Man’s best friend?

The changing role of the dog in Greek society

by

Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr

Abstract:

The role of the dog changed strongly over time in ancient Greece. It is clear that the early Greeks held many negative feelings towards dogs while still holding them as valued work animals and companion animals. These mixed feelings are especially notable in Homer’s works and are indicative of a state when the dog was still a liminal animal -- half domesticated, half wild. Later, in the full life of the polis, the dog became more fully domesticated and played an important, and generally overlooked, role in the homoerotic world of Athenian aristocracy. Evidence indicates that when young boys moved into the adult world they left behind the “dogs of childhood” and kept hunting dogs, marking them as adult members of their society. These dogs could serve as homosexual love gifts in their own right, but also served to provide young lovers with the gifts necessary to function properly in the world of the gymnasium.

We may best begin with a bit of a defense for shifting the basic thrust of the papers here assembled from herd animals and animals bred for domestic economic use to a discussion of what many cultures view as “man’s best friend,” – the dog. One could argue, for example, that the concept of herding in the ancient world would be virtually unthinkable without dogs. Large mastiff-like dogs guarded flocks, protecting animals and keepers alike from human and four-footed predators, and this would be a forceful argument for including the dog in this general discussion. But what I hope to argue in this article is of a slightly different nature, for the dog can be seen as encapsulating the overall progress of animals as they became more and more intricately involved with the humans populating ancient Greece and Rome. In this paper, then, the dog will be studied as it moved from a half feral, half tamed creature to a situation where, in fifth century Athens at least, the dog played an important, and overlooked role often in the homoerotic love life of upper class Athenian males. The present study is admittedly an introductory one and represents research in progress as part of a larger study of the role of animals in ancient Greek life. There are many avenues which beg to be explored and which cannot be explored in the confines of a single article. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this survey of the dog’s progress from man’s liminal friend to man’s best friend will indicate the wealth of information that can be gleaned from studying animal and human interaction in antiquity.

Let us begin, as all proper studies must, with Homer. If one mentions dogs in a room filled with classicists, the first scene mentioned is invariably the touching scene where Argos, long neglected in Odysseus’ absence, recognizes his master as he patiently waits on a dung heap outside the gates of Ithaca (Od. 17.290-327). The scene is undeniably moving and has led many to believe that Homer, such a keen observer of animal behavior, has great respect for dogs. But even a cursory study of the epics reveals a much more complex situation.

The closing moments of the Iliad are most instructive in this regard. The once grand hopes of the Trojans have been dashed. Hector is about to be killed by Achilles and everyone, it seems, is on the walls to watch it happen. Priam calls out to dissuade Hector from fighting, listing the woes that will befall Troy if Hector dies. In his final argument he describes what will happen to himself:

“And myself last of all, my dogs in front of my doorway will rip me raw, after some man with stroke of the sharp bronze spear, or with spearcast, has torn the life out of my body; those dogs I raised in my halls to be at my table, to guard my gates, who will lap my blood in the savagery of their anger and then lie down in my courts. For a young man all is decorous when he is cut down in battle and torn with the sharp bronze, and lies there dead, and though dead still all that shows about him is beautiful; but when an old man is dead and down, and the dogs mutilate the grey head and the grey beard and the parts that are secret, this, for all sad mortality, is the sight most pitiful”

(Hom., II. 22.66-76, transl. Lattimore 1951)

This one passage raises many questions that lie at the heart of the Greeks’ relationships with their dogs. Are the dogs Priam’s pets or work animals? Priam speaks as if he raised them from puppies, but they are clearly not fawning lap dogs. They seem to live in the house but to work outside of it; they are to be found both at the table and guarding gates. Priam’s brief speech informs us that the dog, at least in this early stage of Greek civilization,
is never fully tamed. The dogs may be hand raised and lie at his feet while he dines, but once Troy is gone and the constraints of civilization are removed, it is clear that Priam himself – the king of the city and the reputed master of the dogs – will lie dead outside the very gates his dogs once guarded. He will lie sprawled naked in that liminal area where the boundaries of human, animal, wild, and tame, are ever blurred. In such a time and place the once trusted dogs will revert to their feral state and will treat their master’s body like any other bit of carrion. Such dogs are not, in our terms, fully pets. They are working animals who have been brought into the house but not fully domesticated. They are the sorts of dogs that lie behind the undoubtedly ancient tale of Actaeon whose best friends, his hunting dogs, could readily tear him asunder. One might counter that his dogs did not know him in his disguise as a deer. But some of the most ancient depictions of the scene show him as human in form or as a human with antlers. The dual nature of both the dogs and the master was quite clear to the artists and the culture that produced them.\(^1\)

