

# 6.1 ‘Implore me not, Dog’.

## The Dog in the Classical World: An Apotropaic View

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### Abstract

In the Classical world, the dog has polysemic meaning, as proved by the analysis of poetic and ethological ancient sources. As a symbol of absolute fidelity to its owner, the dog stands for a fundamental iconographic marker for the aristocratic self-representation, but it can also be interpreted in a negative sense. The ambiguity gives it a liminal meaning, in which the symbolic value is intensified by its relationship to the gods, connected to the concept of passage from one state to another. This double aspect contributes to project an apotropaic sense onto itself, which remained in the Roman world until Late Antiquity.

**Keywords:** dog, Greek art, Roman art, classical world, apotropaic value.

### 1 Introduction

In the Classical world the figure of the dog seems to assume a polysemic connotation, as can be clearly seen from the comparison between poetic and ancient ethological sources, above all from Aristoteles and Aelianus. In this perspective, the dog is primarily the symbol of total and eternal fidelity to its owner,<sup>1</sup> as reflected by the notorious Homeric episode of Argos,<sup>2</sup> who died only after seeing Odysseus again. But this animal also represents a fundamental iconographic sign for the self-representation of aristocratic status, particularly during the archaic age, as can be seen in the Greek artistic repertoires relating to hunting activities or to *symposium* scenes. This latter point is clearly shown in Argos's description given by Odysseus:<sup>3</sup> ‘it is fine of form, but I do not clearly know whether it has speed of foot to match this beauty or whether it is merely as table-dogs are, which their masters keep for show’.

With regard to this, there are countless images that can help to focus on this symbolic value. It is the case, for instance, of the Attic Red-Figure *lekythos* from Gela, which is now in Boston, attributed by John Beazley to the Pan Painter and representing the hunter Kephalos and his dog.<sup>4</sup> It is one of the most famous Greek vases in the world, also known as the François vase. It is now in Florence and represents a complex

scene of the Calydonian Boar hunt (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Also for the world of the *symposium*, the images related to the dog are many, as we can see in an Attic Red-Figure *psykter*, which is now in Rome, and is attributed to the Achelous Painter or the Leagros Group.<sup>6</sup> In this image, we can also read the close ideological connection that, through the concept of protection of the owner and his house, links the dog to the idea of *Oikos*, seen as a domestic space, and particularly as a defence of the door. These symbolic mechanisms, emphasising the prophylactic sense of its meaning, turn the dog into a fundamental figure of funerary iconography, not only in iconographical terms, as we can see for example in a funerary stele from Thebes (Figure 2),<sup>7</sup> but also in the symbolic mediation of the myth, which translates into the figure of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the gates of Hades.<sup>8</sup>

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### 2 Material/Evidence and Methods

According to C. Mainoldi,<sup>9</sup> the ambiguity attributed to the figure of the dog derives from two fundamental and complementary aspects that give it a liminal status.<sup>10</sup> The first of these identifies the domesticated dog, which plays the role of guardian and helper in the hunt.

<sup>1</sup> Plin. *H.N.* 8.61.40; 10.83.63.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 27.300–327.

<sup>3</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 27.307–310.

<sup>4</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 13.198. *BAPD* 206356; Panvini and Giudice 2003: 334; Rizza and Giudice 1996: 77, fig. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Florence, Museo Archeologico Etrusco 4209 (François Vase). *BAPD* 300000. For this vase see Torelli 2007, with previous bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Rome, Caltagirone Collection. *BAPD* 718.

<sup>7</sup> Thebes, Archaeological Museum (A88). Funerary stele with a dog dating at the middle of IV century BC.

<sup>8</sup> Paris, Musée du Louvre, Etruscan Black-figure *hydria* from Caere.

<sup>9</sup> Mainoldi 1984: 37–93.

<sup>10</sup> For this value and the interpretation of the figure of dog in Greek society, also related to homoerotic love see Kitchell 2004; Neils 2014.

