

# The Wolf Threat in France from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century

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**A DEBATED ISSUE  
IN THE HISTORY OF PEOPLE AND WILD ANIMALS  
The Wolf Threat in France  
from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century**

Jean-Marc MORICEAU\*

*Abstract* : For a long time, the wolf danger came from rabid animals, as well as predatory ones. During more distant periods, there were undoubtedly more humans devoured by predatory wolves than bitten by rabid ones. “Crisis periods” can be discerned: the 1596-1600 period, at the end of the French Wars of Religion, saw a remarkable number of attacks. It is during the 1691-1695 period that the highest peaks can be observed. This makes it easier to understand the resonance that the publications by Charles Perrault – *Little Red Riding Hoods and Little Thumbings* – might have had during this period.

Almost all French provinces experienced incidents mirroring those seen in continental Europe, from northern Italy to Russia. The memory of these affairs, passed down by witnesses of attacks or by wounded survivors (mostly children when the attacks occurred), very rarely outlasted the mid-nineteenth century. From the end of the Ancien Regime, these extremely localised attacks by “man-eating” wolves had become mere bad memories. In contrast, rabid wolf attacks persisted for longer: the fatal outcome of the illness and the dramatic seizures suffered by rabies victims continued to shock contemporaries until the 1880s. The memory of rabid wolf attacks by animals that struck indiscriminately, regardless of age, sex, or social standing, was also more enduring.

“Marie, aged approximately 7 years, daughter of Jacques Prudent and his first wife, Tiennette Maroyer, was snatched from her doorway by a wolf and devoured in a field. Only her head, one arm and her stomach were found, and nothing besides. These pitiful remains were buried in the cemetery of this church the following day, fifth October, before my entire parish, who had gathered for Sunday Mass.”

Parish registers of La Chapelle-Thècle (Saône-et-Loire), 8 October 1749. (*Archives of the French administrative department of the Saône-et-Loire, online civil registry, La Chapelle-Thècle, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1743-1752, image 66*).

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**F**OR CENTURIES ON END, wolves were considered man's worst enemy<sup>1</sup>. Both France and other European states mobilised extensive resources to contain then eradicate grey wolves, which they had long regarded as the worst of the "harmful" pests. Almost everywhere, very similar financial provisions were made for their destruction. Just as *paga del llop* rewards were customary in Catalan society from the fourteenth century, various *premi per gli occisori di lupi* bounties peppered local decrees in northern Italy and in Switzerland from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. From the bounties in *escalins* offered in Flanders and Brabant since 1397 and possibly before, or the rewards in *maravedis* given in the Region of Murcia from the fourteenth century, to the *tallas de fieras* paid in many villages in the Principality of Asturias in the eighteenth century, people everywhere were encouraged to hunt wolves<sup>2</sup>.

In France, wolves were wiped out between 1882 and 1930. The last reward for killing a wolf that had attacked a human was granted in 1896 and the last reported attack on a human took place in 1918. The last time that a bounty was placed on a wolf was in 1927, in the department of Cantal. However, for several decades, the species has not been native to France. Its presence was reduced to that of roaming, lone wolves until 1992, when the arrival of wolves from Italy signalled its return to the western Alps. During this long absence, spanning two to three human generations, our negative perception of wolves, traditionally fuelled by accounts of tragedy, progressively lost all relationship with reality. So what does the common memory retain of a "carnage" such as that cited in the epigraph, which tells of a little girl of seven, devoured, bones and all, by a wolf in 1749? Undoubtedly nothing, in spite of a priest of what is now France's Saône-et-Loire department wishing to record the incident "for future generations". In France, unlike in some other areas of the world such as India, Turkey, or Russia, the threat from wolves is consigned to an already distant past.

Moreover, perceptions, which began to shift after the Second World War, have been further changed by the reversal of the hierarchy between men and wild animals. The risk of conflict between the two is limited by the way in which the countryside and the environment are managed today. In our time,

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1. Jean Trinquier, "Vivre avec le loup dans les campagnes de l'Occident romain", *Le loup en Europe du Moyen Âge à nos jours*. Studies compiled by Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2009, pp. 1-39

2. Albert Manent, *El llop a Catalunya. Memoria, llegenda i historia*, Lleida, 2004, pp. 152-157 (particularly following the work of d'Albert Curto on the diocese of Tortosa); Mario Comincini (ed.), *L'Uomo e la "bestia antropofaga"*, Milan, Unicopli, 2002, pp. 148-160; Adrien de Melotte de Lavaux, *Le loup dans la légende et dans l'histoire*, Liège, 1938, p. 47; Juan Pablo Torrente, "La chasse aux grands carnivores dans les Asturies au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les *papeletas de fieras*", *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*, 8, 2<sup>nd</sup> semestre 1997, pp. 163-186; Robert Delort, *Les animaux ont une histoire*, Paris, 1984, pp. 326-327.

wolves only create real problems for a small part of the livestock-farming community, itself confined to a few departments in South-East France. Meanwhile, the public perception of wolves has become widely very positive. In the space of a few decades, the status of wolves in a section of public opinion has been transformed: once despised as ferocious, “man-eating” beasts, they have risen to the position of protected “super-predators”. This turnaround is the result of a recent concern to preserve biodiversity, and of ecological issues coming to the front of the agenda. However, the debate is far from settled and the return of wolves on the French side of the Alps has caused tensions to run high in the regions concerned.

