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## Chapter 3

# “He Met His Own Funeral Procession”: The Year Walk Ritual in Swedish Folk Tradition

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### *Introduction*

The belief in prophetic signs bound to specific and important dates can be seen all over Europe as early as Medieval times, with weather and harvest divinations being the most common kinds (Cameron 2013: 65–67). In Sweden, one oracular method was a ritual known as year walk, and those who ventured on this perilous journey were known as year walkers. Success meant that the omen-seeker could acquire knowledge of the following year; it was a ritual that sought answers regarding the unbearable uncertainty of being. Year walk (or annual walk) is known in Swedish as *årgång*, with regional and lexical variations: *ådergång*, *julagång*, *ödegång*, *adergång*, *dödsgång*, *sjukyrkegång*, and so on. Although the term *årgång* has a southern Swedish pattern of distribution (Götaland), similar practices, as well as the same motifs in different types of folk legends, are common and can be found throughout the Nordic countries. Most of the source material comes from, but is not limited to, southern Sweden, and dates approximately from the 17th Century to the first half of the 20th Century.

In this paper, I will examine the Swedish folk tradition (Swedish should be understood in a linguistic sense, not in a geographical or political sense) known as year walk and will try to fit it into a pattern

of other known folk customs. My source material consists of four older accounts by Petter Rudebeck (c. 1700), Petrus Gaslander (c. 1750), Johan J. Törner (c. 1737-1787), and Ernst Moritz Arndt (1807) as well as collections by folklorists and hundreds of records drawn from Swedish folklore archive cabinets, predominantly from the collections in Gothenburg (Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet), Stockholm (Nordiska museet), Uppsala (Dialekt-, språk- och folkminnesinstitutet), and Lund (Folklivsarkivet). To my knowledge, a presentation of Year walk has never been written in English before: Therefore I have translated all of the cited narratives into English.

#### *The oldest records of year walk*

The oldest account of year walk can be found in *Småländska Antiquiteter* (*Antiquities from Småland*), a manuscript produced around 1697-1700, which is now held in the National Library of Sweden. The curious text was written by Petter Rudebeck (1660-1710), a quartermaster who lived in the province of Småland in southern Sweden. One chapter deals directly with the year walk custom. This is interesting, not least because he describes the custom as old, and if we consider when it was written, it ought to describe a custom that was well-known in southern Sweden, at least since the 1600s. I have not found any older records that mention year walk although there are older references to different kinds of omens and oracular rituals associated with Christmas.

Petrus Gaslander (1680-1758) was a vicar who had a great interest in collecting rural Småland's customs and beliefs. One of his works, *Beskrifning om Svenska Allmogens Sinneslag och Seder...* (*Character and Customs of the Peasantry...*), was published after his death in 1774 and includes a brief description of year walk. (There has been some debate as to whether his son Johannes Gaslander wrote parts of the work.) The description of year walk is connected

with Christmas Eve, where it is said that if someone before first light on Christmas Eve goes into a forest without saying a word, without looking back, without looking into a fire, without food and drink, and so far that the crowing of a cock cannot be heard, they can walk on church roads and see all of the funeral processions of the coming year, and by looking at the fields, they will see how the harvest will turn out and if and where there will be fires as well as other things that will come to pass. Gaslander mentions that this is called year walk and that it is an ancient custom that is no longer practiced (Gaslander 1982: 22).

Johan Johannis Törner (1712–1790), a lector and provost from Linköping, wrote *Samling af widskeppelser* (*Collection of Superstitions*), a large collection of notes on all kinds of rural customs and beliefs, which he collected over a span of fifty years. He mentions year walk on two occasions. His first note has to do with Midsummer: someone who does not speak or eat on Midsummer Eve, who sits up throughout the night, and then walks around the fields and meadows – that person will hear and see what will happen the next year, will see corpses, his spouse, children, good or bad harvests, killings, etc. This is called year walk. Some people do this on Christmas Eve, *Persmässonatten* on 29 June, or *Lucia* on 13 December (Törner 1946: 74, 76). The second reference is rather short. He says that it is still known that during Christmas Eve, people use prognostication to look for omens of the future. In pre-Christian times, this was known as year walk (Törner 1946: 151). Sadly, he does not describe the technique in detail but gives many other examples of omen-seeking connected to important calendar days.

Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860) was born on the island of Rügen, an area that was a part of Swedish Pomerania between 1648 and 1815. He wrote his travel memoirs *Reise durch Schweden im Jahr 1804* (*Travels through Sweden in the Year 1804*) in four volumes,

based on his travels from 3 November 1803, until 6 September 1804. He travelled through many districts of Sweden and wrote avidly and meticulously on what he saw and learned. His descriptions of customs, legends, and rural life are therefore of great value. In one chapter, he focuses on Swedish Christmas traditions, not from a specific district but from Sweden as a whole. He mentions that on Christmas night, people try to get a glimpse of the future year and that this is something people did more in the past because, in his days, people think of it as a superstition or something that was done because it was traditional, without any sense of gravity. He says that in the past, some people went as quietly as possible to the forest, without saying a word: they did not look back and had made sure to stay away from food and drink and avoided looking into fires earlier in the day, and they made sure to be so far away that they could not hear a cock crow. When the sun rose, they were on the church road where the next years' funeral procession could be seen. They would also see if the harvest would be good or bad by looking at the fields, meadows, and grazing grounds, and they could see if a fire was going to break out during the next year. This was known as year walk (Arndt 1994: 44).

