

= Blue men of the Minch =

The blue men of the Minch , also known as storm kelpies or in Scottish Gaelic as na fir ghorma , fear gorm or sruth nam fear gorm , are mythological creatures inhabiting the stretch of water between the northern Outer Hebrides and mainland Scotland , looking for sailors to drown and stricken boats to sink . They appear to be localised to the Minch and surrounding areas , unknown in other parts of Scotland and without counterparts in the rest of the world .

Apart from their blue colour , the mythical creatures look much like humans , and are about the same size . They have the power to create storms , but when the weather is fine they float sleeping on or just below the surface of the water . The blue men swim with their torsos raised out of the sea , twisting and diving as porpoises do . They are able to speak , and when a group approaches a ship its chief may shout two lines of poetry to the master of the vessel and challenge him to complete the verse . If the skipper fails in that task then the blue men will attempt to overturn the ship and capsize it .

Suggestions to explain the mythical blue men include that they may be a personification of the sea , or originate with the Picts , whose painted bodies may have given the impression of men raising themselves out of the water if they were seen crossing the sea in boats that might have resembled kayaks . The genesis of the blue men may alternatively lie with the North African slaves the Vikings took with them to Scotland , where they spent the winter months close to the Shiant Isles in the Minch .

= = Etymology = =

The Minch , a strait that separates the northwest Highlands of Scotland and the northern Inner Hebrides from the northern Outer Hebrides , is home to the blue men . According to lexicographer Edward Dwelly , in the Scottish Gaelic terms for the blue men ? na fir ghorma , fear gorm and sruth nam fear gorm ? the word gorm refers to any shade of blue and fear can be translated as " man " , na fir representing the plural " the men " .

The blue men are also styled as storm kelpies . The most common water spirits in Scottish folklore , kelpies are usually described as powerful horses , but the name is attributed to several different forms and fables throughout the country . The name kelpie may be derived from the Scottish Gaelic calpa or cailpeach , meaning " heifer " or " colt " .

= = Folk beliefs = =

= = = Description and common attributes = = =

The mythical blue men may have been part of a tribe of " fallen angels " that split into three ; the first became the ground dwelling fairies , the second evolved to become the sea inhabiting blue men , and the remainder the " Merry Dancers " of the Northern Lights in the sky . The legendary creatures are the same size as humans but , as the name implies , blue in colour . Writer and journalist Lewis Spence thought they were the " personifications of the sea itself " as they took their blue colouration from the hue of the sea . Their faces are grey and long in shape and some have long arms , which are also grey , and they favour blue headgear ; at least one account claims that they also have wings . The tempestuous water around the Shiant Isles 19 kilometres ( 12 mi ) to the north of Skye , an area subject to rapid tides in all weathers , flows beside the caves inhabited by the blue men , a stretch of water known as the Current of Destruction owing to the number of ships wrecked there .

Although other storm kelpies are reported as inhabiting the Gulf of Corrievreckan , described by poet , writer and folklorist Alasdair Alpin MacGregor as " the fiercest of the Highland storm kelpies " , the blue men are confined to a very restricted area . According to Donald A. Mackenzie they have no counterparts elsewhere in the world or even in other areas of Scotland ; such limited range is

rare for beliefs in spirits and demons . Folklorist and Tiree minister John Gregorson Campbell states that they were unknown in Argyll on the nearby coast of the mainland for instance , although Church of Scotland minister John Brand , who visited Quarff in Shetland in mid @-@ 1700 , recounts a tale of what may have been a blue man in the waters around the island . In the form of a bearded old man it rose out of the water , terrifying the passengers and crew of a boat it was following .

In traditional tales the blue men have the power to create severe storms , but when the weather is fine they sleep or float just under the surface of the water . They swim with their torso from the waist upwards raised out of the sea , twisting and diving in a similar way to a porpoise . To amuse themselves the creatures play shinty when the skies are clear and bright at night . They are able to speak and converse with mariners and are especially vocal when soaking vessels with water spray , roaring with laughter as vessels capsize .

When the blue men gather to attack passing vessels their chief , sometimes named as Shony , rises up out of the water and shouts two lines of poetry to the skipper , and if he cannot add two lines to complete the verse the blue men seize his boat . Mackenzie highlights the following exchange between the skipper of a boat and the chief of the blue men :

The quick responses took the blue chief by surprise ; defeated and unable to do any damage to the vessel , the blue men returned to their underwater caves , allowing the vessel free passage through the strait . The blue men may alternatively board a passing vessel and demand tribute from its crew , threatening that if it is not forthcoming they will raise up a storm .

= = = Capture and killing = = =

No surviving tales mention attempts to kill the demons , but a Gregorson Campbell story tells of the capture of a blue man . Sailors seize a blue man and tie him up on board their ship after he is discovered " sleeping on the waters " . Two fellow blue men give chase , calling out to each other as they swim towards the ship :

On hearing his companions ' voices the captured spirit breaks free of his bonds and jumps overboard as he answers :

Sailors thus believed that all blue men have names by which they address each other .

= = Origins = =

Mackenzie 's explanation of the legend of the blue men was based partly on research into the Annals of Ireland and goes back to the times of Harald Fairhair , the first Norse king , and his battles against the Vikings . The Scottish Gaelic term fear gorm , meaning " blue men " , is the descriptor for a negro according to Dwelly . Thus sruth nam fear gorm , one of the blue men 's Gaelic names , literally translates as " stream of the blue men " , or " river , tide or stream of the blue negro " . Around the 9th century the Vikings took Moors they had captured and were using as slaves to Ireland . The Vikings spent winter months near the Shiant Isles , and Mackenzie attributes the story of the blue men to " marooned foreign slaves " . He quotes an excerpt from historian Alan Orr Anderson 's Early sources of Scottish history , A.D. 500 to 1286 :

These were the blue men [ fir gorma ] , because Moors are the same as negroes ; Mauritania is the same as negro @-@ land [ literally , the same as blackness ] .

More recent newspaper reports have repeated Mackenzie 's hypothesis . Historian Malcolm Archibald agrees the legend originates from the days Norsemen had North African slaves , but speculates that the myth may have originated with the Tuareg people of Saharan Africa , who were known as the " blue men of the desert " .

The origin of the blue men of the Minch may alternatively lie with " tattooing people " specifically the Picts , whose Latin name picti means " painted people " . If they were seen crossing the water in boats resembling the kayaks of the Finn @-@ men they may have given simple islanders and mariners the impression of the upper part of the body rising out of the water .