

History of the Cane Corso,

The Cane Corso is one of two native Italian "mastiff type" dogs that descend from the Roman the canis Pugnaces. Both the Cane Corso and Neapolitan Mastiff are the rightful heirs to this legendary war dog. The Cane Corso being the light version, adept at hunting game or a versatile farm hand. Sturdy, strong and athletic, equipped with a vigorous temper, ready to meet any challenge. The Neapolitan Mastiff, the heavy version, a stout, imposing and fearsome guard dog. The very sight of him would be enough to frighten away any with ill intent.

The name;

The term "Cane Corso" is historically as much an adjective as it is a noun. It describes a type of dog you need to perform certain tasks, historically associated with this type of dog. There is documentation to support that as early as 1137 A.D. this term was synonymous with the lighter variety of the molossian dog. While the etymology of this term is open to debate, there are many valid hypotheses to its employment. *Cane* in Italian, even today means dog, a derivative of the Latin *canis*. Also in Latin, *Cohors*- this would mean bodyguard. *Corsus*, would be an ancient Italian provincial adjective which translates to sturdy or robust. The term however does not mean that the dog originates in Corsica. In the past this breed had been known by names with provincial connotations such as Dogo di Puglia. Cane Corso, however is a broader term that encompasses the breed's diffusion throughout all of Italy and Sicily. The Cane Corso was so prized and held in such high regard that there are several metaphors and antidotes associated with its name; "*can corso*, a man of proud aspect and attitude." "He bites worse than a *cane Corso*;" "je'nu cors, is what an elderly peasant would say to describe a young man who was the essence of moral and physical virtue"



Coat of Arms of the Corso family

Ancient;

The Cane Corso is morpho-functionally representative of hunting dogs down through history. Dogs employed helping man in the hunt can be seen in Assyrian bas-reliefs circa 700 BC. These dogs differ from the heavy dogs seen in Nivinah and Mesopotamia 100 or so years earlier. They have much tighter skin around the neck; they present a much

leggier construction with a retracted abdomen. In one scene these dogs are being restrained by their master's while going to the hunt. In another scene the dogs are in full pursuit after wild stag with spears filling the air.



Assyrian bas-relief depicting a hunting scene 700 BC

In antiquity dogs were not classified by rigid breed names but by the geographical location in which they were found or by their particular utilizations. The "Molossian" traces its roots to the Epirus, the ancient Greek state which is now modern day Albania. Of the Molossian Oppiano writes "*not speedy but impetuous, a fighter of great courage and incredible strength, to be employed against bulls and wild*

boar, undaunted even when confronted with a Lion” The reigning Dynasty in the 4th century BC were called Molossians, of which Alexander the Great's mother was a Princess. The Molossians and Macedonians shared an alliance and undoubtedly that is where the Macedonian army procured their fierce some war dogs.

The Romans;

The Romans first encountered these Molossians of Epirus during the Macedonian wars and renamed them Pugnaces because of their willingness to fight. As was the Roman way what they assimilated they improved upon. The Roman procurators cinogiae gathered up dogs from throughout the Empire and separated them into three categories; celeres-those that ran down wild animals, pugnaces-those that attacked wild animals and villatici-those that guarded farms. These “groups” of dogs can be roughly translated into what would be modern day hounds, the Cane Corso and Neapolitan Mastiff respectively. This Roman war dog was used as an auxiliary to the legions, as a hunting dog and as entertainment in the arenas

against all manner of animal and or human. To augment the Canis Pugnaces abilities, dogs from England were brought back to the Empire. The Romans met the pugnaces Britanniae in battle during their European campaign's and had come to value their indomitable fighting spirit. These “imports” would be added to the Roman Pugnaces. It was said of the pugnaces Britanniae “they were inflamed with the spirit of Mars the god of war” Interestingly enough, many believe the infusion of the dogs from England are responsible for the undershot bite in the Cane Corso, it is also hypothesized that the Britanniae was originally a molossian that had been brought to England by the sea faring Phoenicians.