#### *Distinctive calendar days and omens*

In preindustrial and rural Sweden, important calendar days were integrated with numerous and varied folk beliefs. The period that started with the preparations for Christmas and ended with New Year was considered an important, as well as the most dangerous, time of the year. During this time, it was believed that supernatural forces were particularly active, magic formulas worked best, and omens and portents became observable. The days of Christmas were omen-days, and the dead were given free rein to leave their dwellings to roam the Earth and visit the living (Weiser-Aall 1963:

9-10). At the culmination of the calendar year, when nights grew longer and the temperature dropped, Christmas night marked the passing of one year and the beginning of another. At least, this was the case from Medieval times until the 17th Century, but old traditions and customs in relation to Christmas persisted in the countryside for a long period of time (Celander 1928: 205; Bergstrand 1939: 14). Throughout this season – a period that can be considered liminal – dark forces and supernatural beings became active. It started with *Lussenatten* (Sw. *Lusse*, *Lucifersnatten*) or St Lucy's Day, on 13 December. In places where *Lusse* was not celebrated, it was on *Tomasnatten*, the longest night of the year (21 December, coinciding with Winter Solstice). Closely related with beliefs in these supernatural beings are notions of omens and portents as well as techniques to see what is hidden.

In Europe, there is an old belief that the spirits of the dead wander the earth during the 12-day Christmas cycle (the days between Christmas and Epiphany). If the spirits entered a house and were given food offerings, they could bring luck and prosperity to the household. According to Claude Lecouteux, this can be seen as a calendar-based rite that belongs to a system of beginnings: whatever happens on this date predicts happenings over the next year. A similar custom was even celebrated by the Greeks and Romans, where a certain table was set for the deceased. Set tables with gifts or offerings for the dead are recorded from the entire Middle Ages in clerical literature, for example by St Boniface, the pseudo-Augustine, Césaire of Arles, and Yves de Chartes (Lecouteux 2011: 17-18).

During the 19th Century, people in the southern provinces of Sweden used to eat their Christmas meal on two occasions: the first at Christmas Eve, consisting of beer, meat, fish, porridge, and pastry, and a second at around midnight, with lighter food such as butter, bread, and turnips (Celander 1928: 176). Descriptions vary,

but an interesting detail is that some of the food was never cleared from the table: it was intentionally left for the dead who were believed to visit the farms during the night. Other records mention that the food should never run out, which can be explained as an oracular belief that a plentiful table meant that the next year would also be abundant with food (Celander 1928: 204–208). Different rituals and customs became associated with these meals. In records, primarily from western Sweden, it is mentioned that before eating his porridge, the farmer hurried outside and circled the cabin counter-clockwise three times. This was supposed to give a glimpse of the future. Sometimes the farmer brought a porridge sceptre (Sw. *grötkräkla*) or another object with a hole or some kind of opening in it through which he could look (a wedding ring, a black silk scarf, a piece of round bread, etc.) and held it in front of his eyes. If this was done properly, it was thought that he could hear and see things that were otherwise hidden. If he looked through a window, he could see who would die the following year; they, or their shadows, would be seated headless at the table. If the one who did this was unmarried, there was a chance of getting a glimpse of a future bride or groom. Not every record mentions a counter-clockwise pattern around the house; some just say that the walk should be performed backwards (Sw. *avigt*), away from the window, and that it was forbidden to speak to anyone (Celander 1928: 222–223; Wallin 1941: 103).

The practice of walking counter-clockwise around a building (or another object) is known in Swedish folk tradition as *kringgång*. Curt Wallin considered this to be the antecedent of the year walk-tradition. The difference between the customs is that *kringgång*, as practiced in the manner just described, was usually meant to give omens associated with the household or closest family, and that the extent of the walk was limited (Wallin 1941: 102–3). I disagree with Wallin

on this and agree with Carl Herman Tillhagen, who instead thinks that *kringgång* around the house at Christmas night is a watered down form of an older and more complex oracular ritual (Tillhagen 1980: 156). For someone who went on a year walk, the area that he or she was required to walk extended to three or seven churches, to three crossroads, fields, church yards, or a similar distance. In place of omens involving one's immediate household, a year walker tried to glean knowledge of what would happen the coming year, regarding not only the closest family but also the whole village or parish. Both churches and crossroads can be considered liminal places – they are borders between worlds – and as such are intimately connected with the dead, with supernatural beings, and with hidden, esoteric knowledge. Year walk can thus be described as a special technique of divination that attempts to answer fundamental questions for the seemingly random events of life.

*The first steps of the ritual*

Year walk, according to the records in the Swedish Folklore Archives, was performed on certain days of the year, usually during winter and Christmas Eve, but there are records of similar practices taking place at Midsummer, Easter, *Tomasmässonatten* on 21 December, *Staffansnatten* on 26 December, New Year's Eve, and *Trettondagsnatten* (Twelfth Night) on 5 January. Most accounts indicate that year walk took place at midnight, with slight variations, but they agree that the ritual should be executed before the sun rises or the cock crows (Bergstrand 1939: 14–15; Wallin 1941: 108). The oldest records (Rudebeck, Gaslander, Törner, and Arndt) state that the person who wants to go on a year walk has to make certain preparations and observe a set of guidelines. The year walker should not eat (at least not later than the afternoon), not look at or into any source of bright light or fire (if fire was seen, it

had to be neutralised by making a new fire with flint and steel outdoors), not mention the intention of going on a year walk to anyone, not speak or reply to anyone, not look back, not be terrified or laugh at anything that was encountered, no matter how frightening or comical (Rudebeck 1997: 274). Basically, a good method was to brace oneself by entering a secluded and dark room without food or any kind of social contact. If these rules were followed, the year walker became sensitive to the supernatural, but if they were not, dangerous things could happen.

