

The Icelandic horse

As a teenager and a young adult, I had never been much of a person for horses. As a child, my limited exposure was that of a single pony ride at a school fete, and the occasional encounter on countryside walks. I had initially wanted to pursue horse-riding as a hobby – I even got as far as looking up stables in the yellow pages – until I realised just how big horses generally were. As a small child and a short teenager, I soon decided that more ground-level pursuits were best.

However, two years ago whilst studying for my MA in Medieval Studies at the University of York, I decided to write my thesis on the relationship between the medieval Scandinavian hero and his horse in Old Norse literature.

Perhaps I found a kindred spirit in the small-of-stature Icelandic horse.

Though small of stature, Icelandic horses are an impressive breed, trained to master special walks such as the *tölt*, which is a smooth, four-beat lateral gait, very comfortable for the rider; and a gait called the “flying pace.” This is a two-beat lateral gait where the hooves on the same side touch the ground together; it is very fast, and considered by Icelanders as the very best of horsemanship.

With such impressive horses, it’s no surprise that Icelanders throughout history have held their equine companions in high regard; and great care is taken to ensure the purity of the breed. When we look at the Icelandic horse today, we see the very horses that Viking Age Icelanders would ride in the eleventh century.

The special relationships between Icelanders and their horses were even enshrined in their medieval law-books. In these laws, the behaviour of a man’s horse is legally that of the owner. For example, if a man injured another by setting a horse on him, he was legally responsible for any injuries the horse may inflict, as if he had attacked the man himself.

A number of laws also focus on the (often extreme) consequences for stealing a man’s horse and riding it without his permission, or riding it over too great a distance. These laws can seem extreme to us, but to the Icelanders they show the importance of a man’s horse to his

sense of identity and honour. For example, cutting the tail off a man's horse could result in being declared an outlaw!

But it is not just the law-books that show this incredible bond between the Icelanders and their horses. Examples appear in all types of poetry and prose in Old Norse, in which the horse is a companion and treasured possession of the hero.

In one Icelandic story, a man called Hrafnkel calls his horse, Freyfaxi, his foster son, and will do anything for him. In another, a warrior-poet called Björn treats his horse, Hvítingr, better than any of his human friends.

From the 16th century onwards, Icelandic horses were also honoured in poetry known as *hestavísur* (horse-verses), and the Icelandic Bishop-poet Jón Arason (1484-1550) was perhaps the first to compose a *hestavísa* about his horse, Móalingr.

Harriet Jean Evans, October 2014

Currently a PhD candidate at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York researching the relationships between farmers and their domestic animals in medieval Iceland.