In fact, a close study of the dog in Homer brings a host of such contradictions. The first few lines of the \textit{Iliad} itself state that war provides bodies which become the “delicate feasting of birds and dogs” (\textit{Il}. 1.4-5). So numerous are the bodies that the dogs will feast and will be able to take their time doing so. And many a hero laments throughout the work that his body will lie unburied and will provide such an unnatural feast. We are forced to imagine feral packs of dogs, attracted to battles from a distance much as birds of prey are, assured of a free meal. Surely some were dogs who have “gone wild,” attracted out of neighboring houses and huts alike.

There is little noble about Homer’s dogs. Achilles insults Agamemnon with animal comparisons, claiming he has the eyes of a dog and the heart of deer (\textit{Il}. 1.159, 225). The canine insult may imply fawning, cowardice, or both but is, in either case, clearly not complimentary. Likewise, despite all the noble characteristics moderns may attribute to dogs, Schnapp-Gourbeillon points out that in the world of the animal simile, the dog holds low rank indeed. Warriors are routinely compared to noble animals such as lions and boars, but are rarely compared to dogs in the epic and when such similes exist, the hounds are those who rush in to finish off a fawn (no great feat that) or who surround a wounded boar only to have it turn at bay and drive them off (\textit{Od}. 17.579-81, 17.725-29, 22.189-92).\(^2\) Helen refers to herself in most disparaging terms as a “bitch” (6.344), perhaps a reference to her lasciviousness or sneaky behavior. Compare the misogynistic poem of Semonides of Amorgos (7\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.)\(^3\) who compares women to various animals. Of the “dog type” he says that she is vicious, into everyone’s business, and ceaselessly yapping, even if beaten.\(^4\)

Examples can be multiplied, but it is clear that in early stages of Greek civilization the dog was, at best, liminal, man’s best friend who is but one step from the wolf.

What then, of Argos in the \textit{Odyssey}? Argos, like Priam’s dogs, was bred to hunt and he too is a favorite of its master. Once he too was a “sharer of table” (\textit{Od}. 17.309-10) but now, old beyond all usefulness, he has been relegated to the gates of the town where he must sit as a rather pathetic guard on a dung heap, symbolic of all that has befallen Ithaca in Odysseus’ absence. Yet he alone recognizes Odysseus beneath his disguise, only to whimper and die. The scene has led readers to posit a more tolerant view of the dog in this work. While this is true to some extent, it is not to be taken blindly as evidence of some change in attitude towards dogs in the works of Homer, for Argos is the decided exception, not the rule.

Before encountering Argos, for example, Odysseus visits Eumaios, whose herd of pigs is guarded by four dogs which are likened to savage beasts (\textit{Od}. 17.20) and who, when they catch sight of Odysseus, almost savage

---

\(^1\) Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr.
him. He is spared only by his cunning knowledge of canine behavior and through the intervention of Eumaios who pelts the dogs with a shoe and with rocks (Od. 17.29ff). These dogs too are liminal and, unlike Argos, who could see through Odysseus’ disguise, are but one step from the savagery of a feral state.

There is much to learn from a study of Homer’s dogs, but it is safe to say that for the most part dogs were seen as useful creatures who earned their keep. They were clearly not yet “pets” in the sense that nothing was expected from them other than companionship or affection. Dogs such as these had to earn their keep. Their greatest assets were speed and savagery and this latter trait also bore with it some inherent danger. The dog of early Greece might in fact share its master’s table, but it was never forgotten that the wild nature of the dog lay just beneath the surface and could emerge in short order.

By the fifth century BC, the picture was rather different. As the longer version of this study will show, dogs were frequently held in high esteem by their masters. We see them on stelai bidding their masters farewell and the stock scene of arming a warrior as he goes off to war generally includes the family dog standing next to the family humans as they say goodbye. Epitaphs were written for dogs and the emotional attachments were common. Plutarch relates in some detail how, during the evacuation to Salamis in 480, the dog belonging to Pericles’ father “could not bear to be left by his master” so he swam after the ships, only to die when arriving the opposite shore. The Greeks, struck by the dog’s devotion, buried the dog on the spot. (Life of Themistocles, 10.5) These and other stories indicate that the dog as trusted pet was now a commonplace in Athenian culture.

