

Prehistoric American Dogs



“The earth trembled and a great rift appeared, separating the first man and woman from the rest of the animal kingdom. As the chasm grew deeper and wider, all other creatures, afraid for their lives, returned to the forest - except for the dog, whom after much consideration, leapt the perilous rift to stay with the humans on the other side. His love for humanity was greater than his bond for other creatures, he explained, and he willingly forfeited his place in paradise to prove it.” -Native American folk tale

Dogs have played a very important role in human history. Recent research from the fields of archaeology, history, genetics, and veterinary science have shed light on the domestication of dogs, the migration of the first Americans into the continent from across the Bering Straits, and the relationships between Native Americans and canines. The importance of dogs to humans, and the importance of their companionship, is reflected in the caring way in which humans buried their dogs when they died. Prehistoric dog burials, either dogs buried alone or buried with humans, have been found by archaeologists all over the world, and even in Indiana.



Asian Wolf.¹

Anthropologist Darcy Morey has surveyed thousands of dog burials at archaeological sites worldwide². His archaeological research suggests the deliberate burial of dogs was confined to the past 12,000 to 14,000 years. However, genetic research has so far yielded divergent results as to the date of domestication – some dates as ancient as 120,000 years ago or more.³ Although theories differ regarding exactly when dogs became domesticated, it is clear that when people migrated to the American continent approximately 14,000 years ago, they brought domesticated dogs with them.



Dog burial from the Strawtown Enclosure site, Hamilton County, Indiana.⁴

While the timing of domestication is debated, the genetic evidence agrees on the place - the modern dog was originally domesticated from wolves indigenous to East Asia. In fact, dogs are a subspecies of wolf and are thus still able to interbreed with wolves. While some researchers have argued the domestication of wolves was a very slow process, a Russian scientist was able to fully domesticate wild foxes in just a few generations by breeding and selecting only those individuals that showed the least fear of humans.⁵ These foxes no longer showed any fear of humans and often wagged their tails and licked their human caretakers to show affection. Of course, foxes are a bit easier to manage than wolves. That is why other researchers have argued that it was the wolves themselves who chose to interact with humans, recognizing that human refuse was a good source of food, and became less wary of human contact over time – in effect, wolves might have domesticated themselves.⁶

One recent study has measured the genetic diversity collected from ancient American dog burials, finding that multiple and different breeds of dogs were taken into the New World by different groups at different times when humans migrated into the continent.⁷ In fact,

researchers have speculated that the benefits that dogs offer to humans may have contributed to the rapid expansion of humans into the New World. At the top of the list is hunting: archaeological and historical evidence show that prehistoric Native Americans were selectively breeding dogs that showed good hunting traits, such as speed, stamina, and strength. Another way dogs helped prehistoric Native Americans were as “beasts of burden,” hauling firewood and other essentials on wooden frames called travois.



A Lakota Native American and dog with travois.⁸

In 1541, the Spanish explorer Francisco Coronado observed southwestern Native Americans using dogs to haul their tents, tent poles and other belongings in travois.⁹ An experiment by historian Norman Herderson, in 1994, showed these dogs may have pulled loads up to 50 pounds on long trips, at rates as high as two or three miles an hour.¹⁰ In a recent Indiana University dissertation, archaeologist Diane Warren studied dog burials from the south and Midwest, and found that the skeletal pathologies suggested that dogs were used as beasts of burden prehistorically.¹¹

Dogs also provided protection to Native American settlements, furnished warmth with

their bodies (among some historic Northwest Coast tribes, blankets were made from dog fur), and companionship. Some Native American groups served dogs as food for special occasions. In 1673, the chief of the Peoria tribe held a feast for two French explorers, Marquette and Jolliet. The fourth course of the feast consisted of dog, but Marquette and Jolliet refused to eat it and it was taken away.¹³ Lewis and Clark frequently ate dogs during their later expedition (1804–1806).¹⁴ Warren’s study of the skeletal pathology in prehistoric dog burials also documented consumption of young dogs.¹¹ Dogs also appear in the art of prehistoric Native Americans, in particular as effigies on ceramic pots.



Mississippian Period Effigy Pots, ca. AD 1000 to 1400.¹²

At the Koster site, in Illinois, the remains of four domesticated dogs were buried by Native Americans over 8,000 years ago. Each dog was laid on its side in a shallow grave. The dogs were buried in an area of the village where residents also buried the remains of adults and children.¹⁵ Ancient dog burials, dating to the Middle Archaic period, were also uncovered at the Bluegrass site in Warrick County, Indiana. Based on the skeletons, these dogs are thought to have been light-limbed and about the size of a terrier.¹⁶ Other studies suggest most prehistoric American dogs were about the size of a modern dalmation.¹⁷ Lewis, of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition, described Native American dogs thusly: “black

white brown and brindle are the most usual colours. The head is long and nose pointed eyes small, ears erect and pointed like those of the wolf, hair short and smooth except on the tail. . .”¹⁸

Other ancient dog burials in Indiana have been documented as the Strawtown Enclosure site, in Hamilton County, at the Oliver site in Marion County, at the Heshel site –an Albee village in Henry County, and a protohistoric village site in Allen County, where a dog was buried at the feet of a human burial. Although the sites span a time-period from 6000 B.C. to the historic period, most are village sites – sites where Native Americans settled down either seasonally or permanently, with associated cemeteries. Many of the dogs are buried near or with human remains, and many of the dogs appear to have been placed carefully in a curled or sidewise position, as if they were asleep, a testament to the friendship the dogs offered in life.

Sources:

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12) Left image from the Columbus Museum:

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