

By Naoto Kajiwara

The History of The Akita Dog: Ancient To Medieval Periods

No details on the origin and development of Japanese dogs are available. Archeological findings from shell mounds, burial sites and cave dwellings seem to indicate that these dogs have inhabited the Japanese islands since prehistoric times.

Dogs were probably the first animals to be domesticated during the early hunting and nomadic periods, and thus accompanied man in his migrations. **Japanese dogs are also believed to have retained their original features that resembled primitive dogs.** Very little outside influence probably came into Japan in ancient days at first, when she was already an island empire. However, in due time, civilization began to develop in the Kinki (*Osaka-Kyoto*) and Sanyodo (*Yamaguchi-Hiroshima*) regions with the arrival of immigrants from the Asiatic Mainland. Dogs from the Asiatic mainland are believed to have accompanied these immigrants, and this resulted in some crossbreeding with Japanese dogs.

Traditional Japanese dogs are believed to have evolved into their distinctive forms over a long period, influenced by their environment. In areas of advancing civilization, purity of the Japanese dog tended to disappear due to much crossbreeding.

In general, Japanese dogs declared as natural monuments came from remote mountain areas where civilization had not yet made its inroads and where purity of the dog breed had been maintained. **Seven breeds of Japanese dogs** were declared as natural monuments and named according to their places of origin and **classified by size into the large, medium and small dogs.** The **large Japanese dog** is the **Akita dog** from the Odate area. No other large Japanese dog is known to have survived. **Five medium Japanese dogs** exist. (1) **The Hokkaido dog** was widely distributed from the north to the Hokuriku area. (2) The almost extinct **Koshi dog** is distributed in the Hokuriku area which includes Echigo (*ancient name for Niigata Prefecture*), Etchu (*ancient name for Toyoma Prefecture*) and the Echizen (*ancient name for Fukui Prefecture*). (3) The **Kai dog** is from the Kai (*ancient name for Yamanashi Prefecture*) area. (4) The **Kishu dog** is from the Kii Peninsula (*Wakayama and Mie Prefectures*). (5) The **Shikoku dog** comes from the Shikoku Mountain Range. The **Shiba dog** is regarded as the representative of the **small Japanese dog.** However, Shiba dogs are named according to their habitat: The Toishi-inu from the Gunma Prefecture area, the Shinshu-Shiba from the Nagano Prefecture area, Mino-Shiba from the Gifu Prefecture area and the Sekishu (*or Iwami*) dog from the Sanin area in Shimane Prefecture. These dogs were either wild or kept as pets, in their places of origin in remote mountain areas with their beautiful forests of Japanese cedar and cypress.

How did the Akita dog of a specified area evolve into the large dog? One theory assumes that the Akitainu originated in the Odate area under influence of its habitat from ancient times. Therefore, let us now consider the geographical and social conditions of the Odate area from the Ancient to Medieval Periods that pertain to the Japanese dogs of this area.

The city of Odate is located in the northern half of the area formerly called Dewa in Akita Prefecture in Northern Honshu. The northern border of Akita shares the Futatsumori, Mitsumori, Tokichimori and Towada Mountains with the neighboring prefecture of Aomori. The Ou Mountain Range runs northeast in the Ou Region with the prefecture of Iwate on the eastern border of Akita. The western border is the Sea of Japan, while the southern border shares the Chokai Mountains with the prefecture of Yamagata. Odate is the northernmost city in Akita and is located in the Kazuno Basin, halfway down the Yoneshiro River. It is a castle town located in a fault basin, surrounded by the Hanawa Basin upstream and the Takanosu Basin downstream, which face each other. Therefore, Akita is surrounded on all sides by mountain ranges. Moreover, the Tohoku region is in the northernmost region of the temperate zone. The topography of Akita is such that northwest seasonal winds during the winter months bring cold weather and heavy snow to this area. On the other hand, during the summer months, as is characteristic of the coastal areas of the Sea of Japan, melting snow and heavy rains supply ample water to the beautiful Akita cedar forests and vast fields in the mountain areas. The city of Noshiro at the mouth of the Yoneshiro River, is a well-known center for timber.

How has the topography influenced the development of this area? The vast Tohoku Region is divided by the Ou Mountain Range into the Pacific Coast on one side and the Coast of the Sea of Japan on the opposite side. Cultural development and progress of civilization were different on each side of these mountains. Much cultural influence from the south came northward along the coast of the Sea of Japan, while the Pacific Coast was widely affected by cultural influences on the eastern side. Since Odate is located in the Ou Mountain Range, cultural influences from the eastern side was almost nil. Cultural influences from the south was also limited because the severely cold winter months caused closing of the land and sea routes. This resulted in a delayed development of this area.