Canis Pugnaces on a Roman Sarcophagi relief 200 BC Exhibits a very Cane Corso like morphology

The fall of Pax Romana;

The fall of the Roman Empire predicated the fall of the Roman war dog. However, this was not the end for this type of dog; he seemingly melted into the Italic landscape. While no longer the *piriferi* (It was common practice for the Romans to strap buckets of flaming oil to the backs of their war dogs and send them into the enemy's front lines to disrupt the opposing cavalry, these dogs were called *piriferi* or fire bearer) he did find a home with the Italian country folk. This Roman dog was transformed from warrior to a somewhat more peaceful existence as a farmer, hunter and guardian. His mettle forged on the battlefield and so versatile, would now serve him well in these daunting tasks in the invaluable aid of man. This age is where we find the most



Mosaic depicting a molossian dog with Cane Corso type features

interesting evidence of the Cane Corso type dog. A Roman mosaic depicting the wild boar hunt (Villa del



*Fawn Corso like dog with
a black mask*

Casale III-IV century a.d., Piazza Armerina) show's a very Cane Corso like fawn dog. He is agile, tight skinned and sinewy, signature characteristics of the Cane Corso. Couple that with the fact that he is on a boar hunt, a traditional utilization of the Cane Corso. A miniature by Giovannino de Grassi (1390) shows a light, athletic Cane Corso type dog. The Reggia di Caserta, fountain of Diana (1790) the last two dogs on the left are dogs with cropped ears, retracted abdomen and long, lean musculature.

Neapolitan crèche (XVIII century) Figurine of a fawn Corso like dog with a black mask, again the black mask is an essential characteristic of the Cane Corso.

Around the 1100's the term Cane Corso began to be associated the light molossian. This is evidenced in a number of areas;

-Giulio Cesare Scaligero (1484-1558) in his translation and commentary in Latin of Aristotle's *Storia degli animali*, speaks of large dogs employed in the hunt of bulls and boar (once again historical Cane Corso utilizations) called Alani, Corsi, dogas.

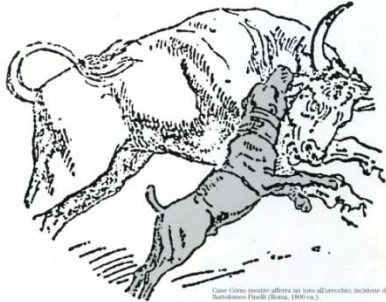
-Konrad von Gessner (1516-1564) In *Historia Animalium, De Quadrupedibus*, "*know that when a Corso has his teeth in a boar or bull he can't be separated him without strong interference from the hunter on his jaws*

Life on the farm;

After the fall of the Roman Empire the Cane Corso proved its versatility by being employed in numerous varying tasks mostly in Southern Italy in provinces like Foggia, Puglia, Bari and Campobasso. The primary task's where that of guardian, hunter and farm dog. The Cane Corso's versatility made it an ideal farmhand. The Masseria or farm/manor was an almost self sufficient socio-economic culture. A series of structures positioned around in most cases a main building, generally a chapel. The Cane Corso was an essential tool in this environment. By day the Cane Corso was chained to guard the permanently stabled livestock, farm buildings and barns. This was necessary to protect the various merchants, butchers, day workers or occasional pedestrian who might pass by. In cases where there was more than one Cane Corso present, the chain was necessary to keep the confrontational dogs apart. The manner in which the dog was chained enabled him to have a free range of motion to be able to reach the areas he was entrusted to guard. This was accomplished by tying the chain to an aerial line and a pulley system. Particular attention was paid to the collar, which was often decorated with the family's coat of arms. He was well suited as a flock guardian, often deployed in the war with the wolves. In these times the Cane Corso often wore steel "Vracciale" collars that were equipped with spikes. These collars would ensure that the dog would have an advantage when he encountered the now extinct Italian wolf.

He was also utilized in the breeding of swine. The Cane Corso would become invaluable when after giving birth the sow would go to thicket to hide with her brood. The Corso's job was to seek out and find the sow and incapacitate her either by grabbing her by the ear or snout so the farmer could safely gather up the litter. Once this was accomplished the dog was given a command to release her and the sow would anxiously follow her brood back to the farm where she was reunited with her piglets. The Cane Corso also was indispensable in keeping the boars under control. The semi wild boar endemic to the Italian south was a large and dangerous animal equipped with sharp tusks and nasty disposition. It

was the agile and vigilant Cane Corsos job to intervene should the boar present a danger; many a farmer was saved by the leap of the Cane Corso. The dog was sure to grab the swine by the ear or flank to incapacitate him, should the dog try and grab him at the snout the boar would be strong enough to run him to ground.



