

Dogs in Athenian sculpture and vase painting
of the Archaic and Classical periods



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Cover: Funerary statue of a Molossian from the peribolos of Lysimachides, Athenian Kerameikos cemetery. Modern cast, in situ. Photo by author. Used with permission of the Archaeological Museum of Kerameikos, Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

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To my mother

*who filled this book with her beautiful sketches
and never complained about the dogs I brought home*

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Introduction

Καί γάρ κυνί λύκος, ἀγριώτατον ἡμερωτάτω.

For the wolf is similar to the dog,
the wildest like the most tame of animals.¹

Plato *Sophist* 231a.6

As the first animals to be domesticated, dogs have coexisted with humans for the past 16,000 years (or more).² This millennia-long relationship between canines and humans has earned the former the title of ‘man’s best and oldest friend’. The presence of dogs in Greece has been documented from the early Neolithic period onwards (Munro and Stiner 2020). The earliest textual references to the animal are found in the Homeric epics: the *Iliad* abounds with references to hunting, herding and table dogs, but also to the dreaded feral dogs feasting on the corpses of the dead in the battlefield;³ the *Odyssey* presents us with the first Greek story of canine loyalty, the emblematic *anagnorisis* scene with Argos, Odysseus’ faithful hound (17.291-327). The earliest known representation of a dog in Athenian art is carved on the surface of an Early Bronze Age storage pithos from Rafina dating to 2500-2100 BC.⁴ As the human-canine bond became stronger, the number of dog depictions inevitably increased. During the Archaic and Classical periods, dogs are portrayed on more than 2,000 Athenian vases and sculptures where they are shown in a variety of roles as companions of mortals and gods alike, working dogs, cherished pets and even mythological creatures.

Despite the rich repertory of canine depictions in the Athenian art of the period, no comprehensive study of their iconography has been attempted. This does not apply to Athenian art alone. Even though the great number of textual and artistic representations of dogs testifies to the animal’s popularity in ancient Greece, scholarly interest on the subject is mostly focused on the study of ancient texts, religion and rituals with artistic evidence only occasionally employed as secondary material to complement textual evidence. With the exception of funerary sculpture, the iconography of the dog in Greek art largely remains an unexplored subject.

The iconography of the dog in Greek art: previous scholarship

As early as 1902, Brueckner published a brief article in which he made an attempt at interpreting the iconography of the so-called Man-and-dog motif depicted on late Archaic and early Classical stelai discovered in various areas of the Greek world. Another step forward for the study of the stelai was taken by Ridgway in 1971 with the publication of her article ‘The Man-and-dog-Stelai’,⁵ in which she convincingly argued for an East Greek (most likely Ionic) origin for the motif. The subject was revisited by Schneider in 2000 and Taliano Grasso in 2012.

The publication of Johnson’s article ‘The Portrayal of the Dog on Greek Vases’ in 1919 constitutes the earliest attempt to study canine depictions in Greek vase painting. The article is, however, very brief and lacking illustrations. The author’s main interest is the identification of breeds in vase painting rather than the study of iconography.

In 1968, Vermeule published an article dealing exclusively with canine depictions in art and more precisely in sculpture (‘The Basel Dog: A Vindication’). The focus of his study is the statue of a hound in Basel that he considers to be a Roman copy of a fourth-century Greek original. He compares it stylistically with other statues of dogs (whether Greek or Roman copies of Greek originals) and provides a brief but useful catalogue of fourth-century Greek canine statues.

Of special significance for the study of the subject is Freyer-Schauenburg’s article ‘ΚΥΩΝ ΛΑΚΩΝΟΣ – ΚΥΩΝ ΛΑΚΑΙΝΑ’ (1970). The author ingeniously observes that the hunting dog depicted on the Classical Attic grave stele of Apollodoros and Lakon, sons of Lakon, constitutes a visual pun to the family name Lakon and can therefore be identified as a Laconian hound. She also provides further examples of similar hounds portrayed in Attic and Boeotian sculpture. Freyer-Schauenburg’s interpretation of the Apollodoros and Lakon stele is important because it allows for the identification of the famous breed of Laconian hounds in art.

