

In Search of Ancient Dogs: A Central Asian Adventure

Stephen Bodio

PO Box 709

Magdalena NM 87825

505-854-2456 ebodio@gilanet.com

In June of 2002 I imported a puppy from the Ukraine. She was the first “tazi” ever to come to the States, and both the culmination and beginning of a story. Her breeder had brought her grandparents from Kazakhstan. They were from a remnant population, almost destroyed under Communist rule, of one of the oldest breeds on earth; possibly the oldest breed that is not a “wolf-type” like the husky.

Although the Arabs claim that the saluki, often considered the oldest domesticated breed, originated with them, recent DNA and archaeological research indicates that dogs and horses were both domesticated in the shadows of the Altai range in Central Asia, where Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Siberia come together. The ancient breed there is the tazi, probably ancestor to such dogs as the saluki and the Afghan hound. Rock art in Central Asia that dates back to 3000 BC depicts dogs uncannily similar to the tazis of today.

In Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Khyrgyzstan, Afghanistan – nomads still use these “primitive” saluki-type dogs to hunt. Although Islam, which considers dogs unclean, is the predominant religion in these countries, salukis and their close relatives tazis are not only accepted but held in very high regard by the people, and are even allowed into their houses. To this day the dogs are used with falcons and eagles to hunt, and people go to great lengths to acquire the finest dogs. They were so valued by the often- rebellious tribal people that the Communists under Stalin made periodical attempts to exterminate them-- under the guise of game preservation, but actually to break the spirit and will of the tribes.

Once we had “Lashyn”, named after a falcon that inhabits the deserts and mountains of Central Asia, she delighted us so much that I began trying to find a way to acquire a breeding stock of these dogs. I made contact with several of the official groups working to preserve them, as well as horses and falcons, as working breeds, My friend, Sir Terence Clark, a retired English saluki judge and diplomat who speaks excellent Russian, filmed some of the stock dogs in Kazakhstan for me; another friend, the Russian-American breeder and scientist Vladimir Beregovoy, provided “real-time” e-mail translations, as my basic Russian isn’t adequate for complicated conversations.

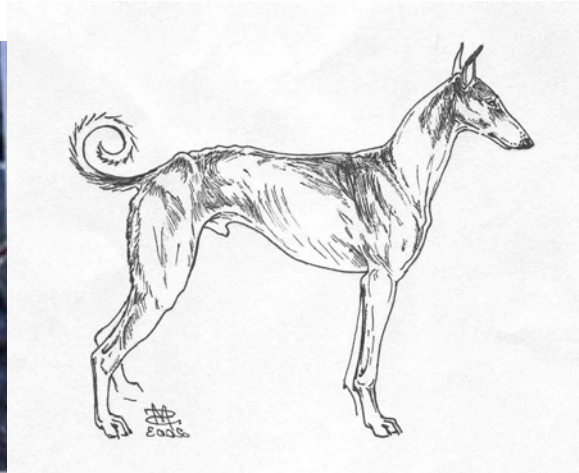
In the fall of 2003 I traveled to Almaty, (formerly Alma-Ata) to meet the breeders. I brought back a female pup—no males were bred that season—and made plans to have a male sent to us to form a foundation stock for the breed in America. I will continue to use these dogs to hunt and work with their ago-old partners -- falcons, eagles, and horses.

While this may be adventurous and romantic in itself (and the dogs are both charming and incredibly photogenic), I want to alternate my tale of travel and adventure with some tales of science as well. As recently reported in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Wade (22 Nov 2002), recent DNA studies date the split between wolves and dogs either 40,000 years ago or 15,000; either way, the place is right there in the Altai foothills!

Dr. Peter Saivola of the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, who did the studies, believes the later date is most likely. (He actually sampled my dog’s parents, and many of the dogs in Kazakhstan.) The oldest petroglyphs in the area bear an amazing resemblance to “ringtailed” sighthounds. See them and the drawings by Dr. Marika Stanovoi below. Notice the difference between the wolf and the dogs in the rock art.



