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## DOG IN ANCIENT HELLENIC CULTURE

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### Abstract

In Hellenic culture, animals held significant symbolic and practical roles, and among them, the dog occupied a uniquely complex position. Dogs were not merely domestic creatures; they appeared across a wide spectrum of myth, religion, philosophy, literature, and art. Mythologically, dogs symbolized liminality and transition—Cerberus guarded the gates of Hades, while Hecate's and Artemis's hounds accompanied them as divine protectors and enforcers of sacred boundaries. In daily life, dogs functioned as hunters, guards, and beloved companions. Philosophers like Plato praised the dog's discernment in *The Republic*, and Xenophon devoted an entire treatise to their training and character. Cynic philosophers, deriving their name from the Greek *kynikos* (dog-like), embraced canine symbolism to reject social norms and champion natural living. Literary sources, from Homer to Aesop, used dogs to explore themes of loyalty, morality, and human folly, while figures like Simonides used the image of the dog to express misogynistic satire. Religiously, dogs were part of healing rituals in Asclepius cults, believed to purify through licking, and were occasionally sacrificed in chthonic rites. Artistic depictions in vase painting, funerary monuments, and votive reliefs reflect their emotional and symbolic significance. This study examines the multifaceted cultural roles of dogs in ancient Hellenic society—not only as a part of daily life but also as significant symbols and carriers of cultural values in mythological narratives, religious rituals, artistic representations, literary texts, and philosophical thought. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literary sources, archaeological findings, iconographic materials, and ancient philosophical texts.

**Keywords:** Hellenic Culture, Mythological Dog, Dog Symbolism, Kerberos, Argos

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## Antik Hellen Kültüründe Köpek

### Öz

Hellen kültüründe hayvanlar hem sembolik hem de pratik açıdan önemli roller üstlenmişlerdir ve bunlar arasında köpek benzersiz ve karmaşık bir konuma sahiptir. Köpekler sadece evcil hayvanlar olmayıp, mitoloji, din, felsefe, edebiyat ve sanat gibi geniş bir yelpazede yer almışlardır. Mitolojik açıdan köpekler, sınırları ve geçişleri simgeler; Kerberos yeraltı dünyasının kapılarını korurken, Hekate ve Artemis'in köpekleri de kutsal sınırların bekçileri ve koruyucuları olarak eşlik etmişlerdir. Günlük yaşamda ise köpekler avcı, bekçi ve sevilen dostlar olarak işlev görmüşlerdir. Platon gibi filozoflar, Devlet adlı eserinde köpeğin sezgisel zekasını överken, Ksenophon ise köpeklerin eğitimi ve karakteri üzerine özel bir inceleme kaleme almıştır. Kynik filozoflar ise isimlerini Hellence kynikos (köpek gibi) kelimesinden alarak, köpek simgesini sosyal normlara karşı duruş ve doğallık savunusu için kullanmışlardır. Homeros'tan Aesop'a kadar olan edebi kaynaklar, köpekleri sadakat, ahlak ve insan zaafı gibi temaları işlemek için kullanırken, Simonides gibi şairler köpek imgesini kadınları aşağılamak için hiciv aracı olarak kullanmıştır. Dinsel bağlamda ise köpekler Asklepios kültüründe iyileştirici ritüellerde yer almış, yalayarak arındırma işlevi görmüş ve bazı yeraltı ayinlerinde kurban edilmiştir. Vazolar, mezar anıtları ve adak kabartmaları üzerindeki sanatsal betimlemeler, köpeklerin duygusal ve sembolik önemini yansıtır. Bu çalışma, köpeklerin antik Hellen toplumundaki çok yönlü kültürel rollerini; sadece günlük yaşamın bir parçası olmalarının ötesinde, mitolojik anlatılar, dinsel ritüeller, sanatsal temsiller, edebi metinler ve felsefi düşüncede taşıdıkları kültürel değerler bağlamında ele almaktadır. Araştırma, edebi kaynaklar, arkeolojik buluntular, ikonografik malzemeler ve antik felsefi metinler ışığında disiplinler arası bir yaklaşımla gerçekleştirilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hellen Kültürü, Mitolojik Köpek, Köpek Sembolizmi, Kerberos, Argos

### Introduction

Throughout history, animals have played significant roles in human societies, not only as economic resources or domestic companions, but also as beings imbued with religious, symbolic, and social meanings. In civilizations such as the Ancient Near East, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, animals became integral to worship practices, either as manifestations of deities or as mediating figures between the divine and the mortal. These roles were immortalized in sacred texts and funerary art (Wilkinson, 2003). Similarly, in the ancient Hellenic world, animals carried multilayered meanings. Symbols associated with deities, mythological narratives, and depictions of daily life reveal the diverse ways in which animal figures were employed (Gilhus, 2006, p. 93; Franco, 2014, p. 5; Işık & Kösece, 2024, p. 833–

840). From sacrificial rituals to divine associations, animals frequently appeared in art, literature, and religious practices, reflecting the complex perspectives of the Hellenic worldview. Some species symbolized specific gods or goddesses or conveyed moral and social messages, while others were positioned as intermediaries between humans and the divine realm (Franco, 2014, p. 5).

In ancient societies, dogs occupied a particularly complex position: they functioned as hunters, guardians, companions, and intermediary beings associated with deities, situated at the threshold between life and death (Gilhus, 2006, p. 57–60). Since their domestication and introduction into human environments, dogs have become liminal creatures—able to move fluidly between the human and non-human worlds in many parts of the globe (Crockford, 2002). In this sense, they should not be regarded strictly as persons or as mere animals (Franco, 2003, p. 91–93). Exploring the role of dogs in ancient Hellenic culture offers insight not only into the everyday lives of the Hellenes but also into their cosmological and ethical systems. In this context, dogs held a multifaceted role that spanned domestic life, mythology, religion, philosophy, literature, and medicine. The dog figure emerges as a prominent cultural symbol—frequently appearing in hunting scenes, funerary stelae, divine iconography, and philosophical discourse—thereby acquiring a richly layered identity within Hellenic cultural expression (Gilhus, 2006, p. 93).