### **The Engaged Historian: Intervening for a Rational Debate**

The current debate about wolves challenges the cultural legacy underlying our previous perceptions of these animals. Distortions have impeded proper judgment of the relationship between wolves and people. It is often claimed that wolves do not attack humans – an assumption corroborated by the observations of most biologists today. By extension and without verification, this fosters the common belief that wolves have never attacked humans, except in incidents involving rabid wolves, deemed not worth dwelling upon. This reasoning by analogy flies in the face of past evidence. Some ecologists use it as an argument to secure protection for the predator, thereby even encouraging a second assumption: that the importance of biodiversity, and in particular of wolf conservation, makes revelations that would cast wolves in an unfavourable light inadvisable. For some administrators, particularly those within national parks in regions directly affected by the return of wolves, “political” considerations dictate a degree of reserve. This is perplexing for the observer, and raises the question of whether the wolf recovery campaign necessarily entails withholding certain available information about the animal’s relationship with humans. The connection between the “man-eating” wolf stereotype and real events, long considered self-evident, has consequently become a sensitive and sometimes even a taboo question<sup>3</sup>.

Until the nineteenth century, France was host to one of Europe’s largest wild wolf populations (10 000 to 15 000 wolves at the close of the eighteenth century). It also had one of the highest rural population densities.

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3. This contribution expands on and updates that already made by the author in the collective work, *Repenser le sauvage grâce au retour du loup. Les sciences humaines interpellées*, ed. Jean-Marc Moriceau et Philippe Madeline, Caen, Presses universitaires, “Bibliothèque du Pôle Rural, 2”, 2010, pp. 41-74 (Jean-Marc Moriceau, “La dangerosité du loup sur l’homme. Une enquête à l’échelle de la France (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)”). For readers wishing to pursue the matter further, this work contains all the references to sources that do not appear here, as well as attempts to evaluate the dangers of wolf attacks on humans.

For such a country, the response provided here is necessarily based on multiple archival sources. In light of this, this study has two main objectives:

- to establish the historian's place in an "informed" public debate, by explaining aims, sources and methods, in order to reiterate the ideas put forward by John Linnel in his international enquiry on the fear of wolves<sup>4</sup>;
- to reveal the documentary basis and the first results of a national survey about wolf attacks on humans, in order to understand and help to manage the impact that wolves in the wild have had on the common memory in France.

### **The Historian in a Public Debate**

#### *The Researcher's Position*

It is important first of all to clearly define the objective of the discussion, since it is often distorted by the interpretations of writers outside the discipline of history. Many writings about past wolf attacks rely on popular conceptions, or worse, embody the ideological biases (be they pro-wolf or anti-wolf) of certain sections of current public opinion. The desire to endorse or refute either point of view leads to a manipulation of history. Similarly, the apparent accessibility of documentation to the public increases the risk of anachronism, distortion, or over-generalisation. In the time that has passed between the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries, unchanged word forms have acquired new meanings and some have come to denote different real-world entities. Economic, technical and social upheavals have had an undeniable impact upon the environment, making it important to have a sound awareness of the geographical and historical context. Moreover, in order to advance our understanding, a broad vision of the facts is required. This vision should be based on statistical indicators and a new analytical scope. These are the conditions in which the historian can contribute constructively to the public debate. In light of this, he is, more than ever, compelled to explain the validation procedures used in his research, specifically:

- *critical assessment*: to establish what accounts are available and their degree of authority;
- *differentiation*: by type of attack, according to whether the wolf was healthy (predatory) or rabid;
- *quantification and situation*: to establish the number of attacks recorded, their patterns of change over time and their geographical distribution;

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4. John D. C. LINNEL *et al.*, *The Fear of Wolves. A Review of Wolf attacks on Humans*, Trondheim Norsk Institutt for Naturforskning, 2002, p. 7.

- *identification*: to distinguish between types of attackers and the different cultural perceptions regarding them;
- *contextualisation*: to establish the demographic and sociological impact of attacks.

