

History of the Alaskan Malamute

by Barbara Brooks and Sherry Wallis

from the book "The Alaskan Malamute - Yesterday and Today" published by Alpine Books)



Origins

The Malamute today is a product of his historical origins. His ancestors came across the Bering Strait from Siberia to Alaska during the last Ice Age with the ancestors of the Inuit people who today inhabit the Arctic regions of North America and Greenland.

The People of the Arctic

The prehistory of these Arctic natives stretches back through many millennia and is largely a reflection of their adaptations to varying climatic conditions. Because they had no written language and virtually no contact with outside historians until the 18th century, their past is an ever shifting puzzle defined by pieces provided by archeologist, linguists, paleontologists, and anthropologists.

The resulting picture of pre-Inuit development is one of successive waves of immigration from Asia over the Bering Strait land bridge, through Arctic North America to Greenland. During long cycles over the millennia, the weather warmed and then cooled, forcing the natives to change their lifestyle as their environment changed.

Continued existence depended on their ability to adapt. Their success resulted from technological developments such as harpoons and kayaks, which allowed them to expand their food base, as well as their use of dogs in a partnership for mutual survival. The ancestors of modern sled dogs, the northern-type dog that accompanied the pre-Inuit on their travels, represent an ancient dog strain with a long history of working for man.

The pre-Inuit's migratory lifestyle varied with the seasons. The short summer found them inland, fishing and hunting, while winter brought them back to the coast for sea mammals. Hauling their possessions back and forth as well as moving meat from the hunt back to their base took the efforts of the entire family, dogs included.

Improving portability with the development of the sled was the next natural step. Today's Inuit, direct descendants of these ancient people, maintained this subsistence hunting culture into the last half of this century. Since then, they have faced repeated incursions into their world that have changed it, perhaps forever.

The Pre-Inuit Dogs

Until recently, interdependence between man and dog in the Arctic was complete. A walrus kill might yield a ton of meat, and the dogs were needed to transport it home. On the other hand, the food needs of the dogs increased the burden on the family. One to two pounds per feeding kept the dogs just on the border of starvation.

If resources permitted, the group kept a few more dogs than were needed to pull their normal sled load. This practice allowed for illness, females with puppies, and lame or sick dogs. The number of dogs needed for a team depended on many factors: the number of healthy dogs, breed of dog, length of the trip, weight of the load, type of terrain, the depth and type of snow, and weather, to list just a few. If the load proved too much for the team, men, women, and children would take up the harness alongside their canine workers. For all the pre-Inuit (except the Aleuts who lived on rock islands with little snow), from Siberia to Greenland, dogs were an essential component of their adaptation to the harsh Arctic environment and often meant the difference between life and death.



An Arctic expedition prepares for its sledge journey over the ice. Harper's Weekly, July 1973. Courtesy of the collection of Virginia Devaney.

NORTHERN DOGS

JUST AS THE DESCENDANTS OF THE FIRST INDO-EUROPEANS STILL HAVE SIMILARITIES IN APPEARANCE DESPITE RADICAL DIVERGENCES IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, SO TOO, CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF VERY DIFFERENT DOG BREEDS MARK THEM AS RELATED TO THESE FIRST 'NORTHERN' DOGS.

FROM MARCO POLO IN THE ORIENT TO NONSEN IN GREENLAND, THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THIS TYPE OF DOG AND ITS WORK ARE REMARKABLY SIMILAR. WHETHER THEY ALL ORIGINATE FROM SOME COMMON ANCESTOR OR WHETHER THEY REPRESENT AN INDEPENDENT ADAPTATION TO A COMMON ENVIRONMENT IS A SUBJECT OF MUCH DEBATE AND CONJECTURE. REGARDLESS OF

Pre-Inuit Dog Care

To prevent the dogs from gnawing through their harnesses, traces or tie-out lines which were made of either sinew or leather, many families filed down or pulled the dogs' teeth, especially the canines. Blunt or missing teeth also decreased the risk of injuries both in fights and to people who were bitten. Because such dogs could not chew their food, the pre-Inuit fed them small pieces of seal meat or walrus skin which the dogs bolted whole. The pre-Inuit believed that the unchewed food lay undigested, satiating the dogs for a long period. Convinced that hungry dogs were better workers, they fed only every other day for working dogs and every third day for maintenance. If food supplies were low, the pre-Inuit advised Arctic explorers that the dogs could be driven for up to five days without food, although after that they quickly died.