Ancient sources reinforce the multifaceted identity of the dog, for instance, in Homer's *Odyssey* (*Ὀδύσσεια*), Argos is portrayed as the embodiment of loyalty (XVII. 290–327), while Hesiod, in his *Theogony* (*Θεογονία*, ll. 311–312), and later Euripides, in the tragedy *Heracles* (*Ηρακλής*, ll. 610–615), describe Cerberus—the multi-headed hound of Hades—as the fearsome guardian of the underworld. In Plato's *Republic* (*Πολιτεία*), the metaphor of the guard dog is used to explore the qualities of the ideal citizen (376a). Similarly, Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (*Βίοι καὶ γνῶμαι τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ εὐδοκμησάντων*), draws on canine characteristics to describe the lifestyle of the Cynic philosophers (VI. 54). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Μεταμορφώσεις*), dogs play

a central role in the tragic transformation and punishment of Actaeon (III. 19–250). These contrasting images—on one hand, love and loyalty, and on the other, fear and liminality—clearly reveal the dual symbolic function of the dog within the Hellenic imagination. Dogs also held a practical place in everyday Hellenic life. Xenophon, in his treatise *Cyngeticus* (*Κυνηγητικός*), provides detailed insights into dog training and hunting, highlighting the dog’s value in aristocratic leisure and military preparation (VII). Aristotle, too, devotes considerable attention to dogs in his *History of Animals* (*Τὸν περὶ τὰ ζῷα ἱστοριῶν*), emphasizing their exceptional sense of smell and behavioural characteristics (I. 10).

Modern scholars have examined the figure of the dog in these texts not only in symbolic terms but also within the context of social norms and systems of values. While exploring the origins of Cynic philosophy, Dudley (1937), Desmond (2008), and Strong (2018) point out that Diogenes’ nickname “the dog” symbolized his rejection of societal conventions and his commitment to a life in accordance with nature. Halperin (1986) and Sergis (2010) argue that in ancient Hellenic literature, the dog metaphor was often used in a derogatory sense—particularly in relation to women and sexual behaviour. Building on this interpretation, Franco (2014) suggests that the frequent association between dogs and women in ancient Hellenic culture contributed to the degradation of women’s social status. Parker (1983) even notes that dogs were forbidden from entering sacred spaces. On the other hand, Edelstein and Edelstein (1945), in their compilation of texts concerning the cult of Asclepius, emphasize that dogs were regarded as sacred animals in his sanctuaries and played symbolic roles in the healing process. Roller (1981), who studied such roles, states that dogs were used both as domestic animals and ritual sacrifices in Hellas, especially in ceremonies associated with goddesses such as Artemis and Hecate. Burkert (1985) explains that in ancient Hellenic religious rituals, dogs were sacrificed particularly in nocturnal rites dedicated to Hecate, linking the practice to themes of purification and liminality. Gilhus (2006) explores how canine imagery associated with Artemis was tied to divine guidance and the dualism of body and

mind. Similarly, Graf (2009) underlines the ambivalent perception of dogs in Hellas as both protective and dangerous beings, particularly in relation to Hecate and the underworld. Drawing on archaeological findings from the Athenian Agora, Whiting (2022) emphasizes the dual role of dogs in ancient Hellenic society as both pets and ritual offerings. Sergis (2010, pp. 62–65) underscores that the practice of using dogs as sacrificial animals began in the ancient Hellenic world and was later adopted by the Romans. Uyanık (2024), in a comprehensive study that synthesizes these perspectives, highlights the dual symbolism of dogs in ancient Hellenic culture, as both sacred and degrading figures, especially within the contexts of religious rituals and social norms. Across these studies, a common theme emerges: the dog functioned not merely as an animal, but as an ideological, social, and cultural instrument. This rich and striking symbolism of the dog later influenced almost all conceptual representations of animals in medieval Western literature and found expression in literary texts (Ramm, 2005, p. 47–69; Sergis, 2010, p. 64–65).

This study aims to demonstrate that, in ancient Hellenic thought, dogs were not merely peripheral beings but active participants in human society, religion, and the symbolic structure between life and death. In this context, the research draws upon a variety of primary sources—including epic, dramatic, scientific, and religious texts—to explore how the ancient Hellenes conceptualized dogs as both real and symbolic figures. The significance of dogs in Hellenic culture is examined through five main dimensions: mythology, daily life, religion and healing practices, literature and philosophy, and artistic and iconographic representations. Accordingly, the works of ancient authors such as Homer, Hesiod, Apollodorus, Pausanias, Xenophon, Ovid, Simonides, Diogenes Laertius, Plato, and Aristotle are analysed, and the findings are corroborated by archaeological discoveries and iconographic materials. In addition, the symbolic and practical meanings attributed to dogs are assessed primarily through the works of the aforementioned modern scholars. Finally, based on the available evidence, the study offers an interpretation of the unique position that the dog held within Hellenic culture.

### **Dog in Ancient Hellenic Mythology**

In ancient Hellenic mythology, animals hold highly significant symbolic meanings (Durand, 1989, p. 87–118; Buxton, 2004, p. 100–130; Gilhus, 2006, p. 93–137). For instance, the dog is not merely an earthly creature; it is often regarded as a symbol of liminal forces that represent the boundaries between life and death, order and chaos—a faithful companion and a vigilant guardian. The most iconic canine figure is Kerberos, the multi-headed<sup>2</sup> dog of Hades. In his *Theogony*, Hesiod describes this creature as “*an unyielding and indescribable monster, flesh-devouring, Hades’ loud-voiced hound, with fifty heads, relentless and strong*” (311–312). Apollodorus, in his *Bibliotheca* (Library), depicts Kerberos as “*a monster with three dog heads, a dragon’s tail, and a back bristling with every kind of serpent head*” (2.5.12). This creature serves as the guardian of the underworld’s entrance, tasked with preventing the living from entering the realm of the dead and stopping the dead from returning to the world of the living. Ogden (2013, p. 120) interprets this role as reflecting the dog’s symbolic position on existential thresholds. Emphasizing this symbolism, Apollodorus recounts the twelfth labour of Heracles—bringing Kerberos up from the underworld without the use of weapons—and underlines that Kerberos embodies both a monstrous being and the boundary between life and death (2.5.12). Euripides, in his tragedy *Heracles*, refers to this episode and celebrates Heracles’ triumph with joy, portraying it as a heroic confrontation with death: “...yes, and I brought up into daylight that three-headed monster...” (610–615). According to Ogden (2013, p. 122), Kerberos’ appearance in this context represents “*an interface between the mythical and ritual otherworld.*”