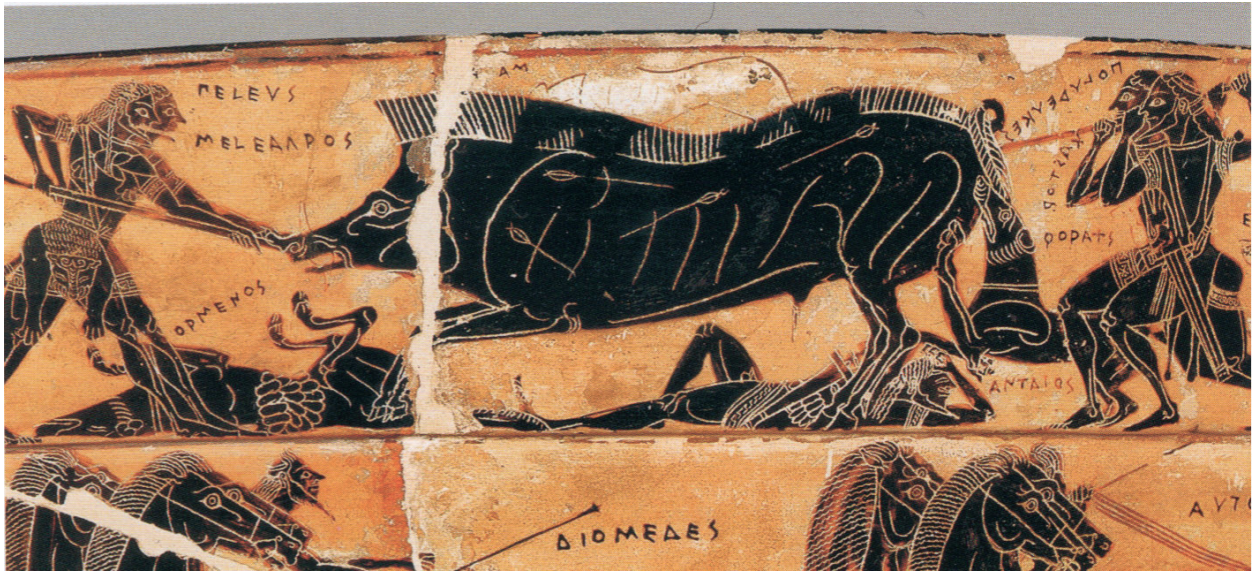


Figure 1. Calydonian Boar hunt, detail on the François vase (from Torelli 2007: 93).



Figure 2. Funerary stele with a dog, unknown provenance (Photo by M. Giuman).

The second aspect is that of the wild animal, linked to the underworld, given its terrifying, contaminating and impure character: the frightening apparitions of monsters or infernal ghosts with canine features.<sup>11</sup> The chthonian appearance of the dog is also evident by its use in private ritual practices, offered as a sacrificial victim in private purification rituals.<sup>12</sup> These sacrifices reflect the important role of the dog as a mediator and *pharmakos*, which, by being possessed, can acquire the powers of evil, removing impurities from the individuals whom it is placed in contact with.<sup>13</sup> From a positive perspective, linked with its keeper's role, this animal was believed to be the guardian of the house. This aspect is provided by its apotropaic image on the mosaics of the vestibules in several Pompeian houses, the boundary space between the interior and exterior of the Roman *Domus*.<sup>14</sup> For example, the mosaic of a chained dog with the Latin inscription *CAVE CANEM* as 'Beware of the dog', occupies the House of the Tragic Poet's threshold, and its context suggests it was a useful instrument to ward off evil spirits that could lead to disease from the streets to the house.<sup>15</sup>

The same valence, translated in a symbolic sense, converts the dog into a guardian of the cycle of time and life, strictly related to Hecate, the goddess of the Underworld who watches over crossroads and frontiers,<sup>16</sup> as well as other goddesses, identified with her under the symbolic concept of procreation, birth,

<sup>11</sup> Levi 1941: 224, note 49: 'Hecate was accompanied during her wandering in the night by (...) the souls of dead, mostly of murdered men'; see also Mainoldi 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Carboni 2017: 16–18; De Grossi Mazzorin 2008; Sassù 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.* 68.280C.