Before we turn to the next part of the ritual, I will give some further examples on how to prepare for a year walk, based on the records from the Swedish Folklore Archives. One informant from Mårdaklev parish in the district of Västergötland says:

One way was to leave the house and go away before the light of day and to go so far in the woods that on the entire day (Christmas Eve) neither dog barks nor cock crows could be heard. When returning home, no words ought to be said and teeth's ought not to be shown. After supper, The Lord's Prayer ought to be read quietly to oneself and it should be done so backwards (IFGH 3304: 1).

Another informant says that preparations were done by going out into the woods on the morning of Christmas Eve where no food or contact with other humans was allowed (IFGH 3314: 13).

#### *How the ritual was accomplished*

A great deal of folk belief and practice centres on time, with rigid temporal limits, and space, with boundaries of all kinds. The year walk must be performed at an explicit time and carried out before a certain hour, for example before sunrise or at midnight, and on a particular night (Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, Midsummer's Night, and so on). The objective is in most cases to get to the parish

church or a cluster of churches: some records mention three or seven churches. A couple of records note various destinations such as a forest, crossroads, or secluded areas far from other human beings. The year walker's senses become heightened and open to the supernatural world, which means that there will be obstacles on the way that can be anything from strange visions to close encounters with supernatural beings. The movement should be in a certain direction (usually counter-clockwise) and done a certain number of times (as a rule, these instructions apply when the year walker arrives at a destination, be it a church or somewhere else). A year walker must usually travel alone by foot, but some records mention pairs, and in rare cases that three could walk together (IFGH 4979:24). In one record, the year walker is allowed to ride a horse (E.U. 4265: 1212).

As noted above, the omen-seeker must usually visit a number of churches, circle them a certain number of times, and follow a pattern: for example so that each time he or she passes the church door, he or she has to breathe or peek into the keyhole. Looking through the keyhole could reveal strange sights, which in turn could expose glimpses of the following year. If there was a service, empty benches meant that a certain person was going to die: sometimes the service was a funeral, a wedding, or other special occasion. In some records, the dead occupy the church, and if someone was among them, it was a sure sign that the person was going to die during the next year. If a year walker attended the service, he or she could learn things that had to do with future events. One record mentions that the year walker had to read 'The Devil's blessing' (Sw. *Skams välsignelse*) at the church door three times and at the same time breathed through the keyhole of the church door. This was, of course, dangerous, and a year walker might become cursed (Sw. *osalig*). By doing this, premonitions of the future appeared (IFGH 4073: 34-35). One record mentions that a

year walker got a forceful slap in his face right in front of the church door and lost an eye (IFGH 3488: 19). A slap in the face is a common motif in folk legends when someone angers the supernatural. Similar records mention loss of sanity or that the year walker's head become distorted (Bergstrand 1939: 25). From Visby, on the island of Gotland, there is a description of a failed year walk. The person had to run around Visby Cathedral (Sw. *Storkyrkan*) three times at midnight but was unsuccessful and disappeared (IFGH 849: 10).

A common motif is that the year walker encounters a funeral procession (Type A40-41 in af Klintberg 2010: 32), either on the road or in the church yard, and learns who will die in the community during the following year. In some of the descriptions, the year walker finds out by asking the procession about the identity of the departed (or by other means) and learns that it is none other than the one who asked the question. This is a recurrent motif that must have been truly alarming and means that a year walker must be audacious and prepared for anything. The graveyard could be filled with all kinds of activity. The graves might be open, songs (usually psalms) could be heard from the graves, the dead could be roaming about (those who have committed suicide were especially dangerous and could be hostile), and fresh graves that otherwise did not exist could show the walker who would die.

In some of the examples I have given, a year walker was supposed to read the Lord's Prayer backwards or use other means that seem to be under the direct influence of the Devil. One record from Uppsala mentions that the year walker was sworn to the Devil and had to go on a year walk every year, otherwise the Devil would come and bang wildly on his door, demanding an explanation (ULMA K, A4). This was pointed out by Carl-Martin Bergstrand, who adds more examples. One such account comes from the Karl-Gustav parish in the province of Västergötland, where a year walker is

standing in front of the church door and summons the Devil, who comes and reveals what will happen in the following year. He also mentions a record in which the year walker never seemed to run out of money, which is a sure sign that a contract with the Devil is involved. He also points out that many of the records do not give the impression that the informants saw year walk as something pagan. The Devil or the black arts are rarely mentioned. Most walks were practiced during a time of year when supernatural beings were lively, and people might very well have considered those nights as belonging to them (Bergstrand 1939: 25–26).

Many descriptions specify that if year walker completed his or her expedition in the right fashion, it was on the way back that omens and portents started to appear. As might be expected when it comes to folk narratives, the descriptions are contradictory. Many accounts speak of the tradition as something that could be repeated year after year. Every year, the year walker's powers grew, and on his seventh or ninth year, there was a chance to gain permanent second sight or other extraordinary abilities. There is one record from Tårsås parish, in the district of Småland, that states that one particular man, described as short and ugly, functioned as a wise man in his community because he had gifts of healing as a result of his year walks, but it also says that the man had to continue with a walk yearly, but when he turned 85 years old, he was too weak, and for this reason he perished (E.U. 3330:70).

