Dogs and Human Beings: A Story of Friendship

Sophia Menache
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA, ISRAEL

The wide consensus in research with regard to the modernity of keeping companion animals lies behind the prevailing conclusions about attitudes toward the canine species in pre-modern societies. These were reviewed mainly from a utilitarian perspective. Characterized, in part, by the protective shelter of the extended household and, as such, free of the tensions affecting the nuclear family in industrial cities, pre-modern societies supposedly lacked in the emotional stress and indigence that condition or encourage dog keeping. A careful examination of the sources, both narrative and pictorial, however, suggests more ambivalent attitudes thus challenging widespread research premises and justifying further analysis. This study, covering rural and urban societies in the ancient and medieval periods, examines references to dogs as companion animals in traditional societies.

In recent years, the various attitudes of human beings toward the keeping of companion animals have received much attention, especially as forms of a psychological projection mechanism (Ronecker, 1994). People attribute their own expectations and desires to animals, including those natural impulses that they most fear in themselves (Geertz, 1971; Douglas, 1971; Firth, 1963; Berger, 1971; Klaits, 1974). Willis (1974) finds in the way that people relate to animals "a key to read off certain otherwise inaccessible information about the way human beings conceived of themselves and the ultimate meaning of their own lives" (Levi-Strauss, 1967). Savishinsky (1983) goes further, maintaining that "petkeeping patterns illuminate aspects of ... the nature of status systems, the dynamics of child socialization, the process of human bonding, and the roots of cultural symbols and metaphors."

These general remarks acquire further weight in the analysis of prevailing attitudes toward dog keeping, dogs being perhaps the first domesticated animals allowed entrance to the deepest emotional aspects of a person's life. With their constant presence in human experience, coupled with their nearness to the feral world, dogs have become the alter ego of human beings, a reflection of both human culture and human savagery. As White (1991) commented, "There is much of man
in his dogs, much of the dog in us, and behind this, much of the wolf in both the dog and man.” On the other hand, some argue that the mastery over dogs is actually the displacement of a person’s wish to enslave other people (Fox, 1972; Malinowski, 1948). Thus an egoistic anthropomorphism may lie at the heart of the human-canine relationship. Whatever the factors behind dog keeping, there is a general consensus that “the history of pets remains too much the history of their masters, revealing more about the owning society than the owned” (Phineas, 1973).

Historians, however, have directed little attention to human attitudes toward dog keeping, though they have shown an awareness of some of the changes in this regard (Walton, 1979). The lack of an historical perspective to dog keeping seems quite surprising in light of the growing consciousness of the weight of popular culture in understanding the past – domestic animals being a basic component of daily life (Haudricourt, 1961). It further prevents a long-range analysis, with a more serious balance of changing socioeconomic, cultural, and mental factors that had influenced the relationship between human beings and their pets. In approaching dogs as convenient symbols for whatever people want to make of them (Stevens, 1972; Sahlins, 1976; Leach, 1964; Adler, 1993), social research emphasizes the centrality of dog-keeping in modern society; although some premises are advanced toward the past, most of these lack satisfactory proof. There is a broad consensus that attachment to dogs – with all its emotional strength – seemingly results from the previous divorce of humankind from nature and the encroachment of modernization, especially the urbanization process (Clark, 1977). In other words, when the megacities detached human beings from the countryside, people found in the dog a suitable substitute for the natural world that had been left behind. Phineas (1973), for example, saw in the disappearance of the extended household unit a main catalyst for petkeeping, since it created the need for additional family members. These additions had to be docile in order to balance the many stresses of the industrial city. Pets served as surrogate, and less expensive, children. He further contends that pets became a symbol of freedom for workers, who also valued them as a defender of property. Thomas (1984), as well, denies any concern for animal rights in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, thus indirectly rejecting the possibility of petkeeping in traditional, monotheistic societies. He identifies as the main catalysts of petkeeping, besides intellectual developments, the growth of towns and the emergence of an industrial order, in which animals became increasingly marginal to the process of production.

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societies. These were reviewed mainly from a utilitarian perspective. Characterized in part by the protective shelter of the extended household and, as such, free of the tensions affecting the nuclear family in industrial cities, pre-modern societies supposedly lacked the emotional stress and indigence that condition or encourage dog keeping. In support of this approach, one should further note the negative, even hostile, attitudes toward petkeeping, especially dog keeping, in the monotheistic traditions (Menache, 1997). A careful examination of the sources, both narrative and pictorial, however, suggests more ambivalent attitudes, thus challenging widespread research premises and justifying further analysis.

