

Animals' Afterbirths Hung in Trees

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In his *Dorsetshire Folk-Lore*, J. S. Udal quotes an account of 1916 according to which a still-born calf would be placed high in the fork of an ash tree in a hedge, with its head towards the east. The tree had to be a "maiden" ash, that is, one grown from seed. This procedure was thought to prevent abortion in the rest of the herd to which the calf belonged. The custom was observed at Holnest, but also near Glanvilles Wootton (Udal, 1922, p. 253).¹ Similar practices have been noted elsewhere than in Dorset and Somerset, though not always in such detail. A report of 1868 from Danby-in-Cleveland has it that a lamb that was dropped dead or died when still very young was customarily hung in a tree – "properly a thorn, though any fruit- or berry-bearing tree would do" (Opie and Tatem, 1989, p. 65). In 1879, the Devonshire folklorist Sabine Baring-Gould supplied a note in Henderson's *Folk Lore of the Northern Counties*, to the effect that in the Weald of Sussex he had often observed dead horses and cows hung up by the four legs from the horizontal branch of a tree – "a sufficiently ghastly sight". As an example he names a magnificent elm in Westmeston, just under the Ditchling Beacon, that was constantly loaded with dead animals. One spring he had for instance seen two horses and three calves thus suspended. He continues with the remark that he never could ascertain a reason for the practice, other than that it was thought lucky for the cattle. For his part, he confidently advances a mythological explanation, to the effect that the animals were sacrifices to Odin, "hanging being the manner in which offerings were made to him". Baring-Gould further alludes to the custom kept by ancient Germanic tribes of hanging upon trees the heads of horses killed in battle, "as offerings to the god" (Henderson, 1866, p. 134). For us it will for present purposes be sufficient to remark that Baring-Gould's note is prompted by an observation of Henderson's. This is to the effect that on a farm in County Durham, following difficulties one year in rearing calves, and the death of many, the leg and thigh of one of the dead animals had been hung in a chimney by a rope, following which, allegedly, not another calf had been lost (Henderson, 1866, p. 134; cf. Opie and Tatem, 1989, p. 65).

So far the talk has been of carcasses and body parts, generally of prematurely born or very young animals, and the practices now to be discussed are probably only superficially similar, concerned as they are with the exposure, not of a dead animal or part thereof, but of a living animal's afterbirth. In 1939, for instance, a Hampshire informant reports that in that county the afterbirth of a calf would be hung on a thorn. This was believed to prevent fever in the cow (Vickery, 1995, p. 170). According to a Norfolk work of 1935, when a cow had calved, the afterbirth must be hung on a whitethorn, "to prevent milk fever and other ills" (Opie and Tatem, 1989, p. 65). As for Norfolk pig-farmers, we have evidence from 1972 that they would hang the afterbirth on a blackthorn tree after a sow had farrowed, "so that the pigs do well" (Watts, 2007, p. 39). As recently as 1998 the Swedish researcher Jan Ekermann discovered a farm in Bilsdale where at the birth of a foal the custom still was for the mare's afterbirth to be hung on a thorn tree "to bring luck to the new-born". An informant of Ekermann's clearly remembered how, when working at Rookwith Grange Farm near East Witton in Wensleydale in 1937, he saw the placenta, or "cleansing"² as he called it, thrown

onto a thorn tree after the birth of a foal, “to bring the foal good luck” (Ekermann, 1998, pp. 8-9).

Even more recently, on January 31st, 2011, the magazine *Horse and Hound* posted the following on its online forum (www.horseandhound.co.uk): “a question about placentas – what do you do with them?”, which attracted some thirty unlocated responses. Quite a few of these responses were relevant to the matter in hand. Thus the following lightly edited examples:

“xloopylozzax: Dad used to throw it [the placenta] high in a tree or hedge ... while saying a little song/poem. Something superstitious no doubt, never got the chance to ask him.”

“Spook: I think it is supposed to be a hawthorn hedge or tree. Something to do with superstition? ... For some reason, if found, the ‘clacker’ (I don’t know the name for the rubbery thing the foal sucks prior to birth)³ was nailed over the box door for luck.”

“gadetra: I throw it over a hawthorn bush!”

“Laafet: We have to pay for them [the placentas] to be taken away – DEFRA regulations. Before, they were burned or buried.”

In search of parallels we now proceed to the continent of Europe. Our first source of information is Ludwig Strackerjan’s work of 1868, the title of which may be translated as “Superstitions and Legends from the Duchy of Oldenburg”. Strackerjan tells us that, once a mare had given birth, the afterbirth needed to be hung high on a tree, so that the foal would carry its head high. Failing this, the foal would die, or at least it would not thrive. Informants from Dötlingen stated that the tree must be an ash, while those from Schönemoor recommended an oak. In the Marshes, where oaks did not grow, ash trees were regularly chosen. The custom was reported from Butjadingen, Friesische Wede and thence into East Friesland, but also from Goldenstedt and neighbouring parts of Hanover, and from Kneheim near Cloppenburg. In several locations the practice, once wellknown, was now forgotten (Oythe, Grossenkneten, etc.). In Goldenstedt a tree was selected with a suitable dead branch that would be used year in, year out. The afterbirth was left hanging until it disappeared. Anyone unfamiliar with the practice would, on seeing the afterbirth in the branches of a tree, take it to be a lump of old weatherbeaten leather (Strackerjan, 1867, p. 144).

According to a recent short article in an Oldenburg regional newspaper, the practice of nailing a foal’s afterbirth to a tree survives to the present day. Close to a farmhouse, there may on occasion be seen, nailed to a branch of an oak or ash, a strange object resembling a floor cloth hung up to dry, or maybe a tool bag, or a sack torn lengthways. A photograph taken by the author and published alongside the article provides evidence. Apparently the same branch of the same tree is chosen year in year out, the afterbirth remaining where it is until it finally dries out and falls to the ground, to be devoured by animals or ants.

