

"There be yer figure, but where might yer soul be?"

Conceptions Concerning Witches and *Blåkulla* in Sweden and Finland

(Summary)

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Swedes of the Early Modern Period referred to the nightly meetings of witches, the so-called witches' sabbat, as *Blåkulla*. This name was also known in the western parts of Finland, which was a part of Sweden at the time, where the cultural links to Sweden were the strongest. *Blåkulla*, however, was not entirely the product of demonological witch theory, but rather there are many belief and perception layers of different ages to be detected from the descriptions in the judgment rolls. By analyzing these, it is possible to increase our understanding of the processes of change concerning mentalities and folk religion. Firstly, attention here is focused on the term 'troll' as a reference to witches by the Early Modern Swedes. Next, I will investigate how the *Blåkulla* journeys coincide with the descriptions of old legends and medieval visionary poetry. Then I will analyze the various auxiliary spirits of witches. Finally, I will investigate how the Christian and pre-Christian ideas of Hell and the afterlife were brought together in the *Blåkulla* descriptions.



Interrogation of a witch. Topelius, Z., Välskärin kertomuksia, toinen jakso, suom. Juhani Aho. Porvoo 1896.

Concepts of 'troll', 'häxa', and 'noita'

In the 17th century Swedish and Finnish judgment roll material 'witch' is always a 'troll', never a 'häxa' as is the case often in modern Swedish. The origins of 'häxa' can be found in the Southern German language area, where it appeared for the first time in the 15th century legal records in the form 'hexe'. In the 17th century, this concept became established as a reference to a female witch travelling to the witches' sabbat, yet in Sweden this meaning did not settle in until after the great witch-hunts (1668—1676).

The meaning of the concept 'troll' was more extensive than that of 'häxa'. It can be understood as a collective name for all malevolent creatures from the beyond. It resembles closely a being called fairy found in the English and Scottish traditions. The difference, however, is that in the Swedish witchcraft cases the beliefs concerning 'trolls' were linked to the witches, whereas in England the auxiliary spirits of the witches resembled the fairy.

The 17th century Finnish legal documents were written in Swedish, thus 'noita' (=witch) was a 'troll' in them as well. In a Finnish-Swedish dictionary from the 18th century, 'troll' is systematically offered as the translation for the Finnish concept 'noita'. The witch implications of the concept of 'troll' can also be seen in the fact that the tradition that spread from the Western Finland towards the east and the north in the 19th and 20th century referred to a witch practicing cattle witchcraft as a 'trulli' or 'rulli'.

A 'troll' did not possess any particular external marks of distinction. It could achieve metamorphosis, yet usually it appeared in human form. In children's testimonies, as a matter of fact, the witches had only one identifying mark that was repeated from one story to another — a lotion horn reminiscent of a medicine horn. The oldest Swedish accounts concerning a witch's horn can be found in the medieval county laws. In the late medieval church paintings it was closely connected to magical milking and flying: the witches stole, with the help of their auxiliary beings, milk, cream, and butter, and then took the items in their horns to the Devil, whom they reached by flying. During the great witch-hunts in Sweden, the horn was said to contain grease. For example in *Älvdalen* (1668), the explanation was that it was possible to fly with this ointment, yet for example in *Gävle* (1675) its function was more unclear and malevolent.

In addition to a witch, the word 'troll' is also the origin for traditions linked to the mountain troll (sw. *bergtroll*). In the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a very lively collection of such tradition in Norway and Sweden. At the same time, it was also recorded for posterity in Ostrobothnia in Finland — thus, in the same region where the *Blåkulla* beliefs in 17th century Finland were the most common.

The troll tradition involves two significant beliefs. Firstly, the troll could snatch away an unbaptized child from his/her crib and leave in his/her place his own child, which would be referred to as a changeling (*byting*). It could be recognized from its slow learning and its disfigured or otherwise odd appearance. This tradition existed as such during the *Blåkulla* cases of the 17th century, in which the changeling child had been taken to *Blåkulla* and he/she had been boiled into grease there. There

were other flirtations with the changeling myth when the persons accused of witchcraft were claimed to have taken their own children to the Devil in *Blåkulla*.

Abduction to a mountain (*bergtagning*) was another set of traditions that actualized in connection with the witch-hunts. A troll could abduct a person to his place of dwelling or he/she could stumble on it by accident. This dwelling was said to be located on a mountain or a hill. The 17th century Swedish witchcraft cases made references to the mountain where the witches took children as *Blåkulla*. The notion of taking someone to a mountain is apparently of Celtic origin, and they are known also at least in England and Scotland where the takers were the fairies, as well as in Germany (*Tannhäuser*). In all of these countries they were part of the tradition shared by the elite and the common people.



A mountain troll. Olaus Magnus Gothus, Historia om de nordiska folken II, Uppsala & Stockholm (First edition: Rome 1555).

