

The Sloughi and its origins

The Sloughi has travelled to us, across the millennia and the continents, while at the same time it seems retaining the features that make it an ancestral sighthound. At a time when the Arab world is forgetting its traditions and the Sloughi is threatened with disappearance, we still know so little about the origins of this sighthound coming to us from the dawn of history. Indeed, proofs of its existence in the distant past are few and fragmentary. Hence only assumptions can be made on its origins.

According to Xavier Przewdzicki, the oldest sighthound relic dates no further back than 9,000 years. This was a rock engraving that showed an African sighthound with prick ears accompanying a masked hunter. It was discovered at Tassili-n-Ajjer, more precisely in the Djerat wadi. This sighthound, named Tesem by the Pharaonic Egyptians, is represented today by the Pharaoh Hound, the Podencos and the Cirneco dell'Etna.

Three thousand years later, we find the trace of another sighthound in Mesopotamia, this time with drop ears. According to Xavier Przewdzicki, this sighthound, certainly of Asian origin, exists at present in the form of several breeds differentiated by type of coat. In the Western world, the word "Saluki" (classical Arabic and vowel) corresponds to feathered specimens while the word "Sloughi" (North African dialect) corresponds to smooth coated specimens. However, in the East they talk of "Saluki" (Arabic) and "Tazi" (Iranian) whatever the type of coat.

We will now show the antiquity of the existence of this "Saluki – Sloughi" Asian sighthound.

In this respect, the so-called Oxford or Two Dog Palette is interesting since it is made up of three oriental sighthounds pursuing gazelles.

This is a ceremonial cosmetic palette originating from Nekhen, a settlement on the right bank of the Nile dating back to 3,200 years B.C.

However, there are also remains in the Fertile Crescent, near the city of Ur, in the built-up area of Erid, the skeleton of an oriental sighthound was found dating back to four thousand years before Christ. From the Assyrian Kingdom, we know of the Tepe Gawra stamp seals near Niniveh just a few kilometres away from Mosul in Iraq. The motifs on the seals represent several hunting scenes with drop-eared sighthounds.

These also date back to four thousand years before Christ.

The wolf, ancestor of sighthounds?

With reference to the origins of the oriental sighthound, Xavier Przewdzicki agrees with Dr. Edmond Dechambre who wrote: "sighthounds existed in the wild across steppe grasslands, and some would have been domesticated". This idea is also supported by Prof. Pierre Pfeffer of the C.N.R.S. who thinks that the dog comes from an original ginger-yellow dog since he observed that dogs left to themselves revert to this type of dog resembling a dingo rather than a wolf. In fact, the vast majority of zoologists see the wolf as ancestor of the dog due to the many similarities in their morphological and ethnological characteristics. Thus, Prof. Francis Petter of the French National Museum of Natural History in Paris asserts that the dog is a wolf that has been domesticated and selected by primitive man somewhere around 10,000 years before Christ, i.e. towards the end of the last ice age. According to F.E. Zeuner According to F.E. Zeuner, sighthounds are believed to be descended from the Indian wolf via the dingo; so as we can see, the issue concerning the origin of the dog and even more that of the sighthound, has not been resolved.

In Egypt, during Pharaonic times

Let us now return to the Sloughi, to say that under the reign of Thutmose III, we see a decline in the Egyptian Tesem and its replacement by the Oriental Sighthound. In the course of time, this sighthound spread widely around the world, including in our Western countries where, from the 3rd century B.C., the Celts had introduced it following their conquest of Asia Minor. The Treatise on Hunting by Arrian (Flavius Arianus), a Roman official in the 2nd century B.C., shows us that, in Gaul, the Celts were using this sighthound for hunting and that they called it "ouertragoi", later to become "vertragus" in Latin.

At the beginning of the 10th century, the Fatimids invaded right across the Maghreb, and the Oriental Sighthound supplanted the indigenous lupoid sighthound. Only smooth coats continued in this part of the world and the sighthound was henceforth to be called Sloughi by the Arabs. Closure of the route between holy places was at the origin of the crusades which were to oppose Islam and Christianity for almost two centuries. In the 12th century, with the return from the first crusades, Sloughis were once again introduced into Europe, in particular by Saint Louis (King Louis IX). In 1830, when the French discovered the Sloughi in North Africa, they didn't know that this sighthound had already been introduced several times in the West in the course of History.

At the origin of many breeds

The Oriental Sighthound is therefore at the origin of most existing sighthound breeds:

- the Greyhound, established since the 14th century, has evolved towards rounder and more powerful shapes since hunting in a terrain of mixed woodland and pasture requires less endurance and more speed.
- the Galgo has undergone an evolution comparable to that of the Greyhound albeit less accentuated since it was used on rougher and more open land.

- the Chart Polski for which we do not know the formative process, was established in the 16th century.
- the Afghan Hound is of recent creation by crossing Salukis with mountain dogs that had dewclaws on their hind legs.
- the Italian Greyhound is the result of a miniaturisation process going back at least to Roman times.
- the Whippet is a smaller version of the Greyhound with the additional crossing of terriers in the mining areas of England in the 19th century.

As we can see, the Sloughi has played an important role in the formation of other Sighthound breeds. We also need to add that it is the basis for several French hunting hound breeds: the Chien Gris de Saint-Louis, the Chien Blanc du Roy themselves behind French scent hounds such as the Braque Dupuy, and the Hungarian Vizsla to mention only a few.

With regard to the Azawakh (Sahelian sighthound) so surprisingly similar to the Sloughi (although even more slender and with white markings on its coat), no blood relationship has been proven. The Azawakh's origin remains an even greater enigma than that of the Oriental Sighthound despite very close morphological characteristics.

Not all archaeological discoveries have been explored as yet in that direction, this would represent a considerable amount of work. Only the study of blood proteins or establishment of the genetic map would make it possible to resolve the origin of dogs and of sighthounds in particular. However, the lack of financial resources means that we will probably have to wait a lot longer.

We think that with a better understanding of the Sloughi's evolution, it should be possible to have a more satisfactory view of its current situation.

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(Translated by Susan Bamford, November 2020)

<https://www.ashmolean.org/two-dog-palette>

Front and back of the "Oxford" or "Two-Dog" palette

