



What Was the Beast of Gevaudan?

by Derek Brockis

A GREAT ENIGMA OF HISTORY

Introduction

La Bête du Gévaudan was a real wolf-like monster prowling the Auvergne and South Dordogne areas of France during the years 1764 to 1767, killing about 100 people, often in bizarre circumstances. Every effort to stop her failed and she became nationally infamous. The King - Louis XV - took a personal interest, one reason being the unrest she caused in an area of religious/political tension and potential revolution. Many explanations - mutant, prehistoric beast etc. - were put forward at the time and during the two centuries since but none has ever been generally accepted. The important firm fact is that sufficient evidence remains to prove La Bête really did exist and was not just a myth. Among all the popular monster mysteries she is unique - she left behind one hundred bodies proving herself real and guilty beyond doubt.

This article gives a balanced view on La Bête, about whom surprisingly little has been written outside France, where she remains a household name to respect or ridicule, according to choice. We always laugh at what we secretly fear.

A PROWL WITH LA BETE

or: 'When twigs crack don't whistle'

The true tale of La Bête du Gévaudan is like a Shakespeare play, loving a plain woman or being a member of parliament - the more you put in the more there is to take away. A

greater depth of information than has previously been available in English on her career is therefore offered - all based on recorded facts and including no fiction.

The French rightly claim their wine and this mystery as the world's best. You can drink more deeply of either at a price. For wine the price is only money and a headache but the price for La Bête's is never again to feel safe when walking alone in a sunny country lane.

In France she is quoted as 'The Greatest Enigma of History'. Prowl on but do look over that left shoulder occasionally.

And little maids all in a row

On at least 5 occasions beasts rumored to have been La Bête ranging from large wolves to a baboon-like animal were killed but in all cases except the last, a not very formidable deformed wolf-like creature killed in June 1767, she recommenced her attacks shortly afterwards.

For example, on 16th September 1764 a wolf known as Le Loup de Pradels was killed and assumed to be La Bête but the real Bête took only until the 26th to kill a girl at Thorts and prove the presumptive assumption wrong. Le Loup de Pradels was soon found to be a fraudulent attempt to claim the reward for La Bête. It was an ordinary she-wolf, stuffed with various items to give the impression she had devoured humans.

Later, after the death on an unlucky 13th of another little girl - only her bonnet and clogs were ever found - La Bête was reported to have been shot in the estate of the Abbaye des Chazes by an aristocrat - M. Antoine, the King's Gunbearer. The big dead male wolf was named 'Le Loup de Chazes'. The ruins of the abbey can still be seen. This was on 21st September 1765 but she was seen at Marsillac on 26th, 27th and 28th of that month. There has been much speculation on whether the Chazes wolf was a genuine or staged killing but either way it was not La Bête. Its body was widely exhibited long after it became smelly.

In spite of being assumed dead, La Bête started a new two year killing career on 21st December, the shortest day of the year and a long Silent Night for little Agnes Mourges. The winter wind hid a very sharp bite indeed, and Christmas cost Agnes more than the usual arm and a leg:- the Church said, 'insufficient remains for burial' - not enough for a church service or to fill a stocking.

La Bête had herself a merry little Christmas and stopped the carol singers from making their usual killing because nobody dared open doors barricaded against her. Snowy New Year 1765 yielded, for example, the head of little Marie Jeanne Rousset of Milienettes, recognizable only by her staring eyes, everything else being cleanly gnawed away.

One poor woman, over 60 years old, nick-named La Sarabande, after the triple-tempo Spanish dance, could find no grass for her cow - her only possession - because of the deep snow. She led it to a marshy area, where sometimes a little greenery penetrated through. La Sarabande's body was ambushed for three days but La crafty Bête did not return. She liked marshy areas because her agility and relatively light weight enabled easy escape from mounted pursuers, whom she often deliberately led into mires and left floundering. Even the local men liked playing this trick on the arrogant and gaudily dressed dragoons they regarded as useless for pursuing La Bête and as costly nuisances. One father and son - Jean and Antoine Chastel, everyday countryfolk - were in fact imprisoned for it, possibly in the cellar, still to be seen, of an old school, in Sauges en route to the dungeons in Mende. They misled some hunters, proudly led by a Royal Huntsman wearing King's uniform, who ended up sitting on his horse stuck in the mud. The Chastels might have got away with it had they not threatened him with a gun when he complained.

An attack with an agricultural theme was on a farmer, who rose early and started scything his wheat harvest by moonlight. He saw a movement coming towards him but the animal itself was hidden by the tall wheat stalks. His first thought could well have been it was one of the farm dogs coming for a fuss but it proved to be La Bête coming for his blood. He managed to fight her off with the scythe but on arriving home was unable to speak for four hours, being paralysed with terror.

There was the case of the wicked stepmother who had two sons, one of whom was not her own. She often sent the one that was not her own to fetch water from a well La Bête was known to frequent. Guess whom La Bête chose to leave in small pieces at the bottom of a nearby ravine?

One typical attack occurred at dusk - locally called 'the hour between dog and wolf' - on 6th September 1764 at Estrets. A woman was tending her humble cottage garden when La Bête seized her by the throat, beginning with her usual apéritif of blood - sucked, not stirred - and did not cease until neighbors armed with axes, sickles and forks arrived. The woman died but La Bête, having enjoyed her liquid refreshment, lived on. It is worth noting that many members of the large cat family usually start to eat a kill by licking the blood from an open throat wound. For example, animals like The Beast of Bodmin - reported in the UK as a cat species - start this way.

Another woman - a servant - going to mass at Escures on 29th April 1765 saw La Bête and tried to delay her because men were approaching fast. She paid for her bravery by losing face, throat and life.

There was the mysterious case of the three women of Pompeyrac, going to church near the wood of Favart, when a dark man offered to escort them through the wood. They refused and before leaving he touched one of them with a fur-covered hand. Dragoons arriving on the scene warned the terrified women not to go into the wood, because La Bête had just been seen there.