This study examines references to dogs as companion animals in traditional societies, covering both rural and urban societies in the ancient and medieval periods. Reference to “urban” societies in the pre-modern period embraces heterogenous phenomena and, of course, all very different from the megacities of our own days. The large cities of the Roman Empire, like Rome, Antioch, Carthage, and Constantinople, counted in their best days up to one million inhabitants; in medieval Europe, on the other hand, cities held an average of about 10,000 to 30,000 residents, and 100,000 only in exceptional cases. Moreover, the existence of social frames, like fraternities, guilds, and convents, precluded the sense of alienation that is at the core of contemporary megacities. It is the premise of this study that the different attitudes toward dogs, being the receptors of people’s dreams, expectations, and fears, were affected by changing circumstances. Although the image of dogs changed in response to differences in time and space, these changes did not affect the basic attachment of Western persons to the canine species. In this regard, one can discern a long story of friendship from the ancient period through the middle ages and up to our own days.

**Dogs in the Ancient World: The Pagan Tradition**

Homeritic narrative – considered the “Bible of the Greeks” – presents the meritorious roles of dogs in daily experience. Dogs appear as men’s very helpful auxiliaries for hunting and safeguarding purposes (Odyssey XVII: 291-327). These tasks confronted dogs with the most dangerous of the wild animals, like lions and bears (Iliad XVIII: 573; Odyssey XIV: 21), thus creating a suitable arena in which canines could prove their courage and tenacity. Little wonder that Xenophon approached hunting dogs as one of the most important possessions worthy of adorning an estate (Agesilaus, 9. 6; cf. David., 1993).

Dogs were not only employed for sport purposes; they also proved their skills as guardians of important public buildings. They were employed as sentinels in the...
temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline (Plinius Secundus, *Naturalis historiae libri XXXVII*, X. 79; Claudius Aelianus, *De natura animalium*, VII: 13), a practice that was also common to the temples of Hephaestus at Etna, Athena at Daunia, and Adrianus at Sicily (Claudius Aelianus, *De natura animalium*, XI: 3, 5, 13, 20; Plutarch, *De sollertia animalium*, 13, 11, 23; Seneca, *De brevitate vitae*, 11; Cicero, *Pro Sextio Roscio Amerino*, 20; cf. Gourevitch, 1968). Plato, further, considered dogs as the trustful protectors of sheep (*Republic*, III, 416a). In the framework of the *oikos*—and the obligation of its head to avenge any harm to the household, slaves and animals included—the killing of a shepherd dog was punished like the murder of the shepherd himself (*Iliad* XII: 303, XV: 583, X: 183). In Spartan society, hounds were considered private property, and their temporary use by someone other than the master, was conditioned on the prior consent of the owner, usually a wealthy man.

Dogs also proved their merit in times of war. The *canis bellator* or *canis pugnator* (fighting) was assigned crucial military roles, a practice that probably originated in the Orient. Aelian reports the case of a dog that fought bravely at his master’s side in the Battle of Marathon, its meritorious behavior perpetuated in pictorial representations (*De natura animalium*, VII: 38). Philip the Macedonian used dogs in the Thracian war to force the Arbelians to leave the forest in which they had found shelter (*Polyaenus, Stratagemata*, IV: 2, 26). The same tactic was followed by the consul Pomponius Matho against the Sardes in 230 B.C. (*Supplementum ad Titus Livius*, XX, 20). Dogs thus came to mirror the most cherished virtues of ancient society; first and foremost, the bravery and courage expected from a citizen on the battlefield, whether in the Greek *polis* or in the Roman Republic.

Beyond the utilitarian level, dogs further emerge as the loyal companion of gods as well as people (*Odyssey* XX: 14, XVIII: 291, 302, 327), and there are many references to dogs as companion animals, with all the emotional strength attached to this concept. *Kyniskos* and *Kyniska*, the male and female for “puppy,” were used by the Spartans as personal names and affectionate nicknames. Especially in aristocratic circles, dogs escorted their owners to social and political gatherings (*Odyssey* XVII: 62), and an impressive number of vases show canines waiting to be fed behind a table; the *Odyssey* explicitly refers to delicacies generously provided them by their masters (*X*: 216). Plato considered dogs as a model for the guardians of the ideal State because they were both gentle and spirited (*Republic*, II, 374e-376c). Among the many qualities associated with dogs, ancient writers emphasized their loyalty, perception (being the sole animal to recognize their
names), memory, and devotion toward offspring (Quintus Smyrnaeus, XVI: 281 ff.; Plutarch, De amore prolis, II, 40; Lucretius V, 862; Varro, De re rustica II, 9; Cicero, De natura deorum, II, 63). Some authors further enlisted historical testimony to prove canine loyalty. When the Persian invasion caused the Athenians to evacuate their city (480 B.C.), Plutarch reports:

Much affecting fondness was shown by the tame domestic animals, which ran along with yearning cries of distress by the side of their masters as they embarked. A story is told of one of these, the dog of Xanthippus the father of Pericles, how he could not endure to be abandoned by his master, and so sprang into the sea, swam across the strait by the side of his master’s trireme, and staggered out on Salamis, only to faint and die straightway. They say that the spot which is pointed out to this day as “Dog’s Mound” is his tomb. (Lives, Themistocles, X. 6)

The perseverance and faithfulness of Xanthippus’s dog were hardly exceptional. Pliny the Elder celebrated the fact that “dogs alone know their master, and also recognize a sudden arrival as a stranger; they alone recognize their own names, and the voice of a member of the household; they remember the way to places however distant, and no creature save man has a longer memory.” He demonstrated canine trustworthiness in this impressive list of faithful dogs:

We are told of a dog that fought against brigands in defense of his master and although covered with wounds would not leave his corpse, driving away birds and beasts of prey; and of another dog in Epirus who recognized his master’s murderer in a gathering and by snapping and barking made him confess the crime. The king of the Garamantes was escorted back from exile by 200 dogs who did battle with those that offered resistance. The people of Colophon and also those of Castabulum had troops of dogs for their wars; these fought fiercely in the front rank, never refusing battle, and were their most loyal supporters, never requiring pay. When some Cimbrians were killed, their hounds defended their houses placed on wagons. When Jason of Lycia had been murdered, his dog refused to take food and starved to death. But a dog the name of which Duris gives as Hyrcanus when king Lysimachus’s pyre was set alight threw itself into the flame, and similarly at the funeral of King Hiero. Philistus also records the tyrant Gelo’s dog Pyrrhus; also the dog of Nicomedes, king of Bithynia, is recorded to have bitten the king’s wife Consingis because she played a rather loose joke with her husband. Among ourselves the famous Vulcatius, Cassellius’s tutor in
civil law, when returning on his cob from his place near Rome after
nightfall was defended by his dog from a highwayman; and so was the
senator Caelius, an invalid, when set upon by armed men at Piacenza, and
he did not receive a wound till the dog had been despatched. But above all
cases in our own generation it is attested by the National Records that in
the consulship of Appius Julius and Publius Silius when as a result of the
case of Germanicus’s son Nero punishment was visited on Titius Sabinus
and his slaves, a dog belonging to one of them could not be driven away
from him in prison and when he had been flung out on the Steps of
Lamentation would not leave his body, uttering sorrowful howls to the vast
concourse of the Roman public around, and when one of them threw it
food, it carried it to the mouth of its dead master; also when his corpse had
been thrown into the Tiber it swam to it and tried to keep it afloat, a great
crowd streaming out to view the animal’s loyalty. (Naturalis historiae,
VIII: 61)

Aelian further attributes to dogs the good management of household affairs,
especially among the poor (De natura animalium, VI: 10; cf. Lewinsohn, 1954).
Though acknowledging that these “proletarians” are devoid of reason – “which can
be a man’s salvation or his destruction” – Aelian also credits canines with
possessing “a presentiment of an impending famine; they are the first, too, to know
when a pestilence or an earthquake is approaching. They can foretell fair weather
and the fertility of the crops” (De natura animalium, VI: 16).

Dogs, thus, gradually lost their animal essence. They were credited with
magical skills that went beyond those of the ordinary human being, thereby hinting
at the many fears and concerns which affected ancient society. Although these
testimonies are of a general nature, there is also specific mention of gender
differentiations among dogs. Aelian praises a pregnant bitch that gave birth to nine
puppies only after accomplishing her hunting duties. “And if the women of Liguria
pride themselves that they also after giving birth rise up and devote themselves to
their household duties, they will, on hearing what the aforesaid bitch did, gorge
their pride and hide their heads in shame” (De natura animalium, VII: 12). The
virtues assigned to canines also included devotion to the institution of marriage. By
barking, a lap dog of Sicily caused a husband to capture his adulterous wife in
After such a display of moral sensitivity, it is no wonder that the Stoics were often
represented as dogs, probably a reference to one of their cardinal virtues as truth-
tellers (Petronius, Satyricon, 43). Aelian could therefore conclude, “It fills me with
pain that a dog should be shown to have more loyalty, more kindly feeling than man” (De natura animalium, VII: 10; I: 8, IV: 40, VI: 25, 62, VII: 28, 29, 38, 40, X: 41, 45, XI: 13, XII: 35).

