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A Report and Request toward Building a Canine Burial Corpus

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A Report and Request toward Building a Canine Burial Corpus

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Current Research:

A Report and Request toward Building a Canine Burial Corpus

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Both the affectionate and mutually adaptive relationships that contemporary humans share with the dog (*Canis familiaris*) are the result of a long history of domestication. Because of this long partnership, an analysis of dog burials can shed light on certain integrated components associated with mortuary practices, symbolic expression, and oral traditions in humans. There is an enormous amount of archeological and ethnological literature describing the role of the domesticated dog around the world (Walker 2000). These sources describe the variable roles of dogs as human partners, friends, companions in hunting and herding, as pack animals, as guard, fighting, and war dogs, as active participants in ritual, and as meat for consumption in lean times or reserved as offerings in ceremonial feasting.

There is little question that the domesticated dog was an important partner and treated with a high degree of adulation and reverence among the Caddo. For example, dogs are recorded as participating in precautionary rituals associated with the Caddo Green Corn ceremony where a series of rituals and offerings are undertaken prior to the consumption of the green corn. If green corn were eaten by a human before the rituals, the violator would “be infallibly bitten by a snake” (Swanton 1942:225). To protect dogs from such an outcome, it is noted that when corn is harvested “[the Hasinai] tie their [dogs] fore-feet to their snouts, which prevents their eating fresh corn, of which they are exceedingly fond” (Swanton 1942:225).

Building upon the work of Todd (2013), I am working toward synthesizing patterns of burial, symbolic referents, and ethnographic accounts of dogs in the Caddo area and begin a comparison of symbolism and ethnography with neighboring groups. The current corpus has 65 dog burials with a minimum number of 79 dogs from 34 sites (Figure 1). Consideration of disposed dogs as deliberate burials, instead of scattered food refuse, is based on the following developed criteria:

1. Remains were found in an articulated position and buried in a defined pit. At the Roitsch site, Perttula (2008:344) describes an “adult-sized dog [that] had

been buried on its side in a ca. 80 cm diameter pit, with its head at the eastern end of the pit, and the front and back legs were partially flexed.”

2. If the remains were found in an articulated or mostly articulated position without a defined pit, such as in a midden. At the Steck site a dog burial was found “lying on the left side with the head to the north, excavated from the midden” (Butler and Perttula 1981:123).
3. If the remains were associated with more than one dog, such as a group of skulls which might suggest a dedicated space for dog burial or disposal. At the Winterbauer site, “nine canid skulls, probably marking the deliberate burial.... of dogs [were found] in the midden deposits, in the southern part of the midden mound” (Perttula 2015:24).
4. If the remains were located in a disturbed area containing an abundance of dog bone fragments suggesting a former burial. At the Mahaffey site, Perino and Bennett (1978:12) describe a potential burial of “bones [that] had been badly destroyed by rodents. It contained a few scattered bones plus a skull and jaw sections.”

Based on archeological and ethnohistorical data collected thus far, it is clear there existed a special relationship with dogs. This is likely because they were considered members of the community and were also certainly valuable as hunters. There are several cases where dogs have been buried within prepared pits and with burial goods. Such special treatment suggests a similar concern as shown with human burials where burial goods were placed as provisions for the next world (see also Schwartz 2000).

As I move forward with this long-term project, I am reaching out to those who are aware of dog burials (and citations) to build and expand the corpus. I am interested in Caddo area dog burials and those in neighboring groups, such as the Quapaw, Natchez, Wichita, and Pawnee.

