



Through The Centuries With Sighthounds

BY AMY FERNANDEZ

Hounds have long been considered emblems of luxurious living. This image is so deeply embedded in popular culture that its use as a literary device can only be described as ubiquitous. The most famous reference to their unspoken value may be the Nikolai Gogol character in *The Inspector-General*, a corrupt public official who accepted only Greyhound puppies as bribes. Thanks to this Russian literary classic, the practice of bribing government bureaucrats came to be described as "*giving greyhound puppies*."

Although bribery and corruption obviously went on in 19th Century Russia, Gogol drew on ancient traditions when sketching out this character. "Frequent references are found in history of Greyhounds being accepted in lieu of fines or payments. From the seven hounds sent by Symmachus in the fourth century, which Rome so admired, through the sixteenth century presentations of a brace to the King of Spain, the King of Poland and many other celebrities, they were a gift for kings." [*The Book of the Dog*] Yes, there are frequent references but when and why did hounds attain this iconic status?

Good hunting dogs have been prized for obvious reasons since prehistory. Even cultures that typically reviled dogs exempted Sighthounds from condemnation. "[H]unting was one of the most favoured pastimes followed by the nobility and persons of opulence ... It is no wonder, therefore, that dogs proper for the sport should be held in the highest estimation." [*Sports and Pastimes*]



FROM NECESSITY TO LUXURY

However, the dogs' value underwent a tectonic shift away from this purpose when hunting transitioned from a necessity to a luxury. Hunting rituals are almost inseparable from Eurasian history, and royal hunts were a well-established institution in the earliest civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China. The cultural dimensions of these traditions had a tremendous impact on evolving perceptions of Sighthounds. At an early point in history, a Greyhound in the kennel became the equivalent of a Ferrari in the garage. Allusions to valuable hounds in Greek literature date back to Xenophon in 380 BC, but the 3rd Century Greek writer Theophrastus may have been the first person to document their political value. "Among his Characters we find the 'Affable Man' going around sending presents to his well-to-do friends — jewels to Byzantium, Hounds of Sparta to Cyzicus " [*De Canibus*]

Few distinct breeds existed in ancient Greece, but competitive spirit motivated the search for better hunting dogs. "It is well worth noting that hounds in Ancient Greece, appear, by and large, to have been notorious for their unsteadiness ... all too often hunters were torn to pieces by their packs." [*De Canibus*] A regular trade in valuable hounds as prestige goods existed by Roman times. "It is quite astonishing to see how the fame of hounds bred in northern Europe spread far and wide throughout the Roman Empire by the first century B.C." [*De Canibus*]

In *Cynegeticus*, Arrian described hare coursing in 180 AD. He tells us that the best coursing hounds came from ancient Gaul. "We find ourselves asking with considerable amazement how it should ever have come about that, in order to improve the general level of hare hunting in Asia Minor, it should have been thought necessary to go to the trouble and expense involved in importing hounds from distant Gaul." [*De Canibus*] Sighthounds were available locally and the importation of foreign hounds was not motivated by necessity, since Romans were simultaneously importing rabbits to ensure faster quarry. The most popular breed was the *vertragus*, a name derived from the Greek word *ouertragos*, meaning swift of foot. This is believed to be the forerunner of modern Deerhounds, Wolfhounds and Greyhound. "[V]eltragus was far faster than any hound hitherto known in classical times ... destined to revolutionize certain branches of the chase in the Mediterranean basin." [*De Canibus*]

Roman incursions into the British Isles raised the bar further, and the demand for select coursing hounds soon shifted from Gaul to the more remote British Isles. Scotland and Ireland in particular became acknowledged producers of excellent Sighthounds. "Great value was attached to the Irish hound more than a century before the time of William the Conqueror." [*The Dog in Sport*]

It is often stated that the breeds of the classical world were wiped off the map, like many other cultural achievements during Europe's Dark Ages. In fact, many aspects of Roman life remained intact well into the 7th Century, especially in the self-sufficient rural regions of northern and western Europe. The inhabitants considered themselves Romans rather than Franks, Goths or Langobards until well into the Middle Ages and their established traditions continued. "This passion for hunting was universally shared in Merovingian and Carolingian Gaul." [*A History of Private Life from Pagan Rome to Byzantium*]

Despite the tumultuous times "everyone cherished childhood memories of blows well struck with the Frankish sword, or years spent training a faithful dog that never missed its prey," and five centuries later the *velter* of classical times still reigned supreme.