The dog, associated with the underworld and transitional realms, is also linked to the goddess Hekate<sup>3</sup>. According to mythology, Hekate’s arrival is heralded by the barking of dogs. Apollonius, in his *Argonautica*, explicitly refers to this when he writes, “*the hounds howled as Hekate approached*” (3.1211–1224). This was regarded as a sign of the goddess’s imminent presence. The pale light of the moon, the shadows cast at night, and the eerie presence of her canine companions all

contributed to the terrifying imagery that connects Hekate with witchcraft and chthonic forces. It was believed that dogs could sense her arrival beforehand, which is why she came to be known as the goddess who gathers and commands dogs (Petropoulos, 1959, p. 43). Likewise, in Idylls, Theocritus describes a scene in which a woman engaged in witchcraft hears the barking of dogs as she invokes Hekate (2.12). Indeed, witches were believed to perform spells and summon the dead to the upper world under the moonlight, accompanied by howling dogs; they would bind people with love charms and, as Theocritus recounts—and as is still believed in modern Greece—they would even draw down the moon to the earth (Petropoulos, 1959, p. 42). All these accounts provide some of the earliest evidence linking dogs to magic and spirits.

A distinctly different representation of the dog appears in Homer's *Odyssey*. In this narrative, Argos, the dog who was neglected for many years but never lost his loyalty, recognizes his master Odysseus after twenty years and then peacefully dies (XVII. 290–327). Argos' loyalty likely persisted as a symbol of faithfulness and guardianship in ancient Hellenic culture. Although this dog's name is not always explicitly mentioned, themes of dogs and loyalty continued to be explored by various authors. For instance, Pliny the Elder, in his *Naturalis Historia*, recounts a story of a dog that fought off bandits to protect its master, refusing to abandon his body despite being wounded, and warding off birds and wild animals from the corpse (VIII. 61). Discussing the enduring dog-loyalty relationship, Skidmore (2020) argues that Argos initiated this bond, functioning as “*the moral reflection of the human condition through pet loyalty*” and reinforcing the value ancient Hellenes placed on loyalty and memory (p. 89).

The dog is also consistently depicted alongside the goddess Artemis. In Callimachus' *Hymn to Artemis*, Artemis is portrayed as the goddess of the hunt, roaming the mountains with her barking dogs. The dogs are part of her hunter aspect and her connection to nature: “*And you roam the mountains with your dogs barking after you, O Artemis*” (line 6). Stafford (2000) argues that Artemis' depiction with

hounds in hunting scenes reinforces her image as a powerful woman integrated with nature (p. 98). In her study of Artemis' relationship with dogs in the context of her hunting identity, Gür (2009) emphasizes that the figure of the dog accompanying Artemis reflects her regulatory role over nature and human life (p. 43).

The dog's connection to Artemis extends beyond companionship. The dog also serves as an instrument of Artemis's vengeance. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when recounting the myth of Actaeon, it is described how Actaeon, transformed into a stag by Artemis's wrath, is torn apart by his own hunting dogs: "*The dogs no longer recognized their master. They thought him prey and attacked together. No one even spoke his name; all of them tore apart their lord, struck down by the god's anger*" (III. 233–252). Modern scholars have offered various interpretations of the dog as a tool of divine punishment. For instance, Slavitt (1994), in his translation of Ovid, reinterprets Actaeon's relationship with his dogs in an emotional context, suggesting that the dogs' failure to recognize their master deepens the tragedy of his transformation (p. 89–91). Likewise, poet Hughes (1997) interprets Actaeon's death by his dogs as a reflection of human inner desires and feelings of guilt (p. 97–104). This perspective treats the dogs not merely as physical threats but also as psychological symbols. Sypher (1992, p. 52–57) notes that the dogs function not only as hunting animals but also as "dramatic elements" within the ancient narrative. In Hellenic mythology, the goat-God Pan, known also as a pastoral deity (Boyana, 2005, p. 173, 186), and the lesser-known fertility god Priapus<sup>4</sup> (Boyana, 2004, p. 31–42) are depicted alongside dogs in various representations (Duymuş, 2014, p. 49).

### **Dogs in Hellenic Daily Life and Social Practices**

Dogs held a practical place in ancient Hellenic daily life, serving various functions such as hunting companions, guard dogs, herders' protectors, and cherished pets particularly among the elite classes. Guard and household dogs were carefully selected; they were generally strong, loud-voiced, and often black in colour to appear intimidating. Shepherd dogs played one of the most important roles in Hellenic daily life, needing to be strong, agile, and courageous to protect flocks from

wild animals. Furthermore, many different dog breeds were specifically chosen and used for hunting in the Hellenic world. Additionally, dogs had economic value in Hellenic societies. Their skins and furs were used in the production of various goods, and their excrement was dried by physicians and used as medicine (Şener & Doğanay, 2023, p. 19–22).

The dog in daily life frequently appears in the works of ancient authors. Aristotle, in his work *Historia Animalium* (Researches on Animals), provides observations on dogs, describing their nature as “wild, sociable, and fawning” (I.1), and emphasizes their keen senses, especially their remarkable ability to track scents (VIII.7.4). Plato, in *Politeía* (The Republic), highlights the dog’s intelligence with the statement: “*A dog distinguishes its friend from its enemy by knowledge and ignorance*” (376a). Aristotle further argues in the same work that dogs learn through habit and naturally exhibit jealousy by defending their territory over time (VIII.1). The protective nature of dogs is also illustrated in Plutarch’s *Bioi Paralleloi* (Parallel Lives, 35), in the section on Pelopidas, where the loyal dog of Pelopidas stays beside his master’s corpse to guard it against enemies dramatically underscoring the dog’s loyalty and devotion. Likewise, Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* notes that dogs are the only animals capable of recognizing the voices of family members (VIII.61.40). In ancient literary portrayals, the domestic dog symbolized loyalty and intelligence, and loyal and alert individuals were positively likened to dogs (Şener & Doğanay, 2023, p. 19). As mankind’s favourite domestic animal, the dog also appears extensively in folktales and proverbs (Hünemörder, 1998, p. 757).

