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# North African Mystery

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By Sir Terence Clark

Some aspects of the Saluki's history have not so far been entirely satisfactorily explained and some are likely to remain the subject of speculation by virtue of the long time-scale, the paucity of the archaeological evidence and the absence of written accounts among the early, often nomadic breeders. A number of writers have assembled such evidence as there is and have produced credible versions of the history and development of the breed from the probable beginnings in Mesopotamia to the present day: e.g. *Le Destin des Levriers* by Xavier Przewdziecki (1975), *The Saluki in Art, History and Sport* by D & H Waters (1986), *The Saluki: Coursing Hound of the East* edited by G Goodman (1995), etc, but one aspect seems so far to have gone without comment or explanation: the mysterious disappearance of the feathered

Sloughi from North Africa. For some this might seem an inappropriate question to raise, as they would argue that it is a contradiction in terms to speak of a feathered Sloughi, since the Sloughi is invariably smooth-coated, but there is evidence to suggest that in the not too far distant past the two varieties existed side by side in North Africa, in much the same way as the Saluki continues to do in the Middle East.

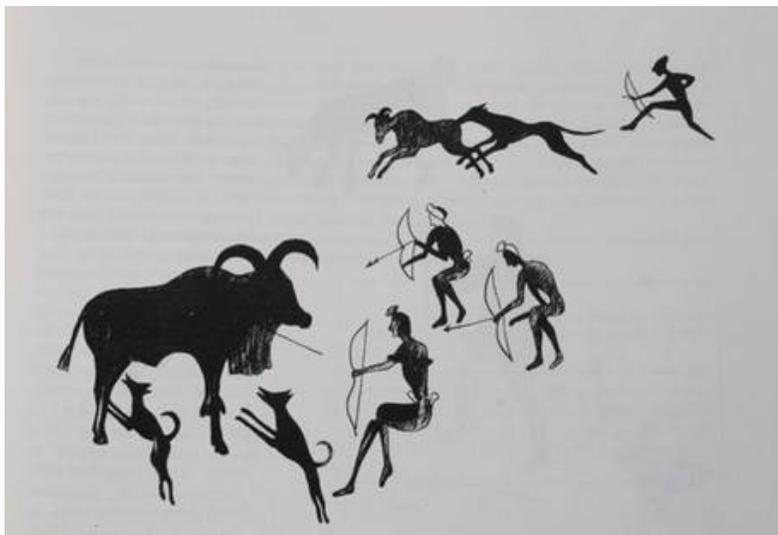
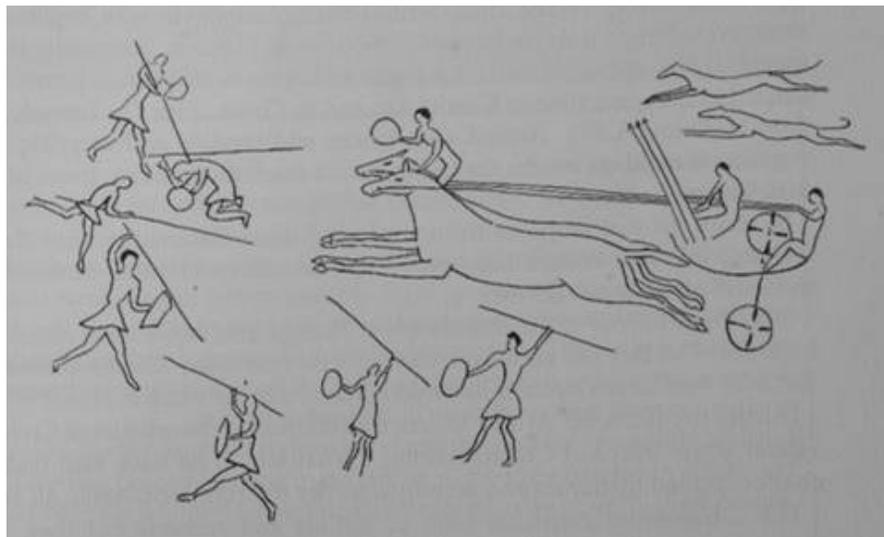


Fig.1 – Hunting the Mouflon, end of the 6th millennium BC

Fig. 2- Chariots at the Flying Gallop, end of the 2nd millennium BC from Tassili n' Ajjer in Algeria, by permission of the publishers of 'Our Levriers' by X. Przewdziecki.]