HUNTING FOR MEDIEVAL RULERS

During the Middle Ages, much of Europe remained covered by forestland, filled with long-extinct big game. Hunting became a year-round occupation for many medieval rulers. They maintained multiple grand residences, each with a kennel of hounds. Royal hunts took place throughout a ruler's domain as quarry went in and out of season. This grand event, involving thousands of hunters, horses and dogs, was more than a prime opportunity to flaunt royal magnificence for subjects throughout the realm. It had unmistakable military connotations. The

political chaos of the middle ages led to the formation of insular kingdoms all over Europe. Hunting became a powerful symbol of political authority, as well as a primary means to establish and maintain diplomatic goodwill that was increasingly essential for survival. To honor foreign ambassadors and illustrious visitors one took them hunting. Regardless of political differences, the mutual admiration for hounds was a reliable means of achieving common ground for negotiations.

In the kingdoms of Franks and Lombards, prized Deerhounds and *veltragus* were treated as members of the royal family. Fabulously decorated with bejeweled leads and collars further emphasized their extraordinary value. "For a hound whose role was cosmetic rather than practical, the leash and the collar were sometimes extremely splendid. Accounts from royal kennels describe orders for collars of white silk and velvet embroidered with pearls and swirls of silver, dog collars of crimson velvet and white leather, leashes quilted with gold and silver, and Greyhound collars of white and green with letters and bells of silver gilt." [*Hound and Hawk*]

For hounds intended as gifts these sumptuous accoutrements were not only tokens of generosity, they sent an unmistakable message of power when the need to maintain good relations reached a critical stage. The Muslim conquest of the Visigoths of the Iberian Peninsula in 718 marked the beginning of a 500 year Moorish encroachment into Europe, triggering centuries of uneasy alliances with close neighbors. For example, in 1367 King Fernando of Portugal sent a gift of six hounds to the Moorish King of Granada. Each dog wore a decorated collar, silver gilt muzzle, and a leash woven with golden thread.

Andalusian culture of medieval, Muslim-dominated Iberia eventually exerted a profound influence on many aspects of European life, and many of these ideas expanded the definition of a valuable dog. Falconry, which originated in the Middle East, soon became the premier form of recreational hunting for European royalty. In contrast to *par force* hunting, this required very close relationships with highly trained and extremely valuable hawks and hounds. Sighthounds already had a defined value in many medieval legal codes, although this was never intended to regulate prices; it was a means of assessing damages. "The enumeration of offenses in Salic Law is almost maniacal." [*A History of Private Life from Pagan Rome to Byzantium*] Second only to the theft of livestock was the theft of hunting dogs. The value of a Greyhound exceeded that of a peasant, and killing a Greyhound was equivalent to murder. The Ancient Laws of Wales codified by Howel Dda (the Good), in the 10th Century contains ten separate references to the value of Irish Hounds.



THE FOREST LAWS AND PRIVATE HUNTING

King Canute established Britain's first Forest Laws in 1014, reserving large areas of the country as private hunting preserves. Sighthound ownership became severely restricted by law, leaving them essentially in the hands of royalty and aristocrats. Endless regulations continually redefined who could hunt; where, when, and most importantly who was legally entitled to own Sighthounds. "The passionate love for the chase which dictated the forest laws of the Danes went hand in hand with a very strong affection for dogs and hounds" [*De Canibus*]

Oppressive hunting laws reached a peak under the rule of King John. "King John was particularly attached to the sports of the field; and his partiality for fine horses, hounds, and hawks is evident from his frequently receiving such animals, by way of payment, instead of money, for the renewal of grants, fines, and forfeitures, belonging to the crown." [*Sports and Pastimes*] The resulting national uprising led to the signing of the Magna Carta (Great Charter) in 1215 and a Forest Charter two years later. This document granted hunting freedoms to private citizens upon payment of hefty taxes, which essentially maintained the status quo by limiting hound ownership to the very wealthy. Hounds were never bought and sold; they were traded or given as royal tribute. "We find our old sporting sovereign King John, receiving, in 1203, 'two leashes of greyhounds,' amongst other valuables, in return for the renewal of a grant to a certain right, and the same monarch repeatedly took greyhounds in lieu of money where fines or penalties had been incurred and forfeitures to the Crown became due. Two of these are on

record, one being 'five hundred marks, ten horses, and ten leashes of greyhounds;' the other 'one swift running horse and six greyhounds.'" [Modern Dogs]

By the late Middle Ages, hunting had evolved into a carefully orchestrated ritual that could be stage-managed down to the last detail, thanks to the development of breeds that would reliably act on cue. At least 14 hounds were specialized for different terrain and quarry, and a good pack included specific numbers of several breeds. For instance, a French Royal hunt in 1390 required 98 running hounds, 8 *lymers*, and 32 greyhounds. This put more emphasis on the value of hounds that reliably did a particular job very well, but this was not the only new emerging trend of the era.



