, but there never appeared structurally permanent features of hereditary servility or protection systems that defined institutional feudalism. Rather, the majority of the landholding farmers—the *adramaa*—were beyond the reaches of ecclesiastical control and governmental taxation, and there existed a sizable proportion of a fluid population including free and landless peasants that had sufficient geographical and social mobility (Raun, 1991). Many “fleeing peasants” flocked to big cities such as Tartu and Riga by hearsay of prosperity or to escape debt in the late 14th century, and it was only in the late 15th and 16th centuries that taxation, or *kumnis*, increased to a relatively significant number of 25%—signifying the expansion of seigneurial powers (Raun, 1991). Entrenchment of institutions concurrently developed in the time of Thiess, where strong relations of dependency become fixed. Rather than tilling on farms out of economic advantages, peasants’ role in society were culturally codified and systemized with the emergence of terms such as *Errbauer* (hereditary peasant) and *Eberherr* (hereditary lord) (Plakans, 1995). By institutionalizing socio-economic differences, the divide between rich and poor grew greater, eventually being manifested along ethnic lines. Most notably, it was first recorded in the 16th century the cleavage between the *undeutsch* (non-German) peasants and the *deutsch* (German) elite, a narrative that became embedded in Livonian lycanthropic accounts (Plakans, 1995).

Social tumult and instability caused by power-hungry authorities competing for dominance and an increase of fiefs, vassals and manors under institutional change have accentuated already existing divides during the 16th-18th centuries. In regards to the second factor, Stefan Donecker pointed that the late institutional developments indicated that contemporaries in more “civilized” regions of Europe regarded Livonia to be “notorious for its strict system of serfdom” which they deemed “oppressive and unjust” (Donecker, 2012). Under the immediate strain between the wealthy Germans and the Livonian peasants was a history of ferocious resistance against authority in the form of uprisings and revolts, partly contributed by deep elements of paganism uncorrupted by relatively recent attempts to Christianize. Civil strife combined with large scale foreign invasions in recent years have made Livonia politically unstable, a powder-keg prone to explode and unleash unresolved tensions. In comparison to contemporaneous France or Britain where efficient centralization have led to relative stability characteristic of their absolute monarchies, Livonia’s feudalistic political climate and constant foreign interference provided a unique opportunity for the marginalized populace to oppose the dominant classes (Plakans, 1995).

### 3. Livonian Werewolves: An Expression of Social Milieu

It is in this milieu of the 1500-1700s where we see an explosion of contemporary records on lycanthropy. The earliest direct attestation of werewolves in Livonia was by Sebastian Münster, an influential German humanist who, in his 2nd edition of his 1550 book *Cosmographia*, explicitly emphasized the ubiquity of such phenomena in Livonia: “In this land there are many sorcerers and witch-women ... (who) become wolves, roam about, and cause harm to all they encounter. Afterwards they transform back into human shape. Such people are called werewolves” (Donecker, 2012). First among many, Münster’s ethnographic account of the exotica in Northern Europe prompted more detailed mentions on Livonian lycanthropy. Olaus Magnus, an exiled Swedish archbishop, dedicated 3 chapters to Baltic lycanthropy in his 1555 book *A Description of the Northern Peoples*. On special occasions (notably the Feast of Christ’s Nativity), “in the night, at a certain place there is gathered together such a huge multitude of wolves changed from men that dwell in diverse places”. These werewolves “set upon the houses of men that are in the woods with wonderful fierceness and labor to break down the doors” and engaged in characteristically human acts such as “invade(ing) beer cellars and drink some barrels of beer or mead” (Donecker, 2012). Following accounts were also made by numerous scholars and theologians such as Kaspar Peucer and Hermann Wittekind between 1570-1590, who argued the presence of werewolf bands several thousand strong driven by a tall man with a whip. The abundance of evidence suggests that Livonian lycanthropy was not only ubiquitous, but also unique. Contemporary accounts in other regions of Europe remained few and far between. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*—the most important document on medieval heresy—lycanthropy only occupied fragments due to their tangential nature to witchcraft (Institoris, 1494). Additionally, William E. Monter has noted: “available evidence indicates that in most parts of Christendom, werewolves were extremely rare” (Monter, 1976). In times of turmoil, the resurgence of fantastic, grotesque monsters “seem to exemplify the discord of the times”, as suggested by Norman R. Smith (Smith,