Published in 1982, the doctoral dissertation of Woysch-Méautis examines the depiction of animals and theriomorphic mythical creatures on the Greek

¹ Unless otherwise stated, translations of ancient texts throughout the book are by the author.

² On dog domestication, see Morey 2010; Galibert *et al.* 2011; Perri 2016; Sánchez-Villagra 2022; Kitchell and Margariti 2026 (forthcoming).

³ See p. 4.

⁴ Athens, National Archaeological Museum 8902: <https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/syllogi-neolithikon-archaiotiton/>

⁵ The article was originally published in *JdI* 86 (1971): 60-79. It was reprinted in 2004 and this is the version of the article I have used (Ridgway 2004).

funerary reliefs of the Archaic and Classical periods. Even though the study and analysis of the subject is not exhaustive, it is certainly concise. Woysch provides her readers with a useful catalogue of material, a brief but solid overview of animal depictions (including dogs) in funerary sculpture and notable interpretations of their possible meaning.

The doctoral dissertation of Zlotogorska, published in 1997, explores the representations of dogs on Greek funerary reliefs dating from the Archaic to the Roman periods reaching interesting conclusions. Her approach largely focuses on the iconographical motifs and typology of canine depictions on grave reliefs. The work is supplemented by an updated catalogue facilitating the attentive study of the relevant material by the author.

Even though Moore's article on the Hegesiboulos Cup (2008) is not dedicated to the study of canine iconography, it is noteworthy for the author's observations concerning the depictions of Melitaeans in Athenian vase painting and especially her convincing explanation for the choice of certain vase-painters to enlarge the figures of Melitaeans in their painted scenes.

The article by Pologiorgi (2009) studies four funerary monuments from Salamis depicting hounds: a grave stele preserving an acroterion in the form of a hunting dog, two relief plaques from a Classical Attic funerary monument and the funerary statue of a hound. Well-written and informative, it constitutes a truly interesting contribution to the study of canine depictions in funerary sculpture.

'Dogged by Debts: The Jennings Dog' is the imaginative title of the article by Williams published in 2010. It traces the history of the so-called 'Jennings dog' statue in the British Museum, also providing useful information on the other five known versions of the sculpture. The author argues that they are Roman copies of a Hellenistic bronze original depicting a Molossian (perhaps meant to represent the faithful dog of King Pyrrhus) and that it was more likely a dedication.

The 2011 article by Palagia examines a previously unpublished statue of a dog from the Dionysos quarry, now in the Kephisia Museum. Even though the statue is unfinished and is described as a lion on the museum label, the author's expertise enabled its identification as a Molossian. The article cites very useful comparanda for Molossian statues and depictions of sniffing canines in Greek sculpture. Particularly significant is the discussion on the dating of the statue and especially the conclusion that 'statues of sniffing hounds can be

more readily assigned to the 4th century BC and that the majority served as grave markers'.

Another notable study is Iozzo's article 'The dog: a Dionysiac animal?' (2012). The author here employs a variety of iconographical and textual evidence to successfully prove that the dog is included in the 'menagerie' of animals associated with Dionysos.

Pevnick's article 'Good Dog, Bad Dog: A Cup by the Triptolemos Painter and Aspects of Canine Behavior on Athenian Vases' (2014) constitutes an important contribution to the study of canine iconography. The author explores various scenes of Athenian vases that portray behaving or misbehaving dogs, offering thought-provoking interpretations of the ambivalent views towards canines reflected in these depictions.