AFFECTION FOR FAVORITE HOUNDS

Descriptions of ideal warriors in Moorish Spain are often cited as the source of Europe's chivalric codes. Along with military prowess, a medieval knight was expected to have a sensitive side. In this age of romance and poetry, displays of affection were encouraged, even towards animals. Greyhounds were immortalized in poetry, and no-one felt compelled to hide their fondness for dogs. "The age of chivalry was the age of the *veltres enchainez*, favorite hounds sharing the baronial halls, settles and beds of their masters and mistresses, and in all the romance of the period." [De Canibus] Even the most powerful rulers openly displayed grief at the loss of a beloved dog. "Favorite hounds were objects of great affection and pride. Alfonso XI of Castile loves to record the devotion of particular hounds. The death of a favorite hound was a sorrowful affair." [The Hound and the Hawk] A miniature in Alfonso's hunting treatise, entitled

"Lament for a Hound," shows three of his huntsmen kneeling and stroking a dead hound lying across their laps while a priest presides over the sad event.

By the reign of Edward III, chivalric codes, forest laws and hunting etiquette reached a pinnacle. "As was natural, the peers followed the fashion of princes, and these dogs came to be accounted the privileged luxuries of the highest, and forbidden to the vulgar. It remained a very select dog until quite a recent period. A hawk on the fist and a greyhound gamboling ahead were outward and visible signs of rank, reputation, respectability, and riches." [*The Twentieth Century Dog*] This pervasive obsession kicked into high gear during the endless factional conflicts of The 100 Years War, 1337–1453, between England and France. All of the principal rulers involved over the years were fanatically dedicated to hounds and hunting. The end result was a prolific trade in hounds, thanks to constantly shifting territorial boundaries and alliances that could have easily inspired Gogol. "The frequency with which the kings and nobles of England and France exchanged presents of hounds makes it certain that the breeds of the two countries were much intermixed." [*Hounds of the Olden Days*]

Gaston Phoebus, Count of Foix, one of history's legendary dog experts, lived during this riotous era. Born in 1331, he ruled an independent fiefdom in southern France from 1343 until his death in 1391. Phoebus devoted most of his time to hunting and dog breeding. The poet and historian Jean Froissart leaves no doubt about this when he states that the kennel at Bearn generally contained about 1,600 hounds. Phoebus somehow found time to write his literary masterpiece, *Livre de la Chasse*, between 1387-1389, regarded as the definitive account of wildlife, weaponry, dog breeds or customs of 14th Century Western Europe. Much of his book is devoted to care and training of hounds, which Phoebus called the "noblest and most reasonable beast that God ever created."

Froissart, a notable hound lover himself, chronicled his experiences as he traveled the circuit of European royal courts, including Bearn. "So Froissart set out, then, as ever, a kind of knight-errant in search of knowledge. He took with him letters of recommendation from Guy of Chastillon to the Count of Foix, and, the better to ingratiate himself with that worthy, a present of four greyhounds. [*Hounds of the Olden Days*] His account shows that he was suitably impressed with the splendor of the court at Bearn during his 1388-1389 visit. "[T]he kennels in Bearn were in all likelihood the best-run in the whole of Europe and ... Gaston de Foix was in all probability the greatest expert on hounds." [*De Canibus*]

Froissart also tells us that the "lords in the English army had their hounds and their hawks, as well as the king. Edward III took so much delight in hunting that even at the time he was engaged in war with France, and resident in that country, he had with him in his army sixty couple of stag hounds, and as many hare hounds, and every day he amused himself with hunting or hawking." [Sports and Pastimes] Unfortunately, this venture did not go well for Edward or his descendants. Britain lost practically all of its French territory and after a hundred years everyone was relieved to see the end of this conflict. Hounds, once again, became a favorite means to initiate and consolidate political alliances.



ROYAL GREYHOUNDS

Few monarchs were as single-minded in their canine pursuits as Louis XI of France, who came to the throne in 1461. "Of all diversions he loved hunting and hawking in their seasons; but his chief delight was in dogs. [*Sports and Pastimes*] Thomas Langton was sent to the French court as ambassador of Edward IV. Along with his credentials he presented the first installment of dogs from Edward to Louis. It's reported that Louis kept up to 27 house pets, called greyhounds of the chamber, and royal accounts note that three valets were paid to look after them. "One may infer a distinction between greyhounds kept in the hunt kennels and those kept in the palace as decorative display. Whether the greyhounds of the chamber took an active part in hunting is not clear; twenty seems an excessive number if their role was purely cosmetic." [*The Hound and the Hawk*]