1980). Half-beast and half-man, the werewolf is an apt metaphor for the renunciation of human sensibility and a deterioration into bestial disorder. It is an imaginative figment which exaggerates and romanticizes the squalid situation in society, a conduit to materialize such abstract emotions by giving them a physically tangible form. The Livonian werewolf, being so intensively recorded in a relatively short period of time, seems to be a fitting expression of the religious, ethnic, and social strife which epitomized Livonian society in the 1500-1700s. Haunting the Baltic imagination in the time of strife was the furtive shape-shifter who roamed the countryside.

#### 4. The Case of Old Thiess: A Close Reading

Yet, by undertaking a more specific analysis, we can see that Livonian werewolves differed not only from their ubiquity, but also in their behaviors, personalities, and characteristics. A deeper answer is required to account for their layered qualities. Unlike the one-dimensional demon that we are often familiar with, the werewolves were often portrayed to have greater richness and depth in character. In the case of Thiess, the central point of conflict lay in Thiess' proclamation that while transformed, he was beneficial to society: he was a "hound of God" (*Gottes Hunde*) who ran to hell, battled witches (*Hexen*) to take back the grain blossoms that these agents of evil had unjustly procured, before sharing it with the populace (Ginzburg et al., 2020). This ran contrary to the judges' designation of werewolves, whose mere existence was indicative of satanic influence as according to Christian theology, it could not be a creature of God. The soul is the "image of God", and the only suitable carapace for such a holy entity was the human body (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Fundamentally, the werewolf's blurry ontological status as a shape-shifter threatens the establishment of biblical taxonomy, which demarcated mankind to "have dominion ... over all the wild animals of the earth" (Darnton, 1984; English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis. 1:1-26). The werewolf destroys such hierarchy by blatantly admitting man and beast can coexist as one. It is likely that while centuries of Christianization had ostensibly reduced the "backwardness" associated with Baltic paganism, deep, penetrating attempts to thoroughly proselytize remains lacking due to the highly ineffective power centers. The Church, much less powerful than elsewhere as it often had to contend with secular powers such as the military and the burghers, was unable to exert unyielding influence conducive for complete Christianization. This was evidenced by strong displays of pagan beliefs still present in the countryside: Elaborate burial rituals, syncretic worship of Christian saints as House Gods, and heavy involvements of tutelary spirits in everyday life (Raun, 1991). Thiess' benevolent werewolf thus partly found its existence in the pagan beliefs of Livonia before Christianity's arrival.

Crucially, Thiess demonstrated human attributes that the highbrow judges would regard as absent in their conceptions of the blood-thirsty beast in the act of eating: "The werewolves tore pieces off with their teeth, and with their paws they stuck the pieces on spits that they found, and when they consumed the meat, they had already turned back into men ... They took salt with them from the farm as they departed" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Both the judge and Thiess were alert to the werewolf's status as an in-between figure between the categorical divide of man and beast, yet their treatments of the werewolf's actions were different. Thiess highlighted human sensitivity when it came to eating, stating that the werewolves transformed into men and ate the meat "roasted" with the condiments such as salt. There was an active effort to emphasize the werewolf's humanness by carefully describing anthropomorphic actions through consumption, a watershed activity that best delineates man from beast as eating cooked food is a fundamental condition of civility. Thiess repudiated the judge's preconceived interpretation of the werewolf: a rapacious beast with a biological penchant for uncooked flesh, being reflected in the inherent surprise in the judge's initial query "why didn't they eat meat raw, as wolves do" (Ginzburg et al., 2020)?

