

North African Mystery continued

by Sir Terence Clark

(Note: The comments by Dr Fitzsch referred to below are no longer available on the internet.)

I was interested to learn that my article exploring the disappearance of the feathered Sloughi from North Africa had attracted comment from Dr Fritzsich, President of the American Sloughi Association, but I was disappointed that it throws little light on the mystery that I described and in some respects serves only to deepen it.

First I was puzzled to read his assertion that ‘the Sloughi is the hound of the Berbers and the Saluki that of the Bedouins’. If he means by this that the Sloughi and the Saluki exist in parallel in North Africa with the Berber and Arab communities respectively, then I would be very surprised, as I am not aware that anyone has previously made such a distinction. Indeed the historical evidence suggests the contrary. As the *Columbian Encyclopedia* (6th edition) makes clear, ‘the Berbers of the plains were absorbed by the Arabs, while those who lived in the mountain regions such as the Aurès, Kabylia and the Atlas retained their culture and warlike traditions’. Anyone who knows the Atlas would recognise immediately that these Berber-held mountains are not the best place for smooth-haired Sighthounds for hunting but rather for large, hairy guard dogs for protection; whereas the warmer and flatter plains and the desert inhabited largely by the Arabs are clearly more suitable for Sighthounds. This is what I think Max Siber meant, when he said: ‘the breed of the feathered Sloughi that is widespread in the whole of the Maghrib and in Morocco, namely with the **Arabs** (my emphasis throughout) in the southwest of Beled-el-Machsin is not found among the Berbers. These animals are often used by the **Arabs** for hunting with falcons.’ Siber added that the **only** type of dog of the Berbers ‘is a village watchdog of no recognisable breed’. He would seem to say that they did not have Sloughis of any description.

I have looked through many of the reliable French sources on the Sloughi in North Africa and cannot find any references to these hounds being exclusively Berber; whereas there is general recognition of them as Arab hounds. I list some of these sources:

- Bédon, G – Contribution à l’étude du sloughi (1974)
- Daumas – Les chevaux du Sahara (1851)
- Duconte – Le Slougui ou lévrier arabe (1973)
- Giudicelli, B – Situation actuelle du sloughi en Algérie (1975)
- Mégnin, P – Le Slougui (1957)
- Mercier, L – La chasse et les sports chez les arabes (1927)
- Przewdziecki, X – Le Destin des Lévrier (1980s)
- Villemont, M - Le lévrier arabe ou le slougui (1970)

The Moroccan veterinarian Dr Ali Miguil, who wrote his exhaustive study ‘Contribution à l’étude du Slougui au Maroc’ as recently as 1986, makes no mention of it being a Berber hound, even though he is himself a Berber. On the contrary most of the references are to the Arabs’ use of the Sloughi. He does however quote some Berber idioms from the Atlas and the South which mention the *Oskai* and a Berber

word *Azgagh* for red sable used around Fes, which suggest, as you might expect in a country with a mixed population, that both communities are familiar with this hound.

Among the English sources, the Hon. Florence Amherst, a recognised authority on Oriental Sighthounds, likewise makes no mention of the Sloughi, both smooth and feathered, as being a Berber hound. On the contrary in her book 'Oriental Greyhounds', she writes: 'The Slughī in North Africa is of the same type as the smooth Slughī further east, and is said to be of the same **Arabian** origin, though it now forms a distinct variety. These Greyhounds are highly valued by the sporting Beys of Algiers, Tunis and elsewhere and the Bedawin of the Sahara...The feathered variety is also occasionally met with in North Africa.'

All the breeders that I have met in Tunisia and Morocco were Arabs and some claimed descent from the Bani Hilal tribe that came from Arabia to occupy parts of North Africa; and the fact is that the peoples of North Africa have chosen to use for their hunting hound the colloquial **Arabic** word 'Sloughi', derived from classical **Arabic** *Salūqī*, rather than a Berber word such as *Oskai*, which would have been more logical if it were indeed a Berber hound.

(Incidentally, I suggest that Dr Fritzscht should take a look at any paintings of the Orientalist school, of which Gaston Casimir Saint-Pierre (1833-1916) was a member, as he would see immediately that the Arab boy depicted in Saint-Pierre's painting in Siber's book is dressed in the style of that period for North Africa. Saint-Pierre's parents lived in Oran, Algeria and I think he would have been in a better position to know how a person from North Africa might have looked.)

Dr Fritzscht says that he was dumbfounded that in all the serious books that he has read about North Africa and the Sloughi, nothing about the disappearance of the feathered variety was ever mentioned. I can only say that he clearly had not read sufficiently widely or attentively. If he had, his curiosity might have been aroused as mine was when I came across the puzzling references to the existence of the feathered variety in the serious works of Amherst, Belgrave, Siber, Przewdziecki and Miguil and the Saint-Pierre painting, but I could find nothing to explain satisfactorily what had happened to it. This is certainly not 'an obsession' on my part, as Dr Fritzscht asserts, but an entirely natural response from anyone with an enquiring mind on seeing such references. Indeed I might equally question the motives of all those who must surely have read at least the Amherst reference but have never thought fit to explore it.

