

HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF THE BREED

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*Terracotta Dog from Mesopotamia, second millenium BC.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum New York*

Condensing over 4000 years of the history of this Italian breed into a few lines is certainly no simple task. From the Mesopotamian terracotta representations at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to the modern Neapolitan mastiff, the breed has certainly evolved, though some of its distinguishing characteristics which give it a unique standing in the ever-growing numbers of officially recognized breeds in the world, remain more or less unaltered. If, from one point of view, there exists an occasional quest for the rediscovery of native breeds of the more or less recent past in the countries of the world, there is the opposite problem in the case of the Neapolitan mastiff; that of maintaining it while also improving it, as the Neapolitan Mastinari so jealously conserved it through the centuries. We owe a sincere debt of thanks to them for having conserved this truly historic monument of Italian cinophilia, for which all the world envies us a little.

There is a vast bibliography, both Italian and foreign, on the Neapolitan mastiff, which in varying ways traces its history from the origins to the present day with plentiful pictorial and written support. Of all the works available today, surely the most respected is Prof. Felice Cesario's "Il Molosso, Viaggio Intorno al Mastino Napolitano", published by Fausto Fiorentino in 1995. Even without journeying back to the ancient past, there is certain proof that the Sumerians bred large and powerful dogs which were used both in battle and in hunting large animal,

especially lions. Their main characteristics were: a large and powerful head with strong and rather short muzzle; strong and muscular limbs supported by a well-developed bone structure; a solid and strong trunk; and an imposing height. Such a powerful dog must surely have been a descendent of the great Tibetan mastiff, which is considered by the greatest authorities as the ancestor of all the mollosoid breeds.

Thus the Sumerians, so mysterious and yet so cultured and advanced must have, in the course of their migrations, brought this breed to Mesopotamia. In the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates, this breed found such fortune as to have been represented in several major archaeological finds. These finds are now kept in many of the world's greatest museums. We know that in Mesopotamia there were already great settlements (Fridu, Susa, Ur, and Uruk, just to mention the most famous) 2000 years before Christ, and that in these settlements large dogs were reared and used mainly to protect property and livestock from the attacks of lions which were common in that region at the time.

The deeds of this dog often gave it a place in popular legend. Therefore, the interest shown by the artists of the day is obvious. Indeed, it is from this time that we see the first historical artistic representations of this dog. The terrecottas from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and another at the Chigago Museum of Art, give likenesses of a dog very similar to our Neapolitan Mastiff. The first shows a sitting dog with an extremely large head, full of folds of flesh, with an improbably powerful muzzle and amputated ears. In the second we see a female with the same characteristics of power and substance of the head, feeding four puppies. The similarity between these historical images and the modern mastiff is impressive. We stress the "modern" mastiff as opposed those presented at the 1946 Exhibition of Naples, which so impressed Piero Scanziani.

To better appreciate the dimensions and power of these dogs, we need only examine the later 9th century B.C. Assyrian terracotta which is kept in the British Museum and which shows a dog being held by the collar by its master. This artifact is of exceptional artistic and historical interest. For this reason it is cited in the most important scientific texts and allows us to make even more precise and detailed speculations about these great molossians of antiquity. First of all, the height at the withers reaches the master's belt and therefore surely cannot be less than 80 cm. The head is great volume with many wrinkles with ears intact, flat and rather high on the head. The dewlap is highly developed beginning near the corner of the mouth and finishing halfway down the neck.

The trunk is of huge power and mass, longer than the height at the withers and supported by a very strong and thick bone structure. These historical testimonies immediately recall the modern Mastiff, so close is their resemblance to today's breed.

But to return to the breed's history: Because of wars and migrations, these dogs spread westward in three directions; to the north toward Anatolia, Greece, Macedonia, and Albania; to the south toward Egypt and Libya; and toward the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean basin in what was then the land of the Phoenicians. This was to prove an important step in the expansion of the breed throughout Europe and particularly in Italy.

Such powerful dogs were often offered as gifts between the rulers of the time. Alexander the Great was proud of his molossians, a gift from a king. The Roman consul, Paulus Emilius, whose legions were victorious on molossian soil, brought back several of these great dogs as

spoils of war to show to the people in Rome. Julius Caesar himself, at around the middle of the first century B.C. during his British campaign, saw his legions faced by dogs of great stature and courage very similar to those described above. He referred to them as "Pugnaces Britanniae". Impressed by so much power and courage, Caesar took several specimens back to Rome with him and at the same time appointed a procurator in Britain who was charged with raising and transporting these dogs to Rome.

The presence of this race in Britain strengthens and confirms the hypothesis that even before the Romans, the Phoenicians (undisputed kings of trade in those days) spread this type of dog in the Mediterranean basin, together with other breeds which were the forerunners of our Cirneco of Etna and of all the Iberian Podenghi. We can therefore state with certainty that even before Paulus Emilius and Julius Caesar, some of these great mollosians had already arrived in our territory, introduced by the Phoenicians.

Both Varron and Virgil dealt with this subject to a certain extent, but the person who studied the Mastiff most closely and in the greatest detail, was Columella, who more or less defined what could be called a breed standard in the first century A.D. In his "De Re Rustica", Columella defines it as an excellent guardian of house and property, anticipating its current use by almost 2000 years. Although the Mastiff was used in Roman times as a weapon of war, and in combat against wild animals in the circus, it was later to be found in the courts of the Renaissance in central and northern Italy as a hunter of large game (deer and wild boar). It remained a guard dog, continuing the function which had made it famous among the Sumerians and the Mesopotamians so long before.

Precisely because of this natural adeptness as a guard dog, the Roman patrician class used the Mastiff to safeguard their villas, which were numerous in the region of Campania at one time. After the fall of the Roman Empire the dogs remained, finding an agreeable habitat on the slopes of Vesuvius, and forming a close link both with the land and the people who lived on it. It was on this very land, on the slopes of Vesuvius, that Piero Scanziani encountered the Neapolitan Mastiff. He fell in love with it, so much as to be rightly remembered as the man to whom we owe the modern existence of this magnificent breed which today is sought after by dog lovers all over the world.