### *Research Stages*

A first stage, from 2003 to 2007, entailed collating existing work from several hundred references scattered across two and a half centuries of publications. Examination of this huge corpus of sources yielded an inter-regional analytical framework. In order to ensure full national coverage, the archives of the 95 administrative departments within metropolitan France (mainland France and Corsica) were examined. The excellent response rate of 90% opened up numerous research avenues for producing a national overview. Nevertheless, beyond this essential work, a scientific approach required quantitative input. To this end, data on wolf attacks from the existing sources, then from targeted archival searches, were used to produce two spreadsheets:

- the first shows victims attacked by rabid wolves that targeted humans whilst under the influence of their illness;
- the second shows victims attacked by healthy wolves that occasionally preyed on and ate humans.

However, since this represented too great a workload for one person, collective research was required. In the 1990s, the late Jacques Dupâquier faced the same problem when attempting to reconstruct a picture of the social mobility of French citizens from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century. In order to obtain a representative corpus of information covering all of France's departments, he called upon genealogists. This strategy allowed his "TRA" survey to yield a national corpus of 3 000 families<sup>5</sup>, selected for study by surname, using the three initials from which the survey takes its title. The research for this study on wolf attacks followed the same principle, calling upon genealogical organisations all over France. The associative network connecting these thousands of amateur researchers and the availability of their research online accelerated the data collection process. Calls for research were transmitted progressively from region to region, allowing information on over 3 000 attacks to be recovered.

For each attack, the time and place of occurrence, the type of attacker and the label applied to it, and the age, sex and social status of the victims were established. This laid the foundations for a study with a social dimension, as well as an environmental one. These serial tragedies were studied on various

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5. Jacques Dupâquier & Denis Kessler, *La Société française au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Tradition, transition, transformations*, Paris, Fayard, 1992.

scales, from local to national and from yearly progression to decennial and centennial evolution, elucidating the relationship between people (in their attempts at territorial management) and environment. These statistics allowed a preliminary assessment to be offered to the public in 2007. The assessment, entitled *Histoire du méchant loup. 3 000 attaques sur l'homme en France (XV<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (“*The Big Bad Wolf: A (Hi)story. 3 000 Attacks on Humans in France from the Fifteenth to the Twentieth Century*”), includes analyses and specific explorations that are beyond the focus of this study<sup>6</sup>.

In July 2008, the scope of the study was broadened. This allowed the attacks that devastated the historic provinces of Gévaudan (now the Lozère/Haute-Loire) and the Auvergne from 1764 to 1767 to be taken into account. These incidents shed new light not only on large predator activity in a particular setting, but also on a society on the verge of poverty, in a forgotten and otherwise unremarkable province. Unlike the literary and cinematic works that have made huge profits from these incidents, the resulting new work – *La Bête du Gévaudan (1764-1767)* (“*The Beast of Gévaudan*”) – also takes the animal as a source of historical insight<sup>7</sup>. This second contribution reveals the specificity of the term “beast” as a label for wolves that attacked humans, and demonstrates the likenesses connecting these extraordinary episodes throughout history. A comparison with spates of attacks recorded abroad, particularly those uncovered by Hans Kruuk in his work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Holland and Belarus<sup>8</sup>, made those examples that I had already compiled appear less unusual. France is therefore not the only country with a history of attacks. Existing country-focussed research highlights this, starting with archivist Mario Comincini’s study on Italy and natural scientist José Antonio Valverde’s study on Spain. However, despite the sometimes questionable approaches used in such studies, particularly Will Graves’ book on Russia, their impact in public debate has been negligible<sup>9</sup>.

In France, therefore, work on the subject has continued, with active internet forums allowing the historian to draw upon reactions from a

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6. Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Histoire du méchant loup. 3 000 attaques sur l'homme en France (XV<sup>e</sup>- XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Paris, Fayard, 2007, expanded and re-edited in 2008.

7. Jean-Marc Moriceau, *La Bête du Gévaudan (1764-1767)*, Paris, Larousse, 2008.

8. Hans Kruuk, *Chasseurs et chassés. Relations entre l'homme et les grands prédateurs*, Paris, Delachaux & Niestlé, 2005, 224 p.

9. Mario Cominchini (dir.), *L'Uomo e la “bestia antropofaga”. Storia del lupo nell'Italia settentrionale dal XV al XIX secolo*, Milano, Unicopli, 2002, 337 p.; José Antonio Valverde, *Los lobos de Morla*, Al Andalus Ediciones, 2001, 550 p.; Will Graves, *Wolves in Russia. Anxiety through the Ages*, Calgary, Detselig, 2007, 223 p. (particularly chapter 6: “Wolf attacks on Humans”).

previously unreached audience<sup>10</sup>. The publication of the *Histoire du méchant loup* in 2007 provoked online debate within circles that are knowledgeable about wolves, but under-informed about historical research. In order to respond to forum users' questions, it seemed necessary to bring the public up to date<sup>11</sup>. Certain key points, although already extensively addressed, needed revisiting. These included the behavioural differences between predatory and rabid wolves, the reliability of accounts by *Ancien Régime* priests, the importance and variety of other sources documenting wolf attacks, and the meaning of the term "beast" (used in descriptions of the most traumatising spates of attacks). Alongside these simple reminders, other details provided increased precision. These included the role of stray dogs and possible dog-wolf crosses, as well as facts about comparable incidents outside of mainland France. Statistical records were also somewhat expanded (from 3 069 attacks to 3 272). A second edition of the work in 2008 presented this complementary information to readers<sup>12</sup>.