*The purpose of the ritual*

Why would anyone risk the safety of home and go on a walk that was considered dangerous? Rudebeck describes the purposes of the year walk (similar details are given in younger accounts):

An old custom in Småland has been to search for all of the year's properties and learn how to observe what will happen in the

following year. How the crops will turn out, who will live and die in the farmstead, if there will be significant death, if someone from abroad will visit, if there is reason to fear war and unlucky fate, if there will be fire or lack of water in the farms or villages, if wicked sorcery will be performed, if fishing or hunting will be good, and much more (Rudebeck 1997: 274).

People have always desired to get a glimpse of the future, and most of the questions naturally circle around basic human needs and fears; life, livelihood, marriage, and death. Marriage and the wish to know one's future bride or groom are not mentioned by Rudebeck, Gaslander, or Arndt, but they can be found in Törner and many of the younger descriptions. It must have been a part of similar oracular traditions from an early stage. In his book on Christmas traditions in Scandinavia and Swedish Finland, Hilding Celander mentions a manuscript from Valdars, dated to the late 17th Century, which can be taken as a confirmation of this:

On Christmas Eve, widows and maidens shall fast until the sun goes down, stars glimmer in the sky, tablecloth lain out, candles and food set on the table. Then they shall, those who have fasted, go to the table and take something with their mouth and something with their hand, then go backwards out through the door, sit somewhere out in the yard, wherever they want, and chew on the food that is in their mouth. During this time they should carefully pay heed if there can be heard knocking or rumbling somewhere, and carefully take note of that place from whence the sound seem to come. For from that place, whence the sound comes from, a suitor and fiancé will come to the one who hears the sound before the year ends (Celander 1928: 224-225).

This description of a marriage divination offers a clear parallel to some narratives of year walkers who wanted to find out about their future brides or fiancés. It does not mention the same kind of ritual,

but many of its elements are comparable – it takes place on Christmas Eve, the practitioner must fast and is forbidden to speak of what happens, a walk is performed backwards, the ritual takes place outdoors, and the omens are sensory. Numerous accounts found in the younger material mention that the outcome of this oracular tradition is a glimpse of one's future companion. One even mentions a sailor who walked around the stern of his ship counter-clockwise and thus got to see his future bride (IFGH 4351: 8). Another method is to go naked around a well three times counter-clockwise and three times clockwise (IFGH 4446:2).

Celander mentions another custom connected with fishing luck from Norway that is similar to some aspects of year walk. Apparently fishermen from the coast of Norway marked the spot where bubbles appeared in a wooden cask filled with sea water. This was brought back home at Christmas Eve and placed at or under a table during Christmas Eve and covered with a piece of bread or something similar. The next morning, before speaking with anyone, it was measured where the bubbles were thickest. That was believed to represent the fjord where fishing would be most plentiful the following year. Celander also suggests that similar traditions can be found in Norrland of northern Sweden, but in those parts the outcome is to measure how the harvest will turn out (Celander 1928: 219; cf. Feilberg, II, 1904: 134). In collections of folk narratives from Norrland by Ella Odstedt (1892-1967) there are many legends that resemble year walk, even though this name is never used. One account (No 978) says that on Midsummer's Night, it was possible to walk to a crossroads where three roads met and wait until midnight. Then a future husband or wife would appear. But it could also happen that a mouse drawing a cart with hay appeared (Odstedt 2004: 230-245).

Some year walkers had a special purpose – to become wise (Sw. *klok*), learn magic, or obtain a magical object (e.g. a grimoire, magic formulas, or a magic hat). The term *cunning* incorporates these aspects: A cunning man or woman is a prominent and numinous figure to whom ordinary people turned when they needed help, for example with healing or finding lost goods (Davies 2003; Wilby 2013: 26–31). Other year walkers wished to increase their luck for the coming year, e.g. by circling a certain church three times (IFGH 2149: 1). It was also possible to gain the ability to learn how to lock out (Sw. *läsa bort*) rats and mice (IFGH 1384: 52). A couple of accounts from Kristianopel parish in the province of Blekinge mention a unique and special purpose: year walk was performed by werewolves who wanted to get rid of their curse. Both accounts are similar, but one is more thorough:

There was an old man who was a werewolf and to get rid of his curse he had to go and look through the keyhole of three churches. On his way he met a hen that pulled a cart with hay. The hen said: ‘To Mörby! To Mörby!’ (Mörby is a place name) At that moment the old man laughed and became hare-lipped for the rest of his life. Not only that, he did not get rid of his foulness. This is not strange, because a werewolf, who went on a year walk, was not allowed to laugh or talk to anyone (LUF 5903, see Wallin 1941: 123).

None of the accounts mention anything involving glimpses of the future, and there are reasons – not least in the narrative style – to suspect that the motifs have become distorted. Werewolves and year walk appearing in the same account is an uncommon theme and might have been parts of local folk narratives, where the informants have mixed up year walk with legends of people who tried to get rid of their lycanthropy. Maybe it was told as a joke, in the same vein as the ones Arndt mentioned much earlier. According to Ella Odstedt, in her great study of Swedish werewolf

traditions, both accounts come from the same informant and can therefore not be taken as proof of a distinctive variant of a tradition shared in the community (Odstedt 2012: 184, n. 152).

