

The Hunter-Gatherers of



By Marie Brennan

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INTRODUCTION

Comic books have never been noted for their realism and adherence to scientific detail. They usually depict characters and situations which are outright impossible in the real world; this is part of the definition of a superhero, a stock figure of most comic books. In some respects *Elfquest*, the longest-running independently published title in the industry, is no different; it takes place on a two-mooned world not our own, and while there are primitive humans inhabiting that world, there are also elves, trolls, and tiny winged creatures called Preservers. These latter three groups have extremely lengthy lifespans of a thousand years or more, and the elves practice various forms of psychokinetic magic which are scientifically impossible. But behind these elements, *Elfquest* exhibits a surprisingly high level of realism in matters as diverse as anatomy, ecology, and cultural composition. Neither Wendy Pini nor her husband Richard, who together are the driving force behind *Elfquest*, have degrees in any of these subjects, but interviews conducted with them over the years show that they have put more than a little thought and research into their work. The concrete data published in various books about the series back this claim up. There are some facets of *Elfquest* where its realism is questionable, primarily in matters of population viability and food consumption, but in general the hunter-gatherer elves of *Elfquest* are not nearly so unrealistic as the average comic book character.

PHYSICAL ADAPTATION

The elves of the story are not native to the planet they inhabit. They traveled there from another world, and would not have stayed, except that unfortunate circumstances stranded them with no way to leave. They found themselves on a world experiencing a period of global cooling, inhabited by extremely primitive homonids who liked these new interlopers not at all. The magic

they were accustomed to depending on worked but weakly in this new world, and so the elves faced a serious threat of extinction (Pini: *Fire* 2-5).

Some of them survived, however, and bred, and adapted to their new home. The original visitors were, in general, very tall and slender; their height ranged from 6' all the way up to 6'10", but they weighed only 121 to 168 pounds. With their long, delicate limbs, they were uniquely unsuited to surviving the increasing cold and the demands of a hunting lifestyle. And so by the present day of the story, they have changed quite drastically. The average "modern" elf is considerably shorter than his ancient ancestor, being only 3'6" to 4'4", and weighing sixty to ninety pounds (Perrin 21). He is more muscular and broader in the shoulder. This change in phenotype contrasts interestingly with human evolution here on Earth; homonids have, in general, become taller and more gracile as time has passed. The elves, on the other hand, moving from a highly civilized lifestyle into a very harsh one, took a reverse path, becoming smaller and more robust. Their changed bodies are much better suited to their new environment. They conserve heat better in the snowy winter of their northern forest home, and need less food; they are also more resistant to the injuries common in the rough life of a hunter.

Certain other body proportions changed have as well. The art shows that current-day elves have heads which are larger in relation to their bodies; even though their size has decreased, their intelligence has not, and since cranial capacity is related to intelligence, their skulls are now relatively large. They also have larger eyes, with excellent night vision, well-suited to their lifestyle of primarily nocturnal hunting. This is in part an adaptation to help them avoid the diurnal humans who are still unfriendly to them, but it is also related to the peculiar relationship the elves have with wolves, which will be addressed later. Their ears are relatively larger as well, and Wendy Pini even thought to include a small but distinct ridge of bone on the side of elf skulls which supports these

larger ears (Decker 174; Pini: *Forbidden* 120). Being nighttime hunters, the elves are highly dependent on their hearing, and their sense of smell is correspondingly sharp; both of these are traits with high survival value for their kind. Their extremely pale skin, on the other hand, would seem to be a liability for nocturnal hunters relying on stealth, but since they are rarely active during the day and eat their meat raw, not sun-dried, it is a necessity for them to be able to manufacture vitamin D (Fancher 202-3). In most respects, the elves are admirably adapted to their environment.

ECOLOGY

Wendy Pini has said that the world of *Elfquest* is in a period much like our Mesolithic (“Bent” 94), and this appears to be accurate. The period of global cooling is ending, making the climate significantly less harsh. The humans are, to all appearances, anatomically modern, but they have not yet developed agriculture – although some groups seem to be nearing it (Fancher 206). The land is still populated by various species of megafauna now extinct in our world, including sabretoothed cats, giant armadillos and sloths, and even a “relic” species of duck-billed dinosaur (Perrin 101-110).

The animal which features most significantly in the series is the wolf. In particular, a specific group of them has formed a curious relationship with the elves. The tribe is called the Wolfriders for a good reason; they do in fact form close bonds with individual wolves and ride on their backs. These wolves are more like the extinct dire wolf than any modern strain. Gray wolves, the largest species to be found today, weigh sixty to one hundred pounds in general; wolves as heavy as 175 pounds have been verified, but they are uncommon (Busch 21). The Wolfriders’ wolves are, on average, 200 to 220 pounds (Perrin 111), putting them much more in the range of the dire wolf, which was approximately half again as big as a modern gray wolf (Encyclopedia Britannica). Could

they, at this size, actually bear an elf as a rider? A horse can carry approximately a fifth its body weight on its back; an elf's weight to a wolf's is at least a quarter. But wolves are built differently, and it is uncertain if that would allow them to carry more or less.

