

The Role of Women in Dog Domestication

Details about many aspects of the dog's domestication process from the very beginning have been open to widespread disagreement. Information about dog domestication as it occurs in the home-life is important to studies of human history. The dog was the first domesticated animal, determining when, where, how, and by who dog domestication began provides valuable insight into the past record of human culture.¹ When we discuss this process, we rarely hear of the role that women played. It is not uncommon that the process of dog domestication would be boiled down to “men hunted with dogs,” or “dogs followed the food.” My goal for this research was to give in depth evidence through the archaeological and historical record, the biological and physiological properties of wolves and dogs, and the culture of those who began domestication, to prove the arguably larger than male role women played in this vital and world altering process. I will also explain the erasure of this type of involvement by exploring patriarchal ideas expressed throughout literature.

Let's Start At The Beginning

There is a gap in the answer to the question of how dogs were domesticated from wolves, while much is known about the nature of current relationships, but little is known about such relationships when the earliest indications of pet dogs are found. There are published stories and historical accounts regarding the interactions between indigenous American peoples and wolves. These stories are not applicable to Eurasian cultures in which dogs were domesticated separately. Humans feared wolves for quite some time in the beginning of their relationship due to the fact that they were aware of the risk rabies poses to humans. Wolves feared humans because we would hunt and kill them, especially if they had killed or threatened a young human child in a

¹ Mech, L. D. (2019). Do indigenous American peoples' stories inform the study of dog domestication? *Ethnobiology Letters*, 10(1), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.14237/eb1.10.1.2019.1474>

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rabies induced craze. There was a mutual fear between wolf and human. There is the theory that wolves became conditioned to human feedings, that somehow these feedings also habituated them to seem friendly. However, from what we know regarding wolf behavior, is that those wolves having lost their fear of humans would be far more likely to end up attacking people. No explanation can be offered as to why the relationship between indigenous Americans and wolves changed. Rabies was pervasive on every continent except Antarctica for all recorded history. For that reason alone hominids likely would have had a tradition of fearing, avoiding, and killing wolves.²

However...

Archaeologists have uncovered ancient dog burials dating as far back as 14,000 years ago. Although interred animals are considered rare, they appear in a minimum of one culture and time period on each continent, excluding Antarctica. It's quite simple for archaeologists to spot a burial: filled-in pits have scrambled, mixed sediment, while the immediate surrounding earth is more solid and layered. Additionally, complete bones in their correct alignment mean care was put into determining their resting places; otherwise the bones would be widely spread out and out of place. How do we prove the intent behind these burials? Past ancestors have buried animals with the same intent we do today, because they were recognized as members of the family and deserving of a memorial. Some were buried alongside their human companions in designated areas that were likely to be graveyards. Furthermore, their human companions would have had to "travel with the dog's body and take it to those locations (Losey, 2014). There is even evidence that some earlier human burials were interrupted to make room for more recently deceased dogs.

² Mech, L. D. (2019). Do indigenous American peoples' stories inform the study of dog domestication? *Ethnobiology Letters*, 10(1), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.14237/ebl.10.1.2019.1474>

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In 1914, workers found a burial site in Oberkassel, which is now a suburb of Bonn, Germany. The findings entailed a dog, a man, a woman, with many decorated objects created from antler, bone, and teeth that date back to the Paleolithic era, meaning it was about 14,000 years ago. The care given to that puppy to nurse it through illness was particularly intriguing to the researchers who discovered it. A veterinarian and anthropologist Luc Janssens found issues with the teeth that had been overlooked. As an animal doctor, she had an eye to spot these issues that appear in the dogs we know and love today. The dog was quite young when it passed, just around 28 weeks old. Indicative details on the animal's teeth showed it likely suffered from canine distemper virus at around 19 weeks old, and may have struggled through two or three periods of grave illness lasting five to six weeks. This dog highlights the earliest known evidence of dogs being viewed and handled as pets,³ a domesticated animal kept for sentimental reasons as opposed to service. The habituation of dogs in the final Palaeolithic has significant indications on how we can understand pre-Holocene hunter-gatherers as most suggested hunter-gatherer intentions for naturalizing dogs have been for work related purposes. However, the remains of the Bonn-Oberkassel dogs might suggest another lens from which we can look.

More theories...