Two women of Escures also on the way to church had a similar experience in an area where, unknown to them, La Bête had just been seen by several people. This time they saw that the man accosting them was covered in fur only when his shirt blew open in the wind. It was said at the time that La Bête, instrument of the Devil, was trying to stop them from going to Mass.

As with all good monster murder mysteries, there has to be the wicked aristocrat solution. In one case the murderer was supposed to have hidden among the nuns of the Cistercian abbey of Mercoire, which is now a farm. The abbess was thought to have taken contributions for hiding fugitives. Some documents mention a name - Count Vargo or Vargas - as being a werewolf or having other connection with the La Bête story. A human solution to the La Bête mystery is unacceptable to most serious students of the subject but perhaps he really did exist.

There are other instances where appearances or attacks by La Bête were associated with human presence, including a famous witnessed sighting from a cottage window by a stream in the moonlight. There were also the two bodies found roughly re clothed after death. Fact, fiction or imagination? The relationship of these occurrences to Robert Louis Stevenson and Brothers Grimm is referred to later.

Scarlet billows start to spread.

Too many horrors occurred, such as what happened to Madame Merle. She had her eyes scratched out and La Bête spat a stream of her blood over approaching rescuers. No 'toujours la politesse' that time.

On 21st June 1765 - the witches Sabbath, when the weather was warm enough for the naughtier country folk to dance naked round bonfires, she killed two people and savaged a third. Was this yet more evidence of her apparent sensitivity to Gothic atmosphere - she was often reported in places with supernatural associations - or did she just fancy a hot takeaway with no French dressing? Either way, she came back for seconds and thirds to go.

Also in 1765 - her busiest year - the case occurred at Javols where a father, a tenant farmer of good reputation, was bound and imprisoned by the fiery Captain Duhamel for failing immediately to report an attack to the authorities. He had delayed doing this only to attend to his child, whose larynx had been bloodily torn open - a specialty of La Bête - and to nurse his seriously ill mother. Many attacks remained unreported for fear of becoming involved with ponderous and ineffective bureaucracies, rather like on housing estates today.

Six year old Marguerite Lèbre was killed in front of six firm witnesses, all testifying to Curate Gibergue at la Pauze, Lorcières, who also recorded reports of a smaller boar-like Bête seen 3 days later. These records of sturdy porcine or feline beasts in addition to our rakish, wickedly graceful wolf-like lady are too frequent to ignore and add another

dimension to the mystery. Another odd fact is that some measurements of distances between her footprints showed she could make leaps of over 28 feet on level ground. If true, this weighs in favor of the athletic build rather than the stocky one. Reserve judgment on this point but favour the fast-rakish rather than the sturdy-porcine.

The three most famous fights against La Bête were Portefaix, the schoolboy, Marie Jeanne Valet (La Pucelle), the maid and La Femme Jouve, the mother. The most heroic was that by the puny Madame Jeanne Jouve on 9th March 1765 at Fau de Brion, where she fought to protect 3 of her 6 children using only her bare hands and rocks snatched up from the ground. Madame Jouve was seriously injured and one child died. The King gave her a reward of 300 livres. The incident was vividly described thus; "The skin of his skull was falling to the right, his cheek was torn, his lip and nose torn away to the root, he died within 3 days." The same evening La Bête devoured a boy at Chanaleilles and was seen again the next day at Estival.

These events caused great consternation throughout Gévaudan and Auvergne. The floor of one meeting hall collapsed from the sheer weight of people crowding in, volunteering to join a hunt for her.

There was the case of the girl, her little brother having been snatched away, who bravely rushed into the wood after him and found him peacefully lying there on his back, apparently intact but in fact lacking liver, entrails and blood.

The girl who cried to warn her sister, "There's a big wolf behind you", turned and ran, only to see her sister's head bowling along the ground. The girl lost her mind.

The little boy who, on 21st July 1765 went to fetch the family cows from their walled meadow near the village of Auvert and simply never returned. At the time La Bête was being sought locally by the wily aristocrat M. Antoine, the King's Gunbearer, who posted his hunters in pairs on paths all over the district. There has always been a question mark over his policy. Why did he post guards at night, when, contrary to the behaviour of most werwolfish monsters, La Bête usually attacked in the daytime? The first thing the searchers found was the boy's shoes standing in the road, then all his clothes lying almost untrampled in the meadow. Of the boy himself nothing was ever found. Beast or human criminal that time? Enclosed meadows were particularly dangerous because the drystone walls - similar to those of the Lake District - with their mossy covering camouflaged her perfectly before she pounced. Jumping down from the top of walls and rocky outcrops was one of her favored methods of attack, especially dangerous to those tending flocks who had built their fires up against them for a little more shelter from the Margeride mountain winds. At least they died warm.

It was said La Bête would plough straight through a flock of sheep, scattering them like leaves to get at the shepherdess. However, she was much more wary of cows, which were sometimes found spattered with the blood she had spat at them. Her lack of fear of fire, dogs and people, especially women and children, but fear of cattle are strange but consistent features.

That so much detailed information still exists is thanks to 'le procès-verbal' or P.V., an old and sensible French legal procedure often mentioned in Maigret style detective films, where evidence is formally noted by officials in front of witnesses. There are volumes of them, often confirmed in church records of burial ceremonies, giving in detail La Bête as the cause of death and signed by witnesses such as priests, mayors and other respected persons.

One struggle against her is particularly clearly recorded by the Curate of Besseyre. Another curate - Ollier of Lorcières got even closer to the action by bandaging a girl's wounds and making a measured sketch of a footprint which was similar to but larger than those previously recorded. It is suspicious that so many churchmen occupied themselves with La Bête both before and after her reign. Was this perhaps because they were the only intellectual, literate and socially responsible people present in every sizable village? This point merits careful thought by the conspiracy theorists. Her consumption of clerics was limited to one convent novice near Grèzes in 1766; no priests, although she ate the cheek of a relative of Abbé Pourcher, her most famous chronicler, whose house, by the way, with its strange Bête-like carving on the door lintel, still stands. She liked her victims in skirts but obviously knew la Différence.

