
Hunting Hounds along the Silk Road – Which Way Did They Go?

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In 2001 I journeyed for the first time along part of the Silk Road from Khiva to Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Bishkek, Lake Issyk-kul and Almaty to realise an ambition I had nurtured since studying Russian at Cambridge years before. The following year I journeyed along another part from Bishkek over the Tien Shan to Kashgar, then through the oasis towns on the southern side of the Taklimakan before crossing the desert to the northern oases and on to Dunhuang, finally leaving via Urumqi to Almaty. During these journeys I came across various hunting hounds peculiar to Central Asia but similar in many aspects to the Saluki, the hunting hound of the Middle East, where I had spent much of my professional career. I was curious to know whether there was indeed a relationship between them and, if so, whether these hounds owed their origins to Western or Central Asia.

Hunting hounds of the Saluki family [Fig. 1], characterised by



Fig. 1. Smooth-haired Iraqi Saluki. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

their long limbs, deep chest, tucked up waist, wedge-shaped head on a long neck, pendulous ears and whippy tail, have been known to exist in Western Asia since at least the fourth millennium BCE. Archaeological evidence from this period in the shape of seal impressions from Tepe Gawra in northern Iraq shows representations of such hounds in pursuit of cervidae (Clark 1995, 132). Similar hounds, though with distinctive pricked ears and a tail curled over the back and generally known as Tesem also occur in Ancient Egypt from ca. 3,750-3,400 BCE (Brewer 2001, 32). In the absence of evidence elsewhere to the contrary, it would seem likely that the Saluki type of hunting hound emerged first on the great plains of Mesopotamia, where they were used for hunting mainly by sight the whole range of the abundant game then to be found there, as well as predators such as fox, jackal and wolf. However it cannot be excluded that among the nomadic tribes of Central Asia, who may have left few tangible clues, similar requirements for a hunting hound on the steppes and semi-deserts there may have shaped a similar kind of hound, possibly with a

denser coat to protect it from the colder climate [Fig. 2].

It has been shown recently that the dog was first domesticated from the wolf in Eastern Asia and spread outwards from there across the world probably about 15,000 years ago or possibly 40,000 years ago (Savolainen et al.). According to the Russian cynologist V. A. Gorodtsov hunting and other types of specialised dogs emerged in Central Asia in the Neolithic period (8-10,000 BCE) (Plakhov and Shelestova forthcoming). This accords with archaeological evidence in



Fig. 2. Central Asian Tazy in Kazakhstan. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

Western Asia and leaves a considerable period of millennia for distinctive breeds of hunting hounds to have developed before the advent of the Arabian Saluki to Central Asia, which Russian cynologists, such as L. P. Sabaneev, A. A. Sludskii and E. I. Shereshevskii, generally agree came in the wake of the Muslim conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries and was crossed with local breeds to produce the Central Asian Tazy (Ibid.). Sabaneev says that the admixture of blood from these local breeds brought about a change in the smooth-haired Saluki's appearance to a longer coat, fringes, pendulous ears and a generally coarser build. He does not specify what these local breeds were but only that they



Fig. 3. Petroglyph from Kazakhstan. Photograph copyright © 2006 Renato Sala of the International Scientific Projects of the Laboratory of Geo-archaeology, Almaty. Reproduced with permission.

were longhaired mountain dogs with pendulous ears (Sabaneev 1993, 13).

However this attribution of the origin of the Tazy to the eastward movement of Salukis with the conquering Arabs seems to overlook other evidence that suggests the presence of very similar smooth-haired hunting hounds in the region at much earlier dates, which might equally have contributed to the development of the Tazy. There are for example petroglyphs from the 1st and 2nd millennium in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that show stylised dogs in hunting scenes, though in general they appear to have pricked ears and an upward curling tail more like the Tesem of Ancient Egypt [Fig. 3].

In the 4th century BCE Alexander the Great and his Seleucid successors had established an empire from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan and the Indus. It is known that the Greeks used Saluki-like hounds for hunting. Indeed there are grounds for believing that the very name Saluki comes from the Arabic word *Saluqi* for Seleucid (Smith 1980). The Greeks traded with western Central Asia and their influence can be seen in some of the

Scythians' splendid examples of the goldsmith's art, including the famous pectoral from the Tolstaia Mogila, showing smooth-haired hounds with either pricked or cropped ears in pursuit of hare (Przedziecki 2001, 67). The Seleucids' capital at Seleucia in contemporary Iraq was retained by their successors — the Parthians, though

the following Sasanians built a new town at Ctesiphon on the opposite side of the Tigris in 226 CE — and was the great hub controlling international trade from Rome to China that became known as the Silk Road (Valtz Fino 2005, 149). Much of this trade for some 500 years was in the hands of the Sogdians, based around Bukhara, Samarkand and the Ferghana valley, who were for long exposed to Hellenistic influence, not least since Alexander's wife Roxanne was a Sogdian (Sinor 1990, 175). So it is entirely possible that Saluki hounds were being conveyed eastwards along that route well before the Arab conquests. Indeed if we look further east in China in the Qin Period (221-207 BCE) we find funerary bricks from noble tombs with graphic examples of smooth-haired hunting hounds with cropped or pricked ears in hunting scenes (Przedziecki 2001, 98). Similar hounds appear on stamped bricks (Ibid.) and in stone reliefs (Schafer 1985, 77) later in the Han Period (206-220 CE).

