

The Wolf Moon

A Viking Legend: The Descendants of Odin

AINSLEY BLOOMER

DEAR READER,

I would like to share a special night with you and what a night it was!

It was the first TGIF Dinner of the year at the Scandinavian Centre where I gave a talk about my new book, *A Viking Legend: The Descendants of Odin*. When arrangements were made for the event, little did anyone know that it would be the week of the Wolf Moon. It was a surprise because another name for Odin is Yfling or Wolf. The descendants of Odin are the Yflings, or the Wolf Clan. I was sharing a story about the Wolf Clan during the week of the Wolf Moon, and I wondered if there was a connection between Old Norse mythology and the Wolf Moon. What is the Wolf Moon and how did it get its name?

After some research, several answers to these questions came to light, although a direct connection seems illusive, as it appears the naming of the Wolf Moon happened long after the polytheistic religion was practiced or the Viking Age had ended, although, there are several similarities.

Wolves are nocturnal creatures and like the moon they come out at night. However, they are at times seen during the day. The Wolf Moon is the name of the first full moon of the new year, when the sun and moon are directly opposite each other, and the sun's rays reflect upon the moon. There have been many names for the first full moon of the year and the sources of the name Wolf Moon are believed to be Celtic, Old English and North American Indigenous. In the northern hemisphere, January is a cold dark month and people heard the wolves howling during this full moon period. They thought the wolves were howling at the full moon. Later it was found that the sound of the wolves' howl, helps them identify their locations, repel intruders, and make mating calls, as wolves tend to breed from January to early spring.

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Although the naming of the Wolf Moon is most likely North American, wolves play a prominent role in Old Norse mythology. Wolves were hated and loved, feared and respected, they could be brutal yet beautiful, or ferocious foes and friends of the gods. Two well known wolves Freki “the ravenous one” and Geri “the greedy one” accompanied Odin, the chief of the Wolf Clan, during battles. They were loyal and always stayed by Odin’s side. As a reward they received portions of meat from Saehrimnir, (recorded as a magical boar or sea beast) whose meat was given only to the warriors of Valhalla, the Einherjar. There are several wolves in the stories of Old Norse mythology. They are mysterious, and represent the cruelty of the untamed wilderness, while being fearsome hunters and savage enemies. They have become symbols of survival, life, family, loyalty, spirituality, guidance, love, as well as fear, destruction, chaos, and death.

The Scandinavian people of the past lived in harmony with nature and were well aware of its delicate and nurturing qualities as well as its terrible and treacherous unpredictability. They were also very aware of the neighbouring wolves. Wolves thrived in the cold, harsh and sometimes unforgiving environment. They were revered and thorough teachers of survival in the wilderness. Wolves lived and hunted in packs, shared their food, cared for their young, and were fiercely protective of family. The people followed suit, lived in groups or villages, hunted together, shared their food, cared for their young and were protective of family. One could not survive alone in an unrelenting environment.

A Viking Legend: The Descendants of Odin has had several family-like groups that have brought it to fruition. Members of my natural family, friends, supporters, the book club at the Scandinavian Cultural Centre in Winnipeg, the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba along with many students, Prairie Heart Press, and as far away as the Eskilstuna City Museum in Sweden. These groups have all contributed to the survival of this project.

The reading chosen for the evening of the TGIF, was not about wolves or the moon, but about a member of the Old Norse mythological Wolf Clan. Her name is Aslaug or Kraka, and her story is in Chapter 44, entitled, “The Saga of Aslaug.” It begins when a group of king’s men discover Kraka, who, unknown to them is the daughter of Sigurd Sigmundarson, the dragon slayer, also a descendant of Odin and Brynhild Budladottir, the valkyrie and warrior maiden. A shorter version of the reading follows:

One evening, ships of the king and his companions came in along the coast, close to where Kraka lived. Some men, in smaller boats, were sent to the shore. The men were ordered to find an oven to bake some bread. They came across the humble hut of Grima and Aki, and asked the couple if they would allow them to use their oven.

“Kind folk, we have been sent by King Ragnar Lothbrok to bake our bread. We have many provisions we can share, if you allow us the use of your oven to bake our bread.”

Grima and Aki, with hopes of receiving provisions from them, allowed the men inside to use the oven. Grima was curious and, in a tired voice, asked, “Who is this king?”

“We are from Denmark, and Ragnar Sigurdsson is our king. He was the son of Sigurd the Ring.”

The men began preparing for the baking of the bread.

Kraka had finished her evening bath in the river and returned to her home to find the men inside. She was surprised to see them there, but Grima said, “Kraka, help the men bake their bread.”

“Yes, of course, mother.”

With that, she took off her cloak and hung it in the hall. When she entered the room, the men were dumbfounded by her dazzling appearance. Her smile filled the haggard, old, dark room with a brilliant fragrant breath of fresh air and sunshine. Her blue-green eyes shone, as she gracefully took to kneading the dough. The men, mesmerized by her magnificence, followed her every move. When she told the men to watch the bread bake, all they could do was watch her. She was beautiful beyond any other woman they had ever seen. They were all captivated, as Kraka moved about the room doing her chores. The men only had eyes for her and, unfortunately, they burned their bread. They had to go back to their ship with burnt bread. When King Ragnar asked them about the mishap of the burnt bread, they told him about the beautiful, young woman in the humble hut.

“We tell you, King Ragnar, this woman is like no other we have ever seen!” All the men blurted out a description of her as being curvy, beautiful, dazzling, magnificent, delightful and radiant, with shining skin and flowing, golden hair! One confessed, “We were all so bedazzled by her beauty, that we burned our bread.”

