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THE CELTIC HOUNDS IN ART AND HISTORY

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Flavius Arrien

We can thank Arrien - of whom we know very little - for his description of the hunting hounds. Born at the end of the 1st century BC in 88 or in 95, bored by his job as governor for the Celtes of Germany, he avoided it by chasing the hare with his hound Hormé. He hunts awaiting the Barbares. Thanks to the preciseness of this author we learn a little more about the celtic hounds and their origins, notably the fact that the Greeks did not have dogs fast enough to catch hare before the arrival of the Celts that destroyed Delphes in 273 BC.

This type of hunt, purely sportive, in which « the hunt is the most beautiful when the hare escapes », finds itself, 15 to 20 centuries later, codified by the English as coursing.

The Celtic Heritage

From our first childhood lessons, learned by heart, we were asked to recite « Our Gaelic ancestors ». Or more precisely, our ancestors the Celts, which are in fact those of 22 European countries, that we call Gaelic, Boians or Galates. The Celts disappeared, their languages remain, those in Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, for the islands, and in Brittany for the Continent. And their hounds, who, through the centuries and their long trail in pursuit of man, have left several set breeds in the sense that the standard is extended.

Travelling through Europe from 700 to 100 BC, the Celts reached their maximum expansion in the 3rd century BC.

Their cultural domination, economic and military, spread out over many centuries, from the Carpathian ocean, and the Great Northern Plains to the shores of the Mediterranean – including Ireland, Scotland and Brittany – the regions of the Danube, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey, Bohemia, Spain, Portugal and the Po in the north of Italy. All of these areas infested with wolves at this time needed dogs trained to capture them, swift enough to track them and brave enough to catch them. The ancient Celtic writings, brought back later to the continent with the accounts of the tales and legends of Arthur of the Round Table and accounts of chivalry, the imaginary Celtic world profoundly affect the mentality of medieval man.

Later, at the height of the 19th century, when the industrial revolution brought forth a change in Europe, the romantic movement revived the literary and artistic tradition of the Celtic countries. We can find astonishing analogies between the creations of the « art nouveau » and the Celtic works of the Iron Age, a pronounced taste for flexible lines, the *entrelacs* of plant origins combined with animal motives.

The arrival and the spread of the large, rapid hunting hounds seems therefore to coincide with the trips of the Celts throughout Europe.

Notions of pure breed. Formation, exchanges and interferences.

The standards that set the physical traits and behavioural characteristics of the breeds are well over hundreds of years old. (*Breed : a natural group of individuals showing common physical characteristics ; the dog breeds are a subdivision of one kind.* Larousse)

Our first remark will banish an idea, more commonly spread than one thinks, that consists, more or less, to assert and persuade that the breed that one has chosen is the oldest, the most marvelous, unquestionably the most intelligent and that it was already present in Noah's arc. In fact, whatever might be in the collective unconscious or by means of idealisation, it would be held in one's region or in one's village, that the breed is pure of any crossbreeding or any stain ! But the borders, human creations, do not exist any more for dogs that they do for birds. Be it enough to acknowledge the dog's omnipresence in all cultures and in history. Of all the mammals, the dog is the one which has garnered the most vast geographical spread, just after that of man on the worldwide level.

Due to tribal wars, expansions and conquest, breeds followed man and established themselves where the warriors stopped. Treated and appreciated differently in civilisations as well as in length and time, treated following the times and cultures as a privileged animal – man's friend or beast to slay, hunting assistant for the sport or the animal that one fattens to then feed upon, filling the master's plate – but present since the dawn of time, the dog puts in doubt the most cultural part of ourselves.

Following thusly human categories, there were some superior dogs, some pariahs and some untouchables. The hounds belonged to the first category. Primarily hunters since the Celts, the use of the rifle helping, the hunt lost or at least declined, hounds became somewhat throughout Europe (except perhaps with the Spanish hunters and the gypsies) the « visiting cards » dogs, in an effort to show their owner's class status. This since the beginning of the age of the great mountain hunts up until the end of the 19th century, when the supposed nobility of pure bred dogs in general and hounds in particular, bounced back on the owners of the later ; who became, but their simple ownership, that which Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* called « people of quality ».

It is interesting to recognise that the Spanish greyhound, the Galgo, for example is tightly related to the Scottish, Irish and English hounds. GALGO is the contraction from the latin « gallicus vertragus », meaning Gaelic Hound or Celtic Hound. We think, in fact, that this is the one that comes the closest to the original archetype.