One of the most detailed accounts of dog training and hunting appears in Xenophon’s *Kynēgetikos* (The Art of Hunting). In this work, the author provides thorough instructions on the breeding, training, and behaviours of greyhounds, especially those used for hare hunting, placing particular emphasis on dog breeds, selection of puppies, training, discipline, and reward (IV–VI). Xenophon clearly illustrates how dog training in the ancient world was considered both a practical and

moral process. According to him, treating the dog “like a man” enhances its loyalty and skills, which form part of aristocratic virtue:

*“Puppies should be taken from the best parents and trained from the moment they begin to understand. They should become accustomed to their names, be taught to come when called and to follow. When they succeed, they should be encouraged with praise; when disobedient, they should be warned by voice alone, without beating.”* (4.1–2).

According to Halperin (1986), Xenophon’s careful attention to dog training reflects broader values dominant in Hellenic symposium and aristocratic culture, such as control, hierarchy, and masculine virtues (pp. 97–99). Plutarch, in the Life of Lycurgus section of his *Parallel Lives*, describes how Spartans used dogs in their military and disciplined lifestyle: “*Just as a dog trainer distinguishes the natural tendencies of animals and trains them accordingly, so did Lycurgus...*” (Plutarch, Life of Lycurgus, IX). This work is especially significant for demonstrating how dogs were functionally employed in military societies within the contexts of hunting and training.

Depictions on Vase Paintings, Funerary Stelae, and Literary Sources demonstrate how dogs were integrated into both the domestic and public spheres of Hellenic society. In Classical and Hellenistic period funerary reliefs, particularly on graves of women and children, small companion dogs are often depicted accompanying the deceased owner. According to Lynn Roller (1981), these depictions emphasize the emotional bond between humans and dogs, especially the close relationships within elite households, and may reflect beliefs that this bond extended beyond death (p. 156). Archaeological evidence also supports this connection. Dog burials have been found in numerous Hellenic settlements such as Athens, Corinth, and Delos, occurring in both domestic and ritual contexts. Some of these burials include grave goods or ceremonial burial markers, indicating respect for the dog or its symbolic function (Toynbee, 1973, p. 107–109).

### **Dogs in Religious and Healing Contexts**

In ancient Hellenic belief, the dog held a unique position both as a sacred animal and a ritual agent. Its presence in temples, roles in healing cults, and participation in sacrificial rituals indicate that the Hellenes ascribed spiritual significance to dog behaviours, particularly in the contexts of healing, death, and boundary crossings. In this regard, the dog belongs to the group of animals sacrificed to gods and goddesses associated with death and functions as an ancient underworld deity and symbol of death (Toynbee, 1973, p. 102–124; Burkert, 1985, p. 67). Due to its chthonic nature, the dog was believed to belong simultaneously to the underworld, the magical realm of dreams (Drexler, 1925, p. 358, 360), to omens (Burriss, 1935, p. 35–37), and the upper world. Especially, the dog's howl was regarded as a harbinger of all impending evils, disasters, and death (Burriss, 1935, p. 41). The dog's intermediate and ambiguous status was certainly believed to endow it with supernatural powers, as it was assigned the role of carrying the souls of the dead on their journey to the underworld.

Dogs also appear in funerary rituals and in the context of necromancy (communication with the dead). As in Homer's *Odyssey*, in necromantic traditions around Lake Avernus and Thessaly, dogs were believed to perceive souls and play protective or mediatory roles (Ogden, 2001, p. 82–84). Such narratives emphasize the function of dogs as “spirit guides,” accompanying and directing souls crossing into the realm of the dead. Religious rites dedicated to gods and goddesses associated with death or the liminal space between life and death particularly involved dogs. For example, dogs were sacrificed in Caria, and dog skeletons found at Didyma confirm this practice (Gräslund, 2004, p. 171). This practice, relatively rare in the Hellenic sacrificial tradition, suggests that dogs—due to their dual nature as domestic yet partially wild creatures—were considered appropriate for rituals connected to purity, death, or chthonic (underworld) powers (Burkert, 1985, p. 67). In particular, dogs were sacrificed to the goddess Hekate, frequently mentioned in apotropaic (evil-averting) and threshold rituals, and associated in magical texts with

howling dogs. According to Johnston (1999), the howling of dogs during nocturnal rites was regarded as a sign of Hekate's arrival and presence (p. 210–212). This indicates that Hekate was invoked during nighttime magic ceremonies, with dogs acting as her heralds. Graf (2009) further notes that dogs were often offered as votive gifts in the cult of Hekate, underscoring their role as “entities guiding souls between worlds” (p. 252). Over time, a dog's howl came to signal bad news or the approach of disaster. For example, Hellenic society linked the onset of plague to the barking of dogs and the crowing of roosters during nocturnal wanderings (Megas, 1923, p. 487).