The preference of La Bête for women and children might have been simply because they were more readily available and less protected than the men. They tended the lonely mountainside flocks in ones or twos, whereas the men did the heavier work in the farm fields, often in groups and armed with spades, scythes etc. All parties were experienced wolf-repellers and had only contempt for these cowardly nuisances; a few stones usually sent them packing, unless they were rabid and, if they were, their messy bites were nothing like the surgical work of La Bête.

In March to June 1766 there were 14 attacks by her within 6 miles of Paulhac. Not bad for a reportedly dead Bête. Incidentally, the old village concluded its history tragically, being burned by the German army in 1944. It is perhaps now haunted by even sadder spirits than the victims of La Bête. She was just a hungry animal seeking food in the only way she could, not a political killing machine.

First catch your Bête

Many 'Wanted' posters appeared. For example this one in August 1764 (only slightly parodied) made a lot of profit for the printers:- "Reward 12,000 livres if dead. Known as 'La Bête' but kills under three aliases. Reddish brown with dark ridged stripe down the back. Resembles wolf/hyena but big as a donkey. Long gaping jaw, 6 claws, pointy upright ears and supple furry tail - mobile like a cat's and can knock you over. Cry: more like horse neighing than wolf howling. Last seen by people mostly now dead. If she

approaches you please leave behind a signed copy of this poster." Many pictures were circulated, some very elegant ones from leading contemporary Paris art houses such as Basset, Corbié, Le Bel, Maillet and Mondhare, even some from Germany, for example in the Hennin collection. Prints of many are still available, especially from book shops in Mende, the centre of Bête history, even though she never killed there.

From August 1764 on the King's orders the world's greatest ever hunting aristocracy was ranged against La Bête with all its resources of châteaux, thoroughbred horses from royal stables for the leading huntsmen and, for others, hacks from humbler stables, wearing darned Agincourt jackets and often rode to their deaths. There were specialist wolf, boar and bear hounds plus as many echelons of trackers, hunters and master-hunters as NHS management grades but wasting less money, having no computers. She didn't stand a chance, or did she?

Note that no suspicious human footprints - sensibly shod or otherwise - were ever found near a kill, although La Bête's own easily identifiable long, clawed prints were there many times. For example, they were all over the riverside mud at her famous fight with Marie Jeanne Valet (the servant girl who successfully fought her off with a spear made from a spindle). Marie - given the complimentary nick-name 'La Pucelle' (little flea), after Joan of Arc, provides the glamorous heroine element of the Bête story. There is a shortage of pretty heroines - the others, alas, usually ending up dead. She was a feisty 20 year old, not afraid to stand up to nobility in maintaining her opinion on the exact nature of the beast she fought. These footprints, recognized as La Bête on the spot by 3 leaders of different hunting parties, bloodstains and supporting evidence from a 16 year old girl witness were all recorded in the procès-verbal, helping to confirm the riverside incident as genuine. Contemporary pictures of the fight still exist, some simple, some stylized, as one would expect.

In another incident, a fresh body was found lying out in snow with no tracks or footprints round it at all. Impossible, of course but typical of the strange happenings high in the Margeride mountains, a harsh region which the locals describe as 'nine months of winter and three months of hell'.

Regarding stories surrounding La Bête, it is unlikely she founded the 'Plump Partners' dating agency but against the fiction or hoaxes (some admitted) there are 100 horrors, mostly with witnesses, graves, names, parishes and dates as evidence. Grim facts and bloodless human body parts prove her existence, even if the more lurid tales are suspect.

One indisputable fact is that La Bête did succeed, aided by bad weather and economic problems with the cloth industry, in dragging the region down to a state of poverty and famine. Women and children were too terrified to tend their sheep and cattle out on the lonely pastures and the men were constantly called away from field work to hunt La Bête. The resulting neglect was sufficient to tip the scales of such a fragile economy into a decline.

Louis XV and his court took her very seriously. She prowled a region where Huguenot/Jesuit tensions were acute and the King feared she, plus the arms massing there, would ignite the revolution whose tumbrels were perhaps just beginning to rumble in the distance. Remember, the Gévaudan was part of the 'Independent States', whose recognition of the French Crown's sovereignty was not at the time fully ratified. Problems arising from the Antipopes in Avignon and the Great Schism of 1378 to 1417 still echoed and the city was not annexed to France until 1791. Although dissolute, Louis XV was not a king who killed more people than he had to - his nickname was 'Le Bien-Aimé', but whether this meant he was well liked or he got a lot of loving is subtly and Frenchly left unclear. Being King in those pre-Revolutionary years must have been one hell of a job without 'The Beast Who Is Eating Everybody' making life even more difficult - Larousse, the main French encyclopedia, even in its recent editions still states: 'the whole of France concerned itself about her for some time'.

The most dangerous animal in the world is the intelligent French female and poor Louis XV had at least three to contend with - Marquise de Pompadour, Madame la Comtesse du Barry, who dined at five, copying the King, a politically significant fact (according to Dumas - 'The Queen's Necklace') and La Bête, who also dined in the daytime but less formally. One Madame lost her head but La Bête kept hers while crunching many others. Unlike the curvy courtesans she never embraced the fleshy King, who died from smallpox - a million little bites instead of one big one. His successor died of the biggest bite of all - la Guillotine, so perhaps Louis XV did not handle French affairs, including La Bête, too badly after all, even if he did, aided of course by Madame Pompadour, bankrupt the state. La Bête nearly bankrupted only the Gévaudan.