The Celts travelled constantly from Iberia to Ireland and to Brittany for at least four centuries. This type is found in Holland of the 16th and 17th centuries, short, wiry or rough coated, in the hunt scenes of the painters De Vos and Snyders, on the trail of stags and boars. It is the same hound often with a rough coat and of variable size, who adapted itself work and to a specific land, now divided as Deerhound, Irish Wolfhound and Galgo . The short-haired Celtic hound followed the same route, and became the greyhound, and with the infusion of oriental blood, Magyar Agar and Chart Polski. The borzoi, the most well-known of the Russian hounds, descends from the Chart Polski, the covering coat acquired by crossing with a local dog and the narrow head most likely from the Siberian Laika (but why so narrow? Through in-breeding?)

Our cynophilic history has a very short memory. It was not felt useful to keep a breed of French hounds, but they strongly help in the formation and the preservation of the Greyhound, because we know through writings that the English courts imported thousands of hounds from Armorique, Brittany and from Champagne. How could we forget Louis XI, the breeder king, who was given some and had some sent back on his return from Italy, England and the western

countries ; François the 1st, Marguerite de Navarre and the court of the Valois ; Mary Stuart who arrived in France for her wedding with a dowry consisting of more than a hundred male guards and just as many Celtic hounds of deerhound type with rough hair that were going to increase the packs of household hounds and those used for the hunt in the courts of France ?

Notes from Capitain Graham. Crossbreeding, outcrosses, the search for the ideal

In rereading Graham's notes on the origins of the Wolfhound we can read :

« It is undeniable that we have in the Deerhound the modern representative of the old Irish Wolfdog. Of less stature, less robust and of slimmer form, the main characteristics of the breed remains ; and in very exceptional instances specimens occur which throw back to resemble in a marked manner the old stock from which they have sprung. It is not probable that our remote ancestors arrived at any very high standard as to quality or looks. Strength, stature and fleetness were the points most carefully cultivated – at any rate, as regards those breeds used in the capture of large and fierce game. » In the book written by Richardson in 1841 is noted « whereas the author give accounts of all the noticeable breeds from a remote period, we do not find any allusion to the Deerhound, except in writings of a comparatively recent date, which would lead us to suppose that the Deerhound is the modern representative of that superb animal. »

Concerning the Irish and the Deer, we know that up until the end of the 19th century, it was one in the same race/ Graham was a breeder of Deerhounds and none the least. He spent a large part of his life and his fortune recreating the vanished Irish, with the help of crossbreedings that are well known : using the Deerhound as a base, the largest and heaviest, but also mastifs, borzoi, great dane and a sort of Tibetan dog with a long and wooly coat (the host of the wooly gene ?) from which the blood continues to run through the veins of today's champions .

The goal was to find not only the largest, but also the most powerful dog, capable of hunting the large game, such as the great stag and the bear, but also to destroy the wolves.

Was the ideal wolf hunter a fantasy or a reality ?

The ambition of Captain Graham and of his acolytes was to recreate the great Celtic hound, whose achievements were praised in Europe of old, with that presence that commanded respect, that musculature and that supernatural force that allowed him to fight the lions in the arenas of ancient Rome , strong enough to bring the large game to the ground straight away and the size of a colt ! But these exploits are taken from tales and legends. We now know the number of health problems linked to a more than normal size. At the end of his life, Graham came to his senses : he regretted have sought after the largest size possible and thought that a good hound, well-balanced was superior to a larger one less well proportioned. Only time would tell.

Representation and reality

The hound, the very image of the faithful canine, is inseparable from nobility . Until the arrival of the small affectionate dogs, wrongly called companion dogs (aren't all dogs such, except for, perhaps, the dogs raised for the purpose of eating ?) he alone occupied this role. The hound embodied this signification for centuries, associating noble birth to fidelity. Most certainly since the Crusades, in a relationship similar to that of the serf to his lord.

The shift took place as such :

- firstly, as hunting dog
- then physically easily recognisable

- called the « king of dogs » therefore « king's dog »
- then as « crowning achievement », « standard of the social class »
- became the model of social stature
- therefore forbidden to the « common » and to the « vulgar », the disobedient punished to death .

A sign of the return home from the Crusades, as sort of living coat of arms, the notions of masculinity, loyalty strength and power are associated with the hound . He is , at the same, the « object » and the « subject » of the chief, the guide and the commander.