FOOD AND MOBILITY

When the Wolfriders first came to the home they occupy at the beginning of *Fire and Flight*, they were the forest's only sentient inhabitants. At the time, the tribe was larger; its exact number cannot be determined, but was likely around twenty-five or thirty, the approximate upper limit to a foraging group (Kelly 130). The wolves, however, must also be calculated in; they are very much a part of Wolfrider society. Could the forest support these two groups together? Packs of gray wolves usually number only four to seven, but groups of thirty or more have been confirmed, and some unverified sightings have claimed over fifty. Larger packs may partly be a response to game scarcity; in greater numbers, wolves can more efficiently hunt larger targets (Busch 41). Working in conjunction with the Wolfriders, who have greater intelligence and use of tools, it is not at all unlikely that they could bring down larger game such as bear with reasonable regularity. The presence of psychokinetic healers to repair injuries makes such endeavours less dangerous. Of course, wolves as large as these would need to eat more, and more frequently, than a comparable number of gray wolves. But the Wolfriders, when counted into this unusual "pack," eat less, and would more or less balance this out. Thus it is possible that a pack of forty to fifty elves and wolves, if it were efficient enough, could support itself given a large enough range; wolves can travel twenty miles or more in a given day, searching for food (62). Unfortunately, no figures for the exact size of the forest are available for calculation.

In actuality, though, the Wolfriders are actually only barely classifiable as "hunter-

gatherers.” Without hard statistics for their exact diet, it is still known that plant foods make up only a tiny portion of their subsistence. They eat almost exactly as wolves do: raw meat, with some small amounts of berries, and perhaps nuts. They might be more accurately described as “hunter-scavengers.” But they do eat a wide range of meat, from bears, predator cats, and various ungulates, down to such creatures as fish, squirrels, rabbits, and even mice. With this diversity, and their ability to defend what they obtain, their food resources are perhaps not too limited to support them. They would, by most definitions, be classified as sedentary; they have not “moved house” in more than a thousand years. But, as Kelly points out, sedentism is complex, and can be divided into “logistical forays,” i.e. hunting or gathering trips, and “residential moves,” a complete relocation of home base. Moreover, societies which depend more heavily on hunting (as the Wolfriders certainly do) will move differently than those which depend on gathering. “Hunters should use long logistical forays and cover less of their large territories through residential mobility” (131). The Wolfriders’ territory would have to be extremely large, but with wolves as mounts, they could travel much more efficiently on these logistical forays than could their footbound human counterparts. Moreover, given that they are hemmed in by unfriendly humans, they would understandably be reluctant to abandon a home and travel through unknown lands to find another.

So it is possible that this situation is workable. Unfortunately for the series’ realism, though, it did not stay the same. At the time the story begins, two other groups have recently moved into the area: one population of trolls, unknown in number and dwelling in an extensive cave system; and one camp of humans, non-agrarian, twenty-five or so strong (Perrin 127-9). Could the forest support a completely non-agricultural population of a hundred or more, all within a few hours’ ride of each other? It is unlikely. But this is the point at which the considerations of the story overtook scientific detail; the opportunities for conflict are greater if the humans and elves, ancient enemies, are

breathing down each others' necks.

TERRITORIALITY

‘The forest was big. It could have fed and sheltered us all! Our paths never had to cross!’
(Pini: *Forbidden* 16, elf chief Cutter speaking to a human)

The question of the Wolfriders' territoriality is interesting, because it can be approached from two directions: as it is defined for wolves, or as it is defined for men. The Wolfriders share behavioral characteristics of both. For wolves, “a territory can be defined as the area in which a wolf pack ordinarily feeds and which it is willing to defend” (Busch 74). For humans, Ingold says that territorial behaviour “presupposes no sense of past and future, no awareness of time, no commitments or intentions” (138). He thus distinguishes between territory and tenure, the latter dealing with “the *relations* of production regulating access to, and control over, the resources of nature”, whereas the former addresses “the practical conduct of activity” (136). In this sense, the Wolfriders certainly claim territory, and not tenure.

The Wolfriders do not have an active concept of “boundary,” beyond the fact that few of their kind are inclined to wander out of the forest into other kinds of terrain. This is logical; as Ingold points out, when a “population turns to the pursuit of prey that is concentrated, mobile and unpredictable in location, territorial boundaries impede rather than facilitate resource extraction” (136). Nor do they envision exclusive access to the animal resources within this non-bounded area they call home; Cutter's words make it clear that the Wolfriders at least would not have disputed sharing the forest, had elves and humans not begun killing one another. It seems, then, that the elves here rise above their sometimes wolflike behavior, and define their territory in more human terms.