The importance of La Bête in French history is virtually unknown outside France. Like BSE, they couldn't get rid so each blamed everybody else. There is no lack of conspiracy theories, especially relating to the King's anti-Jesuit policies, which peaked in 1761, two to three years before she appeared. Certainly people exploited her for political purposes but equally certainly there was a real dreadful entity conveniently there to exploit. La Bête's total effect on history was, perhaps, beneficial. If she took only 100 potentially revolting peasant's lives but stopped war between Huguenots and Jesuits, later saving from la Guillotine some aristos who were recognized as having helped starving peasants fight her, she leaves a moral credit balance. You never know, she might be canonized one day.

Often two or three versions are recorded of stories about her life and presumed deaths. There are, for example, two versions of the La Pucelle (the spindle packing heroine) story when she was called upon by Antoine to identify the body of the Loup de Chazes at the Château of Besset. One says she firmly refused to identify it as La Bête, the other that she did but only doubtfully, from a wound on its shoulder possibly made by her spear. The Loup de Chazes might or might not have been the beast that attacked Marie Jeanne but was not La Bête.

There is more than one version of the Loup de Chazes story itself. One states Antoine's kill as genuine, another as fraudulent. Incidentally, the skin of this wolf is said to have

been destroyed by the National Museum in Paris only early this century, it having lost all its hair. Why would they destroy one of the most famous relics in all France unless it was, as many suspected, a fake or, X File style, something people were not to know about, like the hieroglyphics on wooden tablets discovered in 1722 at the bases of the 593 giant statues on Easter Island? Controversy and mystery still follow La Bête today as persistently as she stalked her terrified victims 200 years ago.

Goaded by the wrath of a King lumbered with a naked wooden rocking horse in his Versailles garden, awaiting her never-to-arrive skin, the desperate nobles were reduced to the argument that La Bête could not exist because it was impossible she had escaped their mighty searches. She did not know this so carried on killing. Can you be completely impossible and yet exist? Certainement, if you are French.

Chastel's deformed wolf-like creature, shot at Sogne d'Auvers on about 20th June 1767, remains as one but only one of the possible answers to the puzzle. Diagrams of its deformities, for example of the jaws, still exist. If it was the solution it was almost certainly contrived and not the whole story, the remainder of which is alleged to involve human elements and various collusions. It is unlikely the popular young Marquis d'Apcher - the leader of the hunt - cheated. It was not his elegant style and cost him the best excuse ever to miss church on Sundays. Which would you rather do as a handsome 19 year old marquis - go to church or gallop round the Auvergne rescuing grateful mademoiselles from the very jaws of La Bête? Suspicion falls on others, including one of Apcher's relations. This involved tale has already created a semi-fictional novel and more arguments than the Dome. It is for smoky camp fires on long nights. Keep an open mind. Incidentally, the gun which shot this creature was bought by Abbé Pierre Pourcher at St. Julien in 1888 and he writes about hearing of its whereabouts from a woman on a train. He met her by chance, having entered her carriage because he feared she might be molested by two unruly soldiers.

In the Gévaudan district wolves were often caught in deep pit-traps, dug and concealed so the wolves fell in. Bait was sometimes scattered round the traps. Because people thought La Bête could jump out of normal pits, very deep ones were dug, sometimes of complex structure, for example octagonal in shape and interconnected by tunnels; the purpose of these is not clear. The bait was often unburied carcasses, or parts, of her victims, left out in spite of protests from priests wanting early and decent burials. She never fell for it. Do not read the accounts of this subject, or those of poisoning - they are not nice.

One desperate measure adopted against La Bête was the extensive use of poison, sometimes applied across whole mountainsides. The King's Wolfcatcher, Monsieur Denneval, the surly Norman squire, who had 1274 (1200 previous ones and a share of 74 while hunting La Bête) wolves to his credit, was an early advocate of poisoning. This was after his hounds, the best in France and excellent trackers but more suited to the flat, open countryside of Normandie than the rugged, wooded Gévaudan, had failed to catch her. Another supporter of poisoning, at least for a time, was M. Lafont, the Syndic, a very important local official, possibly the cleverest of all those hunting La Bête. The chief poisoner was a M. Mercier. With his assistant he was particularly busy during April and



May 1767, buying live dogs, then poisoning them with very big doses to provide ready-poisoned carcasses. The regional Governor, St. Priest, finally ordered operations to cease because so many innocent domestic and other animals were dying, including the dogs providing the poisoned carcasses that killed even more dogs. A serious matter for the mountain shepherds to whom loss of their partners could mean starvation. Specialist poisons supposed to kill only wolves were formulated but they didn't work, killing either all or nothing. Elaborate traps, decoys and ambushes proved equally ineffective.

It is hard to imagine our gourmet Bête, rarely an animal eater, preferring to nibble a hard, cold, dead dog rather than a soft, warm, live milkmaid. Who would? The attacks did, however, taper off and finally cease at the height of the poisoning program. Like so many things connected with La Bête, or Bêtes, it is impossible to say what was effect and what coincidence.

By this time things had got so bad that there is even record of dogs eating human bodies left by La Bête, although the possibility was quickly ruled out that the basic mystery could be explained either by the activities of packs of wild dogs or by wolves acquiring cravings for human flesh. The local French called the wolves that ate human flesh 'Carnivorous', although the ordinary sheep-eating ones could hardly be called 'Vegetarian'.

by Derek Brockis

Who stole my heart away?

Whoever she was, she was no maiden to choose for a goodnight kiss unless your have an unusual taste or your new Tax Return is late. With her, the Last Waltz meant just that. She killed through cunning, surprise and speed, not rash boldness and strength, evidencing a careful professional judgment of risk against profit. The index-linked civil servants tried to prevent her from working, like they always feel compelled to do with entrepreneurs but she survived and kept them in jobs too.

