Human-Dog Interactions in Northern Mesopotamia
A Study of Neolithic and Chalcolithic Period Sites

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Introduction

This research evaluates the changes humans and canines faced amid shifts in settlement and subsistence patterns between the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in northern Mesopotamia. The goal is to understand the role of dogs as social agents and their socio-cultural contributions during the emergence of early complex societies. Recent critiques of zooarchaeology examine its foundations in human-centered ontologies, with anthropocentrism and assumptions about past human-animal dynamics widely debated. Coined by Lynda Birke, the concept of "mutual becoming" broadly describes human-animal interactions as a form of mutualistic cooperation. Using this framework, my analysis of archaeological evidence will investigate how this interspecies collaboration is created and sustained in northern Mesopotamia.

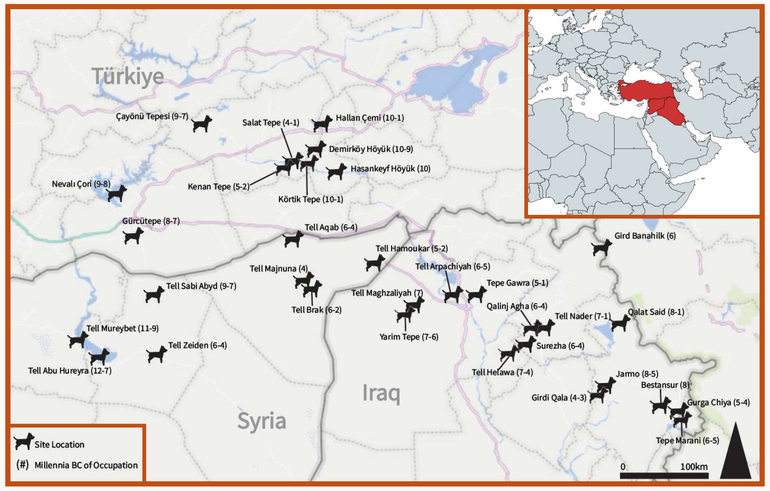

Figure 1. Map of archaeological sites containing evidence of canine presence. Based on *Canine Economies of the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean*, by Price, Meier, & Arbuckle, 2021, *Journal of Field Archaeology.*

Contextual Information

In Southwest Asia, archaeological evidence suggests that dog domestication occurred around 14,000 BCE. Dogs were domesticated before any other animal and prior to the emergence of agrarian practices, within mobile hunter-gatherer communities. A prevailing theory on early domestication proposes that humans and dogs unintentionally developed a symbiotic relationship: dogs benefited from human waste and materials left behind, while humans utilized dogs for hunting and security. To study this evolving interspecies collaboration, 32 sites were analyzed after being identified as having records of either canid skeletal elements, evidence of butchery and scavenging, or related material culture. This information was gathered from published journals, books, and reports, organized by location and period of occupation between the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (10th to late 4th millennium BCE). The regions included in this research span the Nineveh, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah provinces in Iraq; Al-Hasakah and Al-Raqqah governorates in Syria; and Batman, Diyarbakir, and Şanlıurfa provinces in Türkiye.

