

DOG IN THE VENDIDAD

Ali A. Jafarey

The dog, or to take its scientific term *canis familiaris* ('faithful dog'), has been a constant companion of man, experts say, for the last 25,000 years. It is world's first trained animal and the only beast willing to be trained. It is highly territorial in character and aggressively defends what it considers to be its "own" territory. This makes the dog a very good guard. If it were not for the protection provided by the dog, scientists wonder, could human society have survived its natural enemies of carnivorous animals, including the dog's cousin, the much-dreaded wolf, to its present level of civilization. This very statement of scientists shows how important the dog has been to man.

The dog's "territorialism" is proverbial. We have a dog next door. He barks at every passerby, no matter who is walking and how far across the street he or she happens to be. It must bark until he feels that the passerby poses no intrusion into his territory, or his owner occasionally silences him. We have, during the last seven years, got used to his frequent outbursts day and night. We have found that the best way to live along with him is *to completely ignore him*. It works! After all, he guards our house too. We know when someone approaches our house.

One should not be surprised if one reads in the Vendidad, an ancient code of pollution and purification (and an interesting book of history, legend, geography, and anthropology) in the Avesta, that "my house could not subsist on the God-created earth, but for my dogs, the sheepdog and the housedog." Also, a late Zoroastrian writing in Persian says, "But for the dog, not a single head of cattle would remain in existence."

Dog played a vital part in the daily life of ancient Iranians who tended cattle and attended their fields. They, in turn, acknowledged the importance of the dog by granting it an almost equal status with man. The Vendidad, a book of 22 chapters, has more than one chapter on the dog.

It enumerates several breeds of dogs; the most important of them are the sheepdog, the housedog, and the vagrant. It appears that while the first two guarded the sheep and the house against "the thief and the wolf", the vagrant cleaned the village of noxious creatures and barked away aggressive strangers. The wild dog that lived as a scavenger on corpses is also mentioned.

Care was taken to give the dog good food. If bad food was served to a sheepdog, it amounted to having served the master of a high-class house with bad food. If bad food was given to a housedog, it amounted to giving bad food to the master of a middle-class house. Bad food to a vagrant dog was considered as if one gave bad food to a visiting priest. Giving bad food to a puppy amounted to giving bad food to a human child of good standing. The book prescribes severe penalties for giving foul food to various kinds of dogs. Giving hard bones or hot food to a sheepdog or housedog that results in its death makes one liable to the death penalty if not compensated against. Milk, meat and solid food were the right food for a dog.

Hurting various breeds of dogs had its own graded penalties. The person responsible had to compensate the bodily losses of the poor animal as well as pay for losses incurring to the owner through theft and wolf attacks. Smiting a female dog with her pups or chasing them to death from them falling into a hole or from a height also had the death penalty if not compensated in

full. Even a vagrant female dog about to deliver puppies was to be taken to a safe place and supported until the whelps were old enough—six months—to be able to defend and support themselves. If a person avoided to care for a pregnant dog, he or she was held responsible for the willful murder of the whelps and perhaps the mother. On the other hand, if a dog bit a sheep or wounded a person, it received its punishment according to the extent of the harm done, and the owner was made to compensate for the loss.

Female dogs, when in heat, were tied and watched to be mated with three healthy males to ensure conception. Care was taken to see that the males were kept apart as not to assail one another. However, if a dog, male or female, mated with a wolf, the whelps were to be destroyed because it was thought that the whelps would grow to become as destructive to the sheep.

A sick dog was to be cared for just as one cared for a sick man. A scentless dog was to be tied to a post lest it fell into a hole or from a height to its death. Negligence to take care of a disabled dog held one responsible for its death. Even a mad dog was not to be killed but tied to a post to prevent it from harming men and animals. Almost the same hygienic precautions were taken not to come in direct contact with a corpse of a dog as were observed for human dead. Ancient Iranians avoided contacts with dead matters as a good precaution against disease.

In days when there were no physicians to certify the death of a person, an appendix passage in the Vendidad suggests, the dog was brought to see a body and its reaction would assure the relatives of the definite death of the person concerned. Later the sagdid ('showing the dog a dead body') became part of the funeral rite. The dog also played the vanguard in discovering whether a piece of land on which corpses of men and dogs had long decayed was safe enough to pass through without contracting disease. If the dog resented going over the land, it was considered defiled and dangerous.

The ancient Iranians sang an interesting folk song, perhaps in a chorus, to describe the characters of certain kinds of people as seen in a dog. The Vendidad notes it in full. Here it is in its abridged form:

- A dog is like a priest because it is content and patient, wants bare subsistence and partakes leftovers.
- A dog is like a warrior because it marches in front, fights for the beneficent world and remains much out of house.
- A dog is like a prospering farmer because it is watchful, sleeps lightly, leaves the house first and returns the last.
- A dog is like a thief because it likes darkness, prowls at night, steals, shows no manners while eating and is ill natured.
- A dog is like a prostitute because it walks about the streets, pleases when approached and hurts if intruded.
- A dog is like a child because it sleeps a lot, salivates much, is very noisy and runs about.

(References: The Vendidad 5.29–34, 6.36, 8.4,16; 13; 15.4, 20–51)

* * * * *