The ubiquity of dogs in ancient society is corroborated in contemporary art, which reflected not only the canines’ value in daily practice, especially in hunting, but first and foremost their unique status as companion animals. From among the many representations of dogs in hunting themes, one should mention the wall painting “Dogs chasing a boar,” the vase painting “Hunter with his dog,” the clay plaque “Hunter with his dog,” the sculpture “Dogs attacking wild boar,” and the fresco “Hunting scene” (Beazley, 1939; Reinach, 1922; Anderson, 1985). In sepulchral monuments from the late archaic to the Hellenistic period, dogs were depicted protecting their owners both against the living and against the forces of hell, thus fulfilling their functions as companion animals after death, as well. The significant role that dogs played in both daily practice and religious cult is revealed through the abundant portrayals in marble, rock crystal, and terra cotta, by the vases in the shape of dogs, and by paintings. One may take note of several Greek grave reliefs like Alxenor’s “Man with Dog,” “Man with Dog,” and “Monument of Agathocles”; the Roman sarcophagus cover of “Boy with Dog” and the relief of the “Conclamation Ceremony” (Greek and Roman Sculpture, 1931; Reinach, 1897).

Analysis of the prevailing attitudes to the canine species in Greek and Roman society clearly shows, at a superficial level, the ubiquity of dogs in daily life. True, the many functions fulfilled by dogs in hunting, guardianship, and war can hardly be regarded as proof of petkeeping; they seemingly corroborate the utilitarian essence commonly attributed to the human-animal relationship in the pre-modern period. Nonetheless, a careful analysis of the sources shows ample evidence of a projection mechanism, with the most cherished values of ancient society, such as faithfulness, memory, intelligence, and heroism, projected on dogs: sometimes canines even surpassed the skills of the average human being. Indeed, against the fragile, ephemeral essence of human affections, dogs came to represent complete devotion to their masters, an attachment that brooked no other considerations. One may therefore conclude that long before the megacities detached Western people from the countryside, canines, as companion animals, became a repository of the Greeks’ and Romans’ pursuit of limitless loyalty and model bravery.

One God – No Dogs

The development of the monotheistic creed adversely affected the harmonious relationship between humankind and the canine species (Menache, 1997). From the
very beginning, acknowledgment of human domination "over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1: 27-28) favored an instrumental approach to animals, their very existence being justified by their serving the needs of human beings (Batany, 1984; Davidson, 1980). Though this instrumental approach was common to all animals, monotheistic religions show a most extreme opposition to dogs and to dog-keeping. Dogs were regarded as unclean animals in both Judaism and Islam, though there is not a clear theological justification of the kind that Genesis provides against the snake, for example. On the other hand, the peremptory tone of biblical pronouncements against dogs faithfully reflects the ecological environment across Asia Minor, where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam developed; the wild, desertic areas of Asia Minor were affected by hordes of pariah packs, which created serious security and sanitary problems (Taton, 1957). Beyond the geo-ecological framework, the open aversion to dogs further reflects the clergy's animosity against too close a relationship between the faithful and their dogs; this might jeopardize the former's devotion to one Almighty, jealous God, thereby "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Exodus 20: 5) (Menache, 1997).

The agrarian livelihood of some groups, however, eventually encouraged the toleration of hunt and watchdogs, and there are a few testimonies of affection and tenderness toward dogs in both Jewish and Islamic traditions. Attachment to dogs reached its zenith in Western Christendom toward the end of the Middle ages, thus reflecting the continuity of dog-keeping in pre-modern times.

The Jewish Tradition

The apocryphal Book of Tobit refers to Tobias's dog, who faithfully accompanied its owner on his journey to Media (5:16, 10:14; cf. Pfeiffer, 1949). Tobias's dog is the only dog favorably mentioned in Scripture. Rabbinical literature, however, does indicate that dog owning had been common practice among Jews in agricultural villages, especially between the 3rd and 6th centuries (Baba Kamah 15a, 22a, 23a-b, 24b, 33a; cf. Jachter, 1992). Furthermore, there are some halachic (Jewish law) indications of the acknowledgment of canine loyalty and courage, which justify a charitable attitude to pets. Following Deuteronomy 11:15, the Talmud states that one may not eat before feeding them (Berachot 40a, Gittin 62a). When Rabbi Avihu was invited to Caesarea, he was accorded great honor, but in the company of a dog. To the annoyed Rabbi's query, his host explained that the dog had saved his wife during a brigands' attack on the city. This meritorious behavior thus justly earned the animal its owner's recognition for the rest of its life. This story
was used by Rabbi Meir to emphasize God's omnipotence, which in times of danger turns the "natural enemies of men" [i.e., dogs] into their allies. The mysterious actions of the Almighty may also explain why, after exiling Cain from paradise, God furnished the first criminal in the history of humankind with a dog to defend him from the attack of savage animals (Bereshit Rabbah, 22:12). The ambivalent approach to the canine species is further manifested in the tradition that placed dogs on a pedestal, in parallel with the Chosen People. To the question why God bestowed Israel with His commandments, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said: "There are three distinguished in strength: Israel among the nations, the dog among the animals, [and] the cock among the birds" (Beitza 25b). And Rabbi Yehudah heChassid mentions the loyalty of dogs as a virtue that should be imitated by Jewish sons in the respect and faithfulness they owe their parents (Sefer Chassidim, 60, 47).