TECHNOLOGY

It is not altogether easy to infer the elves' technology simply from the art. Some things are clear; they had no use of metal until the arrival of the trolls. Now they exchange meat, furs, and other products of the forest for metal, particularly weapons (Pini: *Fire* 11). Prior to that, their weapons were made of stone, but the complexity of their manufacture cannot be distinguished from the drawings. They had spears and bows, primarily, with small stone knives and similarly small axes, but there were no swords until the trolls began trading them. The alloy, which the elves refer to as "bright metal" (84) is unnamed; it might be steel.

They do have the ability to tan leather; their leader four chiefs back was named for discovering the process (103). All of their clothing is made of leather; their ancestors knew woven cloth (3), but it is difficult to make and less suitable for forest life anyway. Other possessions, such as jewelry, are crafted from bone or wood, with feathers as decoration. They also use fire, but it is unclear how they ignite it. Psychokinetic firestarting is possible (Perrin 42), but none of the current members of the tribe have that ability. At any rate, they use fire cautiously, and with good reason; in the very first issue of the series they are driven from their homes when the forest is burned down.

Medicine, in the absence of a psychokinetic healer, is simple and herb-based. When one of the elves is injured, Cutter, the tribe's chief, can only say that he is "hurt inside somehow" (37). He has no technical term for hemorrhaging. But the herbal medicine is usually effective, at least on small things; the elves know of roots which contain a natural form of aspirin, and they treat blood poisoning with a diuretic (Pini: "Conversation" 50). They may not have the capability to deal with serious trauma, but they are not completely ignorant of how a body functions.

IDEOLOGY

One of the most striking facts about the elves' culture is that they have little to no concept of religion. This has its roots at least partly in the beliefs of the series' creators; both Wendy and Richard Pini are agnostic (Pini: "Conversation" 41). But the writers also have a logical explanation for it, based on the lives the elves lead, and how that might affect their thinking.

The Wolfriders live very close to nature. In many ways they emulate the behavior of the wolves they have bonded with; as such, they have an almost Zen philosophy, living in what they call "the 'now' of wolf thought" (Wendy Pini: "Bent" 95) They are a rationalistic people who do not seek supernatural explanations for phenomena in the world around them (Pini: "Conversation" 44). The stargazer Skywise names the moons and sees constellations in the night sky (Pini: *Fire* 11), but he is very much an exception among his people. Moreover, death is not an immediately present concept to elves; barring accident, they live for centuries, and the presence of psychokinetic healers makes accidental demise much less of a terror (Pini: "Conversation" 44).

There are, nevertheless, some traces of religion, mostly in the way the Wolfriders honor their ancestors. The original elves, whom they call the High Ones, are usually invoked as an oath; with their graceful bodies, near-endless lifespans, and powerful magic, they would seem reasonable as gods. But the High Ones are rarely invoked in a propitiatory or beseeching manner; they are merely honored ancestors. Respect is also given to the more recently deceased members of an elf's family; the Wolfriders say that the spirits of the dead linger in the Father Tree that is the center of their home. Of course, whether certain of their beliefs should be classified as "ideology" is debatable. The Wolfriders, like some Native American tribes (O'Keefe 183), distinguish between an elf's soul name and the name he uses in daily life, and believe that the soul name has power which can be used to harm that individual. But should it be called a "belief" when this harm is indeed very real and verifiable? Should the belief that the Father Tree houses departed spirits be called "ideology"

when the spirits are in fact there, and their presence can be proved? The functionality of magic and other things which cannot be scientifically documented in our world complicates the question of ideology.

REPRODUCTION

On the one hand, elven reproduction makes sense; on the other, it very much does not. It is true that the shorter a lifespan an organism has, the more likely it is to spawn many offspring; insects are an excellent example of this. Humans, on the other hand, have relatively few children. An elf, facing a lifetime as much as ten times longer than that of a human, might logically have a lower birthrate still (Pini: "Conversation" 53). But there is a point at which population growth becomes negative, where the birthrate is lower than the mortality rate. The elves come perilously close to this line; their birthrate is lower than even that of the !Kung, notable for their seriously small families (Bentley 27-8). It is impossible to get an accurate figure on the elven birthrate, as family trees become extremely patchy even one generation back from the current tribe, but the most generous estimate would lie somewhere between two and three children per elven mother. Given that elves do sometimes die without having children, their society is one which may very well be in a constant, if incredibly slow, state of decline.