As distinct from Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, where both smooth and feathered long-limbed, deep-chested, lop-eared Sighthounds appear in a variety of art forms, the earliest archaeological evidence in North Africa is in the petroglyphs of Tassili n' Ajjer in south-eastern Algeria from the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC onwards that show an increasingly gracile smooth hound bearing in the later

examples a close resemblance to the hound often portrayed in mosaics from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD during the Romans' occupation of the region. In 'Our Levriers' (2001) Xavier Przedziecki opines that this type of hound stemmed from the Roman *vertragus*, but whether it became mixed with a local hound is not clear. What is clear is that it was being represented in similar fashion in mosaics of this period from what are now Jordan and Syria, suggesting that this type of hound was to be found right across the region.



Fig. 3 - Mosaic from El Djem, Tunisia, mid-3rd century AD



Fig. 4 - Mosaic from Mukhaiyat, Mt. Nebo, Jordan, late 6th century AD

The decline of the Romans ushered in a lengthy period of instability in North Africa until order was once again restored under the banner of Islam, starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and continuing over the next three centuries, as repeated migrations of Arab tribes from Arabia established themselves in the area. It is known from such Arab writers of the time as Al-Jahiz in his book *Al-Hayawan* (On Animals) that in this period the hound that they called in classical Arabic the *Saluqi* existed in both a smooth and a feathered variety and both varieties seem likely to have been introduced into North Africa by the migrating Arabs. Certainly by the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was

possible for the local writer of a hunting manual for the Hafsid Caliph in Tunis to refer in meaningful terms for his patron to “the hounds of Saluq” as having “long, soft hair” (*Al-Mansur’s Book On Hunting* – T Clark & M Derhalli (2001)). Further imports of feathered hounds may have occurred during the following centuries of Ottoman rule. At all events hounds of both the smooth and the feathered variety were apparently still relatively common in Morocco and Algeria as late as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At that time Richard Strebler completed in Munich work on transforming the notes of his late mentor, Max Siber, into a book called *Die Hunde Afrikas* (Africa’s dogs), which was published by the Zollikofer Press in St Gallen, Switzerland, in 1899. Siber, who was a Swiss *Forstmeister* or Forestry Commissioner, living in the Sihl forest near Zurich, had worked for much of his life on the dogs of the world, drawing on the information of a network of travellers and his own vast library, but did not live to see all his studies published. *Die Hunde Afrikas* is a remarkably detailed survey, with many illustrations, of the history and development of the different breeds that have inhabited the African Continent. In the present context Siber notes that a Berlin newspaper – the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* of 13 July 1891 reported [in my translation]: “In Morocco exists a beautiful breed of dog of which the local people are extremely proud. To prevent the transfer abroad of the valuable animals, a dog monopoly has been introduced and on pain of banishment it is forbidden to export dogs of Moroccan breeding.” Siber says that the



appearance of these dogs is not mentioned and speculates that they are most probably “nothing more or less than a good breed of Sloughi, like those to be found with the Arabs in neighbouring Algeria”. Siber goes on to describe two varieties of Sloughi and provides engravings of them, the feathered variety from a painting by Saint Pierre, whom I have not been able to identify further, and the smooth from a drawing by Pierre Megnin, author of *Races des Chiens* (Breeds of Dogs) (1890). Quoting from the *Zeitschrift fuer Ethnologie XX* (Journal for Ethnology), Siber says [in my translation]: “The breed of feathered Sighthound (Sloughi) that is widespread in the whole of the Maghrib and in Morocco, namely with the Arabs in the southwest of Beled-el-Machsine, is not found among the Berbers. These animals are often used by the Arabs for hunting with falcons.”