Be that as it may, it is clear that by the 7th century hounds looking remarkably like contemporary Salukis were being represented in art across Central Asia and China. In a remarkable exhibition at the

British Library on the Silk Road in 2004 there were two 7th century Tang dynasty terra cotta figurines of such hounds in unmistakable poses: one sitting upright and the other crouching on the crupper of a horse behind its huntsman master [Fig. 4]. A magnificent mural in an imperial 7th century Tang tomb near Chang'an shows a falconer with a Sparrowhawk on his arm accompanied by a beautifully represented feathered Saluki (Whitfield 1999, 89). A 9th-century painted scroll in the British Museum of the Paradise of Bhasajyaguru from Dunhuang in the time of the Tang dynasty shows a smooth-haired hound Saluki reaching for a piece of meat. Another Tang painting shows two Salukis in a butcher's



Fig. 4. Tang dynasty figurine. Photograph copyright © 2007 Victoria and Albert Museum. Reproduced with permission.

shop, while a Song dynasty colour and ink on silk painting from the 10th century shows three mounted hunters carrying unmistakable Salukis on their horses (Waters and Waters 1984, 92, 40). Much later a Jesuit painter resident in Beijing in the mid-18th century painted several Salukis for a presentation album to the Qianlong Emperor, though it is suggested that foreign dignitaries may have given them as tribute



Fig. 5. Mounted Berkutchis and Tazys in Kyrgyzstan. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark, from original on display in Cholpon Ata Museum, Kyrgyzstan.

(Rawski and Rawson 2005, 188-191, 410-411).

Against this academic evidence I set off to explore for facts on the ground today. The start in the walled oasis town of Khiva in western Uzbekistan appeared auspicious as I spotted a *Berkut* or Golden Eagle sitting on a stand. The Berkut is traditionally used for hunting right across Central Asia and is often used in tandem with Tazys [Fig. 5]. My hopes were soon dashed however as it turned out to be a mere tourist attraction. We crossed the Oxus or Amu Darya as it is now called and drove parallel with it along the southern side of the Kyzyl Kum in ideal hunting country but without success, apart from some information about an oasis town far from our road that was described as the centre for hunting with Tazys. However I noticed on the map an area outside Bukhara that was designated as a gazelle nature reserve. I reasoned that if gazelle were indigenous there hunting hounds might also be found there. We stopped at the entrance to the reserve, and I went in with our guide to speak to the Director in charge. Bounding to meet us came the familiar form of what I supposed to be a smooth fawn Saluki. On closer inspection it proved to have turned back ears, which are more commonly associated with Greyhounds, though it definitely was not a

Greyhound; yet it was not a Saluki either. All their keeper could tell us was that this hound and all the others we saw there had come originally from Russia and that he used them for seeking out fallen gazelle in the reserve. During a visit to Russia in 2004 I saw many similar hounds, which were called *Hortaya* (*khortaia*) [Fig. 6]. Some Russians believe that this breed may have descended from those smooth-haired hunting hounds shown in the early Scythian representations mentioned above.

After taking in the many delights of Bukhara, Shakhrisabz



Fig. 6. Russian *Hortaya* in Uzbekistan. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

and Samarkand, we drove on via Tashkent and Bishkek deep into Kyrgyzstan. Our destination was a yurt in the Tien Shan Mountains near the former Silk Road caravanserai at Tash Rabat. All along our route I had been told about the decline in hunting with

hounds, particularly since the departure of many of the ethnic Russian population, and I had given up all thought of seeing any more hunting hounds. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to be greeted on arrival in Tash Rabat by a hound with a dense black coat that the local Kyrgyz called a *Taigan* [Fig. 7]. This breed is particular to the high mountains where it has developed the ability to hunt all manner of animals in the rare atmosphere above 2,500 m even in the depths of winter. It appears to be related to the Saluki but with a broader head, a stockier build and a dense coat.