*Dangers and supernatural interference*

As mentioned above, Christmas-time was associated with increased activities by supernatural beings. This is evident from many descriptions where they clearly tried to hinder the year walker, while the hazards and obstacles could become increasingly demanding. A year walker was not allowed to laugh, stray from the path, or look back, and he or she needed to be prepared to see things that could seem comical, alarming, or baneful. The regulation to stay quiet and not laugh is also common in many treasure-seeker legends. One motif found in year walk and treasure hunt accounts is that of a lame hen or something similar pulling a hay-cart, which manages to get the treasure-hunter or omen-seeker to laugh or talk, with the result that the silence is broken, and the quest fails. The motif of a burning house or village can also be found in both types, where the treasure-hunter or omen-seeker breaks off his quest because he sees a fire, only to discover that it was an optical illusion (Lindow 1982: 264-266; Type A43, V61, V67 in af Klintberg 2010: 385-386). These descriptions can be found in Rudebeck: if there would be a war the coming year, a year walker might experience loud chopping noises from the woods or see soldiers hurrying on the roads to the sounds of horns and pipes. If there would be a bad harvest, a small number of people could be seen on the croplands binding and carrying small sheaves whereas others would sit on heaps of stones, grieving and sighing. Fires and floods could be seen over the farms that would have a tough year. Most of the omens described are inauspicious, but there are also good omens where small men are seen carrying big sheaves.

Rudebeck also remarks that all kinds of supernatural beings roamed the lands during a year walk. He points out that a year walker might experience exhilarating or comical events, but laughing or smiling was prohibited because if the year walker did so, his or her mouth could be fixed in that position forever (Rudebeck 1997: 274–275). This could be easier said than done as some of the narratives are truly hilarious. A variety of supernatural beings did everything they could to break the year walker’s concentration. One account states that the year walker saw a big hay-cart drawn by two small rats and found it both strange and amusing because it was the middle of winter. He had a hard time not laughing, but it got worse; one of the rats slipped on the ice and fell on his back while farting so loudly that it could be heard across the whole parish. At that moment, the year walker burst into laughter, and the vision disappeared, which meant his quest was for naught (Wallin 1941: 130).

Some beings are more dangerous than others: the most terrifying being a year walker could meet was a big sow with sharp teeth and burning eyes called Gloson (see below). Another record from the district of Västergötland says that both Gloson and the Hel-horse could be seen close to the churchyard wall (IGH 3454: 5). In this case, a Hel-horse is probably the church grim in the form of a horse. In one account from Vårvik, in the province of Dalsland, the informant Ragnar Johansson says that a year walker could see an assortment of beings in the church yard: werewolves, revenants, trolls, and rats. If this was managed and the walk completed, it was possible to look into the future. If someone went on a year walk for nine years in a row, that person became “all-knowing” (IFGH 1732: 12). One record from Långasjö parish in the province of Småland states that it was of the utmost importance to stay calm and not look back or stray from the path, otherwise there was a risk of contracting a serious disease (E.U. 2591:687). In folk belief,

it is usually considered dangerous to be touched by supernatural beings such as ghosts and revenants, which could cause a foul and sudden disease (Sw. *gastkramad*, cf. Hagberg 1937: 610–616).

On 25 December, the dead gathered in church and celebrated *julotta*, which in earlier days was a popular service held in Swedish churches in celebration of the birth of Christ, early or slightly before dawn. (cf. Type 4015 ‘The Midnight Mass of the Dead’ in Christiansen 1992: 61). This particular *julotta* overlapped with the year walk. Many records mention that a year walker came to a graveyard and saw light coming out from the church. If the person entered or looked inside, he or she could see that the church benches were packed with the dead – skeletons, corpses, and sometimes a revenant priest who conducted the service. The dead did not tolerate the living: in some horrifying descriptions, it is said that they had to tear something to pieces and that the best way to save oneself was to leave a piece of garment behind (Hagberg 1937: 650–661). Carl Wilhelm von Sydow remarked in a review of the aforementioned book by Hilding Celander that the *julotta* celebrated by the dead had nothing to do with year walk, but he never explained why (the statement was repeated by him later on). The reason for his critique of Celander might be due to a tension that was growing between the two, which made von Sydow lash out with groundless statements as facts. This was typical of his polemical style (cf. Drobin 1983; Bringéus 2006:126–127, 150–152; Skott 2010: 73–75). There are many records that link year walk with this particular *julotta*, and the link is clearly made by the informants as well (Bergstrand 1937: 120; 1939: 26).

#### *Gloson and the church grim*

Numerous records mention a terrible ghost pig called ‘Gloson’, which alongside the church grim were feared enemies of a year

walker. Rudebeck, Arndt, Törner, and Gaslander do not mention Gloson, but Rudebeck speaks of an old man who shows himself on the seventh year walk. This man is clearly supernatural and is described as sitting on a horse with fire coming out of his neck and carrying a stick with rune carvings in his mouth (Rudebeck 1997: 275). I think that this man, who echoes notions of Odin, fills the same purpose as later descriptions of Gloson. The name *Gloson* might be derived from the verb *att glo* (to stare) and *so*, *sugga* (sow), but a great variety of names are attached to this being (*luffsoen*, *gloppsoan*, *gluppson*, *glopsuggan*, *gloffson*, *lyckoso*, *gluffsoen*, and so on). According to Curt Wallin (the records I have read support this), most accounts tend to focus on the Gloson's swift movement, and a number of records mention that the sow's whole body is covered with glowing eyes (Wallin 1941: 125). Descriptions of Gloson vary and are usually filled with all kinds of horror motifs, a common theme being that she is a big horrible sow with her back in the shape of a razor-sharp saw, but in some records it is said that she could also carry a year walker far away on her back (Type C201 in af Klintberg 2010: 81). A common motif is that Gloson runs at the year walker at full speed and seeks to come between the year walker's legs and cleave the walker in two. One means of protection was to cross one's legs (other methods include feeding Gloson certain prepared objects, such as seven-year-old nuts; throwing a fishing net over her; or using knowledge of the black arts). Other records describe Gloson as anthropomorphic, with a pig's head and big tusks. A theme that can be found in many records is that Gloson carries a rune stick or paper roll in her mouth, and if the year walker manages to grab this, either through swiftness or by overturning her, the item could be used to instruct the year walker in sorcery (Wallin 1941: 126-129).