<sup>14</sup> Battelli 1998; Wilburn 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Levi 1941: 224, note 53; Wilburn 2018: 108–111.

<sup>16</sup> Carboni 2017; Levi 1941: 224; Sassù 2016.





Figure 3. Nicolo intaglio in ring from Wroxeter (from Henig 1984: 244, fig. 1 c).



Figure 4. Bronze *Tintinnabulum* from Herculaneum (from Carcanis 1771: tav. XCV).

and development, like Leukothea-Eileithyia, Astarte, Uni, or the Italic *Genita Mana*,<sup>17</sup> the latter being linked to fertility and the menstrual cycle. An example is offered by some Greek-Roman rings with apotropaic function, in which there is a dog emerging from a sea-shell, which according to M. Henig,<sup>18</sup> is ‘the uterus from which

life comes, a symbol of fertility and rebirth’ (Figure 3). However, many gems show the predatory dog attacking a hare: the image could suggest their interpretation both as love gifts and as amulets to attract the love of the beloved, manipulating real life according to the dynamics of the magic of love.<sup>19</sup> The hunting images reproduced on gems could also be donated or purchased in order to promote profits and good affairs, as well as symbolising their appearance in dreams according to the Greek philosopher Artemidorus,<sup>20</sup> who lived in the 2nd century AD.

The apotropaic value of the dog as a threatening predator is revealed by a bronze rattle, a Roman *tintinnabulum* dating from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, which adorned a room inside a Herculaneum house and now shows in the *Gabinetto Segreto* of Naples National Archaeological Museum (Figure 4).<sup>21</sup> This device depicts a dwarfen gladiator fighting his own improbable monstrous phallus in the form of a dog and five suspended bells. According to C. Johns,<sup>22</sup> the motif shown could indicate the sexual sphere as the uncontrollable impulsiveness typical of animals. On the other hand, C.A. Barton<sup>23</sup> recognises the symbolic representation of the masculinity of the gladiator, fused in its main features demonstrated by sexuality and violence. But it seems more likely that, a comic subject like this may have been used to enjoy, laugh or scare away malignant forces. The metal material, the noise of the bells and the phallus are notoriously powerful magic and prophylactic charms against envy<sup>24</sup> and the dog is interpreted as a symbol of impudence.<sup>25</sup>

Many Greek and Roman objects depict the apotropaic representation of the *oculus malignus*, an eye surrounded by animals and various objects which menaced to attack it<sup>26</sup>. These are mosaics, medals, pendants and engraved gems (Figure 5).<sup>27</sup> Among these *probaskania*, namely antidotes against envy and negative influences, appears the dog, able to hurt and avoid the Evil Eye with its bark, and bite but above all its saliva.<sup>28</sup> According to the therapeutic meaning referred to by Pliny,<sup>29</sup> the prophylactic power of the dog’s saliva is manifested in

(nicolo intaglio in ring from Wroxeter); Walters 1926, no. 2416.

<sup>19</sup> Molesworth, Henig 2011: 182, pls. 16a-b.

<sup>20</sup> Artemidorus 2.11.

<sup>21</sup> Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inv. 27853; Carcani 1771: 385–386, tav. XCV.

<sup>22</sup> Johns 1982: 68, fig. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Barton 1993: 73.

<sup>24</sup> Elliott 2016: 202, ill. 27; Parker 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Carcani 1771: 385–386.

<sup>26</sup> The most common animals are the crow, the scorpion, the dog, the lizard, the lion, the ibis and the snake; among the objects are often attested the phallus, the trident, the dagger, the spear, the nails and the thunderbolt: Elliott 2016, ills. 47–50.

