

Controlling the Beast: The Ancient Pet Store

The recent surge of interest in animal studies has opened new doors onto Greco-Roman antiquity. It has also raised many questions whose answers continue to elude us for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the commonplace often was not committed to written documentation. Thus, there has not yet, to my knowledge, been a thorough study of the kinds of equipment required for controlling animals' behavior, including their breeding. This heavily illustrated presentation will discuss the information we can glean about this topic for ancient Greece with special emphasis on companion animals.

Certain random facts come to mind when thinking of controlling animals in ancient Athens. Foremost is the *mēniskoi*, the protective devices attached to statues' heads to deter birds from soiling them. Shepherds certainly used their staffs to guide sheep and one vase even gives us a scene of how to control a pig. Certainly people threw rocks at dogs, as Eumaeus does in Book 124 of the *Odyssey*. But other more specialized products existed for controlling and protecting one's companion animal.

Greek stelai certainly showed such things as leashes and collars but these were painted details and no longer survive. Vases, on the other hand, are an excellent source of visual information. From them we note the use of leashes and collars, largely for dogs, but even, on a pyxis lid in the Worcester, MA art museum, for a rabbit. Leashes and collars were probably

commonly made of leather, but Roman mosaics show us guard dogs on chains as well. The vases also depict any number of cages and from literary sources we know that such cages could contain not only birds but hares and singing insects. Of great interest is the evidence offered by Athenian red-figure *choes* depicting children riding in carts pulled by different animals, including dogs, goats, and deer. Another *choes* shows a child leading a deer or riding one, and each has a harness on its head. Still another shows a child riding a dog.

What does this evidence tell us? First, the vast majority of companion animals shown on Greek vases are unrestrained. However, a dog without a collar is a rarity. Fighting cocks, which could be quite valuable, are not controlled in most scenes, but may have been kept in pens. Most birds shown with children on *choes* are unrestrained although a cage is near one as the boy feeds it a worm. Many birds, such as those shown in women's quarters and one wonders if the Greeks had developed the practice, common in zoos today, of cropping a wing to insure birds cannot fly off, although one *chous* shows a bird in full flight over a dog. When an animal is a love-present in a homoerotic scene, it is often in a cage.

Such evidence opens new avenues of research. What are the economic implications of the need for such products in ancient Greece? Who made and sold animal control products? Finally, why did ancient Greeks feel the need to control some animals? From the story of Alcibiades' dog (Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 9) we know that some companion animals were quite expensive and to insure one's investment the animal must be restrained in some fashion. In

antiquity one always had to fear rabies and keeping your dog from wandering was vital. But another, perhaps more pressing reason was to control the blood lines, and thus the breed integrity, of valuable animals. We have the names of dozens of ancient dog breeds whose existence implies specialized breeders. We know from Thucydides (2.50.2) and the recently published Agora Bone Well that free roaming, pariah dogs were a presence in Athenian life. A single encounter with a cur has potential to thin the breed's integrity.

Further research is needed to collect a full catalogue of pet restraint devices and the information we have for controlling other animals also deserves study. We know, for example, of devices that were used to control the mating of animals in mule production and to control bulls in Roman *venationes* and we would profit from a similar list of devices employed in agricultural settings.