The church also was ostensibly against this working girl making an honest living but she proved to be prayer-proof. For example, several churches were the rendezvous for processions of supplicants on 18/19 August 1765 and other dates. Besseyre, Nôtre Dame de Beaulieu, Venteuges, Pébrac and Paulhac (old church probably destroyed in war) were some of them. There was ceremonial movement of icons of the Madonna between various churches and some of them can still be seen in the places to which they were delivered by the anti-Bête processions two hundred years ago.

Study of frequency and location of attacks using computers and backs of envelopes supports the contention that more than one beast prowled but locals then and now reject the idea of several, although many reports exist of smaller animals seen both alone and with their mother. To the French, La Bête is an Edith Piaf and will remain so. Both were unique stars with neighing voices and no regrets. On the other hand, who ever heard of a French lady lacking boy friends, Joan of Arc possibly excepted.?

Perhaps the Wulver - that burly but unaggressive Scottish werewolf, allegedly seen in the Shetlands this century - should have been introduced



to our fiery Madame to cool her temper. By now those farmers could be assailed by wicked Lady Macbête plus her bairns. Only French farmers deserve such suffering. It is best to laugh at dark corners.

Another overseas candidate as La Bête, in addition to the legendary Nandi bear from Africa, who also had a penchant for rapid head removal, is the famous, mythical and dangerous Canadian beast called the Wendigo - elusive, frequents lonely forests and loves children. A French Canadian Bête would, after all, be appropriate.

If it is acceptable to consider La Bête might have been a surviving prehistoric animal, the one that most closely resembles her appearance is the Mesonychid. This was a wolf-like mammal, an early ancestor of the dolphin, with wide jaw, spots, mobile tail etc.

The thylacine marsupial wolf of Tasmania, alive as recently as 1934 and still occasionally reported, for which a cooking recipe exists (no, not vin-de-loup) is easily dismissed as too puny for the job. However, tails strong enough to knock people over were possessed by larger prehistoric carnivorous marsupials like the Thylacoleo. Such an unusual tail often appears in La Bête descriptions, as do other kangaroo-like features. Another Australian contender, although an unlikely one, being relatively small, is an animal still occasionally reported but which probably became extinct in the 19th or early 20th century. This is the Tasmanian or Queensland tiger, the subject of a TV program, which was marsupial and rather like a wolf with claws, probably resembling the extinct tiger-dog of Japan, which is another possible but uninvestigated candidate.

One report of La Bête describes a strange animal killed and buried in the Pinols region in July 1766. There had been deaths there since 1765. It was recorded by curate Bergier, whose description resembles that of a very large baboon but unfortunately only limited information is available and the killings did not cease with the death of this beast. Crude drawings remain.

Romulus and Remus were allegedly suckled by a wolf, so perhaps a human returned the compliment to an animal, which might explain where she obtained support, if any was needed, when wounded or during the long periods - sometimes months - which could elapse between killings. There are other accounts of humans being brought up by animals. Part of the Gévaudan area was renamed Aveyron shortly after the French Revolution in 1789. Books titled The Wild Boy of Aveyron, who was allegedly a wolf-child, were published in 1962 and 1976.

Not previously recorded in the La Bête saga, registered here almost certainly for the first time in this context, is the fact that a strange and haunting drawing originated in Italy in 1495 of a woman/monster with claws and horse-like head, washed up from the River Tiber. This is yet another unexplained beast story that had a significant effect on the Catholic church.

The idea that La Bête was a human/animal hybrid rears its particularly revolting head in some books. Such are reputed to have existed, almost all degenerate and shambling creatures. For example there is even an obscure story that a man/beast monster was brought back by the Royal Navy and kept in secret on a small rocky islet off the South Coast, being led around on a leash. Obviously not her, or it would have been "Hello sailorburger". Such an aristocrat of killing as La Bête deserves to keep her thoroughbred reputation, not that of a monster from a horror comic.

On 29th January 1997 the first edition of a Fortean TV series on the 'Unexplained' was broadcast by Channel 4. The program reported on a strange vampire-like beast: 'The Goat Sucker of Puerto Rico', nicknamed El Chupacabras. This creature has killed 150 goats in the Canavoras region by sucking their blood and liver through neat incisions in the neck. Other animals - cattle, rabbits and chickens - have also been killed but, so far, no humans. The army has been called to investigate.

Drawings from eye-witness reports show it to resemble no known animal, being kangaroo-like, fast, strong and able to stand on 2 feet. Footprints of three-clawed toes have been found at killing sites. The drawings and TV representations bear a resemblance to La Bête, who also was usually reported as first licking or sucking blood from victims, devouring them only afterwards. Reports have been received from US and elsewhere of attacks on animals by similar beasts. On 19th November 1997 a program based on El Chupacabras, referred to as a weird creature in Mexican folklore, was broadcast in the X Files series but strayed from the original vampire-like monster legend.

So far evidence is sketchy. The animal as reported shows similarities to La Bête but there are big differences. Its incisions are neat, whereas hers could be untidy - you can't call tearing-off heads neat. It has been reported as having three-clawed toes; she was not often reported with three but hers were also sometimes said to be clawed. If El Chupacabras ever graduates almost exclusively to humans, moves faster, operates mainly in the daytime and adopts less tidy eating habits, we can perhaps say, "La Bête has returned".

According to the TV program, explanations considered include an alien or the outcome of genetic experiments at an American military base. These trains of thought mirror those which have taken place - so far unsuccessfully - over the last 230 years to explain La Bête, for example the possibility that La Bête was an alien or caused by alien experiments has recently been studied in France and views published. Closing scenes of the film 'Species' show a female alien who, although furless, uncomfortably resembles La Bête in speed, style and murderous intent. Before dismissing the alien concept remember that for over two centuries clever people have unsuccessfully sought a solution to the Bête mystery. Under these circumstances the apparently impossible must be admitted as a possibility. No, that is not quite what Sherlock Holmes said.