Instead of relenting, Thiess' testimony diverged from the official narrative on all levels. Facing the 9 *Herrs* (an honorific, English equivalent of "sir") of German descent who presided the hearing, Thiess' powerful defense seemed to be alluding to wider social discontent against the powerful foreign elite who often villainized native Livonians by equating them to werewolves. The word "*versipellis*", a byword for Livonian werewolves—translated literally to "turned skin" or "shape shifting"—also had a double meaning of "treacherous" and "deceitful", human qualities that aptly designated the often-hostile attitude native Livonians harbored towards their conquerors (Donecker, 2012). The ethnic dimension of the werewolf is further fleshed out in a little-known yet highly revealing story narrated by German theologian Christian Kortholt (Donecker, 2009). In 1637, his acquaintance, with a band of friends, were invited to a local inn for a drink. Beside their table was a group of native peasants, one of whom offered him a toast.<sup>56</sup> Struggling to comprehend the foreign tongue, the acquaintance was about to reciprocate by thanking him in the most general way possible, but was stopped by his friends who suddenly beat the peasant and chased him out. Little did he know that it was customary practice for beguiling Germans to fall for this apparent act of kindness, and if he had indeed thanked the peasant, he would have transformed into a werewolf (Donecker, 2012). Long gone were the forms of direct confrontation in the 16th to 18th centuries, hence dissatisfaction towards the Germans was expressed in more oblique methods such as trickery, intrigue, and subterfuge. The werewolf is thus inextricably intertwined with the perfidious, devious Livonian peasant whose hatred for Germans remained strong after centuries.

In summary, Thiess' werewolf was an inversion of the traditional narrative. In doing so, he corrected the negative

stereotype of the werewolf, establishing how they were creatures fighting *against* evil forces. But he went further than that. Thiess, in a manner similar to elitist designations of lycanthropy to be a property of ethnic Livonians, launched a counter-attack by equating German ethnicity with evil. The symbolic discourse the werewolf represents can be attested with greater clarity when we analyze Thiess' descriptions of his nemesis. To Thiess, hell was a "storehouse of a great manor", whose lord, the devil, commanded the sorcerers to steal grain for his well-being (Ginzburg et al., 2020). To rectify such a grave misconduct, the werewolves went "to the place at the end of the lake called Puer Esser, in a swamp below Lemburg about a half mile from Klingenberg, the estate of the Herr substitute President. There were lordly chambers and commissioned doorkeepers, who stoutly resist those who want to take back the grain blossoms and the grain the sorcerers brought there" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). The devil and his acolytes stole on a cyclical basis, often happening during St. Lucia's eve, and their unfailing consistency was contrasted by the werewolves' retribution arc, which might not guarantee victory. If that was the case, it could foreshadow infertility for the following year's harvests.

The mentions of a great manor replete with servants and guardsmen were heavily reminiscent of the rich, wealthy German elite who had in the recent centuries established a chokehold presence in the rural landscape of Livonia as overbearing barons of the countryside. This was traceable to recent developments of institutionalized feudalism in the 16th - 17th centuries where unpaid, or *corvée*, labor was established. The seasonality of such raids, combined with the unerring regularity of the procurement of such grain, seemed to be metaphorical parallels to the phenomena of small-scale peasant uprisings and taxation, which was rarely collected in monetary form (Raun, 1991). Meanwhile, from Thiess' narration, we understand that the location of the Lord's dwelling seems to be specifically situated in the local topography, being roughly 4 miles away from Thiess' abode and approximate to the manor of Bengt Johan Ackerstaff, a *Herr* who not only presided over Thiess' court trial but was also his previous employer (Ginzburg et al., 2020). It would not be a baseless supposition to believe Thiess' hatred was specifically directed. The subterranean nature of the manor thus makes sense if Thiess was trying to dramatize and attach certain infernal associations to the German landlord. Perhaps more direct corroboration was found in a separate trial of 1651, when another accused werewolf testified that "the Evil One appeared in person, in black German clothing" (Donecker, 2009). The peasants attributed German ethnicity to wickedness, an ironic reversal of the dominant German attitudes towards native Livonians. As attested by Udo Vulk, "images of demonic evil acquired a concrete embodiment in the figure of the German landlord" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Strong indications of antagonism displayed through the discourse of the werewolf reveal early modern Livonia's unstable politics and class system.