Faunal Evidence

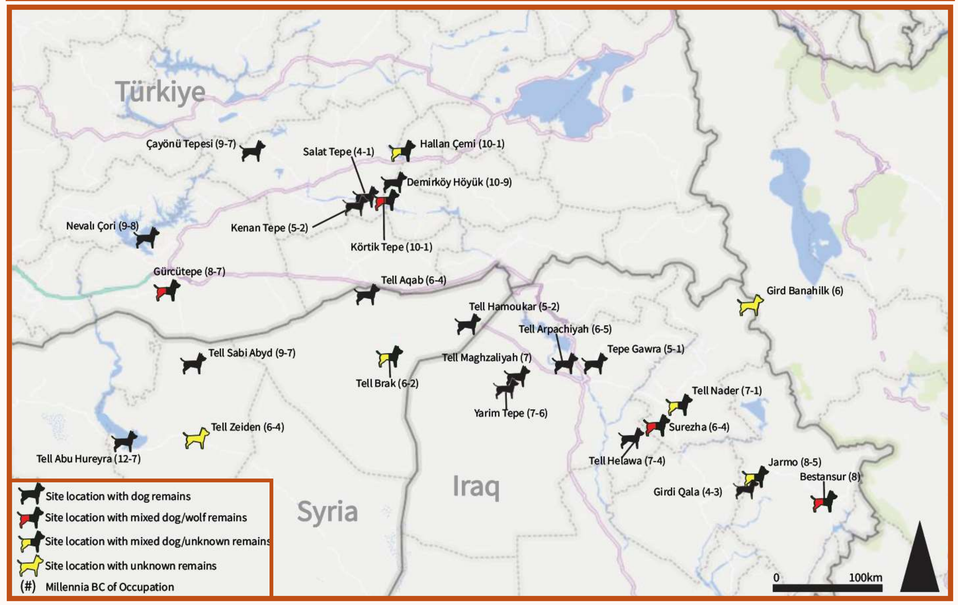

Figure 2. Map of archaeological sites with evidence of Canidae faunal remains. The color of each dog site marker represents the identified species within the faunal assemblage. For example, at Tell Nader, a blue/grey dog marker indicates that dog remains are grouped with other Canidae species in the site report. Based on *Canine Economies of the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean*, by Price, Meier, & Arbuckle, 2021, *Journal of Field Archaeology.*

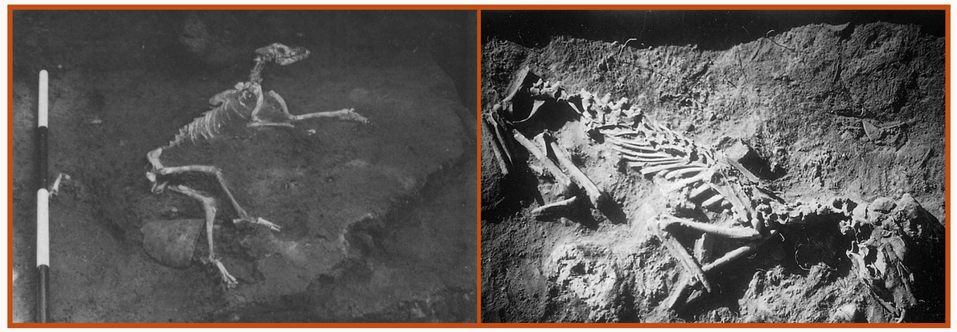

Figure 3. (Left) Photo of dog skeleton found at Tell Brak from *A Dog and a Donkey Excavated at Tell Brak,* by J. Clutton-Brock, 1989, by British Institute for the Study of Iraq, pl. XXX. (Right) Photo of dog skeleton found at Demirköy Höyük from *A Report on Soundings at Demirköy Höyük: an Aceramic Neolithic Site in Eastern Anatolia,* by M. Rosenberg & B. Peasnall, 1998. Fig 9.

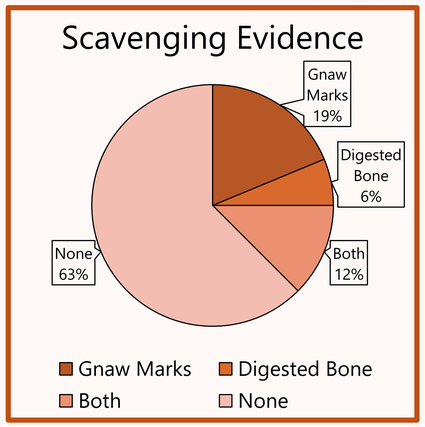

Figure 4. Chart of scavenging evidence on archaeological sites.

Of the 32 sites in this study, 25 report dog or Canidae remains in their faunal assemblages, although information is often sparse or classified under a vague Canidae/Canis taxonomy. NISP data is available for 18 sites, indicating that dogs comprise, on average, less than 2% of the total faunal assemblage, consistent with other studies on the subject. Evidence of dog scavenging is noted at 12 sites. Three sites report butchery or char marks on dog skeletal remains. Additionally, three sites report dog remains in burial contexts: two involve singular articulated dog burials, and one features dog skeletal elements accompanying a human burial.

