

The Molossers

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Throughout history the land has by and large been owned and ruled by a small elite, be they the lords of the manor of medieval Europe, the plantation owners of the American south or the British or Dutch colonists of South Africa. Whether those working the land or in the mines were serfs, peasants, slaves, tenant farmers or share croppers the outcome was more or less the same: those who possessed the land or owned the mine worked little or not at all and benefited enormously, took the necessities for granted and luxuries as they came while those who toiled the soil lived at a bare sustenance level. Of course none of this was ever really voluntary; few of us would choose to be enslaved or tied to the land or to work in the mine.

Just as each class had its function and place in life, they also had dogs according to their needs, desires and resources. The shepherds and farmers had their herding varieties, later to emerge into formal breeds, and the dogs of the lower class tended to be smaller and less expensive to feed and keep.

Those in power maintained it by force and rigorous social bounds, ever vigilant to quench any uprising from below, any sign of rebellion. And rebellion has always been just under the surface, be it the slaves of Rome or the slaves of the American south. Usually these uprisings are crushed, but sometimes they succeed, as in the French revolution which went on to change the social fabric of Europe or the revolution of the slaves in Haiti which succeeded in taking over that nation. Other successful

rebellions lead to an even more oppressive ruling class as in the Russian Revolution of 1918.

Just as firearms and weapons were carefully held away from the working classes, large and powerful dogs were largely in the hands and the service of the rich and powerful. If the aftermath of our American revolution, the right of the people to hold arms was enshrined in our constitution, and although there is not a canine equivalent of the second amendment free Americans of all classes came to possess these large, powerful dogs, as in the progenitors of the American Bulldog in the rural South.

The classic examples would be the large English mastiff and corresponding national breeds such as the Dogue De Bordeaux in France and Cane Corso in Italy. As European colonists spread around the world local variants emerged such as the Dogo Argentino, Fila Brasileiro and Boerboel of South Africa. In many instances these dogs protected the landowner's interests



Cane Corso

beyond the immediate premises, as for instance the function of the gamekeeper and his dog was to keep the peasant classes from poaching on the game in the landowner's forest. And, of course, all of the forest belonged to one powerful lord or another; there was generally relatively little public land open to the common man for sport or sustenance.

The term Molosser has come into use for these large, powerful dogs, usually with down ears, a foreshortened muzzle and a short coat. The term Mastiff is sometimes used as synonymous, but better usage is generally to reserve that term for the original English Mastiff and its variants. Other nations and languages adopted their own vernacular such as Dogge in German and dogue or dogo in French or Italian.

This terminology is in actual practice poorly defined and often confusing. In general working dog conversation a distinction is made between the herding dogs or herders and the mastiff style or Molosser, such as the American Bulldog. But the Rottweiler is generally thought of as deriving from herding or droving dogs but yet is often included in Molosser lists.

It is most important to realize that classifications such as Molosser and Herder are broad and have great overlap, and that many if not most breeds encompassed by such classifications will have significant ancestry from other kinds of dog. Comparative statements are particularly treacherous in that any generalization will have numerous exceptions. State that the Molosser breeds are in general massive and powerful and many will be quick to point out Boxers are often less massive than individual German Shepherds. The Rottweiler is thought of by many as a Molosser and by many others as a herding dog, and can thus be enlisted on either side of any argument.

As an example, consider the Presa Canario of the Canary Islands. This is the historical summary direct from the FCI standard:

"Molosser dog native of the islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria, in the Canary Archipelago. Emerging as a result of crosses between the "majorero", a pre-Hispanic cattle dog originating from the islands, and molosser dogs brought to the archipelago.

These crosses originated an ethnic grouping of dogs of "dogo" type, of medium size, of brindle or fawn color, marked with white, of robust morphology, characteristic of a molosser, but with agility and drive of tremendous temperament, rustic and of an active and loyal character.

During the XVI and XVII centuries their population increased considerably. Numerous mentions of them exist in the historical texts prior to the conquest, mainly in the "Documents of the Town Council" which explained the functions that they fulfilled. Essentially they functioned as a guardian and cattle dog, as well subdued the cattle for the butchers."

The problem with all of this is that much of it is based on promotional enthusiasm rather than objective, verifiable historical fact. Actual records of descent, a studbook, only commenced in the 1960s or 70s. The process, as always, was on the basis of "Yes, that one looks like it might be a Presa Canario." This is by no means intended to slight this particular breed; this is exactly how the German Shepherds, the Belgian Shepherds and the Bouviers came into existence as formal breeds. This is how all breeds commence. Talk about this or that breed being descended from dogs brought by the Romans two millennia ago and similar foundation rhetoric tends to incorporate a great deal of poetic license in that these primitive types are continually being genetically modified by random bleedings to whatever is locally available.

While the Presa Canario is thought of as the Molosser type in actual fact a very significant portion of its genetic heritage is that of the native herding dogs present

on the islands prior to the more recent Spanish colonization. A simple statement of origins is never enough to characterize a breed, for the decisions of the breeders subsequent to the melding of the two originating types must have had a profound influence on the dogs before us today, and these breeders were among the farmers and cattlemen. The similarity to the Rottweiler is striking, and it would seem reasonable to think of both of these breeds as intermediate between the Molossers and the herders, perhaps even with a preponderance of herder in functional terms.

Although substantial plantations predominated in many favorable regions of the south, North America in general came to be dominated by independent family farms. In the hill regions of the South in particular, Molosser style dogs for protection and bull and hog control came into the hands of these small, family based landholders. These dogs tended to be a little smaller, a little more quick and agile than the classic English Mastiff. Remnants of these rural southern farm dogs formed the basis of the American Bulldog after the Second World War.

