Canis familiaris in Olbia Pontica: Shepherds, Hunters, Pets, Pariahs

Alexander Odrin

Institute of History of Ukraine National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Department of Medieval and Early Modern history, address 4 Hrushevskoho St., 01001, Kyiv, Ukraine, e-mail olodrin@gmail.com

Abstract. The present article explores dog breeding in one of the biggest ancient Greek states of the northern Black Sea shore, the polis of Olbia. It outlines the species composition of dog breeds kept by the Greeks: shepherds, scent hounds, greyhounds, toy dogs as well as pariah dogs. The author demonstrates that dog breeding in Olbia generally reflects all the trends common to the Greek world with some specific features, such as presence of breeds of Scythian or forest steppe origin.

Keywords: dogs, Olbia, archaeozoology, pastoral dogs, greyhounds, pets, pariah dogs.

Introduction

Dogs have been human companions almost from the beginning of human history. Of course, they were domesticated at different times, and the level of “domestication” was different [14]. It is only obvious that the first domesticated animals demonstrating a considerable level of emotional proximity to the man were dogs.
It is impossible to find out when dogs became not only hunting assistants or bodyguards but also pets and even friends. One can only assume that it happened a very long time ago. Although the ancient Greeks were probably the first to leave quite extensive records on pets, they, nevertheless, referred to the experience of their predecessors, including the Egyptians and the peoples of the ancient Middle East [7]. It is probable that of all civilized nations, the Egyptians were the first to perceive dogs as pets who were supposed to accompany their owners to the afterworld [9, p. 43f; 39].

At the same time, the ancient Greeks authored the first descriptions of several dog breeds [40]. According to ancient Greek sources, at least half of these breeds were hybrids originating from Balkan or island Greece (hybrids of Molossian and Laconian dogs [41]), as well as from Greek colonies (such as Cyrenian and Sicilian hounds) [42].

Speaking about a significant amount of sources belonging to ancient Greek written and pictorial traditions, one should be aware that these sources mainly originate from the Aegean basin and only some of them – from Magna Graecia (city states in Southern Italy and Sicily). The information provided by the periphery of the Greek world, such as the northern Black Sea coast, is much scarcer.

Strictly speaking, these two types of traditional sources do not allow any general characteristics of dog-breeding in the ancient states of the northern Black Sea coast. They can provide only some sort of a background but the major information comes from archaeological, and specifically archaeozoological, research. Of course, the latter cannot provide a holistic and comprehensive picture but it can help in reconstructing the species of pets and to a lesser extent – the breeds of pets.

Hence, the research presented in this article finds itself at the crossroads between the history of animal breeding in the northern Black Sea region (based on archaeozoological materials) and the history of everyday life. Up to now, archaeological and historical research has been conducted separately. Therefore, it is reasonable to briefly overview the major achievements of each discipline.

The history of animal breeding in the ancient states of the northern Black Sea region undoubtedly occupies the leading positions by the number of scholars and the importance of the results obtained. Archaeozoological research in the northern Black Sea region started in the 1930s [31; 32]. At that time, the materials from Olbia Pontica were in the focus of scholarly attention [15; 31; 32; 38]. It is worth mentioning that during that period osteological findings were not studied by archaeozoologists (because the very discipline of archaeozoology was only being institutionalized) but by multi-skilled scholars for whom archaeozoological materials were only some part of their scholarly interests.

At the same time, the 1930s–1950s was one of the most intensive periods of studying local dogs’ breeds, when the number of findings was comparatively low. When analyzing the materials of Olbia Pontica excavations in 1935–1936, I. Pidoplichko refers to A. Browner and points out that there were 3 dog breeds in Olbia [31, 206]: 1) Canis familiaris palustris, namely resembling spitz-like dogs from stilt houses of Switzerland
in the Neolithic age; 2) *Canis familiaris matris optimae*, i.e. the dog of the Bronze age, which supposedly gave birth to sheep dogs and, possibly, some greyhounds and, finally 3) pet dogs like modern bichons.