However, one issue remained unresolved: that of the quantitative approach that attempts to compile statistical series from a collection of detached cases, each primarily of strictly local impact. On this matter, the new light brought by sociologist Antoine Doré's 2010 interdisciplinary, collective work, which opens up a new stage in this enquiry, highlights the fact that that any scientific conclusion is a product of the particular perspective taken<sup>13</sup>. The subject, therefore, is not closed: this study assumes

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10. The key sites include: [www.citedurable.com](http://www.citedurable.com), "Une histoire du méchant loup" (19 May 2007); [www.loup.org](http://www.loup.org), "Histoire du méchant loup. Quelle contribution au débat sur les grands prédateurs ?"; [ferus.org](http://ferus.org), "Histoire du méchant loup de J.M. Moriceau : vos réactions" (4 Jan. 2008); [www.agrobiosciences.org](http://www.agrobiosciences.org), "Le loup à la fois révélateur de l'histoire des hommes et de l'histoire de la ruralité" (May 2008); [loup.fne.asso.fr](http://loup.fne.asso.fr), "L'histoire et le grand méchant homme"; [www.rue89.com](http://www.rue89.com), « Fallait-il avoir peur du grand méchant loup ? » (27 Dec. 2007); [blogs.laprovence.com](http://blogs.laprovence.com), "Qui a peur du loup ?" (12 Jan. 2008); [la-meute.org](http://la-meute.org), "Histoire du méchant loup. Quelle contribution au débat sur les grands prédateurs ?" (21 Sept. 2007); [www.planet.fr](http://www.planet.fr), "La chasse aux loups est ouverte" (15 Oct. 2009) – [fabrice-nicolino.com](http://fabrice-nicolino.com), "Un loup vraiment anthropophage" (30 Aug. 2007); [www.legrandcharnier.blogs.sfr.fr](http://www.legrandcharnier.blogs.sfr.fr), "Le Grand charnier en Lozère" (26 Aug. 2009).

11. Faced with reactions such as that of Jean-Pierre Raffin ("Quelques réflexions sur l'ouvrage de J-M Moriceau"), online intervention seemed useful: Jean-Marc Moriceau, "Réponses à diverses critiques sur l'Histoire du méchant loup: Comment passer d'une discussion assez vaine à un débat un peu constructif ?", [www.loup.org](http://www.loup.org), "Histoire du méchant loup. Quelle contribution au débat sur les grands prédateurs ", 4 Jan.2008.

12. Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Histoire du méchant loup...*, expanded and corrected edition, Paris, Fayard, 2008, particularly the foreword, p. I-VI.

13. Antoine Doré, "L'histoire dans les méandres des publics : quand les "méchants loups » ressurgissent du passé", in Jean-Marc Moriceau et Philippe Madeline, ed., *Repenser le sauvage grâce au retour du loup. Les sciences humaines interpellées*, Caen, Presses universitaires de Caen, "Bibliothèque du Pôle rural, 2", 2010, pp. 75-90



its position among other reflections on the place of wolves today and in the past. It galvanizes collective and multidisciplinary research, which in turn expands upon it. It draws upon the findings of others, which supplement the data already recorded, to provide information on almost 5 400 victims.

#### **Mapped and Statistical Data: 5 400 Victims**

If all types of wolf attack data in the sources used here are combined<sup>14</sup>, the provisional total as at 17 September 2010 stands at 5 379 victims. This indicative statistical base is already large. However, it is not perfectly homogeneous; it includes attacks by both predatory and rabid wolves, despite the fact that the two types behave very differently. It was therefore necessary to compile two separate corpora. Although the sets of figures that these collate can now be compared, the collections of sources on which they are based are very different, exhibiting near inverse trends.

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14. On the documentary sources and their use, see Jean-Marc Moriceau, "La dangerosité du loup sur l'homme...", in *Repenser le sauvage grâce au retour du loup...*, 2010, p. 41-74.