A landmark in the study of animal iconography was reached in 2015 with the publication of the proceedings of the international conference on plants and animals in Greek vase painting (*Φυτά και Ζωία. Pflanzen und Tiere auf griechischen Vasen*). The volume contains two articles of special interest for the study of canines in Athenian art. Petrakova studies the 'emotional dog' on Attic vases, convincingly demonstrating how certain vase-painters use dogs as 'rhetorical elements for the visualization of emotions'. Her analysis is particularly helpful for anyone researching the iconography of dogs on Athenian vases. The article by Franke ('Die Darstellung der Kommunikation zwischen Mensch und Tier auf griechischen Vasen am Beispiel des Haushundes') is also significant since the author investigates the manner in which vase-painters employ canine body language to depict various aspects of the communication between humans and their pet Melitaeans. She reaches the important conclusions that canine behaviour was consciously observed and that modern behavioural research can be used for the study and interpretation of vase painting scenes.

Dogs accompanying men and youths in pederastic scenes of Athenian vases are the focus of an article by Haworth, published in 2018. She argues that the dogs of these scenes are humorous visual metaphors for the comically aggressive or foolish *erastai*.

Returning to the subject of funerary sculpture, the article by Tanganelli and Masseti (2019) and its English version by Tanganelli (2023) focus on the depiction and meaning of dog breeds / types. They conclude that Melitaeans are associated with children and females, while hounds are associated with male figures. The practice of setting up funerary statues of Molossians over tombs is connected to the function and reputation of these canines as loyal guardians.

My study has greatly benefited from Kitchell's inspiring article 'Seeing the Dog: Naturalistic Canine Representations from Greek Art' (2020). The author skillfully employs evidence provided by the ancient texts and Athenian vases to demonstrate that the Greeks observed their dogs carefully, often portraying them with impressive naturalism indicating deep knowledge of canine behaviour and body language. The same knowledge is observed in the ancient texts, where a multitude of words is used to express a variety of canine vocalizations.

The recent article by Bedossa, Chandezon and Jeannin (2022) revisits the subject of canine depictions on funerary reliefs. The authors agree with Kitchell's aforementioned conclusions, further arguing that the grave relief scenes portraying dogs with humans reflect part of the reality of the human-canine relationship. They identify and discuss depictions of canine behavioural patterns, pointing out that these appear framed by the norms of human society.

Finally, my article 'Portraying the Dog in Archaic and Classical Athens: Image Versus Text' (2024) explores the relationship between Athenians and their dogs during the Archaic and Classical periods through the evidence provided by ancient texts and art. A discrepancy between image and text is noted, since in contrast to the textual evidence, artistic representations hardly ever present a negative image of the dog. Furthermore, Athenian art largely focuses on depicting the relationship between humans and dogs, as well as their collaboration in the hunt. The examination of textual and iconographical evidence reveals that the Athenians of that time were well aware of the negative canine traits that might occasionally prove disruptive to the symbiosis between humans and dogs, but considered the advantages of keeping dogs to greatly outweigh any difficulties presented by the animal's natural instincts.

The dog in Athenian sculpture and vase painting

As the overview of the scholarship on the subject indicates, only canine depictions in funerary sculpture have received some scholarly attention. This striking gap in scholarly research prompted me to begin working on the iconography of dogs in Athenian sculpture and vase painting of the Archaic and Classical periods in 2017, although my interest in the subject had already surfaced during my undergraduate studies in Classical Archaeology. As a dog lover and owner myself, I was inevitably attracted to ancient representations of my favourite animal. More importantly, however, my familiarity with dogs through personal experience and study allowed me to identify ancient depictions that reveal a deep knowledge of canine body language and behaviour by the ancient artists. In truth, had I

not possessed similar knowledge of the animal, such identifications would have been impossible to make.

