Animals and Rites of Passage in Ancient Athens

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Formal rites of passage from childhood to adulthood are common in all societies. They are double edged things. While they bring both privileges and responsibilities as an adult they also represent the loss of the protected status of childhood. You may now be able to drive the car, but perhaps, if your parents are wise, you also now have to contribute to paying for the insurance.

That is an example of an informal rite of passage. We have many informal ones – the first shave, the onset of menstruation, extended curfew, voting age, drinking age. But modern society still preserves formal rituals as well, such as the rites of Confirmation and Bar Mitzvah. There has been scholarly interest in this phenomenon in ancient Greece (e.g. Padilla) before, trying to determine when a child was formally introduced to his phratry, for example, or at what exact age he joined the ephebes. This paper hopes to add a possible informal sign that a young Athenian male was leaving childhood and entering the world of the adult, and that sign was that his pets may have served as a social marker of an informal rite of passage among certain social groups. We will pay special attention to dogs.

Animals in antiquity have been the focus of my research for several years now and I have elsewhere written about the status of dogs in ancient Greek life. As early as Homer,, this status ranged from cur (think of Eumaios’s dogs or Helen’s calling herself a bitch) to faithful, prescient creatures such as Odysseus’ Argos. In my studies a single fact became indisputable -- dogs are omnipresent on Greek vases (Johnson). They seem to be the second most depicted animal after the horse. For a crude survey I searched the Beazley Archive Pottery Database. A search for horse(s) produced 2,124 hits and one for dog(s) produced 1517 hits.

Dogs permeated all levels of society. The shepherd in the fields with huge Molossian hounds (slide) bred to protect herds from predators like wolves. Similar large dogs would have also been kept to hunt larger game such as boar. And peasants and small farm holders surely had dogs of all shapes and sizes, mongrels all, whose barking alone was enough benefit to justify the human canine symbiosis. In fact, Hull lists over 60 named dog breeds.

But upper crust Athenians seem to have had a special affinity for two types of dogs which shared their *polis*-based life, and these, I think, have something to tell us about a young man’s passage into adulthood. The first kind of dog was a sleek hunter, [slide] bred to run long and hard in the field, helping to track down deer certainly, but especially the hare. Here a dog chases a fox. We will return to foxes and hares in a minute. Such dogs were Laconian and Cretan hounds and their handling was treated in depth by Xenophon in his *Kynegetica.* There are other named types. But it is the type that matters – long, slender, fast.

[slide] The second type of dog most seen in *polis* based scenes is called the Melitaean, or “Maltese” a short animal known by its stubby legs, curly coat and curly tail. This terracotta rattle is in the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum.

What has come to my attention is that the situations in which these dogs are depicted and the persons with whom they are seen, fall into a pattern which tells us, I think, something interesting about rites of passage and gender roles in fifth and fourth century Athens. Let’s look at the cute Melitaean first.

The Melitaean shows up in two main contexts. The first is on gravestones. A few examples will be more pleasant to look at than my droning on about them.

[slide] Melisto, Harvard. Note doll. Mention bird

[slide] Moschion Malibu. Proportions // mention Conze plates

[slide] The second place the Melitaeans are found is on the small vases called choes which played a prominent role in the Anthesteria. The Anthesteria was a three day festival to Dionysus, centering around the opening of wine jars that contained the now mature wine that had been put up previously. Part of the festival was devoted to children, and I can do no better than quote Beaumont on the subject:

“…it has become something of a dogma in Classical scholarship to assert that beginning in their third year Athenian children participated in the Choes festival of the Anthesteria on which occasion they were provided with reduced-size versons of the adult *chous,* from which they imbibed their first taste of wine.” (69-70)

[slide] There are all kinds of problems associated with interpreting this festival but one thing is clear – the Maltese plays a huge role on these miniature *choes*. Here the dogs play with children of both genders, pull them in carts, are trained to carry small choes on their backs, and in general seem a full part of the children’s lives. Perhaps they were gifts presented to children at this time along with similar pets such as birds, fawns , and goats which also populate the vases.

[slide] We should notice too, that the Maltese was a popular dog among women. From birth until somewhere in their early adolescence, Athenian males inhabited the women’s quarters of the house. Here they partook basically in the females' world and were surrounded by their favored pets. Illustrations from vases will show that women had their specific pets in these quarters. In addition to herons and geese were the cuddly Maltese dogs whose small size, curly tail and lively actions still evoke a smile across the

centuries.

But a change seems to occur when males moved out of the women’s quarters and into the world of the gymnasion. The Maltese are rarely seen here and in their place we have the sleek hunting dogs mentioned above. These hunting dogs are the youths' constant companions while hunting, at a symposion, or in the gymnasion. A selection of slides will make this clearer than my simply speaking about it. [**12 slides]**

The frequent painted depiction of collars and leashes and dedicatory poems from the Greek Anthology (6.34-35) reinforce the closeness of the young male’s bond with his hunting dog. We see them as companions to the youths in all aspects of their life… in war [slide], going out to war [slide], at athletic events [slides] and, ubiquitously [slide] at the symposium, the ultimate “men’s club” in ancient Athens where they lounge under the couches looking for a handout. This rhyton [slide x 2] is a clever inversion of this normal scene.

But the dog meant the most to Athenian youths in so far as it pertained to the hunt – actual and ertotic. Athenian youths especially hunted hares [slide double click] and fox [slide]. They did so for the sport, of course, but also because the animals helped them in the homoerotic hunt that occurred around the gymnasion where the older erastes courted the younger eromenos.

Here [slide] a relationship is consummated while the gift hare idles in a cage above and the dog below sniffs at the prey. Here [slide] a youth brings foxes on a pole back as prizes. And here [slide] it is possible that the dog itself is a gift.

Athenian youths were, apparently, as judged by their pets as boys in my day were judged by their cars. Plutarch tells us about Alcibiades’ dog, for which he paid an outrageous 70 minae, more than it cost to outfit a trireme for a month. In this well known slide [slide] a youth pits his dog against a cat. And as Ashmead has shown, some youths owned cheetahs which they brought to the gymnasion to show off.

The distinction between dog of boyhood and dog of manhood seems quite clear. It was not, of course, absolute. The illustration on your handout clearly shows a Maltese at the gymnasion. And these examples show that some older men became attached to Melitaeans and kept them beyond boyhood. But as these two grave stelai demonstrate, the dog did indeed serve as a social marker of an informal rite of passage.

There thus emerges a definite pattern of the use in Athens of animals as socially accepted markers of the stages of one’s early life. Maltese dogs, wading birds, doves and fawns were suitable for women and the young males dwelling with them. But an Athenian male’s entrance into the adult world seems also to have included a shift over to hunting dogs. It is not suggested that this was part of any ritual (e.g. the Anthesteria or Apatouria), but it does seem likely that the animals served as informal and socially accepted/respected symbols of one’s status in society.

Moreover, these dogs seem to be more than mere background decoration – they are often engaged in meaningful interactions with their adult masters.

A kylix in the Kimbell Art Museum attributed to the Triptolemos Painter even depicts the training of a dog. Inside is a scene where the unruly dog defecates while it bites a youth on his thigh, drawing blood. On the outside, however, the better behaved dog is being taught the trick of “give me your paw” (cf. Conze, no., 958, p. 205, Taf. CLXXXV).

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Sources mentioned in the talk and for further reading

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