The association of dogs with magical rituals is closely related to their role as “scapegoats” in ancient beliefs. According to Hellenic thought, a sick person could transfer their illness to a dog through contact. In this context, every part of the dog, especially its sexual organs (Koukoules, 1928, p. 461) and bodily fluids (blood, urine, saliva, etc.), was commonly used in magical and sorcery practices (Mainoldi, 1984, p. 169–175). Naturally, the dog's connection with healing is closely tied to the god of medicine, Asclepius (Toynbee, 1973, p. 123). In the cult of Asclepius<sup>5</sup>, patients seeking healing expected the god or his sacred animals, particularly dogs, to bring cure within the sacred precincts. Pausanias, in his *Periegesis Hellados* (Description of Greece), describes the sacred structures of the Asclepieion at Epidaurus and mentions that patients would sleep in the temple, hoping to receive healing visits from the god in their dreams: “*Near the temple there is a sacred sleeping place; here patients lie down and the god visits them in their dreams*” (II.27.2). Although Pausanias does not explicitly mention dogs, he indirectly alludes to their role in this process. On the other hand, Aelian, in *De Natura Animalium* (On the Nature of Animals), explicitly states that dogs were among the sacred animals of Asclepius: “*Asclepius's dogs are not only loyal but also possess divine power to heal the sick*” (VI.18). He defines the dogs' healing ability as their practice of licking wounds: “*When injured, they use their tongues as medicine, licking the wounds and restoring them to health*” (VIII.9). Modern scholars have also emphasized this aspect

of dogs and the significance of their saliva. For example, Edelstein and Edelstein (1945) note that during the *enkoimesis* (sleeping in the temple) rituals conducted in Asclepieia, dogs contributed to the healing process by licking patients' wounds (p. 149–152). This licking was not merely symbolic but reflected ancient beliefs in the purifying and healing power of dog saliva, a concept echoed in Hellenistic and Roman medical texts (Gilhus, 2006, p. 105). Strong (2018, p. 178 ff.) further affirms Aelian's explicit description of wound licking by dogs as a "medicine."

In some local cults, Artemis was worshiped in the form of or closely identified with dogs. Pausanias explains this phenomenon as follows: "*Parrhasian Artemis is worshiped in the shape of a dog. For according to a local legend in her time, wolves and dogs were seen mingled together*" (VIII.38.10). Zolotnikova (2016), in her study of Artemis's historical development and depictions in various animal forms, highlights that the worship of Artemis in the dog form mentioned by Pausanias reflects the goddess's diverse animal associations and the cultural meanings attached to these forms (p. 19–31).

### **Dogs in Hellenic Literature and Philosophy**

The figure of the dog appears in Ancient Hellenic literature and philosophy with both positive and negative connotations. In this dual role, dogs carry moral and metaphorical significance, reflecting their multifaceted symbolic value within Hellenic thought. This complexity is clearly observable in Hellenic literary and philosophical texts. Starting with literature, dogs in Aesop's fables<sup>6</sup> often serve as vehicles for moral lessons. Various types of dogs such as shepherd dogs, hunting dogs, or street dogs symbolize themes like greed, loyalty, or jealousy. For example, in the fable "*The Dog and Its Reflection*"<sup>7</sup>, the dog plays a flawed yet instructive role. Carrying a piece of meat in its mouth while crossing a river, the dog sees its reflection on the water's surface and mistakes it for another dog with meat. Attempting to snatch the reflected piece, it drops its own meat into the water. In La Fontaine's version, the dog loses what it holds because it mistakes its reflection for reality; the author emphasizes the dangers of greed with the phrase "losing the real

along with the shadow” (La Fontaine, 1882, VI.17). In the fable “*The Dog and the Wolf*,” the dog’s loyalty and captivity are underscored: a hungry wolf encounters a well-fed shepherd dog, who tells the wolf that it receives regular food in exchange for serving its master. However, upon noticing the collar marks on the dog’s neck, the wolf decides it does not want to lose its freedom (La Fontaine, 1882, V). Here, the author symbolically connects the dog’s captivity to the collar around its neck. In “*The Sleeping Dog and the Wolf*,” the dog is portrayed as an enemy whose words cannot be trusted: a wolf attempts to catch a sleeping dog, but the dog wakes and tells the wolf that it will be fatter at the time of the next wedding, then the wolf can catch it. The wolf agrees, but later the dog becomes more cautious and avoids capture (La Fontaine, 1882, X.11).

The story of Argos, as recounted in Homer’s *Odyssey*, stands as one of the most poignant examples of loyalty in ancient Hellenic literature. Argos is the aging dog who waits faithfully for Odysseus during his prolonged absence. Upon finally recognizing his master after many years, Argos dies shortly thereafter. This scene is notable both for its epic narrative and emotional intensity, and it remains one of the strongest depictions of human-animal relationships in classical literature (Homer, *Odyssey*, XVII. 290–327). In contrast, the Hellenic lyric poet Simonides of Amorgos, in his iambic poem *On Women* (Peri Gynaikōn, Περὶ γυναικῶν), uses the dog as a metaphor for a certain type of woman, casting her in a negative light. The poem survives in fragments, one of which contains the “dog woman” analogy. Interestingly, the poet initially attributes intelligence and vigilance to this woman: “*The woman who comes from a dog is wise and knows everything; she watches, listens, and nothing escapes her attention*” (Simonides, Fr. 7, 53–56). However, this praise quickly turns into criticism as the woman “*barks incessantly, even when there is nothing to bark at; she constantly nags and scolds her husband.*” Thus, the poet constructs a prototype of a meddling, noisy, and disobedient woman. In this negative portrayal, the dog symbolizes unruliness, rudeness, and social

nonconformity. Üreten's (2012) analysis suggests that such imagery establishes a strong link between misogyny and the dog metaphor in the period (p. 218)

In ancient Hellenic philosophy, Plato, who frequently employed animal metaphors (Uyanık, 2024, p. 27), makes extensive use of the dog in his work *The Republic*. Primarily, the philosopher elevates the dog as an ideal guardian figure. He parallels the dog's instinctive ability to distinguish friend from foe with the protective qualities of philosophers grounded in wisdom. According to Plato, a well-trained dog can govern both its anger and affection through reason; this ability serves as a model for the ideal political order (Plato, 376a). While discussing the nature of the guardian class, Plato considers the watch-dog as an exemplary being both biologically and mentally. He asserts that a good dog recognizes those it knows as friends and strangers as enemies, not merely by instinct but through knowledge-based intuition. This intuitive discernment observed in dogs should also be present in philosophers, for the ideal guardian must be not only physically strong but also endowed with reason and the capacity to learn. Thus, Plato elevates the watch-dog beyond metaphor to situate it at the intersection of philosophical life and natural virtue (Plato, 376bc; Uyanık, 2024, p. 34). Discussing the reasons behind this metaphor, Rosen (2005, p. 83–84) emphasizes that dogs are valued not only for their courage but also for their loyalty and trainability. Despite the existence of animals that are stronger and braver than dogs, the author argues that dogs excel in cooperating with humans and faithfully fulfilling assigned duties. For this reason, dogs are preferred for protection and surveillance roles.