The greatest challenge I had to face was the exceedingly large number of canine representations in ancient Greek art. It soon became obvious that I had to define the boundaries of my research. Even by limiting it to Athenian sculpture and vase painting of the Archaic and Classical periods my endeavour has resulted in a database consisting of 2,027 painted and sculpted scenes. The total lack of photos for certain sculptures and vases that have not been properly published constituted another difficulty. Despite the challenge of working with such an extensive corpus of material, I found the results of the study to be enthralling. Dogs appear in a variety of scenes, from mythological or funerary to images of everyday life. They accompany and interact with male and female figures of all ages, as well as with other animals. They are variously employed by Athenian artists, functioning as symbols, visual pointers, space fillers, indicators of social status, stock or decorative figures. They may be used to express emotion, convey humor, emphasize important details or even make a statement.

A thorough study and analysis of the iconography of canine depictions in Athenian sculpture and vase painting form the core of my research. I seek to identify standard iconographical types existing for each type of scene and explore the various functions of canine figures in the painted and sculpted scenes comprising the corpus of material. Special importance is assigned to the symbolic meaning of dogs, the manner in which their relationship with humans is depicted, the question of dog breeds and their possible identification in Athenian art. Further topics to be researched include the function of canines as status symbols in scenes reflecting the lifestyle of the aristocratic elite and the association of particular breeds or iconographical types with human figures of a specific sex or age. An essential aspect of my research involves the study and interpretation of the manner in which certain artists accurately depict canine behavior and body language, thus revealing their familiarity with the animal. For this purpose, an interdisciplinary approach is followed, drawing from cynology, biology, zoology and veterinary studies.

The first chapter of this book provides a brief introduction to the Greek views and attitudes towards dogs on the basis of textual evidence. The second chapter is dedicated to the depiction of canine figures in Athenian sculpture and vase painting, also discussing dog breeds and their possible identification in art. The remaining ten chapters are thematic, following the classification of the material and arranged in an order that facilitates the study of the iconography. Non-mythological scenes are examined first with chapters

three to five exploring the scenes with the greatest number of canine depictions, namely warrior, hunting and horse or chariot scenes. Warrior scenes are given priority over the more abundant hunting scenes, since they allow for a better analysis of canine body language and behaviour than the more standardized images of the hunt. Chapters six to eight (athletics, symposium, komos, courtship) conclude the study of scenes showing traditional masculine activities. Music and athletics are examined in the same chapter, since they were both disciplines of traditional education for Athenian boys. Chapter nine is dedicated to funerary art offering some new interpretations, while chapter ten completes the study of human-canine interaction by exploring any scenes depicting dogs with humans that do not thematically belong to the themes examined in the previous chapters. With the last two chapters of the book, we leave the world of humans and move into the world of gods and myth.

Throughout the book, the word 'canine' is employed as an alternative to 'dog', so as to avoid excessive repetition of the word. The word 'hound' is used in reference to hunting dogs, regardless of their breed. Despite my personal preference, I am following Franco in referring to dog owners as 'masters' and 'mistresses', thus reflecting the Greek usage (2014: 5). References to ancient texts were derived from the *Thesaurus Linguae*

Graecae (TLG). Abbreviations for ancient texts generally follow those set forth in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Abbreviations for journals, book series and frequently cited works follow those listed in the *American Journal of Archaeology*. Additional references and bibliography on specific topics can be found in the relevant section ('Notes') at the end of the book. All dates are BC, unless otherwise stated. For the readers' convenience I have employed BAPD and CAT numbers rather than catalogue numbers. Sculptures and vases that are not included in these standard reference works are referred to by museum and inventory number. Inevitably, the size of the corpus and length of the book defined the form of the catalogue. The detailed catalogue originally planned had to be replaced by a basic catalogue providing all the necessary information for each work of art. The high cost of museum photographs, always an enormous obstacle for scholarly publications, made it unavoidable that drawings had to replace a number of photos illustrating this book.

The great number of dog depictions that still remain unexplored can provide us with a wealth of knowledge about the human-canine relationship and its versatile representations in ancient art. My biggest hope is that this book may assist or encourage further studies on canine iconography beyond the defined boundaries of my research.