It is a process of symbolism and demarcation of cultural frontiers, a visible sign of control of the social differences between men, an important element of human ideologies. For centuries, the hound is not sold, but offered... or stolen, able by the same to provoke battles and wars (the war of the Picts).

Several hundreds of centuries later, fallen into disuse throught the world, today the hound no longer represents the values of nobility and nostalgia. Several years ago, during a lucheon at the Château of Grillemont, Christine du Rot Hazard made this remark, full of humour, to the Countess of Saint-Seine : « In 1789 they cut off our heads, today they take our dogs ! »

A Royal Gift

Just several short examples in order to demonstrate this custom.

In a letter postmarked 1545 from Henry VIII to the Lord Deputy and Counsel of Ireland, his majesty takes notice of the suit of the Duke of Albuquerque of Spain (of the Privy Council to Henry VIII), « that it might please his Majesty to grant to the said Marquis and his son, two hawks and four Wolfhounds to hunt wolves » and he orders their delivery and to charge the cost to the Treasury.

On 29 December 1595 Henry the Great of France wrote to the Count of Essex :

« To the other obligations that I am under to you I must add this one, that you procure for me a Greyhound of Ireland and a bitch of the same race, in order that I may keep up the breed . »

This ancestral practise as gift of the court continued for many, many years.

Cromwell's Decree

Irish Wolfhounds had been much sought after as gifts for many centuries, but a very large number had been taken out of Ireland, sent by boat to all the courts of Europe. Perhaps because of this the number of wolves increased so much that in 1652 there were not enough large hounds control them. In 1641 and 1652 the wolves had done so much ravage to the livestock that Cromwell, in a decree dated 27 April 1652 prohibited the exportation of Irish Wolfhounds.

Pictorial transcription of Beauty.

The notion of beauty, purity, usefulness in the eye of the artist : deception or idealisation?

The pictorial transcription of beauty brings out the individual personality of every artist. Everyone is capable to see – one just needs to look – everyone is able to write – one just needs a sheet of paper and a pen – but everyone is not capable to express that which is seen and felt and relate those feelings. Transcribing emotions is the characteristic of the artist, whether it be a painter, poet, musician or writer.

That which marks the difference between the « reproducer » and the breeder, is that which differentiates the Sunday painter from the true artist : the issue from a breeder worthy of this name are easily recognisable. At the centre of the same standard, they have a different style, a detail that allows an enlightened amateur to recognise the subjects coming from a celebrated line. As one recognises a Van Gogh from a Matisse or from a Picasso. Their works, basically, come from the same tubes of colour onto the same canvases .

Matisse said « The composition is the art of arranging in a decorative way the different elements which the painter uses to express his sentiments. A work of art must be harmonious in its ensemble . All the details that are not useful to a work are to its detriment. »

These remarks we can apply to the hound, which, perhaps more than all other dogs, is a work of art of nature. There is nothing superfluous, an assembly of pure lines and movements apparently without effort. All of the anatomical details come together to achieve the final goal for which he was created : to run and hunt.

The coats : usefulness and colouring

The dogs coats, in all cases that concern hunting dogs, do not follow fashion, but were selected for only one usefulness : to blend in with the environment and to match the colour of the hunted game. There are no particoloured or spotted wolves, that goes for deer and bears. Maïda, belonging to the novelist Walter Scott, who thought that she was of lovely type, was particoloured, her mother was a Pyrenees mountain dog. We think that she must have been kept due to her type more than for her colour. The markedly spotted dogs must have been from the first generations.

That does not prevent a certain colouring by personal taste or in order to differentiate the dogs from those of neighbouring hunters. The teams of borzoi were composed of one coat colour, in part by esthetics since they took part in a ceremonial hunt, but most of all, to know, at sight, to which pack the different animals belonged.

The reason why Ireland's most famous saint, Patrick, is inseparable from the Irish Wolfhound

Those who celebrate St. Patrick's Day owe a big thanks to the Irish Wolfhound. For, according to the legend, It was the wolfhound that made the works of St. Patrick possible. In his youth, Patrick was enslaved by an Irish aristocrat. After six years of captivity, he escaped to the coast hoping to catch a ship away from the island. The ship that he caught contained 100 stolen and angry Irish Wolfhounds, which were to be sold in Europe. The ship's captain was going to refuse passage to Patrick, until he noticed the calming effect Patrick had on the howling dogs. The soon-to-be saint won the hearts of dogs and crew alike when, after 28 days without food, his prayers led to the miraculous appearance of a herd of swine .