<sup>27</sup> Elworthy 1895: 129–131, figg. 14–16, 19; Mastrocinque 2003: 418–420; Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1990: 67, no. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Levi 1941: 220–225.

<sup>29</sup> Plin. *H.N.* 7.3.

<sup>17</sup> De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63.

<sup>18</sup> Boardman 1970: 297, 232–233, pl. 698; Henig 1984: 244, fig. 1c



FIG. 19.—From King's *Gnostics*.

Figure 5. Engraved gem, representation of the evil eye under attack by animals and objects with apotropaic value (from Elworthy 1895: 131, fig. 19).

healing the venom of a snake, an animal that is often juxtaposed to the figure of Envy, to its personification, represented while strangling the envious, the *Phthoneros*.<sup>30</sup> We can see an analogue image in a floor mosaic at Antioch on the Orontes (Syria), where some creatures attack an ithyphallic hunchback, notoriously considered to be both bringer of bad luck and protector against evil.<sup>31</sup> This use continues during Late Antiquity which a bone plaque from Butrint demonstrates, dated between the 4th and the 5th century AD.<sup>32</sup> The bone plaque is carved with the representation of a hunting dog leaping over the evil eye; its finding in the construction levels of a house suggests that it is to be understood as a domestic amulet.

### 3 Results

The analysis of the literary sources and the material evidence shows that the dog is a humanised animal, that was integrated into the domestic environment a long time ago. Its nature appears twofold since it is part of both the world of man, as his companion and loyal guardian, and the non-human world, preserving its wild nature.<sup>33</sup> Its role as a guardian is also transferred to the Underworld, and the shape of the dog is used to imagine demons, and is interpreted as an evil omen. The power attributed to the goddess Hekate is transferred to the dog. With regard to this, both play the role of powerful *apotropaion*, giving protection

against the spirits, demons and souls of the dead sent by the goddess, as well as the barking of a dog which was considered capable of scattering phantoms.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, its representation in amulets indicates that the dog is considered a symbol of fertility, rebirth, and protection. It is well known that its blood and its body were offered to the gods in expiatory rites, with the intention of protecting and increasing the fertility of crops, but also for favouring and helping with the birth of children.<sup>35</sup> Because the dog as a being is considered to belong to the two worlds, *supernus* and *inferius*, it is endowed with supernatural powers and therefore associated with the magical sphere of dreams and omens.<sup>36</sup> It also has therapeutic and curative properties,<sup>37</sup> according to the magic precept that 'the one who hurt you will cure you'.<sup>38</sup> Ancient sources demonstrate that various parts of the dog were considered magical because they were able to heal diseases and illnesses:<sup>39</sup> the dog's eyes<sup>40</sup> and gall were used for eye-illnesses, its liver, lick<sup>41</sup> and teeth<sup>42</sup> for the healing of human beings. As we have already discussed, the saliva is considered by Pliny<sup>43</sup> as one of the most effective antidotes to protect from the venom of snakes, but it becomes a dangerous agent when it's produced by a rabid dog, a disease easily transmissible to humans through the contact with the bite of this animal.<sup>44</sup> With regard to this, it is important to point out that dog's saliva and spitting are considered useful elements to guard against any accidents from oneself as well as to protect from the actions of the evil eye,<sup>45</sup> as shown by Theocritus<sup>46</sup> in the famous episode of Polyphemus, who spits three times to avoid bad luck.

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### 4 Discussions

As we said at the beginning, in addition to the positive perception, strictly that of loyalty, the dog can assume a negative meaning. In this sense, we can identify the first basic step in an extreme version of the

<sup>34</sup> Levi 1941: 224.

<sup>35</sup> De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 65.

<sup>36</sup> Sergis 2010, pp. 64–65.

<sup>37</sup> Gourevitch 1968.