One theory advocates that early humans began to capture wolf pups, in order to keep them as pets. Through this process they gradually domesticated them. The past remains that are likely to be domesticated dogs go back to around 14,000 years, but this is debated as there are findings that are more than twice that age that are thought to be an ancestor of the modern dog. Since more recent genetic studies suggest that the date of domestication occurred far earlier than

³ Bates, M. (2021, May 3). *Prehistoric puppy was likely pet dog, archaeologists say*. History. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/ancient-pet-puppy-oberkassel-stone-age-dog>

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we previously believed, a new theory has gained traction in the community. The theory that can be summed up with the phrase “Survival of the friendliest”- which has two driving possibilities and theories of explanation. First, we will discuss the widely accepted theory, and then my theory. The widely accepted hypothesis proposes that wolves largely domesticated *themselves* among hunter-gatherer people. The physical changes that appeared in dogs over time included spotted coats, curly tails, large ears that flop, and rounder eyes. These changes give insight that the process that occurred is self-domestication.⁴ It’s theorized that these somatic alterations take place when the amiable animals of a species obtain an advantage. The friendliness trait somehow drives these physical changes, which can begin to appear as phenotypical byproducts of the preferred friendliness trait in as little as a few generations. The main evidence given in support for this theory is derived from a study involving domesticated foxes in Russia, where researchers bred foxes who were comfortable getting close to humans, they quickly learned that these comfortable foxes were also adept in picking up on the social cues of humans. The ongoing selection of the social foxes created the unexpected side effect of making them look cuter and cuter.

Laying the groundwork: Women domesticated dogs

As we covered previously, a possible force behind the “Survival of the Friendliest” theory is that dogs had the sheer will to domesticate themselves. I find it somewhat humorous that we have widely accepted theories and extensive research on dog domestication occurring by the hands of men through hunting or just completely on their own, before we have much research on the definitive role that women played. For those stringent supporters of men's role in the process

⁴ Magazine, S. (2018, August 15). *How accurate is the theory of dog domestication in 'alpha'?* Smithsonian.com. Retrieved December 13, 2022, from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-wolves-really-became-dogs-180970014/>

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I ask, if men domesticated dogs for the purpose of hunting, then wouldn't the dogs with the highest prey drive, along with more aggressive traits, be favored in the domestication evolutionary process of dogs? I realize this could be perceived as an aggressive statement. I do not mean to come at this topic blinded by feminist ideals, I am not out to disprove men's role in domestication or exclude them. The process of hunting with dogs definitely contributed to the dogs we see today, and in some cultures men were more likely to stay in. It is just from what we know, culturally, about these ancient societies, that women bruted a lot of the work that occurred in the home. This assumption I make only due to the fact that women are required to birth and nurse babies. Puppies and human babies alike, cannot be separated from their mother prior to a certain amount of time that allows them both to survive. Vital nutrients and emotional needs are met in those first sensitive weeks of life. Babies and puppies can both suffer extremely from lack of physical touch and affection. I would also like to point out that this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Dog domestication occurred on different continents at different time periods. Some of these domesticated breeds went extinct, and some lines are still traceable today. My theory does not rely completely on the idea that because women might have been more in charge of child rearing and foraging instead of hunting, that in turn dog rearing and domestication responsibilities also fell into their laps. In the past, archaeologists and anthropologists have believed men did the hunting in foraging societies, while women took up the gathering, the recent progressive views entering anthropological circles have pushed for research to challenge this. There is a study involving primate females that are able to provide for themselves and their offspring, without male assistance. There are many current foraging societies, where men and women are flexible about who goes out on hunts and in some

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communities, the hunting and gathering roles are exchanged.⁵ The current widely accepted view is that past foragers had more flexible gender roles than previously thought, these roles depended on individual traits instead of gender roles, such as knowledge, skills and possibly personal desire. There are broader cultural positions that place women as homemakers and in the position of culturing children and disciplining pets, keeping these unruly characters socially acceptable. It can also be argued that the rise of agriculture, which occurred around the domestication of dogs, further divided labor into gender categories.

Physiological Evidence

When non-dog keeping individuals are compared to those who regularly cohabit with or care for dogs, we find that dog owners have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, they participate in more physical activity, report less mental health issues, and require less healthcare related visits. We see indications of the benefits of coexisting with dogs even in the womb. There is research to indicate that prenatal exposure to household pets (as well as farm animals) is associated with lower risk of the off-spring developing an allergic/asthmatic disease phenotype/s. An explanation for this reduced risk, may be related to the way dogs affect a human's personal microbiome and the one of their home. These pets increase the microbial diversity of humans in otherwise sterile environments which in turn promote immune tolerance and a resistance to allergies in early life. This benefit only materializes in cases where the dog cohabitates with humans regularly and is let outside- not in cases where the dog solely was considered an “outside dog.” Some people today have “apartment dogs”, such as the french bulldog, because they were bred in such a way (the pursuit of certain traits) that they cannot do physical activity or they can

⁵ Khan Academy. (n.d.). *Foraging (article) | 6. early humans*. Khan Academy. Retrieved December 13, 2022, from <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/big-history-project/early-humans/how-did-first-humans-live/a/foraging>

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die. They are kept inside for much of their short life, so they would not increase the microbiome of their companion. These dogs are very expensive and indicative of the trends we saw in the Victorian era, where the rich needed to differentiate even their pets from the middle class.