The Jewish tradition, though somewhat ambivalent on the subject, disrupts the close attachment to dogs found in ancient culture. At a theological, dogmatic level, petkeeping was identified with the behavior patterns of non-Jews and, as such, reprehensible (Slay, 1986). On the other hand, a careful analysis of the sources may advance a less rigid perspective. The astonishment of Rabbi Avihu in Caesarea at the benefits dispensed to his host's dog, together with Rabbi Meir's negative approach to canines - defined as the "natural enemies of men" - corroborate the negative approach of the religious, intellectual elite to dog keeping. This group, which found dogmatic justification in the Bible, expressed itself in a rather compelling tone throughout Rabbinical literature (Menache, 1997). Still, the same sources hint at the approach to dogs as companion animals among the common people. God seemingly recognized the linkage, one may say dependence, between human beings and dogs when he provided Cain with the company of a dog, not only against wild animals but, perhaps first and foremost, also against the solitude of his erratic existence. In this regard, one may argue that acknowledgment of dogs as companion animals, as an antidote against loneliness, goes back to the very roots of human existence upon earth.

The Moslem Tradition

Both shared monotheistic tenets and the geographical environment encouraged a similarly ambivalent attitude toward dogs in medieval Islam. On a theological, dogmatic level, dogs were considered unclean animals, and there was a clear admonition by the Prophet Muhammad to kill all dogs (Menache, 1997). On the other hand, in pre-Islamic times, the dog was the only domestic animal given a proper name (al-Djahiz, 1, 313-14). This practice suggested some emotional
sensitivity, especially among nomadic and rural groups, which were well aware of
the usefulness and devotion of the canine species (al-Djahiz, 1, 297-98). Sultan
Mohammed al-Nasir, who was well known for his love of the chase, left 80 different
groups of hunting dogs; these were carefully raised by special officials nominated
for this purpose (Ahmad ibn `Ali al-Maqrizi, 2, 748-49). The Prophet himself was
said to have promised a divine reward to an old woman for her act of charity to a
thirsty dog. According to Moslem tradition, moreover, the dog Kitmir will be
allowed to enter paradise (Koran, CXVIII, 17). The dog had persisted in following
to a cave seven noble youths who, in an effort to avoid it, threw stones and broke
three of the dog’s legs so that the poor animal could no longer stand. Then the mouth
of Kitmir opened, and it said in human speech: “I, too, am the creature of God, as
I love Him as my Creator; and loving God, I love thee also who love God. Sleep,
masters, and I will keep watch over you.” Hearing these words, the seven youths
were astounded and, taking the dog in their arms, carried it into the cave, where they
slept for over three hundred years. Having become the symbol of fidelity for its
loyalty to the merciless youths, Kitmir – in the opinion of al-Baydawi – was given
the gift of speech by Allah (1, p. 557; cf. Gregorius Turonensis and Jacobi a
Voragine).

Beyond the mythical level, there are further indications of a growing awareness
in medieval Islam of canine skills. Though al-Qazwini defined dogs as “the basest,
and filthiest, and most shameless of animals,” he still acknowledged that “it is a
faithful beast, patient in undergoing hardships and in enduring hunger, in rendering
service and in keeping off enemies. It follows up game with quick intelligence and,
although kept hungry, it is faithful and will not leave its master, acknowledging the
duty of obedience. And in respect of followers, the Arabs have made this
comparison: ‘Starve thy dog, and it will follow thee.’ It sleeps little and lightly.
When its belly pains it, it eats ears of wheat and is cured. They say the hunting dog
must have long legs, a small head and prominent eyes; its best food is bread
crumbled in broth.” Al-Djahiz – whose Kitab al-hayawan furnishes the richest
documentation on dogs in Arabic sources – further praised dogs’ memory and
loyalty (their skill in recognizing their owners after long periods of absence) (2,
128), their intelligence (2, 120), and the service they provide as a watch (2, 143, 173,
174, 177). Particularly touching are his references to spoiling dogs, which will
never sleep on the ground if they can enjoy the texture of a delicate carpet and will
always prefer a pillow to them both (2, 161).