In general the Molosser is thought of as heavy boned, large and powerful rather than quick, fleet and agile. The bite is a methodical grip rather than a quick strike. The typical short muzzle is characteristic of the guard dog relying on sight and sound rather than olfactory capability. In general, the attack of the Molosser was to be direct, strong and persistent. Indeed, the Bulldog has become the ubiquitous personification of relentless, dogged persistence.

The herding dogs of protection dog discussions are not generally of the Border Collie type of the midlands of the British Isles, where the land is sparse and the sheep disperse to forage rather than remain in flocks, but rather tending style dogs from northern European areas of Germany, the Low countries and northern France. The quintessential example was of course the dogs of the shepherds, progenitors of the Belgian, Dutch and German Shepherds, who in the herding past were primarily tending and guarding dogs needed where flocks were large, needed to be kept intact and needed to be defended from serious predators.

Thus these tending style herders needed immense stamina to contain, guard and guide the herd around the clock. These dogs were quick and fleet rather than large and powerful. Being lighter boned and less massive than the Molosser, the power of the attack comes from the quick strike rather than massive power. The muzzle tends to be longer for more efficient breathing and for the olfactory capability necessary in searching out strayed herd members.

While the function of the Molosser style dog is to engage an opponent and prevent his escape; that of the herder is in fundamental ways different. The primary duty of the herder is to protect the flock or herd, which means that when an intruder retreats he must react in a manner opposite to the Molosser, that is, break off the attack and stay with the herd. Wolves and other predators are often quite canny; perfectly capable of sending a couple to draw off the dogs in an extended chase while the remainder can have their way with the herd.

In addition to the Molossers and herders, many regions had specific breeds or types for predator eradication, such as the Irish and Russian wolfhounds. These tended to be sight oriented chase dogs and were of entirely different breeding, structure and character from the herding dogs. These sight hounds have had relatively little practical human protection use.

This distinction between the slower, powerful, dogged attack of the Molosser and the quick strike, often with a quick release, of the herder plays a pivotal role in the selection of breeds for modern functions such as police dog, guard dog and personal protection.

The effectiveness of police dog service in Europe is largely a consequence of the various training, trial and breeding systems such as Schutzhund and the Dutch Police

or KNPV trial systems, which began to emerge very early in the twentieth century. Just as police service emphasized the herders, these trials were primarily participated in by the traditional herder based police breeds such as the German Shepherd, Malinois, Bouvier and the others. Other breeds developed specifically as police style working dogs, such as the Doberman Pincher, also played a part.

The Molosser style dogs, other than the Rottweiler and Boxer, have generally not been represented, and their participation has tended to decline with time.

There has been a double edged sword aspect to this, the trial systems were set up to emphasize the nature of the herders, the quickness, and especially the control in the emphasis on quick outs, recalls and automatic guard rather than engagement when the adversary stands still. And this is not discrimination against other styles of dogs, for these trials emphasize the natural tendencies of the larger, more robust tending style herders precisely because they are the most useful and effective in actual police service.

French Ring especially emphasizes the extreme aspects of the herding dog nature, with great emphasis on quickness and agility in engaging a helper who is expected to be deceptive and evasive. This is not really ever going to be to the advantage of the Molosser style dog, although in America we have seen at least one Ring III American Bulldog.

This is a dilemma for the advocates of the Molosser breeds, especially those in increasing popularity where there is a strong desire to emphasize proven working capability. If these breeds are bred for success in Schutzhund and Ring, they will need to become smaller, more agile, less bull dog like and quicker in the bite. But will this in reality only diminish the traditional attributes of the breed, the power, massiveness and strength? Is making a Molosser a pseudo herder really the right direction for any breed?

Some Americans, such as Dominic Donovan on the east coast, are attempting to create new breeds free of European domination and control, a new start in a new land. Although precise combinations are closely held secrets, this seems quite evidently an effort to combine some of the more robust and energetic Molossers with short coated herders, mostly Malinois and perhaps Dutch Shepherds. In principle there is no reason to object to this, Americans in general need to grow up and stand on our own feet rather than sucking up to Europe; but it a difficult undertaking.

But would these dogs be Molossers? How much Malinois blood can you incorporate and not have Malinois with a little outside breeding to maintain vigor, size or whatever the needs of the moment seem to be, as in the Dutch police lines?

Are weight pulling or hog catching trials an answer? In this day and age the draft dog is obsolete, even illegal in much of Europe, and the traditional bull and hog work was in steep decline when the American Bulldog was pulled together by advocates in the south like Johnson and Scott to preserve this heritage as the way of southern life changed, eliminating their function just as the herding breeds were established in Europe as police style patrol dogs half a century earlier for the same reasons.

In the big picture, the American and French revolutions stripping the ancient regime of its land, its power and often its lives and the Industrial Revolution, moving the masses from the land to the cities and putting power in the hands of an emerging merchant class, have made the Molosser style dog more or less obsolete as the working herders of the lower classes have emerged as the modern police patrol dog and to a large extent the guardian of farm, business and homestead.

Just as in the herders and other fashionable show lines, many of the Molossers have evolved into pathetic caricatures, as in the English Bull dogs and the Johnson style of American Bulldog. The advocates of these breeds have a challenge even more difficult than that facing the herder style dogs, for it is obvious that a Malinois

must pass a Schutzhund, KNPV or Ring trial in order to be proven worthy of his breed heritage; but there are really no corresponding, generally available and widely accepted Molosser criteria.

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