 Obviously, the dog still continued to perform its traditional roles as guardian, protector of flocks, and as hunter. While certainty is impossible due to a paucity of records, one is fairly safe in imagining that the role of the dog in the countryside or in very remote areas of Greece had probably changed but little. But there is abundant evidence that in the polis the dog’s role had expanded to include many roles. We will now sketch out one such complicated role in the life of upper class males where in different breeds of dogs played roles as pampered pets, cherished adult companion, and, in fact, facilitator in the homoerotic life of the gymnasion.

 But before proceeding further it will be prudent to anticipate a common, and easily made, error in this kind of thinking. It would be an easy thing to treat the change in the dog’s status through the lens of a sort of social Darwinism. In such a view the more “primitive” Bronze Age had viewed dogs (and other domestic animals) as tools, useful to the extent that they could produce a positive contribution to society. Thus, Homeric hunting dogs would be seen as tolerated for the food they might help catch or protect, objects no more worthy of affection and tenderness than, say, a good bow and arrow. Eumaios may tolerate his guard dogs for the protection they afford his flock, but he is not above throwing rocks at them to control them. They are, after all, little more than an animated tool. “Take care of your sharp-toothed dog,” says Hesiod, “lest a man who sleeps by day come and steal your goods.” (Op. 605-05) This advice is as dispassionate and pragmatic as that he offers on how to care for tools and plows.

 More primitive societies, the theory continues, can not afford the luxury of animals that contribute nothing to the common good. It is only more advanced social groupings, like that of the polis, which can afford the luxury of a pet that takes food, protection, and shelter and gives back nothing other than companionship.

 Indeed, there may well be some truth here, but comparative studies indicate that such a view is fraught with dangers if pursued overly simplistically. Human and animal relationships are rarely that simple, no matter the level of the society in question. James Serpell has studied the various and complex relationships that exist between members of tribal societies and their pets. In some societies there is great affection shown pets and women even suckle young pets along with their own infants. Indeed, among several peoples both pets and young might be classified as creatures which are kept in or near the house, are fed without the return or meaningful services, and which are protected from harm by the “humans.” In some societies pets are never eaten even if feral versions of the animals are in fact hunted and eaten. The Aborigines of Australia are extremely fond of their dingo dogs which do in fact hunt for them, but the B-Mbuti Pygmies, who also uses their dogs to good end, treat them terribly. The Comanches, of North America, relied heavily on their horses, yet treated them fairly indifferently. Their dogs, however, which contributed little to Comanche economy were treated like pampered pets.

 Finally, whereas modern, “civilized” nations routinely
name their animals after humans, the Neuer people of Sudan, who are inordinately fond of their cattle, name people after favorite animals. 9

In short, then, while the next part of this paper will contrast the role of the dog in the fully developed polis and will thus, in effect, be contrasting that treatment with the picture given us by Homer and other early authors, we must be wary of jumping to great conclusions. Most of the evidence we have, pictorial and literary alike, comes from Athens. Just as the robust Molossian hound differed from the sleek Laconian hound favored by Athenian youths, so too must their treatment have been different. It is fair to state that the treatment of the dog in Arcadia need not have been identical to that in Athens, or even that the different classes of Athenians -- or for that matter, individual Athenians -- treated their dogs alike. A story about Alcibiades, a shining star of the smart set, illustrates these dangers well. Alcibiades had paid 70 minae for a large, lovely dog. He then caused an uproar throughout the city by promptly cutting its tail off. His friends were outraged and complained to Alcibiades who only laughed that he had done it to give Athens’ gossips something to speak of other than his many other indiscretions (Plutarch, Alc. 9). What follows, then, we must be very careful not to overgeneralize. We are looking here merely at the male, upper social strata of fifth century Athens and we will see that the dog appears to have been a cherished object.