It proved to be the first of a number of such hounds that we were to see. We took a walk up into the mountains hoping to see into China and on the way came across a yurt that was protected by a red and white Taigan. A woman emerged from the yurt who turned out to be someone to whom we had given a lift earlier. She welcomed us into her yurt and showed us a tiny black Taigan puppy. Her husband appeared and said that he hunted marmot and mountain goat for the pot, and the hounds were very affective even when the temperature fell to -30 degrees C. As we explored further in the area we passed near another yurt from which a man hailed us, offering us hospitality. We declined but asked if there were any Taigans nearby. He indicated a valley



Fig. 7. *Taigan* at Tash Rabat. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

where we would find some. We splashed through an icy mountain stream up the valley and around a bend came on another yurt and a mud-brick house under construction. As we approached three Taigans rushed out to greet us. They were very friendly and looked in good condition: one of



Fig. 8. Afghan Hound? Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

them was heavily pregnant and was due to give birth within a few days. All, we were told, were excellent hunters. A little further on I saw another Taigan on the other side of a stream by a small house. As soon as we stopped to get a better look, the door of the house flew open and some young lads rushed out, jumped onto horses and raced across the stream towards us, followed by a very lively Taigan puppy. It was only with difficulty that we managed to extricate ourselves from their pressing invitations to their house. We did relent further on where a woman appeared from a small house with a plate of different dairy products: *kaimak* (a sweet thick cream), curds and cheese with delicious fresh bread.

As we descended from the mountains the next day we passed many yurts and great herds of horses, sheep and cattle — and even a few yaks. We stopped at one where a woman was making little round cheeses (*qurut*) that she was setting out to dry and harden in the sun. She showed us

round her beautifully decorated yurt, from the roof of which hung a fur from a fox caught by her Taigan. Further on we came across a young lad walking by the roadside with a beautiful black and tan hound that had something of the old-fashioned Bell-Murray type of Afghan Hound about it [Fig. 8].

Nearby I spotted out of the corner of my eye a familiar shape gliding along the base of a farmhouse wall. We made a little detour and were warmly welcomed by the farmer's wife and her small bright-eyed daughter, who proudly showed us the black and white Taigan bitch, rather strangely called Tarzan, and her five tiny puppies. The bitch gave a warning growl when I stepped too near to take a picture of the puppies and the next thing I knew was that she had bitten me in the ankle, to the mortification of her owner! No serious harm was done and I was assured that the bitch had been vaccinated against rabies, but it was a warning not to mess with a Taigan with puppies.

It was clear from all these encounters that the Taigan, like the Saluki in the Middle East, is held in a position of high esteem both as a pot-filler and as a companion. However, as in other parts of the region, the pressures of modern life on the habitat of the hunting hound's prey is leading to a decline in the numbers of the Taigan and, according to local sources, the carelessness of some of the hunters has resulted in some crossing with other breeds. Nevertheless in my short exploration I had seen enough of the breed to form the impression that it is still hanging on successfully in this area of Kyrgyzstan.

By the time of my next trip along the Silk Road a year later I had established via the Internet contact with people in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan so that my search for Central Asian hunting hounds was less haphazard. This time my earlier impression of the situation of these hounds was reinforced both factually and visually. Our guide, Almaz Kurmankulov, was a founder of the Kyrgyz Taigan Society, which had recorded about 200 purebred Taigans and was encouraging breeders to preserve the breed as part of the nation's heritage. Starting in Bishkek he took us first to meet a well-known horse and Taigan breeder on his farm. Here we saw a number of his breeding stock, all of them black and white, with the distinctive ring at the end of the tail where the last two vertebrae are fused together. One bitch was surrounded by a litter of lively puppies, two of which were due to be presented later to King Juan Carlos of Spain. We had intended to see one of the kennels on Lake Issyk-kul, but all the hounds were away in the mountains where they spend the summer months with the flocks and herds. As we were to see later this is the bountiful time for Taigans when marmots are abundant, which they catch to feed their puppies. Instead we made a diversion high into the mountains to visit Zarnai Sagenbai, one of the few remaining *Berkutchis* in Kyrgyzstan. We found him and his wife at their yurt, outside of which sat a screaming Berkut. Zarnai put on a demonstration of his skill, flying the Berkut from his horse to a lure in the valley below [Fig. 9, next page]. He and his sons still flew their eagles to hunt mainly hare for food and fox for fur but also for wolf to protect their livestock. In the past they used to fly them in tandem with Tazys, as an old photograph in the Cholpan-Ata Museum illustrated [Fig. 5, facing page].