I was hoping to learn from the response of Dr Fritzscht, as a 'heavyweight' biologist according to Dr de Caprona, some scientific explanation for this phenomenon, but his argumentation against the very tentative theory that I posited for the elimination of the feathered variety fails at the very first hurdle. He begins by taking as a basis for the population of Sloughis in North Africa at the end of the 19th century the figure of 210 that I was given for the population of purebred Sloughis in Morocco in 1970 and extrapolates from that a figure of 1,000 for the whole of North Africa, of which he says half might have been feathered more than 70 years earlier! I know of no foundation for such an extraordinary leap of the imagination. As I said in my initial article, it is believed that the whole Sloughi population went into decline after 1844 as a result of a ban on hunting game with hounds imposed by the French colonialists and the effect of severe droughts on the desert pastoralists, but I have seen no information

on the actual number of purebred hounds of either variety extant at the end of the 19th century. To speculate on numbers in such uncertain circumstances is totally unscientific. But by analogy with the hunting hounds in similar climatic conditions further east, all I can say is that, however many hounds there were at that time, it is probable that the percentage of smooths was far higher than the 50-50 split suggested by Dr Fritzsich.

Unlike Mendel working on a hypothesis on peas in the quiet of a monastery garden and producing a neat textbook solution on heredity (when I was at school and studied Mendel we experimented with black and white mice in a controlled environment), we are dealing here with the real world. In my experience Arab breeders in the Middle East would not accept for their hounds the degree of close inbreeding implicit in Mendel's laws in order to arrive at a particular type of hound but would seek diversity from within the phenotype based on performance and would breed smooths and feathereds indiscriminately, unless there was a particular reason for not doing so. An experienced breeder in northern Iraq once told me, for example, he would never breed his smooth hounds with feathereds, which he regarded as impure imports to the area, and he would cull rigorously any puppies showing signs of featheriness. I speculated in my original article that there might have been some similar cultural reason, possibly western inspired, to lead the North African breeders to take similar measures, but I could find no convincing explanation in any of my discussions on the subject in Morocco or Tunisia or in works of reference.

Dr Fritzsich asks whether the feathering gene could have been diluted out by crossing non-carriers with carriers, but treats the possibility as unlikely. It is known however that the French introduced Greyhound racing to Algiers and, if the practice in other countries is any guide, many of these would have wound up in the hands of the local hunters for crossing with their indigenous hounds. This would have been further compounded when racing came to an end altogether and large numbers came available. Their impact has not, as far as I know, been studied, but it could possibly have provided something of a boost for the smooth factor in the local population there.

Dr Fritzsich thought I should have bounced my ideas off someone more familiar with genetics. I did of course do that and they were not nearly as dismissive but showed a proper scientific interest in what other factors might have been involved to bring about such a rapid disappearance of the feathered variety. Thinking further on this puzzle, I wondered whether the effect of the French law of 1844 might indeed hold the key. In Oman, a similarly draconian law banning all forms of hunting was introduced in 1976 with the result that by the early 1990s I could find only one native Omani Saluki in the country: all the hounds of the tribes with which Wilfred Thesiger had hunted with Salukis and falcons in the late 1940s had been destroyed or turned loose to fend for themselves. It is known that the Department of Water and Forests (Eaux et Forêts) in the French controlled parts of North Africa often acted vigorously to suppress the local Sloughis and, if the number of the feathered variety was in any case lower than that of the smooth, the effect on the feathereds would have had a proportionately greater impact.

However, I have just reread the thorough study by Bernard Giudicelli on the situation in Algeria about 30 years ago and came across two other important factors: the gun

and rabies. As he says, the nomads found that the gun was more rapid and effective than their Sloughis for hunting or protection, so they had less need for their hounds. More importantly, he says (in my translation): 'As for rabies, it has literally decimated the canine population of North Africa'. As an example of the effect on the Sloughi population he writes: 'We have read in the literature that there were a lot of Sloughis in the South-East of Algeria. One of our friends, secretary-general of the French Sloughi Club, went there and found with difficulty two Sloughis of mediocre conformation'. He goes on to say: 'We have had the occasion to speak with French people who have lived for a long time in this region: they confirmed the fact that there were a lot of Sloughis and that the majority had died of rabies or had been culled'. Rabies and other fatal canine diseases are endemic across North Africa, so it is possible therefore that the answer to the mystery is to be found here: the numerically fewer feathered hounds may have been wiped out by disease.

As I said earlier, it will indeed be interesting to see whether Dr Savolainen's research sheds light on this and other related questions. In the meantime, we have to be patient and wait for the research to be published. However, if, as Xavier Przedziecki maintains, by the 1940s the Sloughi of the coastal regions away from the desert was 'in a state of abandonment' as a result of crossbreeding in a way that the Saluki further east was not, it will not be at all surprising if the genetic background will show some divergence.