First, the dog in the youth of an Athenian male. From birth until somewhere in their early adolescence, Athenian males inhabited the women’s quarters (gynaikonitis) of the house. 10 Here they partook basically in the female world and were surrounded by pets favored by females. A full study is impossible here but these pets included such things as hares, partridges, geese, cranes and, to the current point, the cuddly Maltese dogs whose small size, curly tail and lively actions are even endearing across the centuries. Such dogs are very often seen on grave steiai of women and children of both sexes and they are very much at hand in the small vessels called choes which played a prominent role in the festival called the Anthestera. Here the dogs play with the children, pull them in carts, are trained to carry small choes on their backs, and in general seem a full part of the children’s lives. 11

Adolescent males, however, are routinely seen with sleek, greyhound-type hunting dogs on vases and steiai alike, and it is very infrequent that they are shown with Maltese. These hunting dogs are the youth’s constant companions whether they are actually hunting, are at a banquet, or are at their leisure in the gymnasium. Moreover, these dogs and their masters are often engaged in meaningful interactions. A glance through the plates of Conze’s masterful study of grave steiai makes it clear that the dogs most often are looking up, directly into their masters’ eyes in exactly the same way that children look up at adults. 12 We even have clear scenes where dogs are being taught tricks such as “give me your paw” and “sit”. 13 The frequent depiction of collars and leashes leads one to believe, moreover, that these dogs are a bit more domesticated than those who lay beneath Priam’s couch at banquet. If we are to believe the Greek Anthology (6.34-35) collars and leashes of favorite dogs were even dedicated to the gods.

What was the status, then, of these dogs? It seems probable to this author that on one level the acquisition of such dogs represented part of an Athenian ephes’s right of passage into manhood. As he left the women’s quarters he also left behind the animal companions found there. In the man’s world a hunting dog was the animal of choice. We have already seen above that such dogs could be quite costly, and the evidence we have of other exotic pets such as cheetahs shows that conspicuous consumption in this area must have been common. 14 Thus, as objects of interest among the “smart set,” dogs could serve, as they still are today, as excellent subjects of conversation. The latest, finest hound must have been discussed, observed, and evaluated in the banquet hall and gymnasium alike. In fact, many vase depictions seem to show just this sort of scene and it is surely the pride in such an animal, as well as its master’s affection for it, that caused it to be shown so often on gravestones.

But the dog as a young man’s companion also served a lesser known or commented upon function, for “man’s best friend” played a vital role in the homoerotic world of ancient Athens. We have numerous vases which depict an all male courting scene where the dog is not only present but is, apparently, a present from the erastes, (the generally older lover) and the eromenos (the younger object of his affection) (Fig. 1). 15 To be sure, not all dogs so shown were gifts, as some were simply accompanying the young men involved. Yet Aristophanes (Ar. Plut., 153ff.) specifically mentions dogs as love gifts and one vase in particular seems to remove all doubt. This black figured vase, now in the Vatican, shows a group of young men flanking the eromenos/erastes couple in the middle (Fig. 2). The erastes makes the traditional gesture of courting by touching the youth near the face with one hand and touching his genitals with his other hand. The dog of the older man, almost surely a gift, even helps in the courting by sniffing the genitals of the younger, quite athletic lover. The youths flanking the pair also carry love gifts in the form of cockerels and one other dog. 16

In fact, even a casual study of the love gifts exchanged between male lovers during this period shows an uncanny connection to the dog. Again, this is the subject for a larger canvas, but using the lists provided by Dover and comparing artistic representations we can arrive at a fairly accurate list of what served as love gifts at this time. Among the most popular is the hare, fox, stag, and quail. All are acquired by hunting and the fox and hare were among the most popular targets of Athenian huntsmen. 17 Sometimes these gifts are dead, but at other times they are presented alive. 18 The hare is an excellent example of this tendency for we see it intimately associated with acts of courtship and even copulation. It could be handed over by the ears (Fig. 3), 19 kept in a cage, 20 or even on a leash as on a charming vase
in Worcester, MA. The dogs, then, were instrumental in both bringing back the dead prey of the hunt and in bringing back animals (probably the young) which could be tamed and presented as live gifts. There are many avenues to pursue. It is clear that by the fifth century BC, in Athens at least, the dog was a regular and important part of life, especially the social life surrounding the youths of the city. They were paraded throughout the city and were beloved pets. Epitaphs were written for them when they died and Aristophanes even puts them on the comic stage in his *Wasps*. It would be easy, as indicated above, to paint a picture of a civilization that has evolved to the stage where, within the protective walls of the city state – walls which, after all, separate the “wild” from the “tame” – the dog had lost its bad reputation and implied threat for reverting to a feral state. Yet such a view is too facile and leads to error.