*Two Complementary Corpora***Predatory and rabid wolves (5 379 victims)****Two separate sets of victims**

	<i>Victims of predatory wolves</i>	<i>Victims of rabid wolves</i>
Individualised data	1 714 (66.8 %)	892 (31.7 %)
Individualised data from death certificates	1 626 (63.3 %)	352 (12.5 %)
Collective data	852 (33.2 %)	1 921 (68.3 %)
Total victims	2 566	2 813

Attacks by predatory, non-rabid wolves, which select their human victims as they would any other potential prey, almost always target just one individual. Two thirds of the data sources give the victim's name, with most of our information coming from death certificates, which are always for a single victim. Nevertheless, information on victims wounded non-fatally is scarce, coming mostly from administrative enquiries. This creates severe difficulties in finding records that identify wounded victims. Consequently, and because not all deaths are recorded individually, the figure given for predatory wolf attacks is an underestimate.

However, for attacks by rabid wolves, whose illness leads them to indiscriminately strike any living being they encounter, less than a third of the data are individualised and only a minority (barely an eighth of the sample) come from death certificates. Many of the victims died away from the site of the attack and often long after it, because rabies has a very long incubation period of fifteen days to three months, sometimes extending to over a year. In fact, most of our data are aggregated. The documents, written by priests, administrative officials or doctors, often give an overall number of victims, not always distinguishing between those who died of rabies and those who seemingly escaped infection. Moreover, the number of victims per attack varies widely, from one to several dozen. The serial nature of attacks by rabid wolves distinguishes them from attacks by man-eating wolves. It makes them stand out more in documentation, but means that the information about them is often less precise.

During the French Revolution, bounty systems for wolves were centralised. Rabid wolf attacks are more easily located in the resulting collections of documents, yet these collections were inventoried only recently, for the purposes of this study<sup>15</sup>. This explains the change in the

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15. My thanks at this point to Vanessa Pouteau, History Masters student at Caen University, for her careful study of series F10 of the French National Archives.

proportions of the two victim types since the initial calculations in the 2007 *Histoire du méchant loup*: victims of rabid wolves have gone from representing a generous third to over half of the total. Although tracing victims in burial records is like looking for a needle in a haystack, patient investigation would very likely show some reversal of the victim type balance for earlier periods. Nevertheless, regardless of the type of attack, the data collected offer temporal and geographical points of reference around which further research can converge.

The data were entered into two Excel spreadsheets containing a wide range of headings, to allow multivariate statistical processing in the form of pivot tables. For wolf victims whose attackers were not thought to be rabid, 25 analysis fields are used: year (Gregorian calendar), period (1421-1660, 1661-1715, 1716-1750, 1751-1830, or 1831-1918), day of incident (sometimes different from the day it was registered), month, historical parish or town, modern-day town, INSEE geographical post code, administrative department, archival reference, calculated age (based on the baptismal certificate), stated age (on the burial certificate), age retained (which phases in a balance between the calculated and stated ages), victim's sex (female, male or unspecified), incident details (a precise description, which may necessitate a full account of the attack), victim's first name, victim's surname, victim's occupation or socio-professional status (or, for child victims, that of their parents), label used for the attacker ("beast" in wolf form, "ferocious beast", "flesh-hungry beast", "ferocious wolf", "flesh-hungry wolf", "stag-hunting wolf", "man-snatching wolf", "voracious wolf", "bad wolf", etc.), number of attackers (where known), details of the attack (victim strangled, ambushed, caught, or carried away), details of predation (victim partially or entirely eaten), remains found and buried (bones, head, entrails, body parts), approximate time of day, site of attack (road or path, village, field, meadow, named locality, plot, or section), and circumstances of incident (victim going to water livestock, playing in the yard, harvesting crops, tending cattle, etc.). The number of analysis fields is proportionate to the wealth of information, but is subject to gaps in documentation and to the time needed to implement the database and verify the data.

The second corpus contains victims of rabid wolves only. It is currently less rich, since it is largely composed of collective data, which do not specify the identities of victims and would render a higher number of headings useless. For this reason, only 15 analysis fields are used: year, day, month, attack (since a single attack may have had several victims), site (modern-day commune), department, first name and surname of victim, sex, age, label used for the attacker (almost always "rabid wolf"), incident description, comment, time elapsed between the attack and the victim's

death in cases where they contracted rabies, victim's socio-professional category or status, and archival source.

*Wolf Attacks on Men: Geographical Distribution*

Compared to the first results published in 2007 (based on 3 058 victims), the overall geographical distribution obtained for nearly 5 400 victims (predatory and rabid wolf attacks combined) barely differs, in spite of the increase in numbers. Apart from the rise in the position of departments such as Maine-et-Loire (caused by the terrible rabid wolf attacks of 1714, which took over 200 victims) and the Côte-d'Or (poorly represented in the original file), the pattern of attacks in other departments displays uniform evolution. Areas for which there was initially no data, but which are now covered, such as south-western departments (the Landes, the Gers and the Lot-et-Garonne) remain largely spared by attacks. For some departments, there is even no known information (the Pyrénées-Atlantiques and the Aude). The Val de Loire (particularly the current Indre-et-Loire and Loir-et-Cher departments) still has by far the greatest numbers of victims. Except for Corsica (always unaffected because of its island status) and three southern departments (for which a lack of information hampers the statistics), the whole French territory suffered under the attacks recorded.