Journey to Blåkulla

Already in the ancient sagas the world was divided into two spheres. The ‘midgård’ (=middle yard) was a world populated by humans, animals, and gods, and it was surrounded by the ‘utgård’ (=the outer yard) populated by trolls and giants. The former represented order and a controlled entity. The latter, however, represented chaos and the opposite world ruled by shapelessness – the afterlife – which threatened the order. This threat actualized in the margins of the controlled area, the gray areas of the borderlines, as well as outside the borders. Also, every uncontrolled crossing represented a threat to the ‘midgård’.

The journey to the *Blåkulla* can be compared to a trip to the ‘utggård’, i.e. the afterlife. The children’s testimonies made frequent references to the notion that one had to travel across a large sea to get to *Blåkulla*. This is in line with the old mythical perceptions regarding the sea or current that surrounds the world. Another element that was repeatedly present in the children’s testimonies — the dropping of metal carved out of church bells and words that were spoken in connection with this

— is representative of the renunciation of the world of humans and its values, and the transferal to the opposite world and its service. In the end, it was a question of an old belief, to which the Christian faith added another layer. It also became the renunciation of the true faith and Christ. The Christian element can be seen clearly during the arrival to *Blåkulla*: the Devil baptizes the children again and signs them into his book. Thus the children became the Devil's own.

Also the meal that was had in *Blåkulla* had a dual meaning: the food that was shared had been a central symbol of socialization even before the Christian faith, yet with the Christian faith the parallel with the Last Communion added its significance even further. Thus, when the children mention that the witches had eaten in *Blåkulla*, this is an expression of their willingness to join the evil. Their own unwillingness, on the other hand, is an expression of the opposite. The same themes are repeated in the stories that described those that had been abducted to the mountain or that had travelled to the netherworld. The impact of the transfer to the netherworld also appears in some of the children's testimonies as such that they cannot see clearly in *Blåkulla*. In folk tales, the loss of the sense of time is an indication of the same phenomenon.



Devil's party according to a wall painting in the parish church of Lohja, Southern Finland. Forsström, O. A., Suomen keskiajan historia. Jyväskylä 1898.

In common thinking mythical places and the points of reference in a person's surroundings became entangled. Thus there were places in everyone's living environment, where the border to the afterlife was thinner than usual. Various beings representing the supernatural were concentrated in those places. Also the taking of children to *Blåkulla* occurred via these points. They included for example the chimney, through which the soul of the deceased was believed to enter the afterlife, the hills or mountains at the border of one's existence, as well as a place like the church or the gallows.

As beliefs, the *Blåkulla* journeys were based on the widely shared conceptions in Europe about the two souls of man. Of these, the *self*-soul – which encompassed the spiritual characteristics of man, his/her personality, and which continued the life after death in the afterlife – could exit the body and take with it also other people's

souls. The psycho-physical basis was, however, found in an altered state of mind: a dream, trance, or a bout of illness could cause the sensation of leaving one's body. Visions or dreams that a person had originated from the cultural heritage storage that the actors shared, which in turn made them more believable or at least possible also in the eyes of other people. The judgment roll materials provide also references inasmuch the altered state of mind was the result of a conscious effort.

The transfer to the afterlife required a metamorphosis, because in the spirit world life continued in a new form. Two-way shape shifting could be done only by shamans and the damned, to which last category the witches also belonged. They usually appeared in the shape of a bird, yet kept their human faces. Children gave accounts that described the souls of witches having had taken the shape of a bird at the moment of execution. The stories are representative of the self-soul's bird figure, familiar from the Christian faith. The Christian element is also represented by the description of evil souls as black birds. The Christian material is represented as well by the theme familiar from the medieval church paintings describing an angel or devil that came to retrieve the dead person.

Auxiliary beings

In 17th century Finland, the *Blåkulla* witch was known at the time mostly in the Swedish-language areas of the western coastal region. The Finnish-language term 'noita' originally referred to a shaman – the keeper of faith, a medium between this life and the next, the keeper of the community's unity. He also possessed the ability to undertake journeys to the netherworld in the shape of an animal, yet he could also enlist the help of an auxiliary animal. Traces of this can be seen in the *Blåkulla* cases: also witches were capable of metamorphosis, and they rode on the back of an animal to the netherworld.

In Finland the perceptions that concerned a witch underwent a change when the change to farming and the Iron Age occurred. The witch became a seer, whose area of expertise was no longer the guiding of souls to the afterlife, but who rather protected the community from its external enemies as well as maintained the internal unity of the community. The seer no longer needed to make soul trips to the afterlife, but rather controlled it with his words. This formed a lasting block to the spreading of *Blåkulla* beliefs in the direction of Finland.