Archeological findings in Akita from the Jomon (*Japanese neolithic cultural period extending from about 8000 B.C. to about 200 B.C.*) and the Yayoi (*Japanese archeological history from about 200 B.C. to about A.D. 200*) Periods seem to indicate hunting and gathering of food were the main modes of living then. The cultivation of rice is believed to

have started after the eighth century, although it may have started as early as the third century. However, since rice production is affected by climate, people of that period must have relied more on hunting and fishing for their livelihood. Toward the latter half of the fourth century, powerful clans began to organize in the Tohoku Region and exert their influences in that area. By the seventh century, the unified Yamato Dynasty was sending numerous expeditions for long periods against the eastern barbarians. Until then, the Tohoku Region was regarded as an uncivilized area, and those living in these areas were even scorned by the Ainu. Mutsu-no-kuni (ancient name for the Aomori Region) was found soon after the Reformation of the Taika Era (A.D. 645-650). This was followed by the founding of the Dewa-no-kuni (*ancient name for the Akita Region*) about half a century later.

After the founding of Dewa-no-kuni, a steady stream of settlers from the Kanto and Chubu areas led to the development of this area. Local residents tried every means, political or physical, to discourage settlers from coming, but to no avail. Local governments were established here and there until feudalism was established, so that after the Sengoku Period (1482-1558), only Hokkaido was still being called the wild Ezo-chi (*land of the Ainu*).

Thus, studies into the development of the Akita Region reveal hunting and fishing were the main means of living in ancient times. Farming came later. Almost any developing region usually progresses from hunting to farming to industry. From that aspect, the Tohoku Region seems to have developed much later than the Kanto Region. Although farming is the main means of livelihood in the Odate Region today, hunting was also a main means of livelihood until only very recently, as evidenced by the presence of many matagis' (hunters') settlements.

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According to information from Akita Matagi to Dobutsu (Hunters and Animals of Akita), the following sites were matagis' villages: In Kita-Akita-gun were Nekko, Uchiate, Hianiuchi, Koya and Tsuyukuma in Ani-machi; Haginari and Yagisawa in Kamiani-mura; Ikiyasuuchi, Sashimaki, Tazawa and Okawa in Tazawako-machi; Nakagawa, Shirowa and Hirokunai in Kakunodate-machi; Toyooka in Nakasen-machi; and Yuda in Rokugo-machi. In Yuri-gun were Momoyake and Sasago in Chokai-mura. In Kazuno-gun were Oyu and Dairakuzen in Towada-machi. In Yamamoto-gun was Kanazawa in Fujisato-mura. In Kawabe-gun was Iwamisannai in Kawabe-machi. Similar hunting villages are said to have existed in the Ou Mountain Range on the borders of the Iwate and Yamagata Prefectures.

Some say that the local term, "matagi," comes from the Ainu language. Others claim that this refers to hunters who matagu (straddle) ridges and streams. The term, "matagi," means "hunter" and is not a family name. Thus, the term, "matagi-inu" refers to a "hunting dog."

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These dogs that inhabited these areas, in whatever form, were probably used as hunting dogs from prehistoric times. However, no reliable data of this time are available.

Among available references, **Mr. Kokichi (pen name: Hiroshi) Saito** states: "Careful measurements of more than 300 dog skeletons from excavation sites throughout Japan seem to indicate that these dogs were approximately 37 to 50 centimeters (14.6 to 19.7 inches) tall. More recently, dog skeletons measuring 59 centimeters (23.2 inches) were found in two different sites in the Tohoku Region." Thus, no great differences seem to exist in sizes of dogs of the ancient past and of today from small to large dogs. However, it is very difficult to determine their body form or coat color due to the limited information.

Historical literature on dogs from the Ancient to Medieval Periods begin with the Kofun (A.D. 250-552) to the Nara (A.D. 646-794) Periods. Literature from this period begins with the Keiko Tenno-ki (Chronicles of the 12th Emperor Keiko), Kojiki (Japan's Ancient Chronicles), Shushun Tenno-ki (Chronicles of the 32nd Emperor Shushun), Yoo-ki (Hawk Training Manual), Nihon Sho-ki (First Chronicle of Japan), Tsuzuki Nihon Sho-ki (Second Chronicle of Japan) and Ruishukoku-shi (A History of National Collections). The first three references pertain to dogs only, while other writings from Yoo-ki and later periods pertain to dogs, other animals and commodities used as tributes from Korea and China. Literature from the Early Heian (794-898) to the Kamakura (1185-1333) Periods are as follows: Makura-no-Soshi (Pillow Book), Genji Monogatari (Tales of Genji), Ujijui Monogatari (Collections of Stories by Uji), Konjaku Monogatari ("Once-upon-a-time" Stories), Tsurezuregusa (Random Thoughts From My Leisure Hours), Taihei-ki (Record of Great Peace), Kokonchobun-shu (Collections of Famous Stories, Ancient and Modern). The literary style from this period are more varied.