About two decades later, V. Bibikova, when publishing her analysis of osteological findings from Olbia Pontica excavations in 1935–1948 and also referring to A. Browner, claimed that there existed at least 6–7 dog breeds in Olbia [13]. However, she did not provide a full list of the breeds, pointing out that there were dogs of different sizes – from very small to big ones and that one can observe the remnants of dogs similar to modern dachshunds, mopses, and dogs from Parutino [43].

Archaeozoologists, such as V. Tsalkin, O. Zhuravliov, O. Markova, etc. suggested a more complex study of osteological findings from Greek city-states. Logically, the history of animal breeding and, to a lesser extent, the history of hunting in the ancient city-states of the northern Black Sea coast was the major focus of their attention. Therefore, valuable observations about pets were made only occasionally [44]. Nevertheless, they constitute the elaborations of these scholars which form the necessary factographic basis enabling further research in this field.

Lately, M. Skrzhynska has been productively exploring the history of everyday life in the ancient cities of the northern Black Sea coast [35–37]. However, archaeozoological materials did not attract her scholarly attention. Thus, in one of her last monographs [37, 103–114] the chapter “Domestic Animals” is almost exclusively based on art. Such an approach makes it impossible to assess the role of pets in the everyday life of ancient settlements on the northern Black Sea coast.

Therefore, one can state that as for today the role of the dog in economic (animal breeding, hunting) and everyday life of Olbia Pontica is nearly unexplored. This article intends to fill in this gap at least partially. However, due to an insufficient (especially archaeozoological) source base, the author had to content himself with posing a set of appropriate research questions.

**Pastoral dogs**

The employment of working dogs in the economic life of Olbia was the issue of necessity. The northern Black Sea coast with its plain landscapes offered favorable conditions for animal breeding and specifically for sheep production. Archaeological and archaeozoological research confirms this thesis [45]. It is logical that to ensure effective sheep production, Olbian shepherds needed a considerable number of sheepdogs [46].

Traditionally, sheepdogs are classified into hearding dogs and livestock guarding dogs. The latter include some part of Molossian dogs from Epirus mentioned by Aristotle [47] (the Molossians were used not only for sheep guarding but also for big game hunting
and body guarding). Remnants of a Molossian dog were found on the territory of Olbia Pontica; however, most probably it did not belong to sheepdogs (see below).

As mentioned before, dog remnants similar to *canis familiaris matris optimae* had been long known in Olbia [31, c. 206]. It is supposed that the dogs of this type were used as sheepdogs and they were forefathers of several modern breeds of sheepdogs. Starting from the Bronze Age, the dogs of this type could be found all over the Black Sea coast steppe. One can assume that at least some part of these sheepdogs was of local origin [25]. Unfortunately, almost all the information about Olbian sheepdogs originates from the scholarship dealing with the pre-war excavations of Olbia. It is evident that such a state of affairs was related to the research of renowned zoologist A. Browner, who undertook a thorough study of the history of domesticated dogs. Later, archeozoologists did not continue the research in this field and shifted their focus of attention towards other domesticated animals of Olbia Pontica, primarily, large and small cattle and horses [19; 20; 27].

**Hunting dogs: Greyhounds, Scent Hounds, and Northern Breeds**

It has already been mentioned that local archeozoologists were the first to distinguish several dog breeds in Olbia Pontica. Some part of them was working dogs, and the other part was toy dogs [29]. Later, A. Kasparov used the materials from the Bosporus to distinguish two major breed groups: 1) laika-type dogs of local origin and 2) scent hounds imported by the Greeks [25, 294]. According to Kasparov, the latter were similar to Saluki (Persian greyhound, which, strictly speaking, is not a scent hound but a greyhound). It is also worth pointing out that spitz and laikas as well as other primitive dog breeds belong to the same group according to the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI) [48]. Therefore, one can conclude that there are no substantial contradictions between the data by I. Pidoplichko and A. Kasparov.

Later, scholars managed to discover not only two groups of primitive hunting dogs but also remnants of the Molossians [23, 265]. The latter could be employed both as fight dogs and bodyguars and as hunting dogs for big game like boars or bison tours, as well as large predators such as bears, lions or leopards [12, 15–30].