Overall, the initial observations still hold. Within the area studied, there is a contrast between islands of relative immunity (the North of the Parisian Basin, the South-West, and Lower Normandy) and areas heavily affected by wolf attacks (Burgundy, the Champagne, the Pays de la Loire, North Brittany, and the Auvergne). Two axes can be clearly identified: an eastern, North-South axis from Lorraine, passing through the corridor formed by the Saône and Rhône valleys, to the Alps and the Auvergne, and a western, East-West axis from the Burgundy crossroads, through the South of the Paris Basin via the Loire corridor, to the tip of Brittany. Regardless of secondary distortions arising from the uneven information density, the data collected reveals that wolves were highly present, with large areas affected by the risk.

Is there a relationship between the geographical distribution of wolves and that of their victims? A comparison against the density of wolves caught at the end of the eighteenth century highlights quite a strong correspondence between areas with high wolf population density and high-risk areas.

In the years V and VI of the French Republic (1796-1798), the low numbers of wolves caught in the South-West, Lower Normandy and the northern regions correspond to low numbers of attacks on humans in these areas. In Burgundy, the Val de Loire and North Brittany, densities of both catches and attacks were high. The only anomalies are the Île-de-France and, to a lesser extent, Upper Normandy. These regions rid themselves of most of

their wolves between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. However, the overall map of attacks includes those that took place in the preceding century (in what are now Eure-et-Loir, Yvelines and Essonne). The discrepancy therefore arises from the difference in periods covered. Once this is taken into account, the correlation is striking. Comparison of the geographical distributions of victims of predatory and rabid wolves reveals some discrepancies.

Despite most of the data being individualised, attacks by man-eating wolves appear more concentrated. 41 departments record fewer than 5 victims, 52 record fewer than 10 victims and 16 (including the two Corsican departments) record no victims. This contrasts with the 9 most heavily affected departments, which alone account for 56% of predatory wolf victims (1 315 of 2 566 victims). Research so far shows the most affected departments to be Indre-et-Loire (282 victims), the Loir-et-Cher (197 victims), the Ain (130 victims), Loiret (129 victims), the Haute-Loire (124 victims), Lozère (123 victims), Eure-et-Loir (120 victims), the Isère (117 victims) and Yvelines (93 victims). The majority of victims of man-eating wolves are concentrated in a tenth of the French territory.

If the same calculation is applied for victims of rabid wolves, attacks appear less concentrated. Only 20 departments record fewer than 5 victims and only 23 record fewer than 10. Only 10 departments (including the two Corsican departments) currently have no data. Taking those departments with the most victims, the first 9 account for just 38% of the total (1 082 of 2 813) and 14 must be combined to account for half. Furthermore, this analysis must draw attention to the considerable impact of the attacks of 1714, which account for 244 of the 250 victims in Maine-et-Loire, thus putting it in first position, far ahead of the Saône-et-Loire (174 victims) and the Meuse (122 victims). In general, rabid wolf attacks are more evenly distributed geographically than predatory wolf attacks. This confirms the observation already made in 2007. Finally, if the risks of bias linked to the heterogeneous nature of the sources are reduced by considering attacks independently of the number of victims, the overall distribution of the danger is even clearer.

This final map, which corrects the bias resulting from the unequal human cost of rabid wolf attacks, corresponds even better to wolf population distribution. Rabies is a random illness, above all linked to the density of wolf populations in an area. In this respect, comparison with numbers of wolves killed around the year 1800 highlights the strong correlation.

The sole usefulness of these five maps on a national scale is that they offer an overview of the presence of wolves in France and show the high-risk areas. Both extensions to the European level and finer observations on the national level (using more localised spatial analyses) are required.

*When Wolves Attack : Changing Trends over Three Centuries*

Relatively abundant records spanning almost three centuries (1575-1870) allow an overview by five-year periods. Despite the inevitable biases arising from the varying availability and quality of the relevant documentation, there is every indication of a shift in the main type of attacker during this long timespan. Although predatory wolf attacks appear to have been predominant and victims of rabid wolves remained in the minority until the reign of Louis XIV, a reversal began in 1770. Beyond 1825, it was rabid wolf attacks alone that dominated headlines. This trend was not without consequences for the “big bad wolf” stereotype. Table 1 summarises the pattern.