Another curious point of Thiess' testimony is that he never once explicitly mentioned the relationship between peasantry and elite, as well as the ethnic designations that came with this divide. Instead, we circumstantially glean key details that alluded to a bigger picture of social reality. His roundabout manner might seem questionable, but his actions become understandable if we view his exposition as a court defense. Directly decrying the Germans would have disastrous consequences. Crucially, he would suffer the wrath of law for a severe charge: sedition. After all, Thiess' virulence was not leveled against any specific person; rather, it was a discontent directed at the society at large, specifically its ruling class, and at how peasants were not given their due and unfairly designated from birth their socio-economic status. Thiess probably commanded a great deal of respect—not solely due to his age, but also his role as a folk healer, an irreplaceable vocation in the village as they had the ability to confer fertility, health, and prosperity. Both the judges and Thiess would thus surely realize that he could easily utilize his fame to inflame rebellious emotions, posing a considerable risk to authority. Speaking up would be dangerous. Yet, given the unique opportunity to articulate in front of judges that he harbored many ill feelings for, it would be a waste for Thiess to succumb to their narrative. Therefore, he masterfully packaged a wondrous tale rich with meaning and significance, speaking via analogies a collective hatred towards the German aristocracy. When asked "were Germans found among them (werewolves)?" Thiess' answer was intentionally ambiguous: "The Deutsche doesn't join their company; rather, they have a special hell of their own" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Rather than directly associating the German overlord with the devil, Thiess cleverly maintained a distance from that rhetoric; he implied his hostility with great caution via signs and symbols. His seemingly fictitious testimony required interpretation, something which the supercilious judges deigned to undertake. Instead, many of them were satisfied viewing lycanthropy as mere peasant rabble, an interesting curiosity undeserving of further significance. To put a case in point, Heinrich Von Ulenbrock—a German patrician from Riga—denounced werewolves as "deplorable delusion!" and the shape-shifting peasants "maddened by ungodliness" (Donecker, 2012). In this case, Thiess' articulation was a perfect satire: he insults his enemy without them noticing it.

If Thiess' case was a solitary, one-off occurrence, it seems plausible that his testimony might not be in fact a clever disguise of current sentiments in Livonia. It is equally likely to be a rambling of a senile old man at death's door, or the product of an overly imaginative mind. However, many other accounts can be used to corroborate Thiess' testimony. Olaus Magnus, apart from his detailed description of werewolves, also raised 3 anecdotes about Baltic werewolves (Donecker, 2012). The first concerned a peasant volunteer transforming into a wolf to procure fresh livestock for his lord, while the second and third anecdotes were quite similar—in both stories, the serf transformed in order to disprove the

noble's skepticism about lycanthropy. Running throughout these stories was the dynamic between the lord and the serf, the Germans and the Livonians. Kaspar Peucer, in his 1560 work *Commentary on the Most Important Kinds of Divination*, mentioned a young Livonian peasant who collapsed in a banquet. After waking up, he professed that he had transformed into a wolf in order to chase a witch, which had morphed into a butterfly (Donecker, 2012). Once again, we see a transposition of the standard narrative when the werewolves became missionaries of good will. More tellingly, in the 1683 trial of Tomas Igund we almost see a one-to-one reflection of Thiess' account. Igund described how "for twenty years, he went about in wolf form, but he gave his wolf skin to his father's brother." in exchange for "a piece of meat" and a promise "to serve your master faithfully." Witches "lived beside the same place (as the werewolves' lord), whose job is to steal the blossoms of grain and take them to their lord, but these werewolves take them away from them and restore them to their owners, so that they will suffer no loss." Notably, when questioned why there was "prayer at holy dinners," Igund answered that they were meant for a God that had "left the job eight years ago and no longer flies about with the werewolves" (Ginzburg et al., 2020).