Unfortunately, there was no specific archeozoological research of Olbian dog breeds after the publications by I. Pidoplichko and V. Bibikova, as it was studied by A. Kasparov employing the Bosporus materials, or O. Zhuravliov, who researched small livestock on the basis of Olbian materials [19]. Thus, all conclusions made in this article should be verified and clarified on the basis of new specialized archeozoological research. At the same time, one can rather confidently claim that Olbiopolitians employed several breeds of hunting dogs that enabled local hunters to pursue different forms of hunting.
In the Greek world, namely in the Balkan Greece, the most common breed was scent hounds [7, 116–124], while the best known breeds were Cretan and Laconian [7, 117–123]. According to the Bosporus materials, the northern Black Sea coast mostly hosted primitive scent hounds; however, more ‘advanced’ subranges could also be found [25, 293, 296]. It is probable that the situation in Olbia was similar, but it is not possible to guess about the proportion between primitive and more ‘advanced’ breeds.

In contrast to greyhounds, scent hounds court bags relying not on their speed but on their endurance. Therefore, it is not surprising that in comparison to greyhounds, they have weaker eyesight but a better sense of smell. They also run rather slow, and that allows them to continuously give a bark when running [34, 150]. Accordingly, greyhounds were best adapted to steppe and plains, while scent hounds – to mountains and forests [49]. It is exactly one of the arguments that allows counting the dogs described by Xenophon specifically as scent dogs [50] because greyhounds could not be really efficient in the mountain terrain of Greece.

In Asia Minor, and especially in its inner part with steppe landscapes, the situation was different because the employment of greyhounds was quite possible and appropriate in this place [51]. It means that the Greeks of Ionia in general and the Miletus’ Greeks in particular had access to greyhounds and could bring them to the Black Sea coast. However, the borrowing of dogs and other domestic animals by the Greeks of Asia Minor requires a further study.

At the same time, one can more confidently assume that the Greeks of the northern Black Sea coast borrowed local laika-type dogs [25, 295]. It is well known that hunting laikas are difficult to replace when hunting squirrels and forest weasels [17, 31–38; 33, 28]. They chase the animal into a tree and signal with their voice about its location. As far as I know, such a method of hunting is not described in ancient sources, whereas no dog of some Greek breed can be attributed to laika [5; 7]. At the same time, one can find pictures of such dogs on ancient vases [25]. Regardless of whether the Greeks from the northern Black Sea coast and Olbiopolitians were familiar with laikas already in the metropolis or they started employing them at their new home by borrowing them from the local population (Thracians or forest steppe residents), and the way of weasel hunting with laikas in the woods of Gilea, most likely, had to be the same as in later times. However, as one may know [17, 41–46], laikas are also used for hunting both big predators and hoofed animals. It should be emphasized that laikas, as opposed to greyhounds, are specialized in hunting in the woods and are poorly adapted to steppe open spaces. Under such conditions it is better to use scent hounds, and even better – greyhounds. But were the latter breeds available in the ancient states of the northern Black Sea coast?

Indeed, the situation with hounds is quite confusing. We have already said that, when writing about the dogs of the Mediterranean type, A. K. Kasparov pointed out their similarity to the Persian Greyhound (Saluki) – albeit very primitive but a typical representative of greyhounds and one of the founders of the breed. However, scent hounds
rather than greyhounds are considered to be typical Greek breeds. Moreover, there is a debate in research literature whether greyhounds were familiar to such a renowned theoretician of hunting as Xenophon [5, 25; 34, 12].

Denison Gall incisively commented that his ideal dog was well on track, which best applies to scent hounds, while greyhounds were described as ideal hunting dogs by Arrian in the second century AD [52].