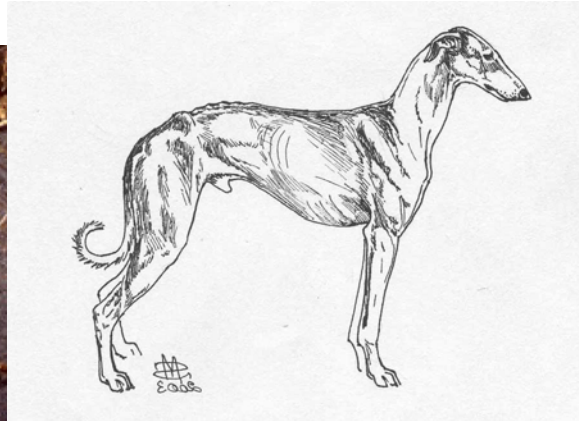
Early dog attacking *Ovis poli*



Present day sighthound



Wolf –note tail carriage



Same dog with ears down

But there may be an ever wilder connection. The anthropologist Dr. Christy Turner, well known for his controversial but well-documented study that suggests that the Anasazi of the southwest were cannibals, has been spending the last few years investigating caves in the Altai. According to science writer Lee Dye in ABCNEWS.com (20 Nov 2002) Turner has come to believe that ancient humans moving eastward “hung up” near the Altai, preyed on by many dangerous creatures, especially giant hyenas. As soon as domesticated dogs appeared, *exactly 15,000 years ago*, they began moving east and north again, right up to and over the Bering Land Bridge, bringing their dogs along.

(Bering Bridge crossers still seem to date from this time; earlier New World dates, more and more seem to have come in over different routes.)

When we were in Almaty we were able to photograph the petroglyphs ourselves, and consult with an Italian archaeologist based in Almaty, Renato Sala, who is studying them. He confirmed that some of them represent “ancestral tazis”. We also photographed one that we had never seen pictured before, which seems to represent a hunt using both dogs and a bird of prey to attack large quarry, as both the Kazakhs and the Kirghiz still do.



We also made contact with some young Kazakhs who had relatives in the back country, in the wild Tian Shan Mountain range along the Chinese border hundreds of miles east of Almaty. These people have never stopped hunting in the traditional manner with eagles and tazis. Our friends tell us it will be a 5- day horse trek just to get in! This will cost very little, but the trip should be valuable both for knowledge and for the scenery. (That our young friends are all professional karate teachers is irrelevant to the main story, but adds to the whole surreal tale—our other breeder friends are professional scientists, and there is a bit of rivalry between the two “ camps”...)



Tian Shan

Obviously we will need to return at least one more time, both to make this trip and if possible to follow up the leads that we developed the first time. We also would try to get another pup, and to do genetic sampling—Saivolainen is continuing his studies, and wants more material from the region.

Why me?

I am the author of many books on natural history and sport, including *Querencia* and *On the Edge of the Wild*, soon to be released in paperback. My latest book, *Eagle Dreams*, about my travels since 1998 with the eagle trainers of western Mongolia, was released late last fall by The Lyons Press. (A couple of reviews are included). An excerpt, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* as “Sovereigns of the Sky”, was selected for *Best Travel Essays of 2002*, edited by Frances Mayes. I have been reviewed, praised, and blurbed by writers including Annie Proulx, Donald McCaig, Thomas McGuane, Tim Cahill, and David Quammen. You can read reviews of my books on Amazon.com.

I know a bit of Russian and have many contacts in Central Asia, and am completely at ease traveling there, where I have been going since 1998. Although I have been in the writing business for over twenty years, my background is in evolutionary biology, and I keep up. The travel piece above also got an honorable mention in *The Year's Best Science Writing 2002*. I am in contact with Dr. Saivolainen, Dr. Turner, and several archaeologists, including Dr. Jeannine Davis- Kimball, founder of the Center for Study of Eurasian Nomads and author of *Warrior Women*, and Dr. Renato Sala in Almaty who is the leading authority on the petroglyphs.

Why the Book?

It is a dog book, a perennially hot subject.

The dogs are among the most photogenic alive.

The Silk Road is an enduring subject, and these dogs (as well as horses and falconry) apparently came down an early version of it to the Middle East, where it was once thought they originated. Recent research places horse domestication in the Altai as well (<http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/anthro/olsen.html>). Salukis, the ancient breed of the Arabs, can only be documented in the Arabian Peninsula after 700 AD! And still-breaking scientific research may show that the one-humped Arabian dromedary is just a domestic variant of the Asian two-humped Bactrian. Such controversies are fun.

The linking of a romantic dog story (lonely girl seeks male) with an adventurous trip (we will also be hunting with hounds and hawks) and plenty of photo and even video ops would be reason enough for the book alone. But the science and the petroglyphs – biology, archaeology, and human origins – make it irresistible. Add the tragic history of conquered peoples whose tribal dogs were nearly destroyed during the Soviet years, and who now are triumphantly restoring them as symbols of traditional culture, and you have a story that is not only a dog tale but one of adventure, old ways, new science, and the

dedication of a small group of men and women to keeping an ancient and wonderful
breed alive.