**Table 1. Wolf attacks on humans over three centuries**  
**Chronological distribution of victims**  
**within the data corpus**

<i>Period</i>	<i>Victims of predatory wolves</i>	<i>Victims of rabid wolves</i>	<i>Rabid wolf attacks</i>
<i>1571-1575</i>	18	–	–
<i>1576-1580</i>	9	1	1
<i>1581-1585</i>	7	10	2
<i>1586-1590</i>	14	13	1
<i>1591-1595</i>	16	–	–
<i>1596-1600</i>	152	–	–
<i>1601-1605</i>	22	–	–
<i>1606-1610</i>	13	–	–
<i>1611-1615</i>	2	7	2
<i>1616-1620</i>	3	2	1
<i>1621-1625</i>	3	3	3
<i>1626-1630</i>	2	14	2
<i>1631-1635</i>	56	10	6
<i>1636-1640</i>	50	0	0
<i>1641-1645</i>	8	7	4
<i>1646-1650</i>	19	12	5
<i>1651-1655</i>	91	11	4
<i>1656-1660</i>	12	10	5
<i>1661-1665</i>	25	10	2
<i>1666-1670</i>	11	43	12
<i>1671-1675</i>	28	6	4
<i>1676-1680</i>	65	10	6
<i>1681-1685</i>	63	17	6

<i>1686-1690</i>	25	1	1
<i>1691-1695</i>	262	26	6
<i>1696-1700</i>	84	4	3
<i>1701-1705</i>	7	15	5
<i>1706-1710</i>	52	43	10
<i>1711-1715</i>	172	246	13
<i>1716-1720</i>	61	135	9
<i>1721-1725</i>	5	49	20
<i>1726-1730</i>	31	116	24
<i>1731-1735</i>	57	21	11
<i>1736-1740</i>	24	146	19
<i>1741-1745</i>	99	9	7
<i>1746-1750</i>	151	83	19
<i>1751-1755</i>	138	34	15
<i>1756-1760</i>	63	30	12
<i>1761-1765</i>	151	109	16
<i>1766-1770</i>	68	106	24
<i>1771-1775</i>	9	101	26
<i>1776-1780</i>	17	72	15
<i>1781-1785</i>	9	81	12
<i>1786-1790</i>	11	42	12
<i>1791-1795</i>	7	61	10
<i>1796-1800</i>	40	228	54
<i>1801-1805</i>	38	185	43
<i>1806-1810</i>	33	67	15
<i>1811-1815</i>	96	181	28
<i>1816-1820</i>	66	103	20
<i>1821-1825</i>	10	86	13
<i>1826-1830</i>	2	60	16
<i>1831-1835</i>	3	31	9
<i>1836-1840</i>	0	36	5
<i>1841-1845</i>	4	3	2
<i>1846-1850</i>	4	27	4
<i>1851-1855</i>	1	51	3
<i>1856-1860</i>	3	6	2
<i>1861-1865</i>	2	2	1
<i>1866-1870</i>	0	5	3
<i>1871-1875</i>	1	21	8

<i>1876-1880</i>	1	9	3
<i>1881-1885</i>	0	10	2
<i>1885-1890</i>	0	2	1

For a long time, the wolf danger came from rabid animals, as well as predatory ones. During more distant periods, there were undoubtedly more humans devoured by predatory wolves than bitten by rabid ones. “Crisis periods” can be discerned: the 1596-1600 period, at the end of the French Wars of Religion, saw a remarkable number of attacks, with 152 reports in five years. The same is true of both the 1630s and, following the civil war period of the *Fronde*, the 1650s (with 91 victims of predatory wolves between 1651 and 1656). The rise in attacks during these periods is even more significant considering the glaring gaps in records: few parishes kept burial registers and many of those that do exist have been lost. Data availability is better for 1667 onwards, due to the introduction of national regulations governing civil registration. It is during this period that the highest peaks can be observed: after the spate of attacks that occurred around Versailles in 1678-1683, casualties indisputably peaked between 1691 and 1695, with 262 victims currently on file. This makes it easier to understand the resonance that the *Mother Goose Tales* being published at the time by Charles Perrault might have had during this period. Little Red Riding Hoods and Little Thumbings were attacked in their hundreds every year. Later, in the final five years of Louis XIV’s reign (1711-1715), a fresh upsurge in attacks was recorded, adding the final brushstrokes to the grim picture of his kingdom.

Louis XV’s long reign is marked by the notorious “Beast” of Gévaudan affair, which contributed to an increased number of predatory wolf attacks in the 1761-1765 period (151 victims, although this figure includes non-fatal injuries). Statistically, the Gévaudan affair was no worse than the clusters of attacks that occurred around 1750, with predatory wolves taking 151 victims from 1746 to 1750, followed by 138 from 1751 to 1755. It was, however, the last significant spate in this long history of attacks. From 1770 onwards, attacks decreased markedly. The threat largely abated and it was not until the second decade of the nineteenth century that it re-appeared in some regions. The last significant clusters of predatory wolf attacks occurred between 1811 and 1820. Beyond this period, the danger became purely anecdotal, with that of rabid wolves taking its place.