Fig.5- Long-haired Sloughi from Tlemcen by Saint Pierre

Siber adds: “Here it is doubtless a matter of the well-known drop-eared, Setter-like Sighthound from western Algeria, Tlemessen (Tlemcen), fig.47, which is found together with the

pure Sloughi types both in North Africa and in Arabia”. I have only a poor photocopy of Siber’s book,



which is long since out of print and very difficult to find, but reproduce here his fig.47, which bears the caption “Long-haired Sighthound from Tlemcen (Algeria)”, as best as I can. {ed note: SPDBS was able to supply a more detailed copy of the artwork, reproduced on the cover of this newsletter} The only type of dog that Siber attributes to the Berbers, again quoting the *Zeitschrift fuer Ethnologie*, is a village watchdog of no recognisable breed.

Fig.6 – North African Sloughi by Pierre Megnin]

So, if the feathered variety was a commonplace, how has it apparently become extinct in a little over a century? According to Przedzicki the Sloughi underwent a drastic decline right across the Maghrib towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He attributes this to persistent drought that forced the nomads out of the desert, when their whole lifestyle underwent a change and the Sloughi had no part to play in it. In his doctoral thesis entitled *Contribution a l'etude du Sloughi au Maroc* (Contribution to the study of the Sloughi in Morocco), presented to the Agronomic and Veterinary Institute of Rabat in 1986, Dr Ali Miguil set out a number of other reasons for the decline, including the use of guns for hunting, the decrease in game, the movement of people to the town and the ban on hunting with hounds. In conversation with me in Zaghoura, Morocco in 1992 he said that the ban stemmed from a law introduced by the French colonialists in 1844 that had far-reaching consequences. According to the law hounds could be used only to protect livestock from predators. As a result poor farmers, who could not afford the luxury of maintaining purebred hounds that were not allowed to hunt and were shot if they did, turned to breeding a different animal capable of hunting in a pack aggressive predators such as jackal. The decline in the numbers of Sloughis, he said, also had a knock-on effect in that it became ever more difficult for breeders to find suitable dogs for their bitches to maintain the purity of the breed. Sometimes they would use whatever was available and provided the offspring had enough of the characteristics of the Sloughi, they called them Sloughi. If the crossbreeding was obvious they called them *barhush* in Arabic or *barrouche* in French. As Dr Miguil told me, they needed a dog that was fast enough to catch the jackal and were not

Fig.7-PrincessRuspoli'sSloughi



too concerned with how it looked. It will be interesting to see whether the current research of Dr Peter Savolainen in Sweden into the origins of Sighthounds and other breeds will show evidence of this crossbreeding when he comes to analyse the DNA of samples taken from Sloughis in Morocco. Przedzicki, who spent much of his career as a soldier and an administrator in North Africa and the Levant in the 1930s and early 1940s, formed the view that by that time the Sloughi was “in a state of abandonment” and as a result of crossbreeding over a long time the type existed no longer. He maintained that the Saharan regions of Morocco were the last

refuge of pure Sloughis, some with black coats, which he describes as identical with hounds from Syria and Jordan, possibly like the hound in this photograph from the late Princess Ruspoli near Marrakesh, which does indeed look remarkably like many of the hounds in Syria and Jordan.



Fig. 8 Jordanian Saluki

It is perhaps noteworthy that in adjacent areas which were not under French influence, feathered hounds were still to be found in the 1920s. For example C Dalrymple Belgrave, who was a British District Officer with the Camel Corps of the Frontier Districts Administration of Egypt first for a year at Matruh on the coast and then for two years in 1920-21 at the oasis of Siwa some 200 miles inland near the border with Libya, where he had what he called

“Silugi” hounds and published a photograph of a feathered pair in *Siwa The Oasis of Jupiter Ammon*, (1923). After describing local falconry, Belgrave writes: “Another sport which we went in for along the coast was coursing hares with Silugi dogs. These dogs are gazelle hounds and came originally from Arabia. There are now a certain number of them in Egypt, and all the officials on the Western Desert keep one or two. Silugis are very similar to greyhounds, generally white or pale coffee colour, with



feathery tails and long-haired silky ears. They are very fast indeed, but have no sense of scent, and hunt entirely by sight.” Siber also mentions a traveller who took “a pure Sloughi” from the Siwa oasis, on which Siber comments: “There in that inaccessible corner of the earth Arabian Sighthounds must have been kept pure; the import of new is almost impossible because of the journey of several days across the desert that is necessary to reach any place of habitation.”