Explorers who adopted the native ways to cope with Arctic conditions continued these feeding practices into the twentieth century. Much of the ferocity attributed to sled dogs, especially with regard to food, undoubtedly has more to do with their constant state of starvation than with an inherently vicious temperament.

THEIR VARIOUS DESCRIPTORS SUCH AS 'NORDIC' 'NORTHERN' 'SPITZ-TYPE' OR 'ARCTIC' ALL REFER TO A DOG CHARACTERIZED BY A NATURAL FOX- OR WOLF-LIKE HEAD WITH ERECT EARS; DOUBLE COAT WITH HARSH, WEATHER-PROOF OUTER COAT AND A DENSE, WOOLLY UNDERCOAT; WELL-KNUCKLED, THICKLY PODDED FEET; AND A TAIL WHICH RISES OVER THE BACK TO SOME DEGREE.

THE 'NORTHERN' BREEDS WE KNOW TODAY AS THE SOMOYED AND SIBERIAN HUSKY EXISTED AS WORKING PARTNERS WITH THE SOMOYED AND CHUKCHI PEOPLES OF RUSSIA, RESPECTIVELY.

JAPAN'S DOGS, RANGING FROM THE GIANT AKITA TO THE DIMINUTIVE SHIBA INU, ARE OF THIS TYPE, AS ARE THE NORWEGIANS' ELKHOUND AND BUHUND, FINLAND'S KARELIAN BEAR DOG, HOLLAND'S KEESHOND, AND MANY OTHERS.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THESE STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS IN TODAY'S BREEDS, FROM THE TINY POMERANIAN TO THE ALASKAN MALAMUTE, IS A TESTIMONY TO THE VIGOR OF THESE GENES. DIFFERENCES IN COAT LENGTH, COLOR, SIZE, PROPORTION AND TEMPERAMENT ARE A REFLECTION OF THE VARIED PURPOSES FOR WHICH THESE BREEDS HAVE BEEN USED.

Many tribes routinely neutered all male dogs except for the leaders. This ensured that females were bred only by the best dogs and also reduced fighting between the dogs.

In addition to pulling sleds, the dogs assisted the hunters by locating blow-holes where air-seeking seals could be harpooned. They also served as combination watchers for and hunters of the Arctic's most dangerous predators, the great bears.

Different Breeds

Although the pre-Inuit dogs were similar in type throughout the Arctic, considerations of work, geography, and usage as well as the type and amount of snow resulted in notable differences between them. In far northwestern Siberia, the smaller, lighter-boned dog of the Chukchi, which we now know as the Siberian Husky, was renowned for its great speed and agility. The Chukchi were subsistence hunters and fur traders who needed dogs to transport pelts from their remote, isolated settlements to far-distant trading posts. Their smaller dogs pulled less weight per dog at much greater speeds than those of the Alaskan coastal hunters, and if the load was too heavy for one team, teams might be combined.

On the other side of the world, were the dogs of the Greenland Inuit. Slightly larger than their Siberian cousins, the Greenland Eskimo Dogs worked in the wide expanses of a still-glaciated land where pack ice created dangerous working conditions. Greenland dogs had to cope with heavier loads and much harsher living conditions as well as a different type and amount of snow. By all reports, they were tireless, willing workers but very aggressive. A favorite of polar explorers, their stamina and hardiness carried them to both Poles.

The Malamutes and their Dogs

The basis of the Alaskan Malamute dog of today was the large, sturdy dog of the Malamute tribe (Mahlamuits or Mahlemuts). This Inuit tribe inhabited the area around the Kotzebue Sound of Alaska and engaged in the same hunting and fishing activities as the other coastal Inuit. The Malamutes fully realized the value of their fine animals which were reported to be of remarkable beauty and endurance. Much larger than the Siberian and slightly larger than the Greenland dogs, the Malamutes had a distinctive coat, a tendency toward more regular markings, and less variation in color. Their wolf-like appearance often led to them being called "wolf-dogs."

Reprinted with kind permission from authors Barbara Brooks and Sherry Wallis. Extracted from the book "The Alaskan Malamute - Yesterday and Today" (published by Alpine Books). Artic-Luv endorses this book and highly recommends it to people who are interested in purchasing an ALASKAN MALAMUTE.