Years later, when Patrick decided to return to Ireland, he was intercepted by Prince Dichu. The Prince was suspicious of Patrick's plans to spread Christianity throughout the island, and tried to kill Patrick by setting his giant hounds on him. The hounds, however, simply ran to Patrick and laid at his feet, whimpering. The Prince was so impressed by Patrick's rapport with the dogs that he became Patrick's close companion and ally in the mission to bring Christianity to the island.

The legend of the great dog of Culann

Here is an example of the Irish Wolfhound's importance in Irish literature in which the Irish Celtic hero Cù Chulainn is put to the test, in the epic of the Ulster cycle (3rd – 4th centuries). In Celtic mythology it is not unusual to find hunting scenes involving hundreds even thousands of extraordinary dogs.

During the last century BC, or the first century AD, there lived in ancient Ireland the famous Irish hero Cu Chulainn, son of Sualtam. His mother, Dechtire, was the sister of King Conor of Ulster. However, his original name was Setanta, and this is how he was known until the following major event occurred when he was 14 or 15 years old. Setanta's uncle, King Conor, accompanied by a convoy requiring 50 chariots to transport it, visited Culann, the blacksmith, renowned for his strength and his mastery. Culann asked if there were any other persons expected to guard the convoy and as he was told that there were not, he offered the services of his dogs, famous as the fiercest in the region :

« I have a savage hound... let him loose....to guard our cattle and other stock. Shut the gate of the enclosure. » sometime later, though, Setanta approached the blacksmith's house and was attacked by the dog, which he fought with and killed.

Culann stood inside the house and said to Setanta :

You are welcome, boy, for your mother's heart's sake.
But for my own part I did badly to give this feast.
My life is a waste, and my household like a desert, with the loss of my hound !
He guarded my life and my honour, a valued servant, my hound, taken from me.
He was a shield and shelter for our goods and herds.
He guarded our beasts, at home or out in the field.

The lad was overcome with remorse, and offered to take the place of the slain hound for a year while he trained a pup of its begetting.

The legend of the hound Gelert

In 1205, King John of England presented a large hound to Prince Llewellyn of Wales, which became his favourite hound « Gelert ». This hound has become famous due to a tragic misunderstanding which led the Prince, stricken with remorse, to build a small church in the town of Bedd-Gelert in memory of his faithful hound. This is the tale : One day when the Prince was away from home, a wolf broke into the house and tried to kill Llewellyn's son. The hound bravely fought and killed the wolf, saving the life of the baby. When Llewellyn returned home, all he saw was blood on the hound and in the baby's room, and no sign of his son. Without thinking, and assuming the worst, Llewellyn drew his sword and killed the hound. Only after this did he suddenly see the dead wolf and then the live baby which had tumbled into a corner. Devastated at his stupid mistake he had the church built in honour of the hound's memory.

The Epic of Finn

As usual it is often difficult to sort out historic fact from legend, but we frequently find in Celtic literature tales in which brave warriors and courageous dogs belong to the same family.

Finn Mac Cumall, the great warrior chief of the tribe of the Fenians, lived in Ireland in the 3rd century. He had a beloved wolfhound named Bran, so fast that he could catch wild geese in flight. According to the legend, Bran was the very cousin of Finn. By way of a cloudy, long and complicated family history (the epic written by most celebrated of the Celtic poets, Ossian, contains 2272 verses about Finn and more than 300 names of hounds !), Finn's aunt had been changed into a dog. Bran was a descendant of her family. Bran is a great figure in all the legends of this time, and he is described thus in the poem « Bran's Departure from the Fenians » :

Two white sides had Bran
and a fresh crimson shining tail.
His crimson haunch was well apportioned,
stretching from his tail to the end of his back.

He had a fierce eye in his shaggy head.
It was impossible to contend with him.
Beautiful and lovely was his fame.
He was swifter than all hare-hounds.

The tallest of the Fian dogs would pass
beneath his groin without stooping :
His head (it was a cunning distribution)
was as high as my shoulder.

The Hound of the Baskervilles

At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the most famous investigations Sir Arthur Conan Doyle put the detective Sherlock Holmes on the track of the « hound of the Baskervilles ». A dog of the greatest size and impressive even more than being ferocious and dangerous. All the breed of dog is not named, what breed was he ? « Elementary, my dear Watson » an Irish Wolfhound !

Painting studies

(Drawings, paintings, oils, engravings, sculptures, bronze and other medias)

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