The classic black and white film 'The Night of the Demon' has a large unforgettable clawed monster, one of the best ever. La Bête can reasonably be described in appearance and behavior as a fast moving mini-version of this and also resembles other traditional demons. Funny how our concept of wolf-like monsters has changed so little over the centuries and is consistent world-wide.

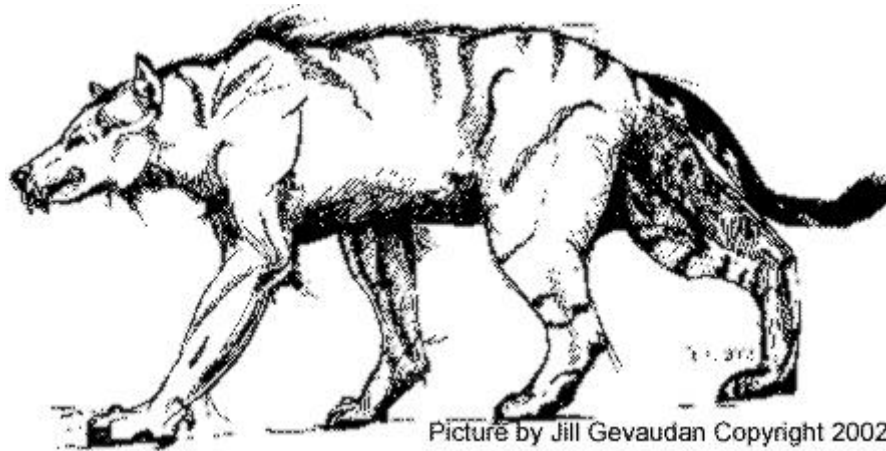
The Hindus believe in a terrible blood-drinking feminine spirit called Kali, dedicated to destroying life to allow for re-creation. She is sometimes represented as clawed, hideous woman and has been worshipped by Thugees for more thousands of years than Christianity has centuries. Victims are left with broken necks, mutilated, in shallow graves. To quote her fellow-worker Shiva, 'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds'. In a hot Bengal night the life re-cycling concept of Kali does not seem as unlikely as it does by a de Quincey style Lake District fireside in November.

Some writings about La Bête refer to mysterious caves, prehistoric bones, once collected for fertilizer, and suspiciously knowledgeable individuals but one question apparently never researched is whether any of the famous cave drawings and paintings in the area show an animal - of known or unknown species - that might have been La Bête's ancestor? The recent discovery of important caves containing 20,000 year-old drawings of animals ranging from rhinos to mammoths in the neighboring Vallon Pont-d'Arc region (to the South East - the Vivarais direction from which she was first reported) gives food for thought. A famous Cro-Magnon cave painting of an odd, upright creature called 'The Sorcerer' exists at Les Trois Frères. At nearby Le Moustier there is a cave containing the world's earliest known ceremonial burial, that of a Neanderthal nicknamed 'Nandy'. There is a museum at Chilhac showing remains of animals going back 2.5 million years. Prehistoric people drew and fought animals which have become extinct (or have they?) only since the council erected the new play area at Stonehenge. Like our own House of Lords, the Gévaudan district contains some of the world's best preserved and most numerous remnants of early intelligent human activity. Incidentally, she was last witnessed in September 1767 strolling peacefully along in Sarlat, also a prehistoric cave area.

In establishing the identity of La Bête one apparently neglected information source is old family records. The use of surnames, especially those with titles, is particularly well controlled and documented in France so the descendants of most people involved are traceable. For example there are still members of the 'Barthe' family in the district, one of whose ancestors, a nobleman, was among the first and best witnesses of La Bête. Unpublished information hides for centuries in old drawers and teenage daughters' bedrooms. Pity the French never ask you home.

Truth may sparkle one day to someone with long bar bill and pickled liver who, Western hero style, strides into local brasseries and asks questions, finally expiring as La Bête's last victim - Number 96 or 101, according to which statistics you accept. Liver (raw no onions) was always her favorite entrée following a warm blood consommé - free lunch for the aristocrat of killing who dined royally by

daylight.



Plump tomes, written in sunny Auvergne wineshine, expansively affirm she was not hyena, wolf or human but none tells what she damn well was. Entries on a postcard please. No prizes, not after the blind dinner date.

Ceci tuera cela (*This will kill that*) (Victor Hugo)

She last definitely killed on 18th June 1767 at Dèsges. Fittingly her final victim is the unknown warrior - an unidentified little girl. Sadly we can never know her name or if she was meant to bear four pretty children. All right, a paradox but so is everything about La Bête. Although there were outbreaks of killings by very similar beasts in the 17th and 19th centuries, after this last one La Bête, as La Bête, vanishes from the world scene, although some husbands might reasonably claim to have married her.

A meticulous and outstandingly elegant French hunting weapons book by Dominique Venner, a man, by the way, published 1984 refers briefly but carefully to her on Pages 113/114.

English comments made at the time consist mainly of newspaper articles, indignantly recorded by Abbé Pourcher in his famous book, which scathingly report that a French army of 12,000 had been routed by a beast. Some beast! It is surprising so little has been written on La Bête outside France when you consider her splendid achievements as a serial killer. Jack the Ripper officially killed only 5 victims, all women, over a period of 10 autumn weeks (not as foggy as films depict), whereas La Bête often had a mixed bag of 4 or 5 within a single week, for example during a snowy 1st to 7th January 1765 and another 95 over 3 years, once killing 2 and maiming 1 on a mid-summer's solstice. As usual, the French do it better and she elegantly beat Jack's score by nearly a century not-out, no doubt would have killed JR too, given une demi-chance.

