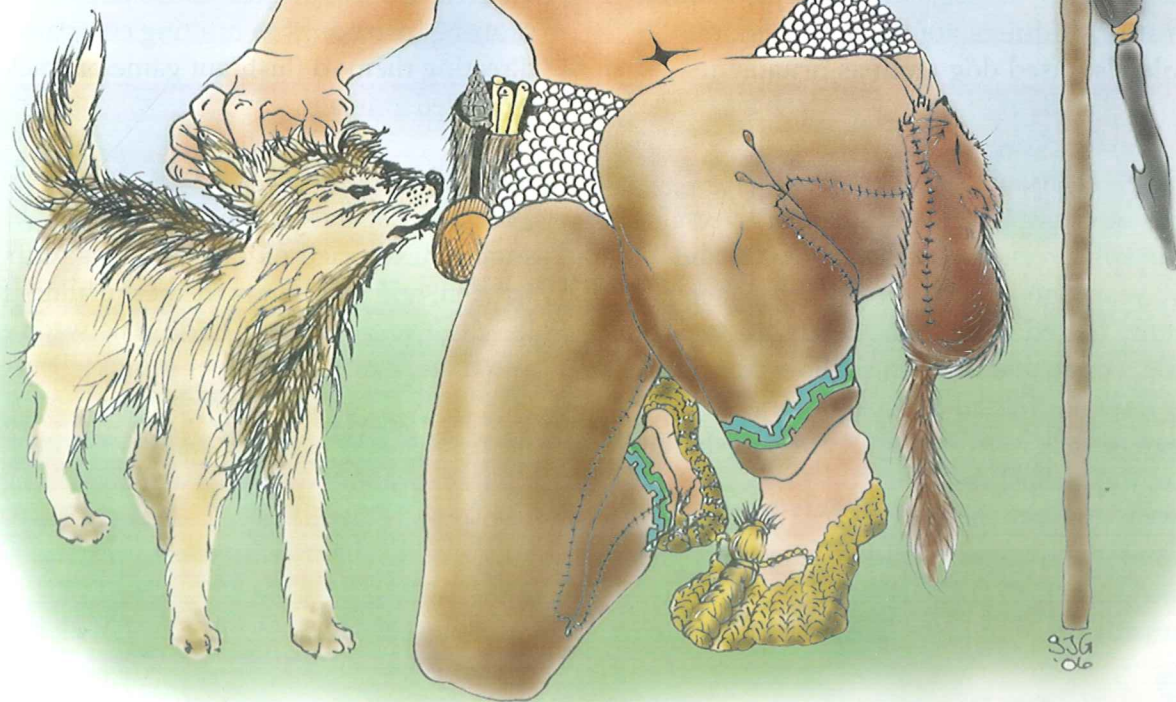


MAN'S BEST (PREHISTORIC) FRIEND

BY A. GWYNN HENDERSON

FRIENDS
FOREVER—
AND TOMBS
DON'T LIE.



A man and his dog leave on a hunting trip in prehistoric Kentucky.

Does your fish jump up and down when it sees you head for the car? Have you ever seen someone walking down the street, led by a seeing-eye cat? If someone threatens you, how loud does your snake hiss?

Only dogs do all these things! No question: There is a special bond between people and dogs. That's why we call the dog "man's best friend."

Have you ever wondered when this bond began? If you guessed more than 8,000 years



Green River Burial

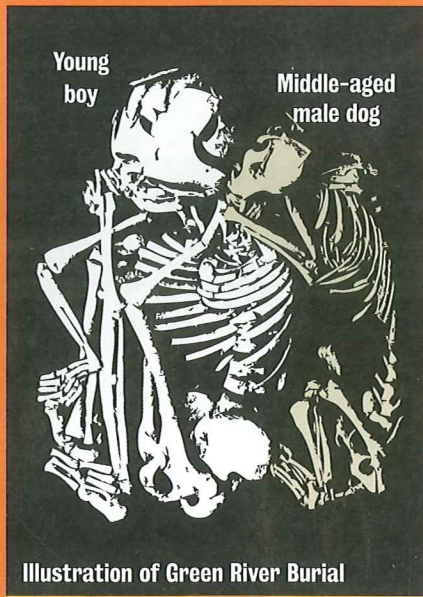


Illustration of Green River Burial

ago, you would be close. From research at the campsites of prehistoric hunting and gathering peoples worldwide, archaeologists know that the dog was the first domesticated animal. Of course, not every dog was man's best friend. Archaeologists have found dog bone fragments in trash heaps, so they know people in some prehistoric cultures ate dogs. Prehistoric people also used dog teeth as ornaments.

WOLFLIKE?

But research shows that there were some special dogs. For example, at campsites scattered along Kentucky's Green River between 6,000 and 3,000 years ago, prehistoric hunter-gatherers carefully buried more than 180 dogs—male and female, young and old—in shallow pits. These dogs were not buried in separate cemeteries; human burials were also uncovered in shallow pits at the campsites.

From studying the Green River dogs' skeletons and how the dogs were buried, researchers have learned that these animals stood about 14 to 18 inches at their shoulders. That is about the size



Dr. Dig says:

For more pictures of dog burials from the Green River sites in western Kentucky or from archaeological sites in other Southeastern states, go to the University of Tennessee's digital libraries Web site at: <http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/wpa/>, click on "search/browse the collection," then type in "dog burial" under "search for."

of a cocker spaniel or fox terrier. They may have had long hair and looked like a young wolf, their closest common ancestor. Of great interest is the fact that different breeds of dogs were not found. The variety in dogs began relatively "recently"—some 2,000 years ago or maybe even earlier.

The buried dogs' bones offer evidence that prehistoric people did keep them as pets and companions—and some had to work. In prehistoric North America, the only "beasts of burden" were people...and their dogs. So, people used dogs to carry loads that included items such as firewood and household wares. Prehistoric hunters, just as hunters today, also probably used dogs as hunting companions, directing them to flush out game or track down wounded animals.

A COMPANION IN DEATH

The fact that these prehistoric people sometimes buried older male dogs with men, women, and children is the best evidence we have of the special relationship between people and dogs. One Green River burial tells it all (see above). A boy—7 to 12 years old—lies on his right side, folded into a fetal position in a shallow oval pit. A middle-aged male dog lies beside him. The dog's muzzle is on the boy's left shoulder, his left paw draped across the boy's chest. What could have happened? The bones provide no clues as to how they died. Were their deaths accidental? Did the boy's family kill the dog to be his companion in the afterlife? We will never know. What we do know, based on archaeological research worldwide, is that dogs truly have been man's best friend for a long time.

A. Gwynn Henderson, staff archaeologist and education coordinator at the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, became interested in dog burials while researching Kentucky's Green River Archaic culture.