Ragnar’s curiosity was set aflame, “Since all of you describe her beauty with such zeal, I wish to see her for myself, but I also want to test her intelligence. A beauty with no brain is no beauty at all.

Approach this woman and tell her that the king requests her presence. But, tell her this: when she comes before the king, she must neither be dressed nor undressed, neither eating nor fasting, and neither alone nor in the presence of company.”



Figure 17: *Ragnar Lothbrok and Kraka* by Louis Moe (1898)

The men thought these requests were rather unusual, but they did not question their king and did as he commanded. The following morning, Ragnar’s men went back to the hut. They gave Aki and Grima a bountiful amount of supplies and then approached Kraka. One said, “Young woman, King Ragnar wishes for your presence on his ship. He has asked you to come before him neither dressed nor undressed, neither eating nor fasting, and neither alone nor in the presence of company.”

Kraka thought the requests extraordinary yet interesting. She replied, “Dear men, you will need to give me some time to prepare, as these are strange and unusual requests.”

Aslaug thought about the requests for a while, and then knew what she would do. She asked Aki for a clean, unused fishing net. He obliged and gave her a net that she dressed herself in, showing she was dressed but also undressed, as she was not wearing clothing. Her long silken locks flowed to the

ground, so her whole body was covered under the net. She gathered up an onion from the garden, cleaned it, placed it in her mouth and bit on it, showing that she was not fasting, because she had food in her mouth, but she was not eating, as the onion was only bitten and held by her teeth. For the last riddle, she took along her pet dog, thereby showing she was not alone, because she was with her dog, yet she was not in the company of any people.

When she was ready, she went with the men to Ragnar. When the king saw her arrive, he laughed out loud and was truly fascinated and impressed by her creative resourcefulness and her exquisite beauty. “You certainly have done what I have asked, and I am thoroughly impressed. Come and sit by me a while.”

The young Kraka sat by Ragnar, and they laughed with one another. He found her beautiful, as his men had said, and he also found her uniquely wise. He thought that she would make a good companion for him and now looked upon young Aslaug as a future wife. He was comfortable with her. She was beautiful and charming and had proven herself very wise. He proposed marriage and, to his astonishment, the young Kraka refused the king’s proposal.

“I must admit I am grateful for your offer of marriage, and I feel I could have a place by your side. Yet, this proposal comes too early in our relationship. In all fairness, Ragnar, how can I honour your proposal, when I may never see you again, because you are going to war. Might I be widowed before even knowing you?”

“Kraka, my beauty, what you say is true, as we are going on a mission. Yet, love swells within my breast for you, and I believe the gods are with us. I pledge to come back for you and, when I return, will you be my bride and my queen?”

“If you still have your breath within you and your wits about you after this battle quest, I may then consider it.”

Does Kraka marry the king or is there another path for them?

In times of uncertainty, battle or conflict, the sight of a grey wolf was considered a good omen because it was believed the wolf would protect the warriors in battle and lead them to victory. Everyone needs a protector and a guide to success. We must remember that these are folktales and mythology. In real life, if one sees a wolf, it is best to get back into the car, move to safety in numbers or find a secure shelter somewhere, as one surely desires

to be home for dinner and not to be dinner for a wild wolf. Wolves are unpredictable, even with the mysterious mythology and fantastical folktales surrounding them, they can be extremely dangerous creatures. Yet, wolves need other wolves for survival, just as people need other people to survive and live in this world. Other people can help you nurture, live, grow and prosper. I am grateful to everyone who helped me and continues to help and joins me on this journey. I hope you have found your tribe, people, clan or will soon find one. I also hope you enjoyed the reading.

A Viking Legend: The Descendants of Odin is a retelling of Old Norse mythological tales from several different sources. It is available at H.P. Tergesen & Sons and The New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli. It is also available at McNally Robinson at Grant Park in Winnipeg or can be ordered online through prairieheartpress.ca.



Figure 18: The book cover of *A Viking Legend*

For the night of the TGIF, special thanks go to our Icelandic Consul Vilhjalmur Wium, who held us all in stitches as he described *bóndadagur* [Husband's Day] in Iceland. He also supported my work and during the reading he read all the parts of all the king's men. I would like to thank Louise Horst, an advocate for my book, who was MC for the evening and read the part of Aslaug (with an attitude). Many thanks go to Ryan Johnson, a PhD Candidate with the University of Iceland, and an Instructor with the University of

Manitoba. Ryan has worked on many projects, including vesturheimur.arnastofnun.is or the database that houses digital access to hundreds of historically written documents owned or created by Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent. I am grateful that Ryan accepted, edited, and supported my project, and during the reading, he read the part of King Ragnar.



Figure 19: Craig Gibb, Ainsley Bloomer, and John Robin.

I would like to thank Craig Gibb and John Robin from Prairie Heart Press who attended the evening. Craig designed the cover of the book. The landscape represents the people living in a harsh environment who did not have much but had each other. Together they shared their stories, songs, and poems beside their hearths or bonfires. In addition, the ship represents the Old Norse mythological tales. Lastly, some believe that when our ancestors die, they become the northern lights.

Also special thanks to Michael and Jolyne of Bonne Cuisine who made a wonderful chicken dinner with amazing vegetables and dessert.

Happy Reading
Ainsley Bloomer

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Also known as *Krákumál*, this poem, as legend has it, was composed by Ragnar loðbrók while imprisoned in King Ælla of Northumbria's snake pit. The French Nordic music group Skáld has recently recorded a song with excerpts from this poem.

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