

Kathleen  
Walker-Meikle

THE  
DOG  
BOOK

Dogs of Historical Distinction

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# INTRODUCTION

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Dogs have been man's closest companion for over 10,000 years, ever since they were first domesticated from the grey wolf. Since then, *Canis lupus familiaris* can be traced nearly all over the globe, in breeds from the burly Newfoundland to the diminutive Pekingese. Over the millennia, they have been keen hunters, trusted guardians or beloved pets; but some of the dogs featured in this book had more of an unusual place in society, such as the multitude of performing dogs who delighted audiences on the stage and, later, on the screen. Wherever their owners went, dogs followed, and so you will also find dogs in the middle of battlefields (occasionally getting lost!), in witchcraft trials, mascots for regiments and postal workers, and even flying over the North Pole...

Throughout history, the most praised quality of the dog – and that which set it apart from other animals – has been its loyalty and devotion to its master or mistress. Although this is an anthropomorphic interpretation of canine behaviour, it forms the basis of many of the tales found in this book, such as those animals pining on their master's grave, or trying to save them from danger. Basic rituals of dog-ownership – such as keeping the animal fed, or adorning it with special accessories such as collars and leashes – are also in evidence across the ages, along with the related perils of overfeeding your pet or extravagantly spending a fortune on coats (or in the case of one Indian prince, an elaborate canine wedding complete with elephants in attendance!).

This book can only recount a fraction of famous accounts of historical dogs, but presents a selection of memorable movie-stars, pampered palace pets, performing poodles and dogs on the battlefield, through various mediums including satirical poems and anxious newspaper notices for stolen animals. There are loyal dogs and spoiled pets, tales of exemplary behaviour and misbehaviour, and the beloved companions of famous figures including Prince Rupert of the Rhine, Lord Byron and President Roosevelt. In literature they have been alternately praised and satirised, due to the vast affection their owners have long lavished upon them. From Roman mosaics to the Bayeux Tapestry and depictions of the Last Supper, the iconography of dogs can also be found almost everywhere, and touching personal portraits of owners and their dogs reveal how a pet often became an essential and proud part of their identity. Keep an eye on history, and you will start seeing dogs everywhere!

*Kathleen Walker-Meikle*



An inscribed limestone tablet discovered at Giza in 1935 attests the elaborate burial of Abuwtiyuw, most likely an *Ancient Egyptian sighthound*, which belonged to an unknown pharaoh of the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181 BC). Only the tablet survives, but it is likely that the dog was mummified judging from the gift of linen. It reads:

*The dog which was the guard of His Majesty, Abuwtiyuw is his name. His Majesty ordered that he be buried [ceremonially], that he be given a coffin from the royal treasury, fine linen in great quantity [and] incense. His Majesty [also] gave perfumed ointment, and [ordered] that a tomb be built for him by the gangs of masons. His Majesty did this for him in order that he [the dog] might be Honoured [before the great god, Anubis]*

Dog mummies have been discovered in many Egyptian sites; the largest collection of ancient canine graves is the burial ground of several hundred unearthed at Ashkelon (in modern day Israel). The dogs were buried there over eight decades in the second half of the fifth century BC. They were all sighthounds (resembling modern greyhounds or whippets), the most documented of Egyptian dog breeds.





*Relief of a scene at Necropolis, featuring two Ancient Egyptian sighthounds (c.2349 BC).*



*This detail from a seventeenth-century tapestry shows Argos recognising his master Ulysses.*



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Homer's *Odyssey*, written around 800 BC, recounts the legendary Greek hero Odysseus's long adventures to return home to his kingdom of Ithaca after the end of the Trojan War.

Odysseus' faithful dog *Argos* had been a young puppy when his master left for war, and is the only one on Ithaca to recognise him when he returns after twenty years. Neglected and covered in fleas, Argos lay on a dung heap by the stables, but pricked up his ears at his master's approach, wagging his tail. Odysseus saw Argos but could not greet him, due to being in disguise – instead he shed a hidden tear for the loyal hound. He asked his companion, the swineherd Eumaus, about the dog. He explained that the dog belonged to someone who had died in a far country and had been a magnificent hunting hound but had now fallen on evil times, for his master was gone and the women no longer took care of him. Odysseus entered the hall of the palace and faithful Argos passed into the darkness of death after seeing his master once more.





*Glazed ceramic amulet representing Anubis, the guardian of the tombs. Dated 4000–30 BC.*

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The *Egyptian god Anubis* oversaw the mummification process. By weighing the heart of the deceased against the feather of truth, he decided whether they should enter the otherworld or be eaten by the Devourer (part lion, hippopotamus and crocodile).

