



Sept. 18, 2017

I wasn't sure I heard the little boy right. He told his mom and dad he wanted to see the "Viking dogs." He meant my Irish wolfhounds, Oona and Oisin. Oh good. I could picture Oona wearing a horned helm. At least she had the beard for it. *And* the attitude.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized the little boy did know his history. After the late 700's when the Viking Age began, wolfhounds became cherished by the Norse nearly as much as by the Irish.

My head was stuffed with Civil War trivia that Saturday. Peggy and I had taken our two wolfhounds to the Chickamauga National Battlefield south of Chattanooga to see the reenactors on the 154th anniversary of the pivotal battle.

Instead, the child's enthusiasm and words rattled around my head all the rest of the day. Viking dogs. I hoped Oona didn't think about it too long. She'd demand her own poleaxe. I'd have to braid her beard, too. Then Oisin's. He'd probably want his own pony, too. This could just get out of hand fast. I'd have to braid *my* beard and start calling myself Bob the Haggard. There just aren't enough hours in the day....

Speaking of braided beards, the boy's father wore strings tiny beads in his beard. He had Viking tattoos. As he admired Oona and Oisin and their elaborate Celtic collars, he mentioned he'd come to see some of his fellow reenactors. In the back of my mind the question whispered..."You're with the 16th Brigade of....Valahalla?"

Where have I been? I've seen the popular "Vikings" series on the History Channel. I just hadn't fully realized the impact it's had on

popular culture. Google "Viking beard products." You'll see what I mean.

Now there are Viking reenactors at many Renaissance fairs, right there beside the green fairies and Joe the Weekend Balladeer. And not infrequently, the Viking stand-ins pose with their war dogs, Irish wolfhounds.

But, yes, it's historical. The first recorded Viking raid was in 795 on Rathlin Island off the coast of Antrim where a church was sacked and burned. Subsequent hit-and-run forays took the raiders all along the western coast of the Emerald Isle. Soon, Vikings came to stay in Ireland and England. And they shipped home a steady stream of treasure.

While the days of Cuchulain and Finn McCoul were long past in Ireland, the now-Christianized Celts of the period still relied on the mighty wolfhound to keep the island's sizable wolf population at bay. Ireland was known on the continent as "wolf land."

Not surprisingly, the Nordic warriors came to admire the jaw-droppingly huge wolfhound, a ferocious fighter and canny foe. Soon, they were included in the booty, or sometimes in attempts by the Irish to appease the Vikings with impressive gifts.

Dogs were already popular among the Vikings as herders, hunters and companion dogs. Odin's wife, Frigga, the goddess of marriage and fidelity, was said to travel in a chariot dragged by the perfect symbols of faithfulness, a pack of dogs.

Based on skeletal remains as much as 5,000 years old, the Norse had long interbred the native Arctic wolf with domestic dogs. The basic Norse dog, a kind of spitz, still registers an unusually high percentage of wolf DNA today.

Wolfhounds were something else altogether. And they quickly found their rightful place in Icelandic sagas. One of the most memorable quotes we have about the wolfhound comes not from a Celt, but from a Viking lord, Olaf, in Njal's Saga, a 13th century tale of blood feuds in the Viking era.

Olaf told his friend, the doomed Gunnarr, "I want to give you three gifts: a gold bracelet, a cloak that once belonged to King Myrkjartan of Ireland, and a dog I was given in Ireland. He is a big animal, and will make as good a comrade-in-arms as a powerful man.

"He has human intelligence, and he will bark at every man he recognizes as your enemy, but never at your friends; he can tell from a man's face whether he means you well or not. He would lay down his life rather than fail you."

The wolfhound's name was Sam and he immediately went to the feet of his new master and settled calmly. Olaf warns Gunnarr to watch his back. With gifts like these he'll be the envy of his countrymen.

Sam's makes a second appearance in the saga when a band of conspirators known by Gunnar creep onto his farm when the field hands are away cutting hay and the hero is alone, except for his wolfhound.

Sam sees the men and recognizes a few of them and lets them draw near. Then he sees strangers among them and their weapons — and attacks. He eviscerates one of them with a mighty chomp to the groin. Then Sam himself is killed with an axe blade in his skull, letting loose a mournful howl like none of them had heard before. Gunnar wakes up and the men flee.

I don't normally flip through the Icelandic sagas for light reading, but a wolfhound did catch my eye in one of my favorite films,

1999's ["The 13th Warrior,"](#) based on Michael Crichton's novel, "Eaters of the Dead." Crichton's tale comes from two sources, the writings of an Arab traveler, [Ahmad ibn Fadlan](#), in the 10th century, and the classic Old English epic, Beowulf.

"Ibn" goes with a band of Norsemen to aid King Hrothgar, whose lands have come under attack from the feared and mysterious Wendol, apparently a remnant band of Neanderthal cannibals who identify with cave bears.

At the side of the leader of the Norsemen, Buliwyf, is his Irish wolfhound. I had to look closely, though, because he was not groomed as closely as many modern wolfhounds are, and....he was red.

The hound's real name is Connor, and he was originally a wheaten. But the producers thought he'd stand out. A grey brindle would blend in too well. So they died him red, a color not seen much anymore one that was more prevalent historically.

Connor was owned by Pauline Weisberger, of British Columbia, Canada.

When Buliwyf fights in a heroic standoff at the film's end, then sits down and dies, clutching his sword, Connor tips off the rest of the band with a wolfhound's signature baying.

Wolfhounds often accompanied their fallen masters on their voyage to Valhalla. The [Gokstad ship](#) is a 9th-century Viking ship found in a burial mound at Gokstad, Norway. Outside the buried ship were the graves of eight giant sighthounds, very likely wolfhounds.

Oona would fit right in at Valhalla. But if I go before she does, I'll certainly wait for her. But it was a different culture and a different day. For the time being, maybe she'll settle for her own drinking

horn...