Fig. 9 – Silugi hounds

The Hon. Florence Amherst had of course already made the Egyptian feathered Saluki well-known by the import of two such specimens in 1897. One of them – *Luman* – can still be seen as a stuffed exhibit in the Natural History Museum at Tring, Surrey. Her hounds were given to her by Colonel Bramley who had been given them when he saved the life of a shaikh from the Tahawi tribe, which is a branch of the great ‘Anizah confederation from Syria. Photographs attributed to the Hon. F Amherst’s collection appearing in Hutchinson’s Dog Encyclopaedia in 1936 show other hounds of the Tahawi tribe but they are smooth – and one is brindle; and a Saluki bitch imported into Germany in 1975 –

Gamila el-Tahawi – from the same tribe was also smooth. These examples suggest that historically both varieties were to be found in Upper Egypt. In the late 1990s a smooth bitch called *Cleo* was imported from Cairo to Germany and when put to a feathered dog produced some feathered pups (see the photograph of *Cleo* in the foreground with one of her offspring).



Fig.10 – *Cleo* and son, by Jutta Rubesam

Przedziecki had a very simple explanation for the disappearance of feathered hounds from North Africa after the Arab migrations: “under the African sky, within a few generations, all Salukis had opted for the shorter coat”. That strikes me as improbable. If climate should have such an effect, it should also apply to other climatically similar parts of the Arab world such as Arabia, but feathered hounds exist there quite happily to the present day. It seems to me therefore that the real reason must lie elsewhere,

possibly in social attitudes. In his survey in 1986-87 of over 100 hounds Dr Miguil did come across some Slouguis with long hair, particularly on the neck and tail, in the north of Morocco but he thought it resulted from crossbreeding. I suspect that the crux of the matter is to be found somewhere here. In the drive to recover the breed in Morocco and possibly in response to western notions about breed purity local breeders have come to associate feathering with crossbreeding and have sought to eliminate it. In my visits to Morocco I have filmed and photographed at least as many hounds as Dr Miguil but I have never seen an example of the feathered variety. Indeed I found that breeders were unanimous in condemning feathering as an indication of crossbreeding; whereas they were quite happy to overlook other indications such as the shape of the head. Thus, if a bitch carrying the recessive feathered gene were mated with a carrier of the same gene and threw a feathered pup or if she threw a mutant feathered pup, it was clear that the breeder would cull it.



Fig. 11 – Sloughi with an uncharacteristic head – beside Fig. 12 – characteristic heads

*Le Club Marocain du Slougui* (The Moroccan Slougui Club) estimated that in the mid-1970s the number of purebred Slouguis was down to 210. From such a small base the numbers have increased significantly as a result of the provision of financial incentives and veterinary services to breeders but in the process it is possible that if there were any remnants of the feathered variety they would have been bred out or eliminated. Although both varieties of Salukis are commonly to be found side by side across the Middle East there seems to have been an increase in the smooth variety in some parts either because of the preference of breeders or simply because the feathered gene pool has not been topped up by imports from other areas. It seems to me that in Morocco hostility to feathering is now so deeply engrained as an indicator of cross-breeding that even if feathered hounds were to be re-introduced they would be unlikely to gain acceptance among the breeders. It would seem probable therefore that the feathered Sloughi that was once part of North Africa’s natural heritage is now extinct.

Footnote: I have used throughout the spellings given to these Sighthounds by the sources quoted. They vary from Sloughi to Slougui and Silugi to Saluki. All these spellings are attempts at transliterating into English or French either the colloquial or the classical Arabic words: none is strictly correct. For the English-speaker Slougui or even Silugi are close to the pronunciation of the colloquial word used across the Arabic-speaking world for the classical Arabic *Saluqi*; whereas the French spelling of Sloughi is entirely inconsistent, since the letters ‘gh’ are generally not used to transliterate the Arabic letter *qaf* but a different Arabic letter *ghayn*, which sounds like the letter ‘r’ rolled in the throat and is correctly used in French for example in their word for North Africa – *le Maghreb*. However in English we have chosen to go back to the classical rather than the colloquial Arabic and have substituted the letter ‘k’ for the Arabic *qaf* to arrive at the spelling of Saluki.