According to Plato, the dog is a unique creature capable of distinguishing friend from foe solely through intuition and training. In this regard, the dog embodies a model of philosophical reasoning-being loyal yet rational, wild yet trainable. Moreover, Plato, while advocating for the inclusion of women alongside men in the administration of the state, uses the example of female shepherd dogs. He notes that female dogs are just as effective as males in guarding the flock (Plato, 451d; Uyanık, 2024, p. 33–34). In the same work, Plato emphasizes that both male and female

future state officials must undergo education according to a specific program before selection, and he argues that the best Hellenic men and women should procreate for the sake of the state. He illustrates this vision by analogy to the breeding of the finest dog breeds (Plato, Republic, 459bc; Uyanık, 2024, p. 35). Plato also warns that the guardian and ruling class of the state may become corrupt over time and turn into a threat against the people. He exemplifies this by comparing it to shepherd dogs who, driven by greed and bad habits, become aggressive and harm the flock. According to Plato, the guardians must be carefully trained and their living conditions well-regulated to prevent them from forgetting their duties and exploiting the populace, much like dogs transforming into wolves (Plato, 416bc; Uyanık, 2024, p. 34–35). In the same work, Plato uses the metaphor of a puppy to criticize the disrespect shown to fallen soldiers in war: “*What difference is there between puppies who, when someone throws stones at them, abandon the thrower and attack the stones themselves?*” (469e). Uyanık (2024, p. 36) interprets this as reflecting Plato’s view on international laws of war. Indeed, Plato condemns the desecration of enemy corpses in battle and likens it to puppies attacking the thrown stones instead of the person throwing them. Through this metaphor, Plato argues that looting the dead is morally reprehensible and dishonours the dignity of war, thereby underscoring the importance of ethics in warfare.

The most extraordinary use of the dog figure in ancient Hellenic philosophy appears in Cynicism<sup>8</sup>. Diogenes of Sinope, considered the founder of this philosophical movement, was popularly known as “Diogenes the Dog” and transformed the motto “to live like a dog” into a philosophical challenge. Cynic philosophers, especially Diogenes, embraced the dog as a direct symbol of a way of life and a philosophical attitude. The dog’s shamelessness, its way of living according to nature, and its indifference to societal values constitute the core components of the Cynic lifestyle. For them, “becoming dog-like” was not derogatory but rather a liberating stance (Dudley, 1937, p. 35; Navia, 1996, p. 14–53; Desmond, 2008, p. 32–34). Dudley (1937) argues that Diogenes’ public lifestyle,

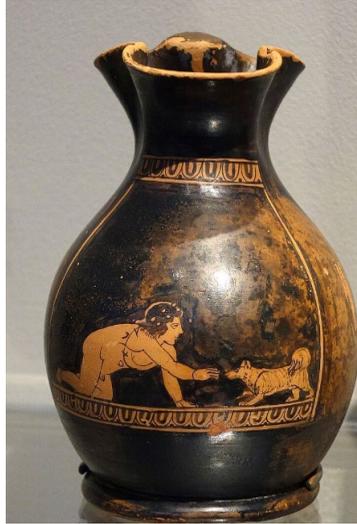
acceptance of begging, and disdain for false virtues are directly related to the dog metaphor (p. 35). Navia (1996), in his work explaining the fundamental concepts of Cynic philosophy, emphasizes the importance of the dog in terms of living in harmony with nature (p. 14–17); Desmond (2008) focuses on the association of the dog with shamelessness (*anaideia*) and naturalness, elaborating on why Cynics idealized the dog as an intelligent being that follows its natural impulses (p. 32–34).

Diogenes Laertius, in his *Vitae Philosophorum* (Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers), notes that Diogenes was nicknamed “the dog” (*kyon*) and explains the reason as follows: “*They say he was called a dog (kyon) because he lived most shamelessly and performed all his actions openly in public*” (6.60). To illustrate this, the author compares the Cynic philosopher’s sharp criticisms aimed at warning or correcting his friends to a dog’s bite: “*While other dogs bite their enemies, he bit his friends to save them*” (6.54).

### **Dogs in Hellenic Art and Iconography**

Visual representations of dogs in ancient Hellenic art provide significant insight into their social, emotional, and symbolic roles. From modest domestic scenes to mythological depictions and funerary monuments, dog figures frequently appear on painted ceramics, grave stelae, sculptures, and mosaics. These representations often reflect the values, fears, and desires of the societies that produced them. Attic vase paintings, known for their rich array of animal imagery, frequently include depictions of dogs. According to Boardman (1997), these images convey an elite ideal of “disciplined companionship and controlled power.” The author further notes that dog motifs often serve to enhance the prestige of human figures, particularly in symposia drinking gatherings where such ceramics were commonly used (p. 145). Among the various symbolic uses of dog imagery, a small aryballos dating to the late 5th century BCE depicts the theme of “friendship” by portraying a young child accompanied by a loyal dog standing beside him (Fig. 1)<sup>9</sup>. Such scenes are particularly associated with the Anthesteria, a spring and wine festival, during a special day dedicated to children when gifts were presented to

them. In this tradition, children were honoured with small little pitchers (Oakley, 1998, p. 165–168). The presence of the dog figure on the pitcher scene indicates that the dog was seen as a friend and protector of the child. Here, the dog becomes a symbol of familial love, loyalty, and the sorrow of loss.



*Fig. 1: Depiction of a child and a dog on a red-figure aryballos*

Dogs are also frequently depicted as companions of hunters in hunting scenes, reflecting their association with aristocratic activities and masculine virtues. Especially in black-figure and red-figure ceramics from the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, greyhounds are shown alongside ephebes and hunting goddesses such as Artemis. The depiction of Artemis with dogs symbolizes her deep connection to hunting and nature. Dogs, as symbols of loyalty and protection, appear beside the goddess, demonstrating their important role both in divine contexts and the elite male world (Stafford, 2000, p. 98; Gür, 2009, p. 43). For example, a relief dated to the 2nd or 3rd century CE depicts a scene where a dog attacks a deer at the feet of Artemis (Fig. 2)<sup>10</sup>.