Mutual gazing is an aspect of relationships between humans and their pet dogs that has been studied. The act of mutual gazing releases oxytocin in both the human and canine counterpart (it is known as an “interspecies oxytocin mediated positive loop”). The release of this “feel good hormone” causes mutual affection for each other's company. In a study of potential stress relief effects of connecting with dogs (Miller and colleagues, 2009) where researchers measured levels of serum oxytocin in men and women after interacting with pet dogs with whom they had self reported emotional attachments. Data was collected after participants returned home from work. Findings show that oxytocin levels increase significantly more when women interact with their dogs as compared to the control experiment, this difference was only noted when it was women interacting with their dogs, not when men did. These findings suggest that the release of oxytocin during human canine interaction could be dependent on human sex/gender.⁶

Research performed on dogs living in shelters showed that these dogs responded in a more relaxed manner when a female person was in or near their kennel (showing physical body language such as yawning more often and spending more time with their head up and relaxed), compared to a male. They are less relaxed (looking and barking more often, and less likely to approach) when the stranger standing in front of their cage is male compared to a female (Lore & Eisenberg, 1986; Wells & Hepper, 1999).⁷

⁶ TEDESCHI, P. H. I. L. I. P. (2020). 4. In *Transforming trauma resilience and healing through our connections with animals*. essay, PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

⁷ Bates, M. (2021, May 3). *Prehistoric puppy was likely pet dog, archaeologists say*. History. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/ancient-pet-puppy-oberkassel-stone-age-dog>

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Dogs can match human genders when viewing a live person with vocal playback in a cross-modal discrimination task. In addition, dogs behave differently towards a live human male, with more defensive aggression shown towards human males compared to females, researchers investigated whether domestic dogs could gender-match a human male or female voice to a still face presented on a computer monitor, Forty-five dogs were presented pairs of male and female faces displaying neutral expressions, while listening to either a male or female voice uttering a sentence in a neutral voice. They measured their looking time at the matching and non matching faces. While dogs showed some evidence of matching male faces to voices, this was not the case for female stimuli, these findings support previous studies that dogs are more vigilant with males than females.⁸

Evidence in the Archaeological record

While it was previously thought that the domestication of wolves was a process that was self regulated, I offer a different perspective, dogs were at least 50% self domesticated, but what gave friendliness an edge that caused this to materialize? Social and evolutionary pressures that occurred in the past aligned human emotional motivations closer to those of social wolves. Wolf domestication is, perhaps, best seen as a two-way process In which each species moves to fill an emotional gap in each other's lives.

⁸ Yong, M. H., & Ruffman, T. (2015). Domestic dogs match human male voices to faces, but not for females. *Behavior*, 152(11), 1585–1600. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568539x-00003294>

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Above, are the discovered bodies of a 12,000-year-old Natufian woman with her hand resting on a pet puppy. In northern Israel, archaeologists discovered these remains at the 'Ain Mallaha site. This is one of the first known remains related to dog domestication. Around the world, several archaeological sites reflect the alliance between humans and dogs, there are pet cemeteries and countless burials of dogs alongside their humans. These are many burials which can be used to examine the bond between women and their companions, most of these sites date further back, at around 12,000 to 8,000 years old. Meanwhile, there is a notable trend in recent settlements which range between 10,000 and 5,000 years old, the burials discovered reveal an increasing number of men being buried with their dogs. This growing commonality may allude to changing beliefs and gender expectations as societies became more structured.⁹

⁹ Wagner, B. B. (2020, October 3). *A woman's best friend: The herstory of dog domestication*. Ancient Origins Reconstructing the story of humanity's past. Retrieved December 13, 2022, from <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-ancient-traditions/dog-domestication-0014352>

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This clay figurine seen above depicts The Grimaldi Goddess, it was unearthed at the Neolithic settlement of Çatal Hüyük in Turkey. The figure dates to about 6000 BC and depicts a seated woman of Çatalhöyük. I believe that the two large dogs sitting beside her can relay information of the role of women in dog domestication. It is not a shock that many researchers believe this figure to be representative of feminine fertility; larger women in ancient depictions are usually investigated through the lens of looking for sexual reproduction symbols, rather than assuming her role in dog domestication and dominance.