Against the basic opposition of Islam to dog keeping (Menache, 1997), the
sources, notwithstanding the theological nature of most of them, thus indicate an
ambivalence very similar to that found in Rabbinical literature: namely, the existence of dog-keeping – the scope of which is open to further analysis – in open discrepancy with theological tenets. One should further note that both Jewish and Moslem societies were agricultural in essence, and the urbanization process was nonexistent and, therefore, completely irrelevant to the scope or the very existence of dog keeping. Though dogs were assigned functional roles in daily practice, especially in hunting and guardianship, there are clear indications of emotional attachment to the point that at least one among them, Kitmir, after being granted the gift of speech, was allowed by the Prophet to enter Paradise. Kitmir thus reflected, in a most faithful manner, the longings of human beings for a life after death and, in a more mundane level, their urgent need for fluent communication with their dogs.

**Medieval Christendom**

The approach of medieval Christendom to the canine species represents a combination of the biblical (i.e., basically a negative perspective) and the classical heritage (essentially positive). Receptive as it was of the classical heritage, Christendom was not immune to the worthy aspects of dogs, which left their mark in medieval literature. Commenting upon the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-25), Ambrose of Milan, one of the four recognized Doctors of the Latin Church, blessed dogs “that represent those who guard the flock and protect it against the wolves ... keep guard for their masters’ safety ... and display noteworthy smelling skills” (Sister M. Theresa, 1931). Ambrose reports in detail the genealogies of several dogs – carefully established in patterns similar to those that served fourth century aristocracy – and birthday parties celebrated in their honor (Ambrosius, xiv, 747-48). Acknowledgment of the canine instincts led Basil the Great to deduce that dogs had achieved the power of reason, while their loyalty should embarrass all sinners who were ungrateful to their benefactors (Homily on the Hexameron, 104). John Scotus Erigena admitted that dogs had some advantages over people, such as memory and faithfulness, both virtues exemplified by Argos, Odysseus’s dog, which recognized its master after twenty years of absence (Odyssey, 17, 291-327; Divisione Naturae Libri Quinque, 168-69). Hildegarde of Bingen went even further, assigning to human beings and dogs a similar nature that instilled the devil’s desire for revenge on these animals. Moreover, following Plutarch’s allegation (De amore prolis, 1 and 2, 478b-f, 479b), Hildegarde claimed that dogs were able to detect human lechery as well as to augur events, unfortunate
or auspicious, about to befall people (De cane, 1327-28; cf. Klingender, 1971). Besides this acknowledgment of canine skills, which may be evaluated as a result of classical influence – as much as this was real in the early Middle ages – we find here clear proof of dog keeping, to the point that birthday parties and genealogies for dogs became common practice among the fourth-century Italian aristocracy. One should further note the attempt by Hildegard of Bingen to incorporate dogs into the endless treasury of medieval myth when, together with the faithful as a whole, dogs became a common target of the devil’s attack. Again, such a premise stood in open opposition to the clergy’s tendency to see in dogs, especially black dogs, an incarnation of the forces of hell, a disposition that was also common to Moslem jurists (Menache, 1997). The attempt to introduce dogs under the safe wings of Catholic orthodoxy also colored medieval hagiography.

Among the more popular dogs in the Middle ages was the faithful companion of St. Roch (1295-1327), the patron saint of those suffering from the plague, who was stricken by the pestilence himself. Alone, he withdrew into the woods to die, but his dog refused to abandon him and provided him daily with a loaf of bread (Fliche, 1950; Bessodes, 1931; Cahier, 1966). A similar story was told about St. Simon Stock (1164-1265), the sixth General of the Carmelites, who lived in the forest of Toubersville, in Kent, and was fed by his dog (Monbrun, 1869). Besides their exemplary role in safeguarding saints, dogs helped simple mortals, including infants. This was the peculiar case of Guinefort, the hunting dog which popular practice elevated to sainthood. According to the testimony of the thirteenth-century Dominican, Etienne de Bourbon, subsequent to Guinefort’s unjust killing after it had saved its master’s child from a snake’s attack, the dog was bestowed a martyrological halo by the peasants of Dombes in the Lyons area. They attributed to Guinefort therapeutic powers, especially on behalf of sick children (Etienne de Bourbon, 325-28). As well proved by Jean Claude Schmitt (1979), these peasants actually confused the dog’s story with the legend of St. Guinefort martyr, who was murdered during the Roman persecutions and whose cult was spread by the Order of Cluny from the eleventh century onwards (Baring-Gould, 1978).