One of the few considered English comments appears in 'Walking through France' by Neillands on Pages 142/155. The dates he mentions are confusing and apparently incorrect, suggesting Bête activity as far back as 1745, which is earlier than elsewhere recorded. He describes St-Juéry, where he stayed, as being ravaged by both La Bête in 1764 and, in 1944, by the Waffen-SS from the Das Reich Division. Even in 1988 Neillands admits he was glad to be sleeping within the friendly claw-proof walls of the Hotel du Bès and not outside under thin canvas. Incidentally, a Monsieur Bès of Bessière wrote a manuscript on a sighting and chase of 23rd December 1764 by a young subaltern called Dulaurier. He had just drawn his saber to strike La Bête when she jumped over a wall and ran across a marsh where his horse could not follow.

A 1992 expensive Canadian book 'Wolf hunting in France in the reign of Louis XV' by R. H. Thompson deals extensively with La Bête, contending that there can be satisfactory explanations based on large wolves for all her depredations.

On the other hand, Denneval, a Norman squire known for his surly directness, recognized as the greatest wolf expert in 18th century France and having the advantage (?) of actually being in charge on the spot,



firmly and officially asserted that there was indeed something very strange going on in Gévaudan and that "La Bête is no wolf". Perhaps that was just because he couldn't catch her.

Which one do we believe?

Another recent article writer, C.H.D. Clarke, is an expert in North American wolves. Firstly, he reprimands those who refer to La Bête as a legend, strongly pointing out that she was definitely no legend but was hard fact and really existed. His second important observation is: 'The certainty that no rabies was involved meant that there was something going on that was without precedent.' Rabid wolf attacks are clumsy compared with La Bête's elegant handbagging. He considers that one explanation of La Bête is there was more than one and they resulted from a natural cross breeding between large dog, possibly of an Italian hunting breed, and wild wolf. Clarke quotes 21 references in his study. His explanation for the Bête phenomenon is supported by reports published elsewhere of vigorous hybrids between wolf and large dog, for example the wolf of Argenton, killed in 1884. Another candidate for cross-breeding with wolf might be the Lycaon - a carnivorous wild hunting dog still active, and feared, in Africa. It is perhaps a little small but is very savage and cunning. A cross with a wolf would be a formidable animal and a litter of them loose in a district could well be taken as an abnormal phenomenon. The presence of African animals - hyenas etc. - in the Gévaudan is recorded in cave drawings over thousands of years and even today there are attempts to re-establish them in large game parks.



was
child
on
1765
Louis



There are connections between the works of Grimm, Rousseau, Stevenson and La Bête. Grimm, apparently, was a friend of Rousseau by whom a poem written on the famous fight between Portefaix, protecting his six companions, against La Bête 12th January at Vileret d'Apcher. Robert Stevenson possibly based

his "beautiful shepherdess" stories on a girl from Paulhac who was killed by her.

What coincidental patterns she weaves. For example, Stevenson carefully includes her in his famous 'Travels with a donkey in the Cévennes', written 1879, particularly admiring her bravery in attacking in daylight a party of couriers armed with pistols and swords. His summation is incomparable: 'if all wolves had been as this wolf they would have changed the history of man.' Then by 1886 he writes 'Jekyll and Hyde'. We will never know if his werewolf-like theme - changing, hairy hands etc. - was based on La Bête but it is reasonable to conclude that she played a part. The book opened as a play in London in 1888 just as Jack the Ripper simultaneously started his, compared with La Bête, meager series of 5 murders. In the war German troops destroyed two villages where La Bête prowled and a chance German bomb on Bournemouth hit the house in which Stevenson had died .

Some further examples of what we call coincidences:

The old oak table on which this article has been written was made by Filmer & Sons, Berner Street for the home of Dr. Langdon Down, who described Down's Syndrome in 1866. His Kingston upon Thames mansion

- Normansfield, - became and still is a hospital. Some say the Ripper was a medical man. An alley off Berner Street is where Elizabeth Stride died of a severed windpipe and Berner Street itself was a centre of Ripper activity. Incidentally, 'berner' is an old French verb for to mock or make fun of. Some do say the Ripper - usually described as about 5 feet 7 inches tall - was a woman; there was talk of Jill the Ripper at the time and who had more motive for killing those sad, loose ladies than someone whose husband or son had been ruined by them? Confusing, but can we admit the concept of infinite situations created to allow all possible connections? A long way from our simple Bête, or is it? Only a god could create such a complicated and extensive system so perhaps Gabriel Florent, wordy bishop of Mende, was not wrong after all when he, like Abbé Pourcher, referred to her in his famous mandate as 'The Scourge of God' and attributed supernatural, indeed heavenly, powers to her.

Another author apparently influenced by La Bête was Jakob Ludwig Grimm of Brothers Grimm fame who published Red Riding Hood as 'Rotkäppchen' in approx. 1812, a work recognized as having deep significance. He had been librarian to Jerome Bonaparte, being expert in antiquities and mythology - not that La Bête was a myth, her 'All the better to eat you with' was backed-up by real teeth. Incidentally, the first clearly recorded Red Riding Hood fairy story is attributed to a Frenchman, Charles Perrault, a great classical historian. It appeared in his book 'Stories of Times Past' in 1697.



The famous Nostradamus, in spite of his Latinised pen-name, was a Frenchman named Michel de Nostradame, born 1503 in Provence, who spent most of his life studying, working in and travelling between places later associated with La Bête, such as Avignon (La Bête was widely reported in the Avignon Gazette) and Montpellier, the city from which the military hunt for La Bête was directed by the Count of Moncan, a cautious but capable organizer, who can take the credit for ordering Captain Duhamel into the fray but handled very delicately an official request that the local population be armed against La Bête with firearms from his arsenals.

One of Nostradamus' prophecies for mid-18th century France states:

'Mars threatens us with the belligerent force.

Blood will be made to spread out 70 times.

The church will grow, suffer harm and more to those who would listen to nothing of them.'

Not too far out, was he, especially as there is nothing else obviously relevant to this particular prophecy?

Allow him another one:

'The lost thing, hidden for so many centuries is discovered.