The seer had a sort of an auxiliary spirit in his aid, *spiritus familiaris*, which could be the soul of a restless corpse subjugated for the task. The auxiliary spirit undertook the tasks commanded by the seer and engaged in battle against the enemy on his behalf. The witches also had other kinds of spirits at their service, which were called by the name 'para' (*bjäran, bärän, mjölkharen*). They were spiritual beings prepared by the witch, beings that carried their maker the neighbors' milk and butter; in later tradition also money. 'Paras' are also mentioned in the Swedish laws and statutes for the first time at the end of the 16th century, and they appeared at the same time in the church paintings next to the witch. The 'para' and the *spiritus* had their equivalents for example in the German and English tradition as well. Finland and

Sweden, however, were lacking a widely known element in England. Here the witches did not suckle their auxiliary spirits.

The categories were not, however, even in this respect mutually exclusive or self-explanatory. The auxiliary spirit and animal became mixed in one Western Finnish case, in which the witch was claimed to have ridden to *Blåkulla* with her 'para'. Another woman in turn was inveighed against as a 'para' and a witch. The relationship between a 'para' and its maker was, according to folk tradition, so close that the killing of a 'para' also caused the death of the hostess.



“Paras” and their misdeeds according to a wall painting in the parish church of Lohja, Southern Finland. Nordman, P. och Schybergson, M. G. (utg.), Finlands kulturhistoria: Medeltiden. Helsingfors 1908.

An unclear category is also formed by the devil that appears in the *Blåkulla* cases. During the beginning of the great witch-hunts and occasionally even later the man that appeared before the children or the witches was described as dressed in colorful clothes. Only as the great witch-hunts and the theological interpretation became more common this man became the Devil with a dark appearance. It is also notable that for example in the witness statements taken down in *Gävle* the witches are active functionaries and the Devil remains passive and does not leave *Blåkulla*. It has, in fact, been said that the Devil was after all an auxiliary spirit of the witch, referred to as the Devil by the authorities. The representatives of the Church and the Crown, in turn, had the habit of calling all the otherworldly beings either the Devil or his helpers.

Blåkulla

The descriptions of *Blåkulla* were influenced by conceptions from many periods. On the one hand, *Blåkulla* was described as a large building with its buffet tables, which

reflects the features of the *Valhalla* for the upper classes and the heroes during the Viking Age. On the other hand, it gathers features from the pre-Christian faraway netherworld *Hel*, which has lent such features to the Christian hell as darkness, burning pits and foundries, anthropomorphic demons and other monsters. Although it was not until the Christian faith connected the fate of the dead to morality and made it contingent on how a person had lived his/her life. According to this, some children provided accounts of having seen cauldrons in *Blåkulla*, where the sinners were tormented. One witness mentioned seeing her mother, who had been sorry for getting her daughter into witchcraft.

In the children's *Blåkulla* descriptions the angels came to rescue them from *Blåkulla*, the place they described as hellish. They took them to *Vittkulla* (=white hill) or a lighted place called angel chamber (= *Änglakammare*), where there was praying, hymns were sung, and where one felt comfortable overall. The proximity of heaven and hell can be explained by the connection between the *Blåkulla* tales and the medieval vision literature. It described people's journeys to the afterlife. Usually the journeys went both to heaven and hell, and they possessed elements of ancient Eurasian tradition.

The placement of heaven and hell in close proximity also had its pictorial basis. Paintings describing the last judgment became more common from the 12th century onwards throughout Europe. In the Nordic countries, paintings describing the activities of the Devil and the eternal suffering of sinners became more common from the early 16th century onwards, and the popularity of the last judgment continued into the Early Modern Period. These paintings repeated a particular framework, in which Jesus was pictured in the center. Angels led those that were saved to Paradise and the Devil pulled the sinners into the anguish of Hell. Also the deceased that arose from their graves were present. Thus the content was exactly the same as in the testimonies of the children.

The moralities of the medieval church paintings also created connections between the witches and Hell. On the one hand, they described the witches as flying into Hell, whereas on the other hand they displayed the witches in Hell, suffering their punishment. This message was emphasized with the aid of sermons. The moralities, however, offered material for the *Blåkulla* stories in another manner as well. For example, in the case of the pictures that displayed a saint, there are many examples of people attending church not being able to interpret them in the context defined by the Church, rather than interpret them from the framework arising from their own lifestyle and living environment.

Therefore, the said topic for a picture could be interpreted in a concrete fashion as a celebration that took place with the Devil or another otherworldly being. The judgment roll materials, in fact, provide a clue that the term *Blåkulla* was used by the authorities. The common people referred to the events of *Blåkulla* with the word '*gästabud*', which in general Swedish signifies a party or a celebration, and in some dialects also a wedding. Also, there are signs that the man that appeared before children especially in the beginning of the witch-hunts was called just a man, yet later on he became the Devil in particular due to the interpretation of the clergy and the authorities.



Witch-hunt in Mora, Sweden in 1670. Hertzberg, Rafael, Hexprocesser: kulturbilder ur Finlands historia på 1600-talet. Helsingfors 1888.

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