Pinelli engraving featuring the Cane Corso and the bull circa 1800's

The Cane Corso was also used as a "cattle dog" or "butchers dog". The beef was raised in wild pastures until the time came for the cattle to be brought to slaughter by the "butteri" (the Italian cowboys). More often than not the herds would have to be driven great distances to be slaughtered. These were essentially "wild" animals and had to be treated with great caution. In order to keep the herd manageable the bulls had to separate, the Cane Corso accomplished this by using its vise like grip on the bull's nose or

ear; the pain was so great that it completely incapacitated the bull. This practice became a popular attraction called "bull baiting" The Cane Corso of the butteri was charged with protecting the herd from predators both man and animal alike.

The Cane Corso also has a history as a hunter of large game. In southern Italy the wild boar was a valued food source. Hunting him was a dangerous proposition. Wild boars are equipped with sharp teeth and are capable of inflicting great harm to both man and dog when cornered. To hunt the boar a pack was made up of Cane Corso and industrial cross breeds developed for their sense of smell and pursuit abilities. The pack was released to chase and corner the boar until the hunter and with their Cane Corso's arrived. The once unleashed the Cane Corso's would set upon the swine, thus incapacitating him, leaving it to the hunter to dispatch the boar using a long spear. The badger was also considered prized game in the meridone (southern Italy) every part of the animal was used, from his bristles to his melted fat. Similarly to the boar, a pack was needed to hunt this nocturnal animal. Again, cross breeds were employed (generally the mother was a sent hound and the father a Cane Corso) the pack would flush out the quarry, once cornered the Cane Corso was set upon the badger knocking him to the ground and killing him with a bite to the neck. In Sicily the breed was used to hunt porcupine. The Cane Corso was sent to the rodent's den to root him out, no easy task considering the quills of this animal are quite sharp and could easily blind the dog. The porcupine was hunted by day, being a nocturnal animal he lazily slept during daylight hours. The dogs used for this type of hunting were docked at the eight vertebrae instead of the fourth; this was to ensure that the hunter would be able pull him out once he went to ground.

Decline

There are many variables that lead to the decline of the Cane Corso, his fortunes were however, invariably tied to the fortunes of the peoples of the meridone. The Masseria, the center of the socio-economic culture of the old south was in decline. The livestock that the Cane Corso was entrusted to control was shrinking as well as the game that he hunted was disappearing. The farms that remained had trended to modern more economical machines to do much of the beloved Cane Corso's work. War impacted him as well; during WW1 much of the



Cane Corso and an unfortunate badger



Cane Corso from the 1920's



populous of the south was called to arms, further weakening the agro-pastoral activities of the region. After the First World War there was a slight renaissance for the breed as things seemed to return to normal, but it was short lived. The onset of World War 2 again brought disarray to the regions rural activities, which were the Cane Corsos livelihood. All able bodied men were in the armed forces leaving pastoral activities to the woman and children. After the "war to end all wars" natural disasters such as flooding and landslides as well as poverty and food rations left the Cane Corso as an afterthought. Much of the returning work force chose to pursue other work opportunities in the north. Thus the golden age of the Cane Corso had come to a close.

Recovery of the Cane Corso

By the 1970's the Cane Corso near extinction survived in only the most remote back woods regions of southern Italian hinterland. These peasants that still employed him and trained him in the traditional ways kept the remnants of the breed alive. But only sparsely, few old time dog men still remembered the proud sturdy dog of their youth. Their recollections more like faded memories of childhood dreams. One such man was SIG. Giovanni Bonnetti. In 1973 SIG Bonnetti contacted DR Paolo Breber when he learned that DR Breber would be working for a time in Foggia. SIG Bonnetti wrote DR Breber "he has noticed in those places a molossiod dog different hair from the Neapolitan Mastiff, similar to the bullmastiff, likeness of the Presa Majorca" the letter went on to say "Prof. Ballotta, eminent dog lover, inhabitant of Romagna, had seen several examples of this ancient Pugliese breed" With Breber's interest peeked he began the search for this Ancient "molossiod" by seeking out Foggiani who's memories went back some 50 years. These conversations led Breber various works of art, illustrations poems and other historical documentation depicting the utilization of the breed. By 1974 Breber had acquired a few specimens of the elusive breed and began to resuscitate the Cane Corso. Shortly thereafter DR Breber had the occasion to write an article in the ENCI's *I Nostri Cane* magazine on his work with the Maremmano-Abruzzese in this article, two Cane Corso's were pictured in the background. This picture drew the attention of 16-year-old student Stefano Gandolfi. Gandolfi sought out DR Breber to learn more about this ancient Pugliese breed of dog. Gandolfi soon enlisted the services of the Malavasi brothers from Mantova, who at the time bred German Sheppard dogs. DR Breber realizing that he was not a professional breeder, agreed the center of the recovery of the Cane Corso should be in Mantova. Breber sent a number of subjects up north to Mantova, most notably Dauno, a very typical large black dog. In Mantova, Dauno was bred to a bitch named Tipsi producing perhaps the most significant litter of Cane Corso's in modern history. In this litter were Basir, the model for the standard of the Cane Corso and his sister Babak, chosen as the model of the feminine characteristics. In 1983 the chief proponents



