

The Big Bark: When and where were dogs first made pets?

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Chasing after a pheasant wing, these seven-week-old Labrador puppies show their hunting instincts early. When and where were dogs domesticated? There are different theories, and much debate. Photo: Derek Neas/DULUTH NEWS-TRIBUNE

LOS ANGELES – Where did dogs come from? How did they come to be pets? For more than 100 years, scientists have argued over this question.

Recently, the conversation has turned into a dogfight.

Scientists know that dogs come from wolves. But exactly where, when and how are the big questions.

Some experts think that our ancestors were attracted to small, furry wolf pups. They took in the wolf pups as pets. Other experts think dogs were raised as food.

A Hunter's Best Friend?

Another theory says that hunters used the early dogs as helpers. This was long before people figured out how to raise goats and sheep for food.

Now, the question of how dogs became man's best friend may finally be solved.

A new study says that dogs come from Ice Age Europe. This was 18,800 to 32,100 years ago. That's much earlier and much farther north than scientists thought. Scientists looked closely at the DNA of 18 ancient dogs and wolves. DNA contains information that guides how living things develop and grow. The scientists then compared the ancient DNA with DNA from modern dogs and wolves.

The scientists say that dogs come from an ancient European wolf. These wolves died out a long time ago. Dogs do not descend from modern day wolves.

The early wolves probably began following groups of hunters. They wanted the dead animals and scraps of meat left behind by the hunters. At first, the wolves and people probably kept their distance. The wolves were large and dangerous, said Robert Wayne. He is a scientist at the University of California. He worked on the study.

After some time, wolves became part of human communities. Maybe they even helped people find animals to hunt. They also may have chased wild animals away from humans, Wayne said.

Bond Between Dogs And Humans

Until recently, experts thought dogs were tamed less than 13,000 years ago. They also thought dogs were from either eastern Asia or the Middle East. One key finding was at an archaeological dig in Israel. Archaeologists found the skeleton of a man cradling a puppy. The man lived 12,000 years ago. The special bond between dogs and humans has existed a long time.

Tracing where and how wolves developed into dogs is very difficult. Ancient dog bones are hard to tell apart from wolf bones. Dogs and wolves often mated. That also complicates things.

In fact, Charles Darwin believed that dogs had more than one ancestor. He thought this because there were so many different dog breeds. Darwin is considered the father of evolution. Evolution is the study of how living things began and changed over time. Darwin died in 1882.

Researchers now think that dogs evolved from only one ancestor. Likewise, the first dogs came from one region of the world.

Studying dogs is definitely harder than studying humans, said Greger Larson. Larson is a bioarchaeologist in Great Britain. Bioarchaeologists study animal bones found in archaeological digs.

Larson said the discovery is important. It's been hard to pin down the origin of dogs. Scientists have come up with crazy ideas about where dogs came from and how, he said.

People Want Answers To The Question

Other scientists strongly believe that Wayne is wrong.

Peter Savolainen is one of them. He is a professor in Sweden. He thinks dogs came from China. They were probably a source of food.

There are strong feelings about the issue.

People make up complicated stories about where humans come from. These stories are based just on a few ancient bones, said James Serpell. He is a professor in Pennsylvania. "I guess we're doing the same thing now to our dogs."

He said, "We view them as members of our families. We want to know where they came from and how this relationship came about."

Quiz

- 1 All the following are possible reasons early wolves became part of the human community EXCEPT:
 - (A) They were very loving toward humans.
 - (B) They helped people find animals to hunt.
 - (C) They were raised for food by early humans.
 - (D) They protected humans against wild animals.

- 2 What event led scientists to believe that dogs came from the Middle East?
 - (A) the death of Charles Darwin
 - (B) an archaeological dig in Israel
 - (C) a DNA test on a wolf's bones
 - (D) a study at the University of California

- 3 What can someone learn from reading this article?
 - (A) the correct procedure for DNA testing
 - (B) unique facts about different dog breeds
 - (C) the threat wolves posed to early humans
 - (D) countries scientists believe dogs came from

- 4 Select the paragraph from "Bond Between Dogs And Humans" that shows the reason why it is hard for scientists to learn how wolves became dogs.

Answer Key

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