The church grim or church genius (Sw. *kyrkogrim*, *kyrkevar*, *kyrkorå*, *kyrkodrake*, etc.) is usually believed to be the first being – typically an animal (horse, lamb, calf, swine, hen, etc.) but sometimes even a human – that is buried when a new church is built. In some legends, it is the first person who dies at one year of age who becomes a church grim and guards the premises of the church yard. This being is a natural enemy of the year walker, who had to pass the graveyard and circle the church (cf. Pape 1946).

*Is the year walk tradition a pre-Christian survival?*

Many of the descriptions mentioned above refer to year walk as an ancient tradition. The well-known Swedish folklorist Gunnar-Olof Hyltén-Cavallius described year walk in the same way, as a remnant that dated back to a pre-Christian past:

The ancient heathen folk practice, that in Wärend since olden days was known by the names to *go year walk* and *go midsummer walk*. [...] can generally be considered, one of the most remarkable remnants from a heathen age and of a mythical outlook that hitherto managed to preserve itself among any of the newer European peoples (Hyltén-Cavallius [1863-1864] 1972: 391).

For Hyltén-Cavallius, the recorded customs and beliefs could easily be compared with a hypothetical past and therefore with even older sources dating back to pre-Christian times. This can be viewed in a much broader perspective, where romantic notions and theories led many academics and writers to embellish their particular national history and place it on a pedestal. It fits the nationalist movements that swept through Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: for some, it was a question of trying to prove through folklore that their nations were the grandest and most exciting; for others, their hearts were intimately attached to their province, and they sought to prove that their own home-region held the

oldest, the most genuine, and the most sensational folklore material (Baycroft & Hopkin 2012). It might be tempting to look upon the practice of year walk as an old survival from heathen times, but then we must find some kind of proof of its existence before the Reformation. In my opinion, there are no such fossilised pieces of quaint tradition that with certainty can be traced back to pre-Christian beliefs or practices. The church effectively suppressed all vestiges of paganism as a religion and as a mode of worship. Although there are links that connect younger folklore material with older traditions, the picture is far from uncomplicated, and the shifting of traditions can often be misleading. What characterises folklore is the tendency of traditions to change or alter shape in transmission from one generation to another. But even if details change, as well as the accepted reasons for different practices, the basic principles can remain and fall into a discernible pattern.

Although it is often stated that year walk is an ancient practice, I have actually not seen any examples of how year walk can be traced to pre-Christian or even Medieval Scandinavian traditions. Therefore, I will give a couple of samples of traditions known from Norse sources of rituals performed outdoors and associated with prophecy. Space prevents me from exploring it in depth. Predicting the future, as well as different methods for affecting or controlling it, was viewed as witchcraft and sorcery in the medieval provincial laws in Scandinavia. It was considered a short step between wishing to know the future and desiring to affect or control it. It was actually so abominable that the perpetrators of such fortune telling were severely punished by banishment and a heavy fine of 40 marks. In the Norwegian Borgarthing Law, in the older Christian law sections, it is stated: *Dæt er ubotaværk at sitia uti* “it is a felony/crime to sit out” (Halvorsen & Rindal 2008: 154). What this legislation means is that the practice of “sitting out” is strictly prohibited and

cannot be atoned for with wealth: the condemned practitioners (*ubotamenn*) were barred from compensating their crimes and were normally banished, usually into pagan countries, and their property confiscated (Jørgensen 2013: 246–247). The key word *útiseti* (*sitja úti*), also known from the Norwegian Gulathing Law, is a ritual strongly associated with someone who sits outside at night, possibly on grave mounds or at crossroads, and practices, in the eyes of the law, sorcery and witchcraft. Its semantic spectrum signifies more than a night-time location, and it should be seen as an old technique for evoking spirits. Similarly strict prohibitions, with slight variations, against the ritual as a heathen practice can be found in other laws. One law condemns: *spafarar allar oc utisætor at ueckia troll upp* “spae-journey and sitting out awakening trolls” (NGL II 265; cf. de Vries 1956: 328–330). The Old Norse compound *spáför* is interesting: the first element *spá* is the same as the archaic English and Scottish *spae* and means ‘soothsaying, foretelling, or prophecy’. The second element *för* indicates a journey or travel but can also mean walk in the sense of begging (Fritzner 1954: 533). It sounds similar to year walk, and in connection with trolls, it means that the law condemns a practice associated with invoking and gaining esoteric knowledge from supernatural beings. The church was extremely critical of this practice, and one Icelandic episcopal ordinance of 1178 condemns people who: *sitja úti til fróðleiks* “sit out at night for the sake of gaining knowledge” (Samplonius 1995: 77). This ritual is a solitary nocturnal practice aimed at establishing contact with the Otherworld. Even though the law texts themselves, or rather the manuscripts, are no older than the 13th Century, they suggest that the traditions they ban are likely much older.