It will be best, perhaps, to end with a problem, rather than a solution – an indication of the amount of benefit we can accrue from a careful study of the role animals played within the fifth century polis. For this example we turn to the great Athenian plague of 431 BC. The plague struck Athens at the height of its power and its sophistication. Surely Athens had never risen to a higher state and we can imagine that the dog by this time was completely domesticated.

Yet, in describing the unique nature of this plague, Thucydides says a most strange thing.

The nature of the disease was such that it defies all description, and its attacks were almost too grievous for human nature to endure. In the following fact it showed its difference from all ordinary disorders most clearly. For all the birds and four footed beasts that prey upon human bodies either abstained from touching them (though there were many lying unburied) or died once they tasted them. The proof of this is that the birds were noticeably absent. They were not to be found near the bodies or anywhere else. But dogs offer much better evidence for observing such a thing since they live alongside man. (2.50)

As Gomme points out in his commentary, Thucydides’ point is that the birds may fly in or out of the city at will. But dogs are already in the city and their behavior could be readily studied. Yet it is generally overlooked that Thucydides’ statement also implies that it would be normal for the dogs to act in Homeric fashion and partake of the “delicate feast” of unburied bodies. That they did not do so was cause for comment.

The status of the dog in fifth century Athens was clearly different from that in the time of Homer. Yet the nature of the dog, and its implications for Greek society was not so readily changed. More study is required before the true nature of “man’s best friend” in the sophisticated world of the polis can be fully understood.

Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr.
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
kkitchel@classics.umass.edu

1 *LMC* 1.1 nos. 33a-43, many from the fifth century, show him with a human head but characteristics of a deer. Nos. 76ff. show him with a full deer’s head. At least one depiction (no. 6, from 470-60 BC) shows Actaeon suffering the indignity Priam feared as his former comrades tear at his private parts. In his moving tale, “*Call of the Wild,*” the American author Jack London vividly chronicles how easily a working dog can revert to its feral state.

5 See, for example, Lilja 1976, 29-36.
6 Beck 1991, treats all the scenes mentioned.
7 Serpell 1996, 60-72.
8 See also Serpell & Paul130 for the parallel between children and pets.
11 Hamilton 1992, Fig. 5, 12, 15. Van Hoorn 1951, 46-47.
12 On the Maltese, or Melitean, see Hull 1964, 21 and 35. He incorrectly says that the Maltese was “only a ladies’ lap dog.” Its association with children is clear. See also Keller 1909 92-93.
13 Conze 1893. The examples are numerous but, for example, cf. #958 Taf. CLXXXV or #1006 Taf. CXCV.
15 Ashmead 1978 offers an excellent survey of cheetahs in ancient Athens.
16 Dover 1978 92-93 with ill. B 502. A 6th c. BF vase found at Vulci (Moretti1975, 46-47, Tav. 11 no. 5) seems to show a faked offer of a dog as a gift from a hunch backed lover. Note the leashes he holds.
19 Dover 1978, ill. B250, shows a live deer (with antlers), a dead hare, and a dead fox.
20 Dover 1978, ill. R502, shows a man copulating intercrurally with a youth who holds a hare by the ears in his r. hand and a dog by the leash in his l.
21 Dover 1978, ill. R55, admittedly of heterosexual love. Note the dog below the cage. We must be careful to point out that the same love gifts are regularly given to males and females alike.
22 Gomme 1962-81, 1.156-57.
Conze 1893  
A. Conze, Die attischen Grabreliefs, 4 vols, Berlin 1893.

Dover 1978  

Golden 1990  

Gomme 1962-81  

Hamilton 1992  

Hull 1964  

Hunt 1983  

Keller 1909  

Lattimore 1951  
Homer, Iliad Transl. Richmond Lattimore, Chicago 1951.

Lattimore 1965  
Homer, Odyssey Transl. Richmond Lattimore, New York 1965.

Lilja 1976  
S. Lilja, Dogs in ancient Greek poetry (Commentationes humanarum litterarum 56), Helsinki 1976.

Lloyd-Jones 1975  

Lonsdale 1990  
S.H. Lonsdale, Creatures of speech. Lion, herding, and hunting similes in the Iliad, Stuttgart 1990.

Mainoldi 1984  

Morgan III 1935-36  

Schnapp-Gourbeillon 1981  

Serpell & Paul 1994  

Serpell 1996  

Tapper 1996  

Van Hoorn 1951  
G. van Hoorn, Choes and anthesteria, Leiden 1951.