It would seem logical that Olbiopolites imported greyhounds from Asia Minor for successful hunting in the open steppe. Meanwhile, the analysis of faunal remnants of the pre-Roman period clearly demonstrates that the Olbians hunted in the forests much more often than in steppe. Accordingly, they did not have any specific reasons for breeding greyhounds. Moreover, scent hounds could also be used in steppe. Hence, the last word in the discussion about hunting with greyhounds in Olbia Pontica should be said after archaeozoologists say their word.

Speaking of hunting with dogs, it should be noted that in most cases (especially when one speaks about a pack of dogs rather than one dog), hunting was not available to ordinary Olbiopolitians. Expensive hunting or fight dogs were at all times a sign of prestige and status. In fact, one can observe it even today that our wealthy contemporaries who have never experienced hunting keep hunting or fighting dogs in their apartments in the city. Of course, Greek aristocrats who possessed pedigree dogs as a sign of status were engaged in hunting because it was a traditional form of “aristocratic sport”.

In fact, one could find bison, elks, aurochs, deer and wild boars, not to mention the small game [53], on the northern Black Sea coast, which offered good conditions for hunting. Despite the fact that city-states in this region were small and not rich, local aristocrats could still keep expensive dogs. Remnants of mastiff-type dogs were discovered not on the territory of the polis but in one of the settlements in the Olbia region – Chornomorka 2 [23, 265]. It is obvious that this dog belonged to the category of the Molossians – the group of large breeds, the ancestors of modern Great Danes, bulldogs and mastiffs.

The already quoted German scholar, Otto Keller, distinguishes at least two classes of the ancient Molossians as well as a group of the so-called pseudo-Molossians [7, 103–113]. The first class includes large bulldog-like Epirian dogs – shepherds and personal guards [7, 103 et seq; 54], the second class is comprised of strong hunting dogs, which, according to Keller, appeared as a result of cross-breeding of the Molossians belonging to the first class with Thracian scent hounds. The author includes watchdogs (like the one embodied in the statue of the so-called “Jennings dog” or the Dog of Alcibiades) to pseudo-Molossians. However, not all scholars recognize the group of “pseudo”-Molossians as sufficiently convincing [11, 238]. In any case, it is not clear so far what class (or subclass) of the Molossians the dog from Chornomorka 2 belonged to. On its shift, this classification would help to determine its intended use – either the hunter or the guard. It is known that the modern Great Dane was used both to hunt wild boars and aurochs and as a guard [12, 177–178]. Hence, one can assume that the Molossian dog from Chornomorka 2 could perform similar functions.
Although it is the only finding but it is very much indicative. After all, the number of owners of expensive pedigree dogs in small and rather poor Olbia could not be considerable. It is obvious that the owner of the dog was a wealthy person belonging to aristocratic circles. However, it is unknown whether he was a permanent resident of Chernomorka 2 or the owner of a country house who lived in Olbia or Berezan.

Pets

Obviously, the best definition of a pet excludes working, or even hunting dogs; instead, it includes house decorative dogs like modern bichons. It is well known that in ancient times these dogs were already present in the houses of wealthy Greeks and Romans [55]. The Maltese was the most popular breed of toy dogs [56]. Dogs of this breed are known to have lived in Greece from at least the turn of the 6–5 century BC [1, 206]. One should also point out that besides decorative functions, the Maltese (such as Piccolo Levriero Italiano) could also perform some useful role in the household, for example to exterminate rodents [30, 66].

In general, it seems that compared to the Romans, the Greeks less appreciated the breeding of toy dogs. Economic reasons also played an important role because the possession of “living toys” was a prerogative of the rich. Therefore, the Greeks pragmatically chose those breeds that could be used in the household, such as shepherding and hunting breeds, and, to some extent, fighting dogs employed as personal guards.

Pariah dogs and dog-eating

From ancient times to present day the reverse side of keeping dogs has been homeless dogs or the so-called “pariah dogs” who were abandoned by their owners and their offspring [10]. O. K. Kasparov [25, 295–297] used materials from the Bosporus settlements (primarily Nimfey and Mirmekiy) to demonstrate that the streets of ancient towns of the northern Black Sea coast were full of homeless dogs. It is unlikely that other towns of this region, such as Olbia or Thira, were much different from the Bosporus by anything else but a number of dogs [26, 725]. By the way, pariah dogs were used as sacrifice by both Greek and non-Greek inhabitants of the northern Black Sea coast.