The transactional nature of passing the "wolf-skin" from people of different generations and serving a master indicate the presence of institutional organization. Being a werewolf thus initiated an entry to a social network which reinforced the phenomena by ensuring its continuity and persistent influence. Similarly in Thiess, we discover the social nature of the werewolf. When questioned about the origins of his lycanthropic beliefs, Thiess answered that "they have a wolf pelt, which only they put on. He had it from a peasant of Marienburg, who came from Riga, and he turned it over to a peasant from Alla a few years ago" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). One cannot help but hypothesize about the possibility of underground peasant organizations in the stifling atmosphere of early modern Livonia, who would bear arms if they saw injustice too great to bear—possibly gleaned from the perennial themes of oppression, despotism, and resistance in the *dainas*, Livonian folk songs (Ray, 2003). Moreover, as we have seen in Thiess, the werewolves were benefactors of society who sought to address the unfairness Livonian peasants experience on a common basis by hunting the malefactors—the witches. The specific reference to agricultural produce once again emphasizes not only how the struggle was closely intertwined with peasant life, but was more likely than not a direct reflection of reality. Yet, what is more salient—even though it had been discontinued—was the "prayer at holy dinners." Clearly the God of worship did not refer to the Christian God; if that was so, Igund would not have a reason to be tried. Rather, he seemed to venerate a very different God, one who had a fugitive presence and was unconventionally down-to-earth by "flying" with the werewolves for hunts (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Instead of possessing the qualities of omnipresence and omnipotence, this God took on an image of a spiritual leader amongst a band of vigilantes. Upon closer examination, Igund's testimony seems to be an informative attestation on peasantry sentiments towards the German lords.

##### **5. Livonian Werewolves: Being Utilized by Both Peasantry and Elite**

Yet, there can be accounts of lycanthropy that are quite different from the detailed, biographical narratives from the peasantries. We can contrast the case of Igund and Thiess with Kaspar Peucer's *Commentary on the Most Important Kinds of Divination*, which seems to be less of a description of reality and more of an ideologically infused story (Ginzburg, 1990). In the book, he mentioned that werewolves slaughtered cattle, but did not harm humans, and often formed huge contingents that underwent metamorphoses after walking through a shallow river, being led by a limping child while a tall man at the back made sure there were no stragglers. Certain key elements in the story alluded to the same themes we have discovered before, even though the account had a noticeably lurid tone. The nightly procession of crossing a river to achieve a lupine form was indicative of a ceremonial aspect in becoming a werewolf, further echoed by the more prevalent initiatory act of uttering magic words and sharing a mug of alcohol with a fellow werewolf as attested by Kortholt (Donecker, 2009). Similarly, the "thousands of them" were exaggerations, but did point to the communal character of the werewolf. Yet, the atmosphere created was one which instilled uncanny apprehension: a deathly cavalcade driven by a solemn, imposing figure who used the iron whip and led by a hobbling child. Particularly interesting is the imagery of the child. Lameness is an indication of disability, thus rendering a person an incomplete whole. The integrity of man as a bipedal, symmetrical creature is impaired. On a metaphorical level, the werewolf is also a cripple, since it is half-beast, and is therefore an entity distinct from the normal human. If we extrapolate, such incompleteness is suggestive of an infernal association with the Great Beyond, the supernatural realm of death, spirits, and ghosts.

There was thus an indication that werewolves, on an abstract level, were inevitably connected to otherworldly forces potentially demonic in origin. Meanwhile, the dark man reinforced such a mood by highlighting the presence of sinister forces. Comparing Peucer's first-hand account with other sources we have looked at, we can see two drastically different attitudes. It is not surprising that Peucer, a German reformist and philosopher indoctrinated in the standard elite narrative, would seek to paint a negative light of werewolves. This is illuminating: the attempt to disparage the "uncivilized" Livonians reveals unresolved strains within society that required active efforts by the dominant class to cement their positions. Nonetheless, the varying accounts share commonalities, including but not limited to: the non-solitary nature of the werewolf, heavy ritualistic and communal significance in metamorphosis, and the werewolf's "threshold" existence

between man and beast. The lupine figure thus provided a common vocabulary that both the elite and peasant could utilize to their own advantages. The peasants could emphasize the goodness of the werewolf's actions, while the elite were given the opportunity to designate the werewolf as the devil's spawn.

The werewolf was thus not the sole dominion of the native peasants; it could equally be used, interpreted, and twisted to suit the needs of the German elite. The discourse worked both ways, and from the many different characterizations of the werewolf we sense messages meant for different classes. Yet, they all reveal social tensions within society, most crucially via lines of ethnicity, status, wealth, and to a lesser degree—religion. Establishing this precept, we can further understand the uniqueness of the Livonian werewolf in comparison to its other counterparts in different geographical locales.