Pasteur will be honored almost as a demi-god.

Dishonour shall come by other winds when the moon finishes her great cycle '.

Be careful with that cloning!

In the Place des Cordeliers, Marvejols there is, by the sculptor Auricoste, a contemporary style statue bringing out her cunning brutality. However, La Bête was never seen in Marvejols, so why they have a statue is another mystery. Perhaps they are jealous of the towns and villages she really did haunt. "Mon Dieu, they have Une Bête and we do not!" Shades of Clochemerle. The inscription claims the statue to be her but in fact it is of only the deformed animal killed by Jean Chastel, so perhaps it is just a cunning spoiling act. They even held a Bête exhibition in the Mairie - the Town Hall - at Marvejols in 1958.

The church at St Alban-sur-Limagnole has La Bête as its weathercock - in memoriam as in life she remains inaccessible and knows just which way the wind is blowing.



Most parts of the world take particular stories or legends to heart - hero or beast, distilling them out from all the rest to reflect exactly the character of the country. In England we have King Arthur and Robin Hood. In America they have Mickey Mouse and Davey Crockett. In France La Bête is still alive because she represents the tough Auvergne landscape and its independent people who often have had to fight occupying troops and oppressive bureaucracy.

Maybe its not too late for her to take an evening stroll round the streets of expense account restaurants in Brussels. Bon appétit, Bête.

Well, what do YOU think she was?

The question Bête students fear. It always feels undignified and rude simply to answer, "I don't know." Some modern experts in wolves who never hunted her think she must have been a wolf but hunters on the spot at the time held very different opinions, as did the cripples suffering in squalor and poverty from her blurringly fast unbelievably wide-ranging attacks.

No article on La Bête is complete unless it clearly states the opinion of Abbé Pierre Pourcher, the meticulous author of by far the greatest and longest (1040 small pages) book on the subject, which was personally approved by Pope Léon XIII. Pourcher's interpretation of the mystery is entirely religiously based, sober and critical. His concept is La Bête was just the deformed wolf-like animal killed by Jean Chastel in 1767 but that it had been aided by God as a Scourge to correct human wickedness, being brought on specifically by bad behaviour and unacceptable changes in church ritual. This heavenly aid, not being a monster, explained to Pourcher her power and invulnerability. He repeats, several times, that she was something very abnormal: "Her cunning, skill and mobility, even her very existence, were completely beyond human understanding." The highly respected - Gabriel Florent - Bishop of Mende at the time of La Bête agreed with Pourcher.

There are many different views on what she was - about twenty books have been written - and almost all the other authors do not agree with Pourcher. They are fairly equally divided between conventional explanations - large wolves, cross-breeds, tricks with hyenas etc. and the abnormal - alien, mutant, prehistoric etc. There are also differing opinions among authors on La Bête as to the character of the Chastels - father and son. Pourcher records Jean Chastel as being a man of very good character whereas, for example, Chevalley, in his semi-fictional novel, regards the family with suspicion, even to the extent of surmising there might have been some deception or cross-breeding involving a hyena. It is alleged his son, Antoine, had been a prisoner, castrated and tortured in the Middle East. Incidentally, the hyena species, which hunts as much as it scavenges, is genetically more similar to cat than dog, being of the feline family Felidae, which certainly opens up the possibility of a terribly formidable cross-breed, such as hyena and big cat. In any event, the Chastel name is closely associated with the La Bête mystery but whether justifiably and, if so, for good or evil has never become clear.

To answer a difficult question like the identity of La Bête try shooting sighting-shots at the two extremes and hope the third shot lands, navy style, correctly in the middle.

At one extreme let us say she never existed, being only rumor arising from attacks by a few large wolves, which may have been cross-bred or deformed, and a rise in cases of rabies. The Jesuits may have invented or exaggerated her to shepherd members of their flock back into loyalty to the church, which was under political pressure from 1761 onwards. Some Huguenots, terribly persecuted and almost wiped out by the Jesuits in the past, welcomed her as an excuse to be armed. Hotheads of all types used her - ultimately successfully - to foment revolution. Even Louis XV might have taken advantage of the opportunity to send his troops to an increasingly unruly district. All these possibilities have been repeatedly analysed in literature on La Bête. On the other hand, we have graves and 100 corpses - a lot compared with the modest scores of most serial killers. We have hundreds, maybe thousands, of individual and collective eye witnessings, sometimes by whole dioceses en masse - intelligent French people of all ranks reporting to every type of state and religious body. We have a vast quantity of manuscripts, diagrams and other records authenticated by the highest possible religious, military and state bodies and by respected individuals, such as ministers, dukes and generals. Conspirators probably could not have murdered 100 people over four years and fabricated all the evidence without being suspected at least once. The more likely situation is that some



parties took what advantage they could of the existence of a real beast rather than inventing one when there was no need to.

At the other extreme, we could accept that she was something unique in recorded human experience:- an alien, mutant or surviving prehistoric monster. Only such explanations fully satisfy the records of her speed, elusiveness and cunning.

You can, of course, choose to dismiss La Bête as merely a large wolf but you will find those two very uncomfortable words 'and yet' keep coming to mind.

It is for the reader to decide from the unbiased information honestly presented here, and any obtainable from other sources, where between the two extremes the truth lies.

Mal bloss den Teufel nicht an die Wand!

(Talk of the Devil and he will appear)

Whatever it, or she, was, something strong, fast and clever painted the green French countryside red for three years two centuries ago without being caught. A warning perhaps against genetically creating intelligent beings who regard humans as free lunches, not lords of creation.



To the explanation for this particular naughty lady of shady lanes the only limitation is your imagination.

After 200 years just a faint echo remains of the terrible shadow La Bête cast in the 18th century so should she still be feared? Walk thoughtfully alone in a darkening wood or on misty Bodmin moor and find the answer.

When twigs crack, don't whistle.

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