Anubis is his name in Greek – his Egyptian names are Anpu, Inpw and Yinupu. He had many epithets such as ‘He Who is in the Mummy-Wrappings’ and ‘Chief of the Necropolis’. He is depicted as half human jackal, although there is confusion concerning exactly which canid he was supposed to be – a jackal, a wolf or even a wild dog. Recent DNA studies have proved that the Egyptian jackal is actually a subspecies of the grey wolf.

In Egypt, his cult centred in a town the Greeks called Cynopolis, meaning the ‘City of the Dogs’. The Greek writer Plutarch (c. AD 46–120) wrote that a small civil war erupted when a resident of Cynopolis ate an Oxyrhynchos fish. The people of Oxyrhynchos began to attack dogs, which resulted in communal violence. The cult of Anubis was still extant in the second century AD.



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An association between *dogs and the afterlife* appears in many cultures.

In *Greek mythology*, Cerberus is the fearsome multi-headed dog guarding the entrance to the underworld. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas' sneaks past Cerberus after his guide, the Sibyl, throws him drugged honey-cakes. Cerberus is also lulled to sleep when the musician Orpheus comes in search of his wife Eurydice, and when the god Hermes gives him water from the river Lethe, which brings forgetfulness. Capturing Cerberus and bringing him to King Eurystheus is the last labour of Greek hero Hercules. Hades, god of the underworld, gives his permission on the condition that the dog is unharmed. Hercules overpowers the beast and presents him to Eurystheus, who hides in terror when he sees the dog. Hercules then returns Cerberus to his home.

In *Norse mythology*, Garm is the terrifying hound that stands by the gate of Hell. The poem *Grímnismál* in the Poetic Edda recounts that he is the best of dogs. In *Welsh mythology*, the *Cŵn Annwn* (dogs of Annwn) guard the otherworld.





*An Ionian Hydria depicting Heracles bringing Cerberus to Eurystheus, c.530 BC.*

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Sirius is the brightest star (actually a binary star system) in the sky. It is part of the constellation Canis Major (Greater Dog), who is supposed to have been the faithful hound of the hunter Orion, and is also known as *the 'Dog Star'* or Canicula. Associated with them both is the constellation Canis Minor (Little Dog), whose brightest star is Procyon ('Before the dog').

The 'Dog Days' (*dies caniculares* in Latin) are the hot days of summer, and began when Sirius was seen just before, or at the same time as, sunrise (this does not happen now due to the precession of equinoxes). The 'Dog Days' of July and August were associated with rabid dogs and fevers and other diseases, as Homer recounts in the *Iliad*:

*Sirius rises late in the dark, liquid sky  
On summer nights, star of stars,  
Orion's Dog they call it, brightest  
Of all, but an evil portent, bringing heat  
And fevers to suffering humanity.*





A ninth-century representation of the constellation Canis Major. Sirius is the bright shining gold star on the dog's tongue.



*Relief from the Kerameikos necropolis in Athens, depicting a fight between a dog and a cat (510 BC).*





*Mosaic representing a guard dog, from Pompeii in the first century AD.*



*Marble statue of two playful dogs, first or second century AD, known as 'the Townley Greyhounds'.*

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A moving marble tombstone, now in the British Museum, was erected for a beloved dog called Margarita (Latin for pearl) in the second century AD:

*Gaul was my birthplace. The oyster from the rich water's waves gave me a name suited to my beauty. I learned to run boldly through treacherous woods and to pursue shaggy beasts in the hills. Heavy chains never restrained me, nor did my snow-white body ever suffer any blows. I used to lie in my master's and mistress's soft laps, and curl up on their bed when I was tired. I used to talk more than I should, with my dog's dumb mouth, though no-one feared my barking. But alas, misfortune befell me when whelping, and now this little marble slab marks where the earth enfolds me.*



