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ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD SLOUGHI

By Sir Terence Clark



I read with interest the thoughts of Tarek Tahari on the origins of the word Sloughi, as it is a subject that has absorbed me and many other students of this hunting hound for many years. I regret however that he may have created some confusion with his misuse of standard forms of transliterating Arabic into English. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the initial and repeated transliteration of the Arabic letter qāf, into which he introduces a superfluous h. It is, as he points out, a letter the pronunciation of which causes difficulties across the Arabic-speaking world. In Classical Arabic it is pronounced as a strongly articulated guttural k; but in parts of Arabia and Iraq, it is pronounced as a hard g; whilst in Egypt and the Levant it is replaced with a glottal stop! However, in Classical Arabic the pronunciation is qaf everywhere and in the English-speaking world today, it is generally written as q, as in, for example, Iraq and Iraqi or, indeed, Tariq.

(In parentheses, I should point out that his Arabic version of Salūqī is also incorrect. The little w-like sign over the Arabic letter lam, called shaddah in Arabic, has the effect of doubling the letter below it, thus making Salūqī into Sallūqī!)

The fact that it is difficult for the Arabs themselves

to settle on a standard pronunciation made it all the more a problem for Westerners to select a version to transliterate when describing the Salūqī in their respective languages. So, it is not at all surprising that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when travellers, who often had little knowledge of Arabic, started to bring these hounds back with them to Europe, they employed a variety of spellings for the Arabic name they heard – or thought they heard. Their confusion was of course compounded by the different words used in Arabic for masculine and feminine hounds and plurals. Thus we find them using such names as Seleughi, Slugi, Slougui, Slag, Silagi, etc. In Britain, the Kennel Club opted in 1923 for the (incorrect) transliteration Saluki; whereas the French varied between Slougui and Sloughi, before settling on the latter. However, this spelling is inconsistent in that the letters gh are internationally recognised as the transliteration of a different Arabic letter, namely ghayn, as may be seen commonly in such words as the Maghreb.

Tarek Tahawi makes the traditional case for Salūqī as the nisbah (relative adjective) of a place called Salūq in Yemen near modern Ta'izz. According to Professor Rex Smith, the earliest indication in Arabic literature of such an origin is a line from a poem by Yazid bin Dhirar al-Muzarrid, who was born before Islam (i.e. before 622 AD), which mentions banāt Salūqiyayn (the daughters of two Salukis). The difficulty that I have with this location is that it is in a mountainous area not suited to hunting with Salukis. As the late Professor Sergeant describes in great detail, the dog used for hunting Ibex in the mountains of South Arabia 'was not of the type

known as Saluqi'. However, there are other possible origins.

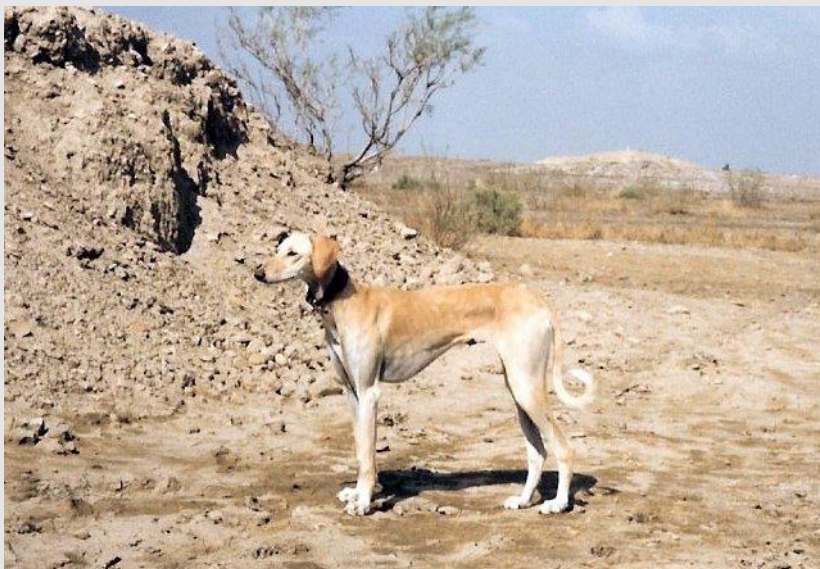
Professor Smith records that there was also a place called Salūq on the border of Armenia to the west of the Caspian Sea, but this too appears to be a mountainous area. There were, however, three towns in the region with the name Salūqīyah, from which the nisbah is also Salūqī. The first was near Antioch on the Mediterranean coast in Turkey. The second was on the site of Selifke, also on the coast in Turkey. But neither of these was in typical coursing country. The third was ancient Seleucia (Salūqīyah in Arabic) facing open country, then abounding in game, on the west bank of the Tigris south of Baghdad, which was founded by Seleucus I Nicator, one of Alexander the Great's generals, in about 305 BC. It was the capital of the Seleucid dynasty, with a mixed population of Greeks, Macedonians, 'Syrians', a term used by the Greeks to designate the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent, and Jews, all of whom used Greek as the administrative language but various dialects of Aramaic, a semitic language, as the vernacular, until about 141 BC, when it was conquered by the Parthians, but even so it remained largely Hellenistic in culture,.