For Greeks, dogs were not only toys, a sign of social status, or animals performing important functions in the household or for entertainment, but also as some sort of a food. Many dog bones in all regions of the northern Black Sea coast inhabited by the Greeks are marked with characteristic notches, indicating the dismemberment of carcasses [23, 264–265; 24, 39; 26, 726]. Thus, dishes cooked from dogs were on the tables of local residents as often as pork or lamb [23, 265]. Although other sources do not mention dog breeding for food, one cannot claim that dogs were only eaten as part of rituals [2; 26].
Conclusions

To sum up, one can argue that dog breeding in Olbia generally reflects all the trends common to the Greek world of that time. At the same time, one can only assume presence of some specific features such as the following.

1. Presence of sheepdogs accustomed to the steppe (and not mountain like in the Mediterranean) landscape. It is possible that this process occurred by involving local, and, specifically Scythian, breeds.

2. Presence of northern breeds, mostly of local (perhaps forest steppe) origin, which were used in weasel hunting.

However, there are no sufficient archaeozoological data at our disposal to confirm these assumptions today. One can only hope that professional research of osteological findings from the territory of Olbia Pontica will allow a better assessment of the major trends and the analysis of the ratio of Greek and native components in the composition of local breeds in the nearest future.

Sources and Literature

15. ВОЙСТВЕНСКИЙ, М. А. Орнитофауна Ольвии. Археологические памятки УРСР. Киев, 1958, т. 5, с. 156–158.
18. ДОБРОВОЛЬСКАЯ, Е. В. Охота и рыболовство в жизни населения Фанагории и Мышако I. Боспор Киммерийский и варварский мир в период античности и средневековья: ремесла и промыслы. Керчь, 2010, с. 117–120.
27. МАРКОВА, О. В. Equus caballus з Ольвійського поховання. Археологія, 2002, № 1, с. 109–126.
29. ОДРІН, Олександр. Домашні улюбленці в античних державах Надчорномор'я. Соціум. Альманах соціальної історії, 2013, № 10, с. 131–143.
31. ПИДОПЛИЧКА, И. Г. Домашние и дикие животные Ольвии по находкам костей из раскопок 1935 и 1936 гг. Ольвия, Киев, 1940, т. 1, с. 203–211.
33. РУКОВСКИЙ, Н. Н. Охота на пушных зверей. Москва: Физкультура и спорт, 1980. 128 с.
38. ТОПАЧЕВСКИЙ, А. О. Фауна Ольвії. Збірник праць Зоологічного музею. Київ, 1956, № 27, с. 61–129.

Comments

39. Traditionally, Egypt is considered to be the fatherland of decorative breeds. Archeozoologists even distinguished a specific breed of the so-called Egyptian Spitz, the existence of which is now doubted [10, p. 71].
40. Many scholars argue that they were not considered to be “breeds” in the modern meaning of the term because cynology was only emerging at that time. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak about the morphological types of animals. However, to avoid terminological confusions, the author prefers to employ a traditional term of “breed”, bearing in mind its complexity.
41. It is obvious that both Laconian and Cretan breeds had to have Greek origin. At the same time, the pictures of these breeds are dated as Late Minoan and Mycenaean periods (see e.g.: [6]).
42. For Greek breeds and a detailed analysis of written sources, sculptures, and pictures on ceramics and coins see: [7, s. 91–151].
43. This similarity was pointed out back in the mid-19th century by Finnish paleontologist Alexander von Nordmann [8, s. 148]. However, we cannot speak about genetic linkage between Olbian and Parutino dogs.
44. The work by А. Каспаров offering the reconstruction of appearance of dogs from the European Bosporus is some sort of an exception [25].
45. For sheep production in Olbia see: [28].
46. Animal production employs not only sheepdogs but also dogs for guarding beef cattle, such as Synnehund Swiss Cattle dog or a much younger breed of Australian Cattle dog.
47. Arist. *Hist. anim.* IX, 1. «Of the Molossian breed of dogs, such as are employed in the chase are pretty much the same as those elsewhere; but sheep-dogs of this breed are superior to the others in size, and in the courage with which they face the attacks of wild animals».