In The Historical Record

One friendly behavior featured in the story/historical account (Fogg et al 2015) retold by Native Americans is of wolves taking care of humans in trouble. One such account (Grinnell 1926 and Hampton 1997) related to the Sandy Creek Massacre in 1864 in the Colorado Territory. “.... Two Cheyenne women and their children escaped and took refuge in a cave under a bluff after nightfall, when a male wolf entered the cave and lay down beside them. Afterwards, the wolf traveled with them, stopping to rest wherever they did, showing that its behavior was not simply coincidental. One woman addresses the wolf, telling of their need for food, after which the wolf led them to a freshly killed Buffalo. For several weeks the wolf remained, catching food and

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protecting them from potential human and nonhuman enemies.”¹⁰ These stories typify the numerous stories that were related about native interactions with wolves. These stories however should be met with much criticism, Native Americans retelling of stories may not be the best way to deduce how wolves were domesticated. These stories contradict what we know biologically of wolves. I believe however, that this story is indicative of a symbolization that women recognized wolves could be tamed enough to supply them with vital services, protection and transportation. In exchange, women nourished the wolves with comfort beyond basic needs as well as food.

It seems that, in some cultures, wolves might have been representative of male energy in a positive way. The aspects of protection and supplying the mother and child with meat is what I draw this conclusion from, and the fact that the gender of the wolf being male was notably mentioned early on. It is an interesting shift from contemporary times, where we see dogs and women equated in the worst possible way, once dogs fall out of favor and are seen as vermin by humans.

Women and Dogs under the Patriarchy

Our companionship turned to disdain at some point. A cultural disgust may have arisen because of the canine habit of occasionally consuming waste, or more likely, when they ate corpses throughout the black death. Prior to the Victorian era, people who enjoyed keeping pets were subject to criticism, it was only the elite who could keep pets and avoid being judged heavily (Franklin 1999). The Victorian era saw growing popularity of pet-keeping which led to the development of certain phenotypes being associated with breed categories. The period of Enlightenment afforded egotistical humans with a sense of mastery over nature that extended to

¹⁰ Mech, L. D. (2019). Do indigenous American peoples' stories inform the study of dog domestication? *Ethnobiology Letters*, 10(1), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.14237/ebl.10.1.2019.1474>

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animals. The influence the upper class maintained while keeping pets created the foundation for other classes to begin the practice as well in the 1800's. There was then a need for the upper class to further define themselves as wealthy, and be different from the middle class. This led to the pursuit of new and unusual breeds and characteristics.

Dogs tend to be perceived as controlled beings in relation to men, they are more often seen as fellow dominated creatures when associated with women. Women's subjugation to men does not mean, however, that they didn't exercise power over the dogs in their life. The breeds often referred to as being a 'lap-dog' as a fashion accessory shows a form of dominance women had. Dogs have been stereotyped by many Christian leaders throughout Western history as morally depraved and incapable of self-control, particularly in regards to personal sexual behavior, they have oft been compared to women in this respect. Traces of the comparing of women with dogs are still visible today and have been outlined by feminists since the middle of the last century. De Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Françoise d'Eaubonne are French philosophers who have discussed this comparison and women's association with nature under a patriarchal framework.¹¹

Deuteronomy 23:18:

"Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow: for even both these are abominations unto the Lord thy God."

The association of women as dogs in the bible, as well as other major proponents of literature, made women wary of any relationship with canine creatures and further objectified women. There are many traditional storytellings and fairy tales that stage animal creatures as female human beings trapped in animal bodies. Leda's myth, Mary d'Aulnoy's tales, the White

¹¹Desblache, L. (2011). Dogs and women's contemporary fiction in French—abjection vs. compassion: Marie-Hélène Lafon's *le soir du chien* and Catherine Guillebaud's *dernière caresse*. *L'Esprit Créateur*, 51(4), 73–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2011.0058>

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Cat and White Doe, and Andersen's Little Mermaid all entail depictions of animalised women stripped of their autonomy. This staging and the negative associations between animality and femininity can still be traced in today's contemporary fiction.

Conclusion

I want to reiterate that, women were not more likely to domesticate dogs, because women are naturally better “caretakers”, that they are more likely to fall victim to the absolute cuteness that puppies possess, *especially* when they have big floppy ears and round reflective eyes. It is my position that women were more likely in these ancient societies to participate actively in the upbringing of human and animal babies. This is not only seen culturally in the roles women filled, but in measurable studies of the physiology and biology of dogs and women. Pregnant women may also feel a desire to cohabit with an animal like a dog not only because of the companionship and protection they provide, but the health benefits for them and their unborn child. Interacting with animals in the home may replicate the feeling of being in nature, which in turn, enriches well being. Studies show that being a better parent and having parental instincts is not based on gender, but who spends the most time in the home with the child. Women might have developed instincts for parenting baby dogs, even if they were injured, as an extension of the skills they gained from parenting their children. This goes hand in hand with attachment theory, that argues that humans are genetically predisposed to form attachments with others, especially parent to child.

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