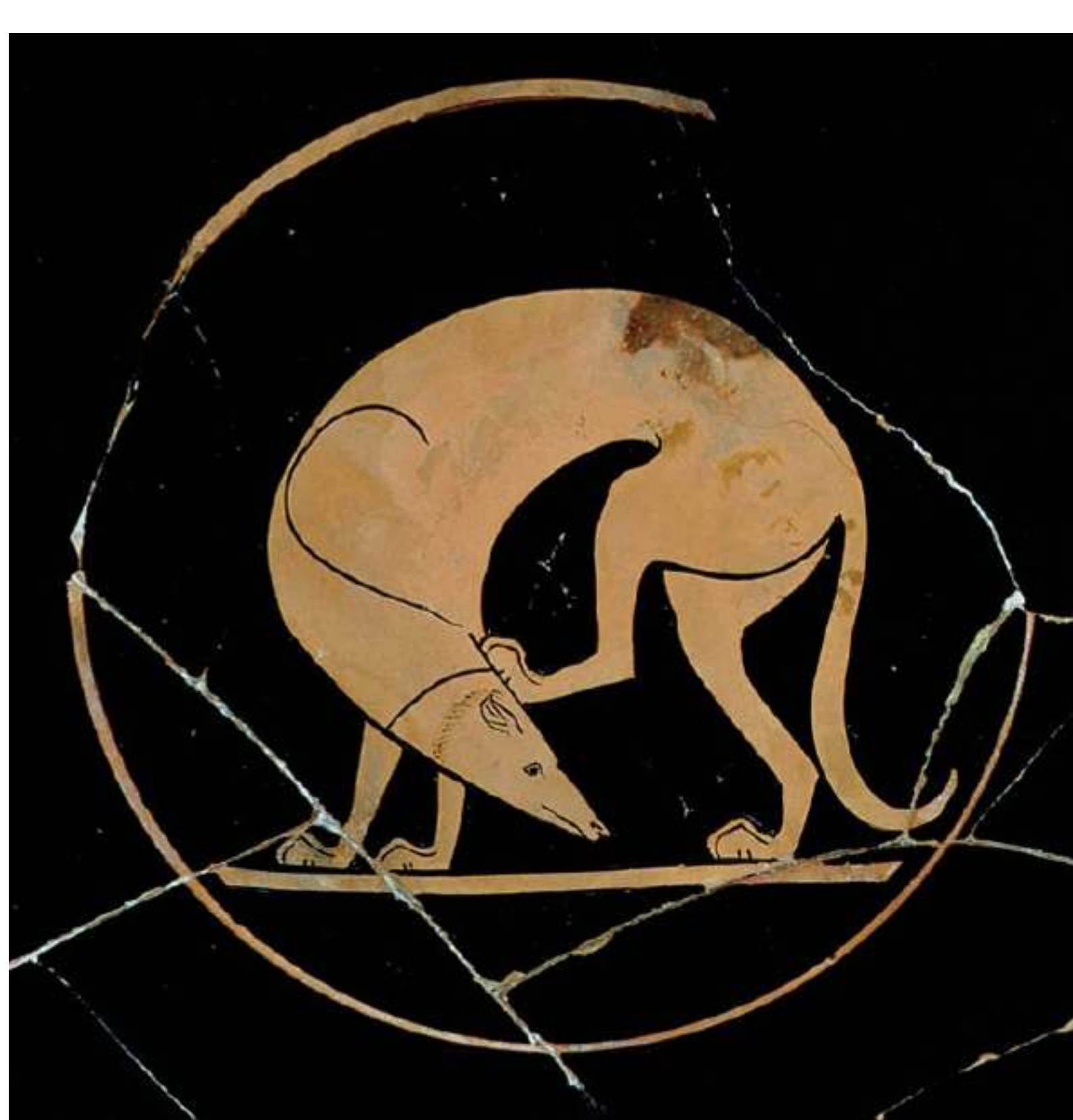
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There were many *types of dog in the Classical world*. The two most popular breeds for hunting and guard duties were the Spartan dog and the Molossian dog. The former was a lean hound best suited 'for the swift chase of gazelle and deer' while the Molossian was large with a short muzzle, good for attacking bulls and boars. Others were the vertragi from Gaul and the shaggy Agasaeon hound, an export from Britain.

The favourite lapdog was the Melitaeon, which probably originated in Malta. They were small, with long hair and short legs. A traditional belief claimed that if they were pressed to the stomach, they alleviated the symptoms of stomach-ache.

There were also *performing dogs in Ancient Rome*, such as the one who performed at the Theatre of Marcellus before the Emperor Vespasian. The act consisted of giving the dog food that the audience believed was poisoned. The dog then began to shiver and shake, stagger around and collapse. The actors moved it about to give the impression that the dog was dead. But then, on a cue, the dog 'woke up, raised its head and ran to the actors.





*Detail of a cup featuring a Laconian hound scratching his head, c.500 BC.*

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The first-century Roman poet Martial wrote an epigram on a very beloved little dog:

*...Issa is the darling little puppy of Publius.  
If she whines, you will think that she speaks;  
She feels sorrow and joy.  
She sleeps resting on his neck, and takes her naps  
Such that no breaths are heard;  
And compelled by the desire of her bladder,  
Not a single drop has befouled the coverlet,  
But she awakens him with a caressing paw, and advises  
That she be put down from the couch, and asks to be picked up.  
There is such great modesty in the little puppy;  
She does not know Venus, nor do we find  
A mate worthy of such a delicate girl.  
So that her last day does not snatch her away entirely,  
Publius is portraying her on a painted tablet...*





*Terracotta figure of a rather rotund pet dog, first century AD, Campania.*



*A large dog gnaws on a bone by Judas' feet in James van der Straet's sixteenth-century fresco of the Last Supper. A cat can also be seen, cowering behind a stool.*



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