*The Poetic Edda* mentions the practice of both *útiseti* and *sitja á haugi* (see below). One of the best-known eddic poems, *Völuspá*, dated to the 10th Century, describes how the god Odin seeks out a *völva*

“sibyl, prophetess” and asks her to foretell future events. In Stanza 28, we read: *ein sat hón úti* “alone she held séance out in the night” (Dronke 1997: 14). The Old High German expression *hlīodarsazzo* “sitting to listen” can also be seen as a parallel to *úti seta*. The oldest occurrence of the derivative agent noun is *hleotharsazzo*, which glosses Latin *negromanticus* (cf. Meissner 1917: 100–110; Samplonius 1995: 79). There are many Old Norse texts in various genres that deal with the expression ‘sitting out’, usually in connection with prophecy, sorcery, awakening trolls (spirits, the dead), or as a heathen practice, and the practice can still be found in Icelandic legends as late as the 17th Century (Mitchell 2011: 161–162; Strömbäck 2000: 127–129). Dag Strömbäck divides the practice into two parts. On the one hand, the practitioner takes an active part in summoning the supernatural beings (the dead) from their Otherworld. On the other hand, the practitioner is passive and sits at crossroads, on mounds, in caves, or in other secluded places and quietly listens and observes the surroundings for signs (Strömbäck 2000: 128–129).

Another ritual is the practice of *sitja á haugi* “to sit on a barrow”, which occurs frequently in the Old Norse texts and seems related to *úti seta*. Axel Olrik thinks the practice of sitting on barrows or grave mounds is connected with kingship (Olrik 1909). In my opinion, it suits a popular pattern of omen-seeking, which can be seen in both year walk and “sitting out”, without any aristocratic connotations. There was always a danger with this kind of ritual, for a person who dared it might be attacked by the dead and killed or end up insane.

I will end this brief survey of Nordic traditions of “sitting out”, with a 19th Century Icelandic example from Jón Árnason’s collection of folk-tales. Motifs will be recognised from both the old practice of “sitting out” and year walk. In most of his tales, the ritual is most successful if done on a Midsummer’s Night or, as in the following account, on New Year’s Eve:

He who intended to practice 'sitting out' to gain news had to equip himself with a gray cat, a grey sheepskin, a walrus hide or the hide of an old bull, and an axe. All this the necromancer should take to a crossroads all of which led straight and unbroken to four churches. At the crossroads the person was to lie down, cover himself with the hide and tuck it in on every side so no part of the body was left visible. He is to hold the axe between his hands and stare at the edge and look neither left nor right whatever happened; nor was he to answer should someone address him. In this posture one is to lie motionless till dawn of the following day. When the necromancer had finished installing himself he started an incantation and the formulas necessary to summon the dead. Thereupon his relatives appeared, if he had any buried at one or more of the four churches which the roads led to, and they told him everything he wanted to know, both things that had come to pass and were to pass many centuries hence. If the necromancer was steadfast enough to stare at the edge of the axe, never take his eyes off it and not say a word whatever happened, he would not only remember everything the dead told him, but he could, whenever he wanted to and without any risk, receive news from them of everything he wanted to know by sitting out (Aðalsteinsson 1978: 118).

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1978) gives many examples of soothsaying under a cloak or skin, both from Iceland and parallels from Ireland. They all mention that the soothsayer should not speak to anyone, be solitary, and usually must withdraw to a secluded setting. The quoted example above, together with older motifs related to omen-seeking and a quest for hidden knowledge, easily finds counterparts and falls in a visible pattern of many folklore traditions in agrarian societies. It is hard to prove that a tradition, known from younger sources, can be linked with pre-Christian practices.

The Swedish year walk custom is probably not a pre-Christian survival, but some of its elements are surely connected to the past and several layers of folklore and religious traditions. We must not forget that Sweden gradually became a Catholic country in the Medieval period and later converted to Protestantism in the 16th Century, but folklore elements can linger for a very long time, even survive for more than a thousand years, albeit in new forms.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude this brief article on year walk, it might be a good idea to contextualise the ritual and place it in a fitting folkloristic framework. One thing that is clear is that people could take great steps to preserve or gain good luck and avert ill-luck, which also includes a wish to secure the prosperity of the household and, if they were unmarried, find a future spouse. It is also certain that there were all kinds of beliefs connected with the eves of major holidays. Different techniques for finding out what the future holds can be found in a great variety of records of Swedish folk tradition (cf. Tillhagen 1980). Due to concerns about how the next year would turn out, people did what they could to obtain glimpses and knowledge of the future. Societies of all times have sought to presage the future by observing things or occurrences around them. This could involve all manner of signs and omens: omens of good luck, omens of ill luck, death omens, marriage omens, weather omens, fire omens, war omens, visitation omens, omens of wealth, and so on (cf. Ó Súilleabháin 1942: 378-80).

The practice of sitting out or going to a crossroads or grave mound to learn about the future is, as we have seen, an old custom. Can the year walk be seen as a form of divination? Divination is the practice of attempting to discover the unknown or gain insight into the future by supernatural means. The Latin word *divinus* means ‘one inspired

by the gods', and divination might be described as any ritual and its associated tradition that is performed in order to ask a supernatural being for guidance. The practice still flourishes in the Western world in the form of fortune-tellers, tarot card reading, palmistry, tea leaf divination, and gazing into crystal balls (cf. Ellis 2004: 142–173). If we seek to outline divination into categories and see it as a system of knowledge, a good starting point is to cite Åke Hultkrantz's classification, which covers many types of divination from different cultures, including Nordic folklore material (Hultkrantz 1976: 70):

1. Passive divination

A) Spontaneous inspirational divination: supernatural forces come into direct contact with the human being, intentionally or unintentionally. It can be in waking hallucinations, dreams, or as ecstatic hallucinations.