<sup>38</sup> Elliott 2016: 264.

<sup>39</sup> De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 64; Goebel and Peters 2014: 601.

<sup>40</sup> In the II Book of the *Kyranides*, the following magic remedy is reported: 'With the two eyes of a white dog, of the stone magnet, of the obsidian stone make a preparation like a dry eye drops and spread it on the lashes in the evening, you will see in the darkness everything that happens' see Macrì 2009: 146, note 171.

<sup>41</sup> The healing of children cured by the licking of a dog is remembered by inscriptions from the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus: Mainoldi 1981: 37.

<sup>42</sup> According to Pliny, ashes of dogs' teeth mixed with honey availed to help children who were slow in teething: Elliott 2016: 264.

<sup>43</sup> Plin. *H.N.* 7.3.

<sup>44</sup> Plin. *H.N.* 8.152; Aristotle, on the other hand, rules out its transfer to the man with the bite: Aristotle, *HA.* 8.22.

<sup>45</sup> Giuman 2013: 118.

<sup>46</sup> Theoc. 6.35–40.

<sup>30</sup> Giuman 2013: 130–131.

<sup>31</sup> Giuman and Napolitano (in press); Levi 1941: 220–225; Trentin 2015: 56–57.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell 2007: 282–283, 294–296, fig. 11d; Wilburn 2018: 110.

<sup>33</sup> Sergis 2010.



Figure 6. Detail on the Statue-rhyton from Kush (Sudan) attributed to Sotades. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (graphic design by M. Giuman).

fidelity concept, understood as the idea of servility, submission, absolute denial of individual freedom; all attitudes that represent the well-known corollary by which the Greeks feel the Eastern world.<sup>47</sup> In this perspective, it may be useful to better understand this concept with an image related to a configurated *rhyton* by the Sotades Painter. In it, the *episemon* of the pelta-shield<sup>48</sup> of a Persian warrior is decorated with a dog with its tail between its legs and its head bowed, an unequivocal proof of submission (Figure 6).<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, it is not by chance that the pelts held by oriental enemies and reproduced on the Greek vases never have a symbol. The *episemon*, in fact, represents a space that, already in the epic world, constitutes a true and proper paradigmatic projection of the moral and military virtues of the warrior who parades it;<sup>50</sup> such as,

for instance, in the famous description of the Achilles shield.<sup>51</sup>

But this reading is not the only negative one, as we can clearly understand by the disdainful words with which Achilles replied to Hector, mortally wounded by Peleus' son. To the request made by the Trojan hero to return his dead body to his father Priam, Achilles replies with hard and hopeless words:<sup>52</sup> *'implore me not, dog'*, says with ruthlessness the Achaean warrior, nobody will *'ward off the dogs'* from his body.

This Homeric image is confirmed by many passages of Greek literature, such as in the final *Chorus* of *Seven against Thebes*, during which to the unburied body of Polynices it is said *'prey to dogs'*.<sup>53</sup> Another example can

<sup>47</sup> Vegetti 1979: 133. Sassi 1988: 104 ff. about the way in which the Greeks perceive the Persians, especially after the Persian Wars, see Vlassopoulos 2013, with previous bibliography.

<sup>48</sup> For a preliminary study about *episemata* (that is the symbols of the Greek shields) in Attic ceramic repertoires see Chase 1902; Giuman 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 21.2286. BAPD 209548; Beazley 1963: 772; Bothmer 1957: 57, tav. 90, 1; Hoffmann 1997: 89 ff; Kahil 1972: 283, figs. 18–19. It seems interesting to note that, in the Persian world, the dog does not appear only as an animal generically connotated to the funerary field – and in this way consecrated to Ahuramazda, the deity of the dead – but it also seems to fulfill specific functional areas related to the ritual sphere of death. See also Herodotus 1.140.