Dogs begin to appear in picture scrolls and storybooks from the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). Gaki-soshi (Storybook of Demons) and Ojoyo-shukai (Collected Illustrations of Death) are generally called the Rokudo-e (Illustrations of The Six States of Existence) or Jukai-zu (Diagrams of The Ten Worlds) which illustrate the teachings of Buddhism. Picture scrolls were very popular from the Late Heian (897-1185) to the early Kamakura (1185-1249) Periods. Many of these scrolls have sketches of dogs as incidentals and many of these dogs appear to be pintos. Among these, the Kobodaishi-gyojokai (Illustrations on Morals by Kobodaishi) and the Yadajizoengi-emaki (Picture Scroll of The History of Jizo by Yada) have dogs as the main subject with fields and mountains in the background, accompanied by a samurai (warrior) and a hunter with bows and arrows. The dog is of one color and appears to be a

hunting dog. One is able to see dogs illustrated also on ancient earthen figures, clay images and crest patterns on earthenwares.

The literature and illustrations become more impressive as one goes from the Ancient to Medieval Periods. The most well-known literature in this group is about the Ninth Kamakura Shikken (Regent), **Takatoki Hojo** of the Later Kamakura Period, who later became a Sagami lay monk. **Dog fighting**, one of his favorite pastimes, is described in detail under the section, "The Sagami Lay Monk Entertains Himself With Ritual Music, Dancing and Dog Fights" in **Volume 5 of the Taiheiki (Record of Great Peace)**. "He loved dog fighting as a form of entertainment to the very marrow of his bones. Thus, he collected dogs as a form of taxes or asked for dogs as gifts from influential people or shogunate officials. Provincial defenders, governors, kinsmen from all over and feudal lords began to raise ten to twenty dogs at a time and sent them to Kamakura. These dogs, which were heavily fed with fish and fowl, were dressed in elaborate brocades. (Omission) In Kamakura, one saw 4,000 to 5,000 such dogs dressed in such brocades. A dozen dog fights were scheduled monthly, as the kinsmen of Hojo, feudal lords and other dignitaries sat on cushions on rooftops or in courtyards to observe this spectacle." Dog fighting of this period differed from those of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), in that about 100 to 200 dogs were released at once for a free-for-all. These were indeed acts of extreme cruelty.

In volume 22 of *Taiheiki*, the section entitled "On Rokuzaemon Hata" describes the battle of the Takanosu Castle in Kozuke-no-kuni (*ancient name for Gunma Prefecture*), in which a Rokurozaemon, Akuhachiro and a pet dog, "Inujishi" ("Lion Dog"), are mentioned. This indicates that military dogs were used during the Namboku Period (1336-1392).

A tournament called inu-ou-mono (dog chasing game) was very popular during the middle of the Kamakura Period (122-1298?) to the Muromachi Period (1392-1573). Within a large circle outlined with a rope in the public square, a dog was released from the center of the circle, whereby several mounted samurai bowmen tried to shoot the dog with arrows with blunt tips before the dog escaped from the circle. White dogs were reportedly used for more formal occasions.

Christianity was introduced during the Azumachi-Momoyama Period (1573-1392) with the arrival of the Portuguese, Dutch and other Europeans, who brought western dogs with them in increasing numbers. Sceneries of this period are seen on folding screens that are displayed in art museums.

In summary, it seems Japanese dogs from the earlier developing areas in Japan, owing to crossbreeding with other dogs, went into a gradual decline. These areas were the Kanto Area west of the Pacific Coast of Japan to the Inland Sea, and including Northern Kyushu. However, dogs in relatively remote mountainous areas maintained their purity as ji-inu (regional dogs) or as matagi (hunting) dogs. Therefore, one may assume for now that the Akita dog originated in the Tohoku Odate area and inhabited this area from prehistoric times as a ji-inu or as a matagi-inu.

Note: **Bold** types and *italics* were supplied by the translator.

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