As on our last trip we made for Tash Rabat whence we planned to drive over the Torugart Pass into



Fig. 9. Kyrgyz Berkutchi. Photograph copy-right© 2007 Terence Clark.

the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China. As we arrived at our yurts we were greeted with the news that there was a Kyrgyz community some 30 km away with Taigans that Almaz was keen to register. So he and I and a local Russian driver set off to find them. Before long we found ourselves at a military checkpoint before the border with China. The prospects of passing it did not look too good as neither of my companions had passports with them. However a friendly officer pointed to a white house a few hundred metres away where he said we would find many Taigans and allowed us to pass. Sure enough we found several mature hounds there, some with young puppies that kept popping out of deep holes in the ground where they lived, protected from the biting wind and predators. Almaz duly measured them and recorded their details. A young lad came up and asked if we would like to see some more. So under his guidance we set off in our ancient car across country where there was not so much as a dirt track. After some while we stopped at the top of a bluff from where we could see below a yurt belching smoke from its chimney: we had arrived. Scrambling down we were met by several Taigans of different ages and sizes and in no time Almaz was submerged in a heap of playful puppies, grown fat on regurgitated marmot meat from their parents. The lady of the

yurt dragged out from her underground den a very reluctant bitch to show us her recently born puppies. There could be no doubt that in these remote parts Taigans still formed an essential part of the Kyrgyz nomads' way of life.

Fascinating though the journey along the Silk Road through the Uighur Region proved to be, in terms of hunting hounds it was totally unrewarding. According to border officials and our guide, we were not allowed to depart from the main road to visit Kyrgyz villages in which I had expressed an interest; so I could not make enquiries there. Among the Uighur and Han Chinese I met only blank looks when I showed them photographs of the hounds. Yet a contemporary mural in the Khotan Museum illustrating medieval travellers on the Silk Road showed in the central foreground an unmistakable Tazy.

How different was the reception at our final destination in Kazakhstan! In Almaty Konstantin Plakhov, a biologist at the Institute of Zoology and a champion of Kazakhstan's native breeds, came to the hotel and took me to call on Askar Raibaev, President of the Dog Breeding Federation of Kazakhstan. As I entered his house I almost fell over Roshan, a beautiful Tazy that occupied much of the centre of the room with her eight puppies. Askar described the considerable efforts being made to preserve not only the Tazy but also the Tobet [Fig. 10], a huge shepherd guard dog, of which I was shortly to see some specimens at my next stop — the Sunkar Breeding Centre in a beautiful setting outside the town. The Centre contains a large

number of raptors of different kinds, some of which are there for breeding and some for rehabilitation, after being found injured, and release into the wild. Running loose were several mature Tazys and puppies, while in well-designed kennels some Tobets padded massively up and down. Both the Tazy and the Tobet have suffered from a decline in numbers and in quality, and the Centre is endeavouring to preserve the breeds and to encourage their wider distribution. It is hard to judge its success. Certainly I heard of some Kazakhs who maintained quite large kennels of Tazys for hunting on their farms and on the steppe, and I met some Tazy breeders in Almaty. However, the problem is also one of changing lifestyles: there is no longer the same need to hunt for food or for fur, and younger people are more interested in computer games than hunting in the often harsh conditions of the steppe.

Throughout my tours I was collecting here and there from the various hunting hounds both mtDNA and DNA samples to send to Dr Peter Savolainen in Sweden, who is undertaking research into the origins of dogs. The research,



Fig. 10. Kazakh Tobet. Photograph copyright © 2007 Terence Clark.

which has of course important implications for the history of mankind in this region, continues, and in due course it may lead to an answer to my initial question about the western or central Asian origins of these hunting hounds along the Silk Road.

About the Author

The author studied Russian at Cambridge University while in the Royal Air Force but on joining the British Foreign Service was sent to study Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University and at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in Lebanon. He spent much of his career in the Middle East, latterly as Ambassador to Iraq and to Oman. In retirement he retains close links with the Middle East through a number of academic bodies and has written extensively in books and journals on the history and politics of the region and on the Saluki and hunting. E-mail <Sirterenceclark@aol.com>.

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A Thousand Years on the Silk Road: Epic Poetry and Music from the Kyrgyz Republic

Rysbai Isakov, *Epic Singer*

Akylbek Kasabolotov, *Musician*

Dr. Helen Faller, *Anthropologist*

In February-March 2006, with generous support from the Silkroad Foundation, anthropologist Helen Faller toured the United States with two young artists from Kyrgyzstan in a series of university residencies called the Kyrgyz Cultural Performances Project. The artists were Rysbai Isakov, a laureate epic singer, who

performed episodes from the Kyrgyz national epic *Manas*, the longest in the world at over half a million lines, and Akylbek Kasabolotov, a member of Kyrgyzstan's *Tengir Too Ensemble*, who shared his country's unique nomadic musical traditions. The three of them were in residence at eight universities

in six states and performed for over 3000 people. The purpose of the tour was to provide opportunities for Americans to learn about Central Asian performance culture from two talented cultural ambassadors and to provide the artists with experiences that would help them to develop their art in new ways. Video footage of the Kyrgyz Cultural Performances concert at the University of Texas at Austin is on view at www.silkroadfoundation.org and realaudio.cc.utexas.edu:8080/ramgen/cola/centers/creees/images/media/kyrgyz_022206E.rm. Information about the project can be found on