<sup>50</sup> Giuman 2000: 39 *'L'area centrale occupata dall'episemon ci si presenta come l'unico spazio sufficientemente visibile sul quale poter collocare un*

*qualche segno di riconoscimento che, nella calca e nel fragore assordante di un combattimento – proprio le 'fiere percosse di scudi' ricordate da Tuciddide (4, 96, 2) –, possa favorire un rapido riconoscimento dell'avversario o del compagno d'arme (Cfr. Vegezio, Epitome rei militaris 11.18)'.*

<sup>51</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 18.477–606.

<sup>52</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 22.345–348: *'μή με κύνων γούνων γουναίεο μή δὲ τοκήων / αἶ γάρ πως αὐτόν με μένος καὶ θυμὸς ἀνήη / ὦμ' ἀποταμνόμενον κρέα ἔδμεναι, οἷα ἔοργας, / ὡς οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅς σῆς γε κύνας κεφαλῆς ἀπαλάλκοι, οὐδ' εἴ κεν δεκάκις τε καὶ εἰκοσινήριτ' ἄποινα / στήσωσ' ἐνθάδ' ἄγοντες, ὑπόσχονται δὲ καὶ ἄλλα'.* In this perspective, see also Homer, *Iliad* 1.4; 22.335; 24.409.

<sup>53</sup> Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 1013–1017: *'τούτου δ' ἀδελφὸν τόνδε Πολυνείκουσ νεκρὸν / ἔξω βαλεῖν ἄθαρτον, ἀρπαγὴν κυσίν, / ὡς ὄντ' ἀναστατῆρα Καδμείων χθονός, / εἰ μή θεῶν τις ἐμποδὼν ἔσθη δορὶ / τῷ τοῦδ'.*



be found in a passage of *Hecuba* by Euripides, in which Polymestor threatens Trojan women after the murder of his sons:<sup>54</sup> 'where am I rushing, leaving my children unguarded for maenads of hell to mangle, to be murdered and ruthlessly cast forth upon the hills, a feast of blood for dogs?'. It is precisely in this instance that it is imperative to note that, little further, Hecuba herself is turned into a ghost dog with eyes of fire.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, it is in the symbolic idea of the dog as a stray carnivorous animal that feeds on unburied bodies, an attitude confirmed by ancient ethological sources, that we must read its negative connotation. In this respect, it could be useful to underline a significant matching in terminology: in ancient Greek, the verb *skylao* or *skyleo*, related in etymological terms to the substantive *skylax* ('puppy'), can extend its semantic meaning and indicate the deplorable action of robbing a cadaver<sup>56</sup> or, by analogy, the violent and bloody raid of an enemy city fallen after a siege.<sup>57</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The image of the dog has been commonly used with a protective aim, especially because of its known role as keeper. Furthermore, it could represent a defence against the dangers which the dog itself personifies, following the ambivalent peculiarity of the superstition based on the ambiguity related to this figure.

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## Acknowledgments

M. Napolitano gratefully acknowledges Sardinia Regional Government for the financial support of her PhD scholarship in Storia, Beni Culturali e Studi Internazionali (P.O.R. Sardegna F.S.E Operational Programme of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, European Social Found 2014–2020 – Axis III Instruction and Formation, Objective 10.5, Line of Activity 10.5.12).

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<sup>54</sup> Euripides, *Hecuba*, 1075–1078: ποῖ πᾶι φέρομαι τέκν' ἔρημα λιπῶν / Βάκχαις Ἴτιδα διαμοιρᾶσαι / σφακτά, κυσίν τε φοινίαν δαίτ' ἀνή- / μερόν τ' ὄρειον ἐκβολάν'.

<sup>55</sup> Euripides, *Hecuba* 125 ff.

<sup>56</sup> So, for example, in Herodotus 1.82.

<sup>57</sup> Plb. 9, 10, 13.

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**Website**

BAPD. Beazley Archive Pottery Database, University of Oxford, viewed 10 December 2019, <<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/pottery/default.htm>>.