It may sound excessive, but this was not the only example of Louis' devotion to his hounds. "The French royal hunting accounts show, every year, payments, such as one to Perron *le parquier, varlet des chiens*, 'to take all the hounds of the King to the Church of St. Menier les Moret, and to have mass sung in the presence of said hounds.'" [*The Hound and the Hawk*]

Henry VIII's fascination with hounds is well documented. His court was usually described as being overrun with dogs and "he was particularly lavish with his gifts of Greyhounds to foreign monarchs." [*The Dog in Art*] He sent 400 dogs to Charles V of Spain and the Queen of France declared herself "the gladdest woman in the world" on receiving his gift of greyhounds. We also know that he sent them off in style. "His inventories list many precious collars ... two Greyhoundes collars of crimson velvet and cloth of gold ... two collars with the kinges armes ... a collar of white velvet embrowderd with perles." [*The Dog in Art*]

In France and England a fine hound became the equivalent of a nice box of chocolates or a bottle of wine: safe, friendly, and always well received. The tradition continued when Henry IV shipped an entire pack of staghounds to James I of England. James was already King of Scotland when he followed Queen Elizabeth I as King of England. "Raised in a thousand-year tradition of hounds and hunting, no British sovereign was more devoted to the chase than King James I." [*Hounds in the Old Days*] His predecessors had customarily issued commissions empowering their officials to "take up" any exceptional hounds owned by royal subjects. In 1605 James cancelled these commissions, stating that he could depend upon the goodwill of his subjects to provide him with all the hounds he required.

Along with expecting a customary tribute of hounds, he also continued the royal practice of handing them out as gifts. "This sort of thing made British breeds well known abroad; so much so that not only heads of state of Europe, but eastern potentates specifically asked for British hounds. Various state papers reveal a considerable exchange of dogs for horses, spices, and so on. The East India Company did a roaring trade and many a bad bargain in the East was later put right by the gift of a good hunting dog. In fact, dog buyers for the East India Company snapped up many of the best specimens. ... So early in the 17th Century, we can see there was a flourishing traded in dogs both at home and abroad." [*The Complete Dog Breeders Manual*]



DEMAND FOR ENGLISH HOUNDS

The demand for English hounds reached new heights during Stuart times, especially throughout Continental Europe. "[L]icences were granted to Masters of the Royal Buckhounds, which conferred upon them the monopoly of the export trade in hounds and sporting dogs." They, and no others, might "transport and carry beyond the seas all manner of dogs, hounds, beagles and greyhounds of several kinds and names." [*Hounds of the Olden Days*]

One of the most unusual episodes in annals of hound gift-giving involved an exchange between Britain's third Duke of Marlborough and the King of Poland. Augustus the Strong may qualify as the most ostentatious sovereign during an age of formidable excess. He became Elector of Saxony, Germany's largest state, in 1693 and King of Poland four years later. His position provided free rein to indulge his fancies. In this case, an obsession with hounds and hunting was matched by his insatiable desire for porcelain, which was unfortunately a Chinese-controlled monopoly that rivaled the East India Company's dog trade at that time. There was only one way for Augustus to lay hands on the amount of porcelain he apparently required, and he set out to unlock this age-old Chinese secret of porcelain manufacture. Rather than offering prizes or research grants, he simply imprisoned the best chemists and artisans in his kingdom until they discovered necessary formulas. This breakthrough allowed Augustus to fully indulge his mania to the extent of building a mind-boggling porcelain palace. His resulting world famous Meissen porcelain factory subsequently generated unimagined profits — but his desire for great hounds remained.

While all this was going on, Britain's third Duke of Marlborough was deeply in debt due to his outstanding ability to squander one of the country's largest fortunes. In 1740 the Duke's friend, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, was appointed ambassador at the court of Saxony. With his new political connections, he offered to broker a deal that would provide Augustus with some truly exceptional hounds and alleviate his friend's spiraling financial plight. Incredibly, the cash-strapped Duke refused to sell his hounds to Augustus. He agreed to send them as a gift. The hounds were shipped off to Dresden, and a priceless collection of Meissen porcelain, presented to the third Duke of Marlborough by the King of Poland, remains part of the family's legacy of art treasures.

Illustrations from 15th Century illuminated manuscripts. The one of the Greyhound on the floor being given a treat by a page is a detail of a much larger illustration showing the Duc de Berry receiving guests during a banquet; note the little dogs on the table. The other illustrations are from Gaston Phoebus' "La Livre de la Chasse," showing not only how hunting at that time was performed with a mixed pack of Sight- and Scenthounds, but also how the hounds were cared for and kenneled.

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