



BOOKS *et al.*



ANIMAL STUDIES

# The question of canine origins

With few solid leads, a paleoanthropologist explores the emergence of the first dogs

By Greger Larson

There are roughly 1 billion dogs on Earth, about 10% of which live in homes in North America. For many of us, dogs are not just pets, they are family members with their own bespoke clothing and therapists and trendy snacks (for example, the many varieties of canine pumpkin spice latte treats). Dogs have become so integrated into our lives that it is difficult to imagine how, for at least 90% of our species' history, we lived without them.

In her new book, *Our Oldest Companions: The Story of the First Dogs*, Pat Shipman sets herself two admirable goals. She seeks the complete dog origin narrative, attempting to identify how and when and from where dogs first emerged, and perhaps more ambitiously, to understand “why we have so often misunderstood the full story.” To her credit, Shipman is aware of the pitfalls associated with storytelling, including the human bias that enforces an inevitability to the things that are important to us now. Her goal, she explains, is to present the

story “the right way around” by questioning fundamental aspects of canine origins that are often assumed and unquestioned.

So what do we know for sure about our dogs' earliest days? We can be certain, for one, that dogs emerged from gray wolves. Although limited amounts of gene flow from other canid species into dogs have been recorded, it was definitely a population of gray wolves from which dogs emerged.

As to when they emerged, that depends on whom you ask. Some scientists have controversially postulated that dogs were with us 32,000 years ago. A minimum bound of 15,000 years is generally accepted. The temporal window of uncertainty results from the difficulties associated with distinguishing the first unambiguous dogs from wolves. Dogs are the result of a fundamental behavioral shift in the relationship between people and wolves, and behaviors are less than easy to infer from either the archaeological or genetic records. In her telling, Shipman presents the case for the older dates but curiously avoids discussing why this deeper end of the time frame has been challenged.

Gray wolves have been distributed across

Modern dogs emerged from a population of gray wolves, but when and how remain a mystery.

Eurasia and North America for tens of thousands of years, so pinpointing the precise location where dogs first emerged has also proved vexing. This assumes, too, that there was just a single occurrence. It is possible that dogs emerged more than once, independently, from widely geographically separated populations of gray wolves. Shipman avoids choosing a side in this lively debate and leaves the matter unresolved.

The weight of ambiguity begins to take a toll on the book's prose, and Shipman falters by heading down cul-de-sacs and Denisovan tangents. However, she quickly recovers by addressing the twinned questions of how and why dogs came into being. Here, she explicitly states that the domestication of dogs “cannot have been intentional,” but she then frequently undermines this position by using the term “domesticate” as a transitive verb, implying that the process was something that people did deliberately to wolves. Shipman avoids stating precisely how she believes dogs first emerged, which is perhaps a braver stance given the lack of evidence for any specific model.

Eager to battle against the dearth of certainty, Shipman heads for Australia, where she suspects a deep investigation of the dingo will offer insights into the dog's hazy origins. Dingoes are a fascinating case study of feralization. Functionally, the way they fill an ecological niche is analogous to wild, Indigenous Australian species, but their genomic ancestry belies a clear-cut relationship to both modern and ancient East Asian domestic dogs and feral New Guinea singing dogs. Undeterred by the overwhelming evidence in support of these relationships, Shipman claims that the ancestors of dingoes were never domestic dogs. Her bewildering position on this issue is likely a symptom of the overall lack of both theoretical and empirical foundations from which we attempt to understand dogs.

In the absence of smoking gun evidence, investigating dog origins can make us feel as though we have no choice but to present myth and contorted logic as fact. Perhaps, instead, there is opportunity. Let us not be intimidated by the abyss. With cleared heads and renewed vigor, we can step forward and collectively seek the origins of our beloved animal companions. ■



**Our Oldest Companions: The Story of the First Dogs**

Pat Shipman  
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