During the contemporaneous witch craze in Central and Western Europe, werewolves appeared in areas most devastated by religious strife amidst overtones of counter-reformation following the Protestant Divide: Franche-Comte, Lorraine, and Western Germany (Voltmer, 2015). In the Eifel region of Germany, we see staggering lycanthropy accusations nearing the ubiquity of Livonia. Between 1630 and 1635, 22 shape-shifters—mostly werewolves—were tried in the municipal parish of Schmidheim (Voltmer, 2015). But we do not see any ambivalence in the werewolf's character or competing portrayals of it suggestive of an inter-ethnic or inter-class struggle. Rather, we see a bloody murderer devoid of humanity, a hollow shell inhabited by the devil, which is more suited to the religious discourse prevalent at the time where different faiths engaged in ideological wars against each other to condemn, belittle, or denigrate. Serving as “bulwark(s) against the spread of Protestant heresies”, such peripheral regions were possessed with intense religiosity, manifested in the werewolves who were equated to religious waywardness: “forced denunciations of male and female werewolves and shape-shifters were directed against (those) who probably resisted the anti-witchcraft movements” (Voltmer, 2015). A politico-religious complex is more prominent in the werewolf's construction, which seemed to be a product of religious struggle rather than the socio-ethnic strife which defined the Livonian version.

## 6. The Cultural Significance of Wolves in Livonia: How the Werewolf Came About

Yet, understanding the werewolf to be a mouthpiece for social struggles does not mean its existence is completely justified on its utility to transmit abstract ideas via a digestible and evocative image. Another reason why werewolves were so endemically unique and prevalent in Livonia is the cultural significance of wolves. The repeated occurrences of lycanthropy point to a “framework of pre-existing grammar” where the elite and the poor could manipulate to further their own interests (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Social struggles were merely taking advantage of the wolves' strong cultural presence in Livonia, and brought them to the forefront as a more horrifying creature: the werewolf. Here, Ginzburg, a foremost researcher on Thiess, uses linguistic concepts of *langue* and *parole* to illustrate this concept. In this context, the *langue*, or vocabulary, refers to the rich significance of wolves in Livonian folktale. The *parole*, or the articulation of language, refers to the concrete instances whereby individuals proclaim themselves to be werewolves, or first-hand accounts which testify their existence. Importantly, *parole* is both strictly limited by the cultural constraints of *langue* but at the same time engendered by it. This is not unlike our use of language, where despite being restricted by recognized words in the dictionary and acceptable syntax rules, we can also craft many different sentences, words, and phrases with variable meanings. The werewolf's significance as an expression of social tensions thus warrants a deeper dive into a cultural stratum that places special emphasis on the wolf.

Contemporaneous accounts referred to Livonia's geography as a “marshy, flat, densely forested land” (Donecker, 2012). With its nature in relatively pristine condition due to slow economic development and the late arrival of advanced European institutions, its untamed forests had an ancient and mysterious ring to them. Wolves were thus common predators that stalked the undergrowth, preying on unsuspecting individuals. Ilmar Roots, in his doctoral dissertation, noted that as recent as the 19th century, over 111 wolf attacks had been recorded over a span of 50 years from 1804-1853 (Metsvahi, 2015). If we go further back to the 16th or 17th centuries, we find evidence that travelers were often armed with lances, crossbows, blowing horns, and all sorts of protective equipment to fend off against hungry wolves in food-scarce winters (Päärt, 2011). The “overwhelmingly rural” landscape of Livonia would mean that wolves are habitual occurrences that always posed a potential danger to the countryside, preying on livestock and susceptible age groups (Metsvahi, 2015). The image of this forest predator was likely to be deeply embedded in the psyche of non-town dwelling farmers, who constituted most of the population. Deep respect was accorded to these creatures, for the native Livonians knew that they neither had the bureaucratic power nor technological ability to cull these fiends. Wearing a wolf's tooth was thus said to be a talisman which warded off harm, and it was customary to leave offals in the forest to appease the wolves. They were seen as a manifestation of the forest spirit, and their sudden acts of barbarity were the forests' retribution for humans' wayward behavior in the woods (Metsvahi, 2015).