#### *The Notorious “Beasts”: Serial Killers*

In spite of this change, these recurrent spates of predatory wolf attacks hold a well-defined place in the French common memory: they were the work of what people at the time called “beasts”, because the animals seemed



to them so far removed anthropologically from the ordinary wolves that attacked only livestock. These series of attacks, each of which cast a shadow over a small region for several years, left their mark in people's minds as much for their terrible consequences as for the difficulty of exterminating the attackers. This is why, a century before the Gévaudan affair, the "Beast of Gâtinais" was just as notorious. The term "beast" often surfaces in descriptions of the most dramatic affairs, and it is this same term that is used to refer to the most prolonged and deadly spates in this long history of attacks. Whenever the deaths and injuries could be counted in tens, and attacks continued for several months or even several years, "beast" was the label that came to the fore in discourse.

Nevertheless, the wolf still lurked in the background. When the affair drew to a close and the attacker – or one of the attackers – was found, it always turned out to be a large wolf, with extraordinary attributes. Yet catching these attackers was not easy. If and when capture was successful, the truth could be uncovered by examining the predator, and the "beast" would step aside to reveal a "large, strong wolf". This was the scenario in 1634 for the "furious beast" that had afflicted the area surrounding Évreux, as well as in 1655 for the terrible "Beast of Gâtinais" affair. It was also true for attacks on a smaller scale. In 1743, the "ferocious beast" that had strangled two or three children in Upper Brittany turned out to be "a large wolf". The recovery of a child's foot from the stomach of a wolf in Chailly-en-Gâtinais in 1665 brought an end to public hysteria, when this beast was revealed to be no more than a "strong wolf". The people of Touraine came to terms with the truth in the same way, when the entrails of the last wolf hunted in 1748 were found to contain human flesh<sup>16</sup>. In all provinces concerned, the trauma of populations that had suffered serial wolf attacks fashioned the image of a single culprit: the "man-eating beast". This does not apply uniquely to France, since Mario Comincini had previously made the same observation about northern Italy's "ferocious Beast"<sup>17</sup>.

The temporal distribution of attacks shows a recurring link with armed conflict, particularly at the end or in the aftermath of civil or foreign wars, when higher numbers of corpses were left unburied. This confirms the theory advanced by many witnesses that wolves could progress from scavenging on human corpses to preying on living people. The link is very clear for the Wars of Religion at the end of the sixteenth century and in the aftermath of the *Fronde* in the mid-seventeenth century. However, there were also possible cases during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV, for

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16. Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Histoire du méchant loup...*, 2007, p. 82 ; Jean-Marc Moriceau et Philippe Madeline, ed., *Repenser le sauvage...*, 2010, p. 66 (document 11).

17. Mario Comincini, *L'Uomo e la « bestia antropofaga »*, 2002.

example following the end of the Franco-Dutch War in 1678 and the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763.

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In fact, almost all French provinces experienced incidents mirroring those seen in continental Europe, from northern Italy to Russia. The memory of these affairs, passed down by witnesses of attacks or by wounded survivors (mostly children when the attacks occurred), very rarely outlasted the mid-nineteenth century. From the end of the Ancien Regime, these extremely localised attacks by “man-eating” wolves had become mere bad memories. Only in a few residual areas, such as the Cévennes or Burgundy, did attacks continue sporadically until around 1820. In contrast, rabid wolf attacks persisted for longer: the fatal outcome of the illness and the dramatic seizures suffered by rabies victims continued to shock contemporaries until the 1880s. The memory of rabid wolf attacks by animals that struck indiscriminately, regardless of age, sex, or social standing, was also more enduring. Between the two World Wars, although wolves had been disappearing from the French territory for seven decades, the children and grandchildren of those attacked by rabid wolves were still telling the tale of these local tragedies.

However, as the reality of the events has receded further into the past, the risk of distortion has increased, and with it the risk of confusion between predatory wolves that attacked selectively, occasionally preying on humans, and rabid wolves no longer in control of their actions. In both scenarios, the fate of victims terrified those around them. The idea that wolves could “devour” humans remained anchored in the public consciousness. Although appropriate for predatory wolves, the expression is inaccurate for rabid wolves: their throats paralysed, these animals could only lacerate and bite their victims cruelly. It is, in part, this confusion that gives rise to the “big bad wolf” stereotype. Whilst predatory wolves still made occasional reappearances in other European countries such as Portugal, Spain and Romania, or in more distant locations such as Turkey, Russia and India, they had disappeared from France, having fallen victim to a complete reversal of the power balance between wolves and humans. It is this dual heritage and this distortion over time that have contributed to the construction of such a negative stereotype of wolves in France.