There are factors which would logically account for this. Elves live a life which is extremely demanding physically, and since few of their women are of a "stay at home" kind, athletic amenorrhea is a distinct possibility (36). Moreover, with a two-year gestation period, it is quite likely that more than a few pregnancies fail due to poor nutrition, injury, or simple stress (Pini: "Conversation" 53). Statistics on other factors, such as frequency of menstruation, nursing periods for each child, and the presence or absence of venereal disease, all of which can affect birthrate

(Bentley 31), are not available, but it is not really so unbelievable that elves have so few children. It does mean, however, that their tribe is eventually doomed to extinction. It might take a very long time, simply because elves live for so many years, but it would eventually happen, unless something were to change.

The question of genetic diversity also arises. Wendy Pini admits to “tremendous inbreeding” among the Wolfriders (Pini: “Conversation” 46); they have been an completely isolated population group for an extremely long time. They apparently have a good genome, though, as no elf has yet shown signs of hemophilia or other genetic recessives. Perhaps the talents of healers can account for this. But not only do they suffer from a lack of genetic input from outside, they have a remarkably low number of adult, fertile females among them. At the beginning of the tale, there are only five, plus one immature girl. Of course, the tribe has, at that point, recently suffered a number of losses, at the hands of humans and an animal gone mad. But even before these deaths, there were certainly no more than twelve. With so few adult females, few of whom are having any large number of children, the Wolfriders would eventually die out. Fortunately for the story, they are driven from their home, and thus finally encounter other elven groups with whom they can interbreed.

WOLFRIDER SOCIETY

It is not surprising that a group as small as the Wolfriders would have a very simple political structure. Their system of leadership is very similar to that of the G/wi (Silberbauer 29); decisions which will affect the whole tribe are arrived at through a group discussion, in which all adults and near-adults participate (Pini: *Captives* 54), and a particular elf’s reputation and rhetorical skill can augment the weight his or her opinion carries. The most striking difference lies in the fact that the

Wolfriders are led by a single figure, a chief, who “rules” (in a very loose sense of the word) until he dies or is overthrown. As it happens, the latter has occurred only once, when an early chief went mad and was subsequently challenged and ousted by his sister (Pini: “Conversation” 44). The leadership of the tribe has remained in a single bloodline since the group’s inception, despite the theoretical possibility that any given leader could be put out by a challenger. The chief is not an authoritarian figure, though; he is merely a leading voice when there is dissension among the group.

Beyond that one mostly hereditary position, though, the Wolfriders are nearly as perfectly egalitarian a society as an anthropologist could hope for. They exhibit only two real types of stratification, both of them nearly universal: age and skill (Flanagan 248). Elders are given some measure of respect based on their greater age and experience (and therefore, presumably, wisdom); likewise skill counts for something, as a younger elf may be heeded in his personal area of expertise. Women enjoy an equality of position which more closely resembles that of wolves than most humans. They speak out in council and, as mentioned above, even lead the tribe; approximately a third of their chiefs have been female (Pini: *Fire* 101-2). They join the males on hunts without any thought that this might be unusual; since they are so infrequently pregnant or caring for small children, it is seen as much less of a risk. Children are treasured but not coddled, and are raised more or less communally. But because they are so few, they almost never have a peer-group, and so they tend to mature very rapidly (Pini: “Conversation” 53).

This is not to say that strife does not occur among the tribe. It is, however, handled in different ways. A human among the G/wi might leave to join another band (Silberbauer 24) if he were faced with an untenable situation at home, but this is not an option for a Wolfrider, surrounded by humans and unaware of other elven groups. He can, and sometimes does, distance himself for a time (Pini: *Captives* 55-6), but this generally happens when an individual disagrees with the

decisions the tribe has made. Interpersonal conflicts are almost always settled in a more direct fashion which the Wolfriders have taken almost directly from their lupine companions: the practice of challenge. Wolves in a challenge will snap and bite at each other (Busch 45); elves choose a different method, that of a mind-to-mind telepathic battle of wills, but the result is the same. The loser is definitively subdued, after which everyone more or less behaves as though nothing had happened (Pini: *Forbidden* 20). The challenge, once over, is not even history; it is simply gone. The issue is settled in favor of the winner.

CONCLUSION

The Wolfriders in many ways straddle the boundary between wolf behavior and that of human hunter-gatherers. The reasons for this are complex and not to be addressed here. But in general, they show a surprising amount of logical rigor, reflecting the amount of time, research, and consideration the series' creators put into their work. The Wolfriders are, perhaps, doomed to extinction, unless their situation changes (as it does). And the population situation as it stands at the beginning of the story is dubious at best in its supportability. But in matters of technology, ecology, anatomy, social structure, and even perhaps mobility, *Elfquest* is not so terribly far off the mark. This attention to detail, reflected as it is in the art, characterization, story line, and every other aspect of the series, accounts for its popularity and long life. Pointy-eared elves they may be, but the Wolfriders are very lifelike, and very believable.

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