48. FCI Spitz and Primitive Types Group.

49. There is no wonder that in the modern era hunting with scent hounds was only practiced when large open spaces were available: in England, Anatolia or the Russian Empire [34, c. 21], earlier – in Poland [34, c. 20]. However, the nomads of the Black Sea region are considered to have used only scent hounds [34, c. 13].

50. Most important are descriptions of coursing animals when consistently giving tongue, which is typical of scent hounds.

51. Sabaneев [25, c. 10] pointed out this fact by giving a long tradition of hunting with scent hounds in Anatolia as an example. However, the last argument is doubted by Scythologists [16, c. 147].

52. It is worth remembering that Xenophon lived in Balkan Greece and Arrian – in Asia Minor; hence, at this point one can speak about geographical rather than chronological inconsistencies.

53. For wild animals as objects of hunting in the northern Black Sea coast region see: [21, 22, 23]; For other regions of the northern Black Sea coast see: [18, 24 etc.].

54. For war dogs in Ancient Greece see also: [3–4].

55. For example, Piccolo Levriero Italiano (dogs of Egyptian origin) were fashionable in Rome. They could also find their place in the houses of Greek aristocrats, and, specifically, on the northern Black Sea coast; however, the lack of information does not allow us to confirm this statement. Moreover, it is not known whether they were used as miniature scent hounds or as “pocket dogs”.

56. See collection of ancient testimonies about this breed: [1].

---

**Naminis šuo Olbijos mieste: aviganiai, medžiokliniai, kambariniai, benamiai šunys**

Alexander Odrin

Ukrainos nacionalinės mokslų akademinės Ukrainos istorijos institutas, Viduramžių ir ankstyvųjų naujųjų laikų skyrius, adresas Hruševskio g. 4, 01001, Kievas, Ukraina, el. paštas olodrin@gmail.com

---

**Santrauka**

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomas tyrimas yra kryžkelėje tarp gyvulininkystės istorijos (remiantis archeozoologijos duomenimis) juodosios šiaurės šiaurinėje dalyje ir kasdienybės istorijos. Nepaisant
to, kad Juodosios jūros šiaurinės dalies archeozoologijos tyrimai prasidėjo XX a. 3-iam dešimtmečiu, galime teigti, kad ir šiandien šuns vaidmuo ekonominiame (gyvulininkystė, medžioklė) ir kasdieniame Olbijos miesto gyvenime yra dar labai menkai ištirtas. Šis straipsnis mėginà nors iš dalies užpildyti šią spragà. Juodosios jūros šiaurinė pakrantė ir jos lygumų kraštovaizdis sudarà palankias sąlygas gyvulininkystei, ypaè avininkystei. Taigi Olbijos piemenims reikëjo nemaàai aviganià. Šio tipo šunà liekanos Olbijoje randamos jau seniai. Tikëtina, kad bent dalis šià aviganià buvo vietinës kilmës. Olbijos pilieèiai naudojo kelias medžioklinià šunà veisles (pvz. pèdsekiai, laikos ir, tikëtina, kurtai), kurios leido vietiniams medžiotojams uþsiimti ðvairià formà medþioklë. Vietiniai aristokratai laikè brangià veislià ðunàs, tokius kaip molosinio, mastifà tipo ðunàs. Galima numanyti, kad Olbijoje bûta ir dekoratyvinià, ir benamià šunà. Šunininkystë Olbijos mieste atspindi visas to meto Graikijos pasauliui bûdingas tendencijas, taèiau tikëtina, kad Olbijoje bûta ir tam tikrà specifinià poþymià, tokià kaip skitù genties ar miðkastepià kilmës vietinià veislià ðunàs.

Įteikta / Received 2015-10-30
Priimta / Accepted 2015-12-23