B) Spontaneous premonitory vision (and auditions): this applies to premonitions experienced in waking hallucinations or dreams. They can be distinguished by the fact that they depict a course of events still to occur, or persons who will experience future fateful events in some way or other.

C) Spontaneous configurations to be read (Sw. *tydor*): this class refers to omnia that appear unexpectedly (or essentially without foreboding) and are experienced by the person while awake.

2. Active divination

A) Active inspirational divination: this group refers to those states of inspiration (waking hallucinations, dreams, and ecstatic hallucinations), which have been prepared or provoked by the inspired person himself or herself and which result in encounters with supernatural powers. Trance experiences in shamanism belong here.

B) Pre-arranged premonitory visions (and auditions): these are inner, non-inspirational experiences of a prophetic bearing,

which have been prompted in some way or other by the affected persons themselves.

C) Pre-arranged configurations (Sw. *tydor*): human beings themselves build up supernatural experimental situations in which the higher orders of law or finality that determine life are explored, or in which the veil is lifted from various secret matters, such as witchcraft trials and their various tests in order to find out whether or not the accused person is a witch.

Year walk is, as we have seen, definitely an active form of divination centred on spontaneous visionary and auditory experiences, based on a system of preparatory techniques and interpretations. Therefore it can be seen as pre-arranged premonitory visions (2b in the classification above) that have been stimulated by the year walkers themselves.

Popular forms of divination are found outside of the institutional religious context and interact with it at different levels, from conflicting to complementary. Inadequate attention has been given to divination in its own right, independent of institutional religious contexts – that is, to the folk beliefs and their use of divination, and the interaction between practitioners of divination and the general population. Particular forms of divining rely on spontaneous reception of knowledge through intuitive or altered mental states. The use of special techniques and instruments can also lead to acquisition of knowledge (cf. O'Connor 2011). Sometimes special rituals are needed for the technique to be effective, which is the case with year walk. As with any sort of folklore, the details of how this is accomplished may vary. One constant in the records is the importance of time and direction. The ritual was accomplished at midnight or before dawn, and movement had to be performed in certain ways, usually leftwards. The counter-clockwise motion meant going around a house, church, hay-stack, or object a certain number of times. Another

aspect, involved how a year walker acquired omens through sensory perception. They are central to all forms of intuitive divination: dreams and visions, auditory sensations, change of taste and smell, inner voices and directives, optical illusions or hallucinatory experiences, heightened and changed emotional, mental and physical states, perceptions of signs and omens, and so on.

Parts of the year walk ritual can be compared with the basic pattern for love divination. Its principles and underlying pattern can be summarised as follows: if someone 1) does something 2) in a certain way 3) at a certain time, 4) he or she will discover his or her future spouse. When it comes to the pattern for year walk, it basically follows the same structure. The outcome might also be grim for both forms of divination, and the consequences that the unpredictable future shows, through signs and omens, might be horrific. In older records, love divination usually clusters around certain important calendar days (Halloween, Midsummer, St Agnes Eve, St Valentine's Day, New Year), and the symbolic power of the particular date is enhanced by the time of day, with midnight usually being most potent. If love divination is performed in the wrong order, or somehow the rules are broken, then it is – just as with year walk – for naught.

Nowadays, it might be hard to grasp the aspects and need for something as exotic as a year walk. This has to do with rapid urbanisation. The village communities have dissolved, and the villages have expanded into rural centres at such a pace that contemporary people cannot apprehend the way in which older generations were bound to the village community and traditions in all aspects of life. People viewed life in a different way and lived in fear of the supernatural: the world abounded with unpredictable events that were frequently explained as being caused by unseen, unpredictable, and supernatural beings and influences; good and ill luck; fate; and so on. We might be on slippery ground if we

generalise too much about preindustrial village life, even for an agrarian life that seems as homogenous as Sweden's (Frykman & Löfgren 1980). When it comes to different legends, there is a chance that some of them might have been told as entertainment. Many legends speak of a world and a worldview that is taken seriously, especially in a genre such as belief legends, and that world is not fictional but is very real. People's attitudes towards supernatural experiences were also different from today and did not need explaining in the same way (cf. Virtanen 1992). Supernatural beings existed, and many people believed in them. We have many examples of people in preindustrial Sweden who were put to death by court order because they were believed to have fornicated with beings such as the forest nymph or the neck (Häll 2013). Time and space played significant roles in folklore. It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, at our present state of knowledge, to fully understand or interpret the meaning of many of the different customs and beliefs associated with time, space, boundaries, luck, fate, supernatural forces, and so on. There is plenty of evidence that points to the importance of calendar divination, where a large body of beliefs and customs are based around a particular date or period. The calendar combines the religious, the cultic, and the practical. Year walk can be seen as one of many possible expressions of this: It served a desire to lift the veil of what is hidden and unknown and cross the barriers of space and time.

One final question needs some clarification: is year walk forgotten? I would not hesitate to say yes, as far as the old ritual and practice goes. Appropriately, however, something took place recently in southern Sweden: a small game developing studio in Lund called Simogo decided to base one of its games on a curious ritual that one of its developers had picked up from a popular handbook on Swedish folklore (*Årets högtider* by Ebbe Schön). Inspired

by what they could learn of the custom, and with a lot of artistic interpretation, *Year Walk* leapt into the popular imagination worldwide on 21 February 2013. It was released first as an iOS-game and later converted and reworked for PC. This tendency to market folklore and supernatural beings for entertainment serves another purpose: It makes sure that the old narratives and beliefs survive in a new environment. With this article, I hope that the old custom will also receive attention and inspire a scholarly as well as a public audience.

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