*Fig. 2: Depiction of Artemis and a hunting dog on a relief*

Artemis, who is often depicted with animals and her brother Apollo, is also associated with a punishment involving a dog. According to myth, the goddess punishes a human—due to offenses such as boasting, lust, or seeing her naked—by having them torn apart and killed by a dog. This is vividly illustrated in the maiming of the hunter Actaeon by his own dogs, a scene dated to around 560 BCE and depicted on a lekythos (Boardman, 1997, p. 219, fig. 258) (Fig. 3). In Athenian vase painting, dogs frequently appear as prominent figures symbolizing the hunter's glorious return and the grandeur of cavalry processions (Boardman, 1997, p. 56). For instance, one depiction on an amphora prominently features a dog at the forefront of the scene (Boardman, 1997, fig. 91) (Fig. 4).



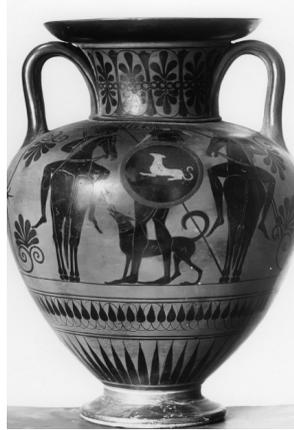
*Fig. 3: Scene of the hunter Actaeon being torn apart by his dogs, depicted on a lekythos*



*Fig. 4: Depiction of a dog on an amphora*

Similarly, a black-figure amphora dated between 530 and 525 BCE portrays two horsemen, a warrior, and a dog together (Fig. 5)<sup>11</sup>. Cerberus, the mythological guard dog of Hades, is a recurring figure in vase paintings depicting Heracles' twelfth labour (Whiting, 2022). For instance, on a red-figure krater attributed to the Andokides Painter, dated to around 490 BCE, there is a composition showing Heracles capturing the three-headed Cerberus, with Hermes and Athena witnessing

the scene (Shapiro, 1993, p. 112–113; Boardman, 1997, p. 105) (Fig. 6)<sup>12</sup>. In this depiction, the dog's simultaneously monstrous and controlled nature emphasizes the tension between chaos and heroism.



*Fig. 5: Depiction of two horsemen, a warrior, and a dog on a black-figure amphora*



*Fig. 6: Depiction of Heracles and Cerberus on an amphora*

Hellenistic funerary art reveals a more personal and emotional dimension of human-dog relationships. Classical Athenian grave steles often depict small domestic dogs alongside women, children, or young people. Such representations suggest that dogs were considered members of the household and may have held emotional or spiritual significance even after death. A notable example is the famous stele of Amfarete from the Kerameikos Cemetery in Athens. According to Roller (1981), these images symbolize loyalty and domestic affection, while also

reinforcing gender-based ideals such as compassion and fidelity (p. 162). For instance, a late 4th-century BCE marble grave stele belonging to Eukoline from Lesbos portrays a young woman bidding farewell to her relatives, with a small dog placed beside her chair. This scene illustrates that dogs were seen not only as protectors or hunting companions but also as emotional members of the household (Banou & Bournias, 2014, p. 91)<sup>13</sup>. Another notable example is a marble relief grave stele dating to the late 5th century BCE, found near Dipylon, which depicts a young man with his dog on the left and an elderly man bidding him farewell on the right (Banou & Bournias, 2014, p. 224) (Fig. 7)<sup>14</sup>. This grave stele may symbolize the close and trusting relationship between the dog and these two humans, as well as hopes related to the afterlife.



*Fig. 7: Grave stele depicting two men, one accompanied by his dog*

Votive objects and healing iconography associated with the cult of Asklepios also feature the presence of dogs. Particularly in sacred sites such as Epidauros, dogs are depicted in small statues and reliefs resting beside or at the feet of patients undergoing healing. These images correspond with written accounts describing dogs licking wounds, reinforcing their therapeutic role. As Gilhus (2006) notes, such depictions blend everyday realism with ritual significance, highlighting the trust inherent in human-animal relationships (p. 108). Perhaps one of the finest examples of this iconography is found on a silver coin dated to circa 350–330 BCE,

believed to originate from the city of Epidauros. The coin shows Asklepios seated on a throne, his right hand placed upon the head of a serpent while holding a staff, and at the base of the throne, a dog is depicted (Fig. 8)<sup>15</sup>. The positioning of the dog near the god's feet emphasizes its role in healing.



*Fig. 8: Depiction of the dog at the feet of the god Asklepios on a coin.*

### **Conclusion and Evaluation**

In the context of Hellenic mythology, dogs especially figures such as Cerberus and Hecate's companions are positioned as guardians of the thresholds between life and death. These figures indicate that in the Hellenic mindset, the dog was perceived not only as a physical being but also as a metaphysical "threshold guardian." These myths clearly reveal the multifaceted symbolism of dogs in ancient Hellenic mythology and religion, pointing to the fact that the Greeks regarded the dog not merely as an animal but as a culturally significant carrier of meaning. Dogs served as guardians of sacred boundaries, companions of the dead, and symbols of loyalty and transition.

In the everyday life of ancient Hellenes, dogs did not appear as marginal creatures but as close and meaningful figures. Embodying values such as loyalty, protection, and affection, these animals fulfilled practical needs while also entering symbolic and sacred realms through emotional bonds. With their roles in protection, hunting, and companionship, dogs occupied a place in both domestic and public life.

The discipline, loyalty, and sense of duty attributed to dogs were particularly presented as reflections of virtue within the male sphere.

