AFRICANIS: THE PRE-COLONIAL DOG OF AFRICA

Tim Maggs and Judith Sealy

Yellow cur, *brak*, *godoyi*—many harsh words of insult and opprobrium have been poured scornfully on the head of the African dog by colonists and their descendants. Even in academic circles, African dogs have fared little better. They have most commonly been referred to as ‘pariah dogs’ in the literature. Typical of European observers are phrases like: ‘...the native fox-like breed are awful-looking creatures’ and ‘he [i.e. the dog of Khoisan people] was an ugly creature, his body being shaped like a jackal...’. Yet even these nineteenth-century gentlemen were forced to attest to virtues: ‘...but he was a faithful, serviceable animal of his kind’ and ‘I have never found any others equal to them for daring or pertinacity’. The lowly African dog has even found an honourable place in South African literature, for loyalty beyond the call of duty, in that excellent canine tale ‘Unto Dust’ by Herman Charles Bosman.

*Dogs and Their Ancestors*

Dogs are derived from wolves, and were the earliest animal species to be domesticated. Analyses of DNA clearly indicate wolf ancestry. Clutton-Brock emphasises the importance of behavioural traits in the successful domestication of the wolf, rather than other types of wild canids. She points out that wolves’ pack structure, and their

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4 Andersson, *Notes of Travel*, 180.
5 From the outset, we should admit to a bias, since we are fond owners of African dogs. Tim Maggs has kept Africanis since 1985, and admired them for longer still from acquaintance in deep rural parts of South Africa.
communication by means of facial expression and posture, make them particularly receptive to similar cues from humans. There have been claims for very ancient dogs, at around 100,000 years ago, but these are based solely on genetic evidence, and are not widely accepted. The earliest recognizable bones of domesticated dogs (i.e. bones of a shape and size significantly different from those of wolves) appear between 15,000 and 10,000 years ago, and most specimens thus far come from the Near East. These animals were physically very similar to their wolf ancestors, but tended to be smaller, with shorter muzzles, leading to some crowding of the teeth. The animals that thrived in close contact with humans must also have had particular behavioural characteristics, including sociability and willingness to submit to human authority. Domestic dogs can breed twice a year, compared with only once for wolves, and this feature may have evolved early on.

African Dogs

Distributed all over Africa is a basic variety of dog, generally considered to represent an ancient form. This is a medium-sized, lightly-built animal with a long slender muzzle, usually with a short coat, frequently fawn in colour but varying from white through browns and brindle colouring to black.

Within this broad spectrum, there are some regional variations that we think are the result of isolation and a limited degree of deliberate breeding. The degree of variation among traditional dogs in Africa is, however, far less than that seen in Europe or Asia, where selective breeding has a long history and has produced highly differentiated varieties of dog such as the Great Dane and the Pekingese.

Looking at the earlier scientific literature on African dogs, particularly that covered in the classic review of Epstein, one gets the impression that there are many different ‘types’ or ‘breeds’. Many different names

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8 Vilà et al., ‘Multiple and ancient origins’.