The miraculous role of dogs in daily practice as well as their endless fidelity became a common subject in medieval art. Dogs were depicted licking the wounds of St. Roch or lying at the feet of St. Bernard, St. Benignus, and St. Wendolin. In the portraits of St. Dominic, dogs carry a lighted torch – the Dominican Order being the protector of orthodoxy and its members earning the prestigious classification of canes Domini [the Lord’s dogs] (Ferguson, 1954). Thus, canines gradually gained the blessing of Catholic orthodoxy and were accorded an honorable status
at the side of the saints. Instead of fighting a lost battle against dog keeping, the Catholic religious establishment made a significant step toward popular practice and, in the late Middle ages, enlisted canines in the service of an almighty, loving God and His most distinguished representatives on earth, the saints.

The Church’s gradual acceptance of dogs in the congregation of the faithful hints at the development of dog keeping in Western Christendom, especially from the thirteenth century. Beyond the mythical, symbolic level, there are further indications of a growing awareness of canine skills, especially for hunting purposes (Menache, forthcoming). In the early Middle ages, dogs formed part of the burial gifts for persons of high social standing. Five graves containing dogs, probably used by the deceased for hunting – two of the dogs wearing leather collars – were found at Vendel (Ohman, 1983). In the late Middle ages hunting gradually lost most of its primary economic role and was more and more identified with the nobility (Menache, forthcoming). In the framework of this class-identification, dog-keeping, as well, was associated with the upper class. Hardouin de Fontaines-Guérin wrote that all noblemen must be trained to hunt with dogs and to develop a love and mastery of the sport (Tresor de venerie, 1-3). Gaston Phoebus (1331-91), who wrote one of the most popular hunting treatises, further recommends that in order to cheer one’s dogs on, the owner should be well acquainted with their names and call them continually by name. He himself could name individual hounds with appellations such as Bauderon, Baudellette, Bloquiau, Briffault, Cliquau, Fillette, Huielle, Huiiau, Loquebaut, Mirre, and Ostine (Thiebaux, 1967). In this regard, one should note Claude Levi-Strauss’s remarks (1967):

Dogs do not form an independent society; as “domestic” animals they are part of human society. We design them by metaphorical names. Consequently when the relation between (human and animal) species is socially conceived as metaphorical, the relation between the respective systems of naming takes on a metonymical character....The names of dogs in effect reproduce in its entirety a portion of names formally similar to human Christian names although rarely borne by ordinary human beings....It will readily be agreed that the metaphorical names given to dogs place the role of the figure of speech at the level of the signifying.

According to medieval hunting treatises, owners should be acquainted with the voice and the character of each of their dogs, and huntsmen should especially encourage the pack with an extensive vocabulary of different supporting cries (Gaston Phoebus, 34, 183 ff.; Guicennas, 14). One may argue that all these
expressions of care and love toward dogs were in fact of a utilitarian character, destined to assure the success of medieval nobility in hunting. But we have also testimonies of dog keeping seldom connected with hunting. *Le roman du lévrier Achilles, "Li courtois,*," a French poem written in Italy in the early fifteenth century, belongs to this category. After a lively description of the exceptional beauty of his pet, the anonymous writer gives Achilles speaking skills; it could therefore tell that its master, the count, had decided to provide it a female partner as a means to perpetuate Achilles’s pedigree, which would become a source of admiration for all Italy (Thomas, 1913). In this regard, one should bear in mind Savishinsky’s (1983) observations regarding the use of pets as a symbol of status in cultures with established patterns of domestication and, particularly, in stratified societies. He further argues that “examples from the Middle ages show how pets become a kind of living heraldry, an animated, almost totemic symbol of class and group identity.” This kind of “living heraldry” is rather manifest in the illustrations accompanying *Les très riches heures* of Jean de Berry, whose devotion and love of dogs was well known to his contemporaries (Durrieu, 1909). Contemporary sources, further, reflect a significant awareness of the canines’ skills as guardians (*Ottonis Morenae*, 43; cf. Ortalli, 1983) and their bravery in very difficult situations. Thus, in a report of the Duke of Bourbon’s futile enterprise in Africa (1390), specific reference was made to canine help, which actually saved the Christians from the Moslems’ furious attack (Dupleix, 1634). Among aristocratic circles, therefore, there was a gradual return to the classical heritage in the appreciation of canine virtues. Medieval nobles, the main representatives of knightly ideals, projected on their dogs their own longings for faithfulness and heroism. They further turned their dogs into their partners, sharing with them the excitement of the chase and thereby creating a sense of solidarity between the master and his/her dog against wild animals.