The wolf thus had significant cultural import to the Livonians. It was a wandering brigand that oftentimes came into conflict with the sedentary farmers and must be treated with due regard. It is thus no surprise that this creature was employed as the central figure to express long-standing animosity against the decadent lords who resided in manors



waiting to be robbed. As Peter Jackson put it, “not only did the wolf dissimulate the dog as its undomesticated counterpart, it was also the quintessential ‘enemy of the herd’ and thus a looter’s perfect token of identification” (Ginzburg et al., 2020). The wolf symbolized the untamed nemesis roaming in the forests, a bestial counterpart to the native pagans who were comparatively insulated from German influence. It came out and conducted raids on villages when hungry or threatened, like the occasional harassments peasants performed on the local elite when oppression had passed a tolerance threshold. Instead of manifesting the forest spirit, the wolf symbolized the anti-establishment desire of the natives. As if to argue the wolf’s allegorical purpose, we see a blending of man and beast in the constitution of the werewolf. Assuming a beastly exterior and a human interior, this creature of imagination terrified the lords, and they saw it as a reflection of their disobedient subjects, exaggerating their lowliness by comparing them to beasts. But to the peasants, the werewolf was merely a way to express their discontentment with reality. Wearing the wolf-skin was a badge of honor, not a mark of shame. Hence, when Thiess was acquitted due to insufficient evidence and him not pleading guilty, Judge Ackerstaff noted that he was “idolized by the peasants” (Ginzburg et al., 2020).

## 7. Conclusion

Even within Livonian werewolves, Thiess’ case is *sui generis*. It is an anomalous example, where the accused disagreed so completely with the prosecutors a sensible ending was nowhere in sight. The old man did not conceal his lycanthropy. In fact, he was proud of it.

Again and again, we hear him proclaiming his virtue along the lines of: “(I) have done God much service.” and “werewolves cannot tolerate the devil” (Ginzburg et al., 2020). Neither did he omit details, nor were his professed actions too rose-tinted to be adequately believed; after all, he did concede that he killed many small livestock such as “lambs, piglets, and the like” for sustenance (Ginzburg et al., 2020). There was little evidence of circumlocution or intentional use of diction to blur his testimony, as he expounded and clarified when there were further enquiries—the trial transcript was unusually long, standing at 19 pages. When tried with difficult theological questions, Thiess answered with great perspicacity, hinting to the judges that their questions were heavily inflected by preconceived notions and crude subjectivity. He established his position with great conviction, succumbing to neither “alternating kindness or threats” (Ginzburg et al., 2020). This was the most brilliant moment in his life. In his 80 or so odd years, he finally had the chance to verbalize his deeply held beliefs with clear thinking and sharp acumen that belied his age. But such defiance had a cost. Shaken by his indefatigable spirit, the court reconvened a year later in October 31, 1692 to deliver the verdict: in “regard to lycanthropy, as also the perpetration of other vexatious and highly forbidden misdeeds”, “twenty pairs of blows will be administered by the hand of the *Scharfrichter* (*executioner*) of Lemberg before a public gathering of the peasantry in the parish” for preventative purposes “before he is banished from the land forever” (Ginzburg et al., 2020). This will be the last we ever hear of him. But beyond Thiess, through the werewolf that he identified with, we catch a glimpse of a social history mired in struggles, discord, and oppression. In a region devastated by warfare and strife, the werewolf appears as a lingering specter that personifies disorder and social divides. It reminds us that the ethereal howls of the brute were mere accompaniments to the deathly wails of anguish ringing through the ravaged plains of Livonia.

While this paper has demonstrated how a micro-historical perspective is useful in revealing social phenomena, a more analytical lens can be used to better justify the connection between an isolated event in history and its wider socio-cultural background. Therefore, a suggestion for future studies can be to comb through more lycanthropic sources of early modern Livonia and methodically map their relevance to socio-cultural events at that time. Instead of employing a narrative approach that focuses on one particular case like this paper did, a broader study which grants equal dignity to all possible sources might prove more convincing. New studies can utilize methods such as comparative-historical analysis (CHA) to systematically process primary and secondary sources to form a more precise argument.

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