Material Representation

Figure 5. Stamp seal of Saluki silhouette dogs with other animals (Left) Man with two Saluki silhouette dogs (Middle) Possible representation of a dog with a leash around the neck (Right) from *Excavations at Tepe Gawra Vol. 2,* by A. Tobler, 1935, by University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 448, 450, 452.

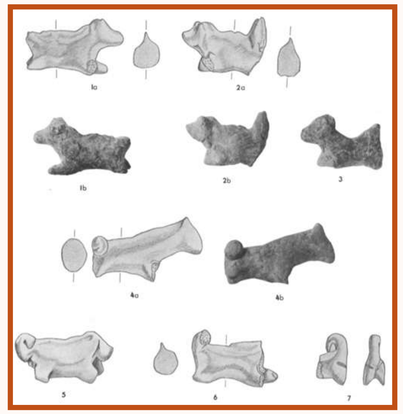

Figure 6. Figurines from Jarmo of type D1 (4a-7), and type D2 (1a-3) from *Prehistoric Archaeology Along The Zagros Flanks,* by L. Braidwood, R. Braidwood, B. Howe, C. Reed, & P. Watson, 1983, by The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publication, p 101.

Early Neolithic depictions of dogs often show them in hunting scenes, highlighting their role in human activities. As dogs become further integrated in human culture, iconographic representations evolve, leading to more diverse portrayals. By the Chalcolithic period, distinct attributively selective breeding populations like those resembling the "saluki" silhouette appear alongside prevalent pastoral motifs. Additionally, material culture, such as figurines, may indicate emerging connections between dogs and magical or healing properties, an association that becomes more prominent in later periods.

Conclusion

The shifting human-dog relationship dynamic in Northern Mesopotamia complements the evolving changes in settlement practices as agrarian and pastoral technologies develop. While dogs were culturally valuable, their exact significance can be difficult to interpret, especially in ritual contexts such as burials. Dogs began the process of domestication and cohabitation with humans much earlier than other domesticated species, not primarily as a food source but integrated into other aspects of human life. This distinction positions dogs differently from other species valued by humans. Patterns of tension are evident in depictions of tethering and hunting, as well as in evidence of canine scavenging and butchery. Likewise, humans have evolved from the forces of the natural world, including dogs. These tensions, whether to influence, resist, grapple for agency, or communicate, have resulted in millennia of continuous and persistent "mutual becoming."

Selected Bibliography: Armstrong Oma, K. (2010). Between trust and domination: social contracts between humans and animals. World Archaeology, 42, 175-187; Birke, L., Bryld, M., & Lykke, N. (2004). Animal Performances An Exploration of Intersections between Feminist Science Studies and Studies of Human/Animal Relationships. Feminist Theory, 167-183; Braidwood, L., Braidwood, R., Howe, B., Reed, C., & Watson, P. J. (Eds.). (1983). Prehistoric Archaeology Along The Zagros Flanks (Vol. 105). Chicago: The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publication; Haraway, D. (2008). When Species Meet. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Price, M., Meier, J., & Arbuckle, B. (2021). Canine Economies of the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. Journal of Field Archaeology, 46(2), 81-92; Rosenberg, M., & Peasnall, B. L. (1998). A Report on Soundings at Demirköy Höyük: an Aceramic Neolithic Site in Eastern Anatolia. Anatolica, 24, 195-207; Russell, N. (2012). *Social Zooarchaeology Humans and Animals in Prehistory.* New York: Cambridge University Press; Russell, N. (2022). The Three Faces of Domestication. In M. Grygiel, & P. Obst (Eds.), Walking among ancient trees: Studies in honour of Ryszard Grygiel and Peter Bogucki on the 45th anniversary of their research collaboration (pp. 75-85). Wydawnictwo Fundacji Badań Archeologicznych Imienia Profesora Konrada Jażdżewskiego; Tobler, A. (1935). Excavations at Tepe Gawra Vol.2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Yeomans, L., Martin, L., & Richter, T. (2019). Close companions: Early evidence for dogs in northeast Jordan and the potential impact of. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology, 53,* 161-173.

Please refer to the QR code for site specific faunal data and references.