

Animals and Rites of Passage in Ancient Athens

Formal rites of passage from childhood to adulthood are common in all societies. They bring both privileges and responsibilities as an adult and the loss of the protected status of childhood. Formal rituals are common (e.g. the rites of Confirmation and Bar Mitzvah) and others are symbolic but none the less accepted by the average citizen (driver's license, right to vote, drinking age). There has been scholarly interest in this phenomenon (e.g. Padilla) in ancient Greece and this paper hopes to demonstrate that pets served as a social marker of an informal rite of passage among certain social groups. Special attention will be paid to dogs.

Dogs are omnipresent on Greek vases (Johnson) and seem to have marked out the stages of an Athenian male's life. From birth until somewhere in their early adolescence, Athenian males inhabited the women's quarters (*gynaikonitis*) of the house. Here they partook basically in the females' world and were surrounded by their favored pets. Illustrations from vases will show that women had their specific pets in these quarters. In addition to herons and geese were the cuddly Maltese dogs whose small size, curly tail and lively actions still evoke a smile across the centuries. Such dogs are very often seen on grave *stelai* of women and children of both sexes and they populate the small vases called *choes* which played a prominent role in the Anthesteria. Here the dogs play with children of both genders, pull them in carts, are trained to carry small *choes* on their backs, and in general seem a full part of the children's lives. Perhaps they were gifts presented to children at this time along with similar pets such as birds and fawns.

Adolescent males, however, having moved from the women's quarters to the world of the *gymnasion*, are routinely seen with sleek hunting dogs (not the bulkier mastiff guard dogs) and it is very infrequent that they are shown with Maltese. These hunting dogs are the youths' constant companions while hunting, at a *symposion*, or in the *gymnasion*. Moreover, these dogs seem to

be more than mere background decoration – they are often engaged in meaningful interactions with their adult masters. A *kylix* in the Kimbell Art Museum attributed to the Triptolemos Painter even depicts the training of a dog. Inside is a scene where the unruly dog defecates while it bites a youth on his thigh, drawing blood. On the outside, however, the better behaved dog is being taught the trick of “give me your paw” (cf. Conze, no., 958, p. 205, Taf. CLXXXV). The frequent painted depiction of collars and leashes and dedicatory poems from the Greek Anthology (6.34-35) reinforce the closeness of the young male/canine bond. Such dogs are common companions in funerary *lekythoi* and grave *stelai* where the dogs look up, directly into their masters’ eyes.

Hunting dogs also played an important role in the transition into the homoerotic life of Athens. Numerous vases depict an all-male courting scene where the dog not only accompanies its master, but is, apparently, a present from the *erastēs*, (the generally older lover) to the *eromenos* (the younger object of his affection). Aristophanes (*Plut.*, 153f.) specifically mentions dogs as love gifts. Further, in many vase scenes the dogs accompany the men as they exchange love-gifts (most notably hares and deer), which the dogs have helped capture (Barringer, 70-124). Such dogs were also brought to the *gymnasion* to be shown off as status symbols as were exotic, expensive animals such as young cheetahs (Ashmead).

There thus emerges a definite pattern of the use in Athens of animals as socially accepted markers of the stages of one’s early life. Maltese dogs, wading birds, doves and fawns were suitable for women and the young males dwelling with them. But an Athenian male’s entrance into the adult world seems also to have included a shift over to hunting dogs. It is not suggested that this was part of any ritual (e.g. the *Anthesteria* or *Apatouria*), but it does seem likely that the animals served as informal and socially accepted/respected symbols of one’s status in society.

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