

DEUTSCHE SAGEN UND LEGENDEN

Frau Perchta



Traditional narratives

According to Jacob Grimm (1882), Perchta was spoken of in Old High German in the 10th century as **Frau Berchta** and thought to be a white-robed female spirit. She was known as a goddess who oversaw spinning and weaving, like myths of Holda in Continental German regions. He believes she was the feminine equivalent of Berchtold, and she was sometimes the leader of the Wild Hunt.

In many old descriptions, Bertha had one large foot, sometimes called a goose foot or swan foot. Grimm thought the strange foot symbolized her being a higher being who could shapeshift to animal form. He noticed that Bertha with a strange foot exists in many languages (German "Berhte mit dem fuoze", French "Berthe au grand pied", Latin "Berhta cum magno pede"): "It is apparently a swan-maiden's foot, which as a mark of her higher nature she cannot lay aside...and at the same time the spinning-woman's splayfoot that worked the treadle".^[8]

In the folklore of Bavaria and Austria, Perchta was said to roam the countryside at midwinter, and to enter homes between the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany (especially on the Twelfth Night). She would know whether the children and young servants of the household had behaved well and worked hard all year. If they had, they might find a small silver coin next day, in a shoe or pail. If they had not, she would slit their bellies open, remove stomach and guts, and stuff the hole with straw and pebbles. She was particularly concerned to see that girls had spun the whole of their allotted portion of flax or wool during the year.^[9] She would also slit people's bellies open and stuff them with straw if they ate something on the night of her feast day other than the traditional meal of fish and gruel.^{[4][9]}

The cult of Perchta, under which followers left food and drink for *Fraw Percht* and her followers in the hope of receiving wealth and abundance, was condemned in Bavaria in the *Thesaurus pauperum* (1468) and by Thomas Ebendorfer von Haselbach in *De decem praeceptis* (1439).

Later canonical and church documents characterized Perchta as synonymous with other leading female spirits: Holda, Diana, Herodias, Richella and Abundia.