Situated in the centre of Ancient Mesopotamia, where the archaeological record indicates the existence of a Saluki-like hunting hound from at least 4,000 BC, it is reasonable to conjecture that the Seleucids carried on the Greek tradition of hunting with hounds, as described by Alexander the Great's chronicler Arrian. Professor Smith opines that the Arabs may have associated their hounds with the Hellenistic empire and dynasty of Seleucia and that by the rules of Arabic grammar the Seleucid hound became the Salūqī. In this context I might mention that years ago when walking round the Archae-

ological Museum in Mosul, Iraq, I noticed that in descriptive labels on Seleucid objects wherever the Arabic word Salūqī appeared it was translated as 'of the Greyhound dynasty'!

The problem for me with this otherwise attractive thesis was that there was a centuries-long interval between the end of the Seleucid Empire and the first appearance of the word Salūqī in Arabic literature. However, on closer study I came to the conclusion that there was a possible explanation for how this gap might have been bridged.

Although the Parthian city was destroyed in its turn by the Romans in 165 AD, only for it to be rebuilt sixty years later by the Persian emperor Ardashir I, the bulk of the people of the area continued to speak dialects of Aramaic and from the first century onwards Christian churches were active there. In the third and fourth centuries Seleucia was once again an important centre, by which time Syriac had become the literary language of Aramaic-speaking Christians and was the medium of communication over a vast area throughout Syria, Iraq and wider. It had a fundamental cultural and literary influence on the development of Arabic, which was already spoken by Christian Arabs on the western edge of Iraq and which eventually replaced Syriac as a vernacular towards the end of the eighth century.



Although by then Seleucia had fallen into obscurity and today is no more than an archaeological site, it seems possible that Aramaic or Syriac might have provided the medium for the transmission of the word for the Seleucid hound into Arabic. Dr Erica Hunter of Cambridge University informed me that Seleucia would have been pronounced s(e)līq(e)yā' in Aramaic, with the (e) murmured and seleuqāyā' in Syriac. The linkage with the Arabic Salūqīyah is clearly there – at least linguistically- but it is not, of course, the whole story. We have no evidence that the Aramaic/Syriac-speaking people of the area gave their hunting hounds a name derived from the former Seleucid Empire or that, when they conquered the area, the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula did indeed adopt it in place of whatever name they may have previously used. Until the answer to these questions is found, the origin of the

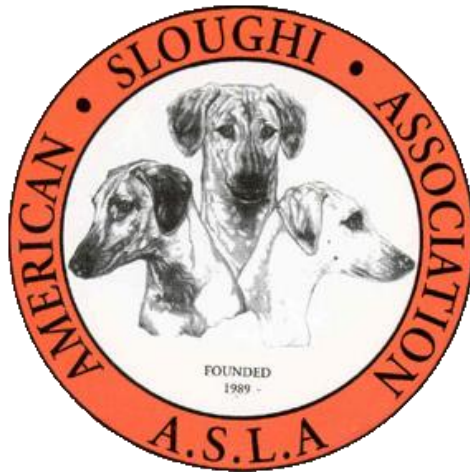
breed name must continue to remain an unresolved enigma.

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