At this point our author exchanges the factual for the speculative. Apart from dialect names for the afterbirth such as *dat Tüch* and *de Hamen*,⁴ he comes up with a synonym “from another region”, namely *Wood* or *Wode*, which he connects with *Wodan*, “a god from heathen times, to whom the horse, that noblest of animals, was dedicated”. This “mythological” explanation is of interest insofar as, like Baring-Gould’s mentioned above, it reflects a happy-go-lucky, unscientific approach that, common as it was among nineteenth-century folklorists, is no longer acceptable. Alongside this mythologising interpretation, the newspaper article gives us a rather more interesting, “home-grown” explanation to the effect that hanging the afterbirth high on a tree will ensure that the foal “will always carry its head high” (“dat he den Kopp alltied hoch dreggt”). Far from accepting this at face value, our author takes it to mean “that the future of the young animal will be assured”. Finally, for good measure, like Baring-Gould he refers to the practice among Germanic tribes of honouring Wodan by hanging horses’ skulls high in the trees of their sacred groves (Fass, 2012; cf. Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, 1934-1935, 6, 1664, but also 763).

Proceeding now westwards from Oldenburg we find ourselves in the Dutch province of Friesland, to the vernacular culture of which Waling Dykstra in 1895 provided a valuable key in his *Uit Frieslands Volksleven*. In this he describes a custom that closely matches those we have so far here reviewed. His description runs: “When a mare gives birth to a foal, it is advisable to suspend the afterbirth, here known as the *haem* or *ham*,⁵ in a tall tree, the higher the better. This is thought to ensure that, once the foal becomes a horse, it will be a high-stepper and good trotter.” (Dykstra, 1895, 2, p. 235). Here we have an explanation that has already been encountered more than once in the foregoing, and, indeed, will recur in what follows. Unlike the “learned” explanations imposed, as we have seen, by Baring-Gould and, as recently as 2012, by Dirk Fass, it is clearly believed in, or at least accepted, by those familiar with the actual practice. Whether or not it is “true” is beside the point.

It will now be appropriate for us, our investigations having brought us to the Netherlands, to give a few examples of our custom as presented in the Meertens-Instituut database containing responses to the question: “What do you do with the afterbirth once a mare has given birth?” The order of responses is not necessarily chronological. All are from the Netherlands and Flemish-speaking Belgium, as presented verbally and cartographically by the Nederlandse Volksverhalen Bank of the Meertens Instituut (www.verhalenbank.nl).

Thursday, January 17th, 1963. KOOIJMAN 0998. “A horse’s afterbirth must be hung high up in a willow. That will make the foal run with its head nice and high.”

Friday, January 18th, 1963. KOOIJMAN 0990. “Once a horse had given birth, the afterbirth had to be hung high up in a willow-tree. That would make the foal run with its head high.”

Tuesday, January 8th, 1963. KOOIJMAN 0777 “They used to hang the afterbirth of a horse in a tall tree, where it dried out. Failing this, the foal would later run with its head down.”

Saturday, April 3rd, 1965. WEV 008606. “In our place, the membrane surrounding a new-born calf was hung on the partition. If anyone had a minor injury, a bit of the membrane was placed on it.”

May, 1963. AMT00807. “The afterbirth was hung as high up as possible in a poplar.”

Tuesday, January 29th, 1963. WEV 0004005. “Father-in-law would hang a mare’s afterbirth in a tree. The afterbirth was hung as high up as possible in the tree in order to make the foal grow strong. Later, the foal was supposed to hold its head proudly upright, and also to have pricked-up ears.”

Monday, January 14th, 1963. WEV 0003503. “Nobody ever hangs a mare’s afterbirth in a tree any more. The informant always used to do that as long as he kept horses. He never had a foal that did badly. Hanging the afterbirth in a tree means that later on a horse will hold its head erect.”

Wednesday, June 25th, 1969. CJ 068805. “When a horse had a foal, the afterbirth was hung as high as possible in a tree. That made the foal into a good harness horse.”

If, alongside such folk interpretations that grow quite naturally from within their context, we seek a “learned” interpretation that will view the facts rationally from the outside, so to speak, and will supplant the mythologising approach already encountered, we shall do well to follow Simpson and Roud, who suggest, on the strength of evidence from France at least, that farmers hanging placentas in trees could be doing so in order to prevent the maternal animal from eating offspring as well as afterbirth (Simpson, and Roud, 2000, 280).

Notes

1. On p. 226, in an otherwise identical account, Udal places the custom at Holwell, which is near Wincanton in south Somerset. The evidence points rather to Holnest, which is in Dorset.
2. For dialect words for the placenta of animals, see for instance Orton et al. (1962-71), III, 1, p. 13.
3. Cf. Smith, 2009, pp. 407-409.
4. The basic meaning of *Hamen*, a fishermen’s term for a bag-net, is something like “covering”, and in parts of northern Germany, but also West Friesland (see below), it has taken on the sense of “afterbirth”. This *Hamen* meaning “net” must not, *pace* Fass and his authority Karl Fissen, be confused with its homonym meaning “fishhook” (Grimm, 1877, 4, 2, pp. 306-307; Götze, 1939, 3, p. 305; Kluge, 1989, p. 290; Pfeifer, 1989, 2, p. 639). Other terms denoting “afterbirth” and calling for further attention are for instance Old English *cildhame* and modern German *Nachfreude*. See Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, 1934-1935, 6, pp. 760-766, and Beitzl, 1974, p. 585.
5. See note 4 above.

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