Basir, 1980-1990 the model for the Italian standard

of the breed's recovery form a breed club for the Cane Corso, the Society Amatori Cane Corso. By 1994 the Cane Corso receives official ENCI recognition; by 1996 the breed receives FCI recognition.

In America

The Cane Corso like the Neapolitan Mastiff was introduced to American shores by Michael Sottile SR. As the story goes in 1988 Sottile imported the first litter of Cane Corsos to the U.S. The following year he brought a second litter, this second litter was a repeat breeding of the litter from the previous year. Sottile for years while in search of Mastino Neapolitano in Italy had heard stories of a lighter more athletic molossar. While in Sicily for a



Santino, a male from the second litter Sottile imported

friend's wedding he happened upon a farmer on the side of the road working with cows, prior to

that encounter he had only seen pictures of the breed. Sottile had made many trips to Italy over these years to make contacts with the Cane Corso club in Italy (the first edition of "Il Cane Corso" list Sottile as the US delegate to the SACC) and to visit with all of the prominent Cane Corso breeders of the day. While on one of his trips he videotaped the Empoli LIR open book certifications (subjects of unverifiable lineage enrolled into the Italian stud book based on

their phenotypical characteristics). Sottile eventually registered this new breed of dog with the Federation of International Canines.



Bruno, a male from the first litter Sottile imported

In 1993 the International Cane Corso Federation was formed to serve as the parent breed club and registry for the Cane Corso by Ed and Kris Hodas along with Mark and Tracy Wilson. The Hodas's and Wilson's also made a number of trips to Italy for the same reasons Sottile did, to cement relations with the SACC and to procure additional breeding stock. In the Second edition of "Il Cane Corso" this time Mark Wilson is listed as U.S. delegate to the SACC. The Wilson's eventually faded from the Cane Corso landscape, eventually leaving the club and registry to the Hodas's. In late 1994 it was decided to split the club and registry, the Hodas's would maintain control of the registry while the club would be reformatted to be more in line with a typical AKC club, complete with elections, a constitution, Board of Directors and regional Vice Presidents. The ICCF also decided the reinstitute the original Sottile standard for the Cane Corso. A year or so earlier Mark Wilson decided to implement the ENCI standard. Soon



Delegates from the ICCF, AICC and CCCN at the 2000 AICC International Raduno

thereafter the ICCF and the SACC parted ways, thus cutting the U.S. off from ties to the Cane Corso's country of origin. The strained relations with Italy lasted until 1999 when a new club in Italy the Association of Italian Cane Corso made its debut and extended an olive branch to the ICCF. The collaboration was beneficial to both clubs as they shared a common vision of what the Cane Corso was, functionally, historically and practically. Also an important source of knowledge was now available to the American Cane Corso lover.

Delegations from the AICC came to America to participate, give judges seminars and judge in the ICCF National Specialty in 2000 and 2001, while ICCF delegates went to Italy in 2000, 2001 and 2003 to seek with the ENCI and participate in the AICC International Raduno.

Eventually, due in no small part to the relationship between the AICC and the ICCF the standard was changed to be more in line with its European counterparts.

In 2003 the ICCF general membership voted to seek AKC recognition. To achieve that goal various delegates have worked diligently toward the goal of recognition. The name of the breed club had to be changed to Cane Corso Association of America. The Constitution and standards respectively had to undergo changes in order to meet AKC criteria. In July 2007 the breed was approved for the miscellaneous class and received full recognition as of July of 2010.



An exemplary brindle Cane Corso

Cane Corso Association of America 2010