Emotional attachment to dogs, however, was not restricted to medieval aristocracy, but embraced the bourgeoisie, as well. Alexander Neckham reports the ubiquity of dogs in twelfth-century London streets, gnawing bones, spoiling the peasants’ merchandise, and generally getting in the way. (Tigner Holmes, 1952). In the *Menagier de Paris*, written between 1392 and 1394 for the instruction of a young lady, the bridegroom asks his new spouse “to be very private and loving with your husband” and illustrates his request as follows:

With domestic animals you see that a greyhound, a mastiff, or a small dog – whether walking in the street, eating, or sleeping – always stays close to the one from whom he gets his food and avoids, and is reserved and timid with, everyone else. If the dog is far away from is master, he always has his
heart and his eye on him. Even if his master beats him and throw stones at him, he follows him nevertheless, wagging his tail; and he appeases his master by lying down before him and follows him by rivers, woods, thieves’ dens, and battles. Another example can perhaps be taken from the dog Macaire, who saw his master being killed in a wood and after he was dead did not leave him, but lay down near the dead man, and by day even went far away to seek food, which he carried back in his mouth without eating it – sleeping, drinking, and eating near the corpse – guarding the body of his master, quite dead in the woods. Later, the same dog attacked and several times fought the man who had killed his master. Every time he found him, he attacked and fought him, and finally he defeated him on the field on the island of Notre Dame at Paris.

Although one may wonder about the fate awaiting a wife who was expected to fulfill such “canine” expectations, there is significance in the husband’s additional request “to think most especially, carefully, and diligently of your house pets, like the little dogs and birds … for they cannot talk, and, therefore, if you have any, you must speak and think for them” [emphasis mine] (Bayard, 1991). This clear manifestation of dog keeping could hardly be justified in terms of an “urbanization” process in Paris at the end of the fourteenth century. After the Black Death, Paris counted only about some tens of thousand inhabitants who represented a confederation of different social groups, each of them giving its members a sense of solidarity and cohesion.

Dog keeping, though, did not remain the monopoly either of a narrow aristocracy or of the emerging bourgeoisie. In the thirteenth-century fabliau Del Houstillement au vilain, there is a touching description of the typical peasant who has a small garden and a dog for watch (Evans, 1969). There is also an attractive picture of a peasant playing with his dog in Marie’s fable, De l’asine ki voelt juer a sun seignur (Higgs, 1965; Salzman, 1926). Shepherds usually had huts in which their faithful dog passed the night with them. Thus, medieval Western society as a whole gradually discovered the advantages of dog keeping. As companion animals, dogs became an integral component of daily life of all social strata, each one with its own needs and its own dogs.

**Conclusion**

Analyzing the keeping of companion animals in modern society, Charles Phineas (1973-74) argues:
It was the growing role confusion of the middle classes in a maturing industrial economy that drew them to pets. Cut off from the bases of economic and political power, their essential functions gone, the middle class required control over a subject being to give them any sense of purpose. Small wonder that pet ownership and fascist voting relate so closely in Weimar Germany.

Economic, political, or personal crises were hardly unique to Weimar Germany: they are more or less constant factors in the history of humankind. So is the presence of dogs, especially in Western culture. The generally negative and hostile attitudes of monotheistic religions did not succeed in eradicating the canine species from human society, and people's attachment to dogs permeated both ancient and medieval cultures. In the detour from ideology to daily experience, people exalted dogs for their loyalty, memory, intelligence, as well as their oracular and therapeutic skills. All these virtues not only elevated dogs to the apex of the animal kingdom but also placed their qualifications above those of ordinary people.

To sum up, petkeeping did not result from a market society, but from the tendency of human beings, whether in the framework of traditional societies or industrial cities, to project onto their pets—dogs being perhaps the most important members in this category—their most cherished values and expectations. True, the content of this projection changed from time to time and the bravery expected from dogs in ancient cultures is today replaced by affection, as an antidote to the loneliness inherent in urban life. Dog keeping, though, did not emerge from the detachment of modern human beings from nature, though this detachment did change its meaning. Dog keeping appears, rather, as a constant component in the annals of Western civilization and, in fact, is entitled to be freed of the modernism ascribed to it.

Note

* Correspondence should be sent to the author at the Department of History, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905 Israel, email: S.MENACHE@UVM.HAIFA.AC.IL.

While I was writing the final draft of this paper my dear dog, Rocki, died. I would like to dedicate this paper to his memory.

May he follow in the steps of Kitmir.

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