In ritual contexts, dogs emerged as sacred and intermediary beings. At the Asklepios temples, dogs depicted licking the wounds of patients were seen as purifying and healing agents. Furthermore, the use of dogs both as sacrificial animals and ritual companions in the cult of Hecate indicates that these animals were considered suitable mediators between the divine and the human realms. All these religious and medical contexts suggest that dogs were viewed not only as animals but also as beings endowed with spiritual power. Their presence in temples, healing cults, and transitional rites reveals the complex status of dogs in ancient Hellenic thought: protectors, purifiers, and companions of sacred beings.

In philosophical and literary texts, the image of the dog served different ideological purposes. While poets like Simonides used the dog metaphor to disparage women, Plato employed the dog as a symbol of the ideal state and virtue. Cynic philosophers, on the other hand, embraced “doggishness” as a virtue itself, thus expressing a stance against social norms. Consequently, the dog figure in ancient Hellenic literature and philosophy appears in diverse contexts as a satirical tool to demean women, a moral lesson, a model of philosophical virtue, and even a symbol of an alternative way of life. This demonstrates that the dog was not only a biological entity but also a deeply culturally coded symbol.

In art and iconography, dogs appear both as figures reflecting aristocratic virtues in hunting scenes and as emotionally and communally charged symbols on grave stela. These artistic representations show that dogs were not merely background figures in Hellenic visual culture but carried complex meanings. Whether as loyal pets, markers of social status, mythological signs, or healers, dogs were processed as visual codes reflecting human anxieties and ideals.

This study has revealed that dogs held significant roles not only in the practical life of the ancient Hellenic world but also in mythology, religion, literature, art, and philosophy. The figure of the dog transcended being an ordinary animal to

gain social, symbolic, and spiritual meanings. In all these respects, the dog occupied a conceptual and moral position in ancient Hellenic thought and culture, not merely a physical one. These multifaceted representations add historical depth to our current understanding of human-animal relationships, shedding light on a world where animals were not merely instrumental but also meaningfully integrated.

### Notes

1. The dog is one of the earliest animals to be domesticated by humans, though the exact timing of this first domestication remains uncertain. It is estimated to have occurred around 30,000 BCE (see Germonpré et al., 2015, pp. 210–216). The earlier hypothesis that dogs evolved from the jackal species known as *Canis aureus* has now been abandoned. Instead, it is currently believed that dogs evolved from several wolf species classified as *Canis lupus* (see Germonpré et al., 2015, pp. 210–211).

2. Ancient authors offer differing interpretations regarding the number of Kerberos' heads. The earliest and most explicit account appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where he refers to the creature as having "a hundred heads" (lines 311–312). However, many later authors describe Kerberos as "three-headed." See, for example: Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.5.12; Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1076; Euripides, *Heraclēs* 24; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.25.6; and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.451.

3. Hekate became a popular folk deity during the Hellenistic period (see Decharme, 1959, p. 156) and was frequently mentioned in 3rd-century Hellenic literature (see Geffcken, 1978, p. 5).

4. Priapus is a god believed to bring fertility and abundance and to protect people from evil. His mother is thought to be Aphrodite, and his father is considered to be either Dionysos or Zeus (see Boyana, 2004, pp. 31–42).

5. The cult of Asclepius was one of the most widespread and influential religious practices associated with health and healing in Ancient Greece. In this context, patients would seek healing within the sacred precincts of the god, hoping for recovery through the intervention of the deity or his sacred animals. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, pp. 142–152).

6. The most comprehensive and academically reliable collection of Aesop's fables was compiled by the classical philologist Ben Edwin Perry. Perry's work systematically organizes the fables attributed to Aesop and has established a reference system known as the "Perry Index" (see Perry, 1952). The French poet Jean de La Fontaine reworked many of these fables in his own style, frequently featuring dogs as central figures (see La Fontaine, 1882).

7. This fable is listed as number 133 in Perry's (1952) index, see Perry, 1952. In La Fontaine's (1882) collection, it appears under the title "The Dog That Dropped the Substance For The Shadow."

8. For detailed information on Cynic philosophy, see Dudley (1937), Navia (1996), and Desmond (2008).

9. For the image, see Red-figure *chous* depicting a boy and a dog, ca. 430 BCE, attributed to the Eretria Painter, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession No. 95.52. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red-figure\\_chous\\_boy\\_and\\_dog\\_\(Boston\\_MFA\\_95.52\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red-figure_chous_boy_and_dog_(Boston_MFA_95.52).jpg) (Accessed May 14, 2025).

10. For the image, see: Votive stele in relief portraying Artemis, at her feet a dog is attacking a deer, 2nd–3rd century AD, Philippi Museum (accessed May 18, 2025).

11. For the image, see: Greek black-figure amphora depicting a man and a dog, ca. 550–500 BCE, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, inv. no. 48.19. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greek\\_-\\_Black-figure\\_Amphora\\_-\\_Walters\\_4819.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greek_-_Black-figure_Amphora_-_Walters_4819.jpg) (Access date: May 14, 2025).

12. For the image, see: Boardman, 1997, p. 116, fig. 162.

13. For the image, see: Banou & Bournias, 2014, p. 222, Env. no. P 694/I 281.

14. For the image, see: Banou & Bournias, 2014, p. 225, Env. no. NAM 2894. See also Grave stele depicting a young man shaking his father's hand with his dog, c. 400 BCE, Pentelic marble, National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grave\\_stele\\_depicting\\_a\\_young\\_man\\_shaking\\_his\\_father%27s\\_hand\\_with\\_his\\_dog\\_Greek\\_400\\_BCE\\_Pentelic\\_Marble\\_NAM\\_Athens.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grave_stele_depicting_a_young_man_shaking_his_father%27s_hand_with_his_dog_Greek_400_BCE_Pentelic_Marble_NAM_Athens.jpg) (Access date: May 14, 2025).

15. For the image, see Staatliche Münzsammlung, Munich, Germany. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epidauros\\_-\\_350-330\\_BC\\_-\\_silver\\_drachma\\_-\\_head\\_of\\_Apollon\\_-\\_Asklepios\\_-\\_M%C3%BCnchen\\_SMS.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epidauros_-_350-330_BC_-_silver_drachma_-_head_of_Apollon_-_Asklepios_-_M%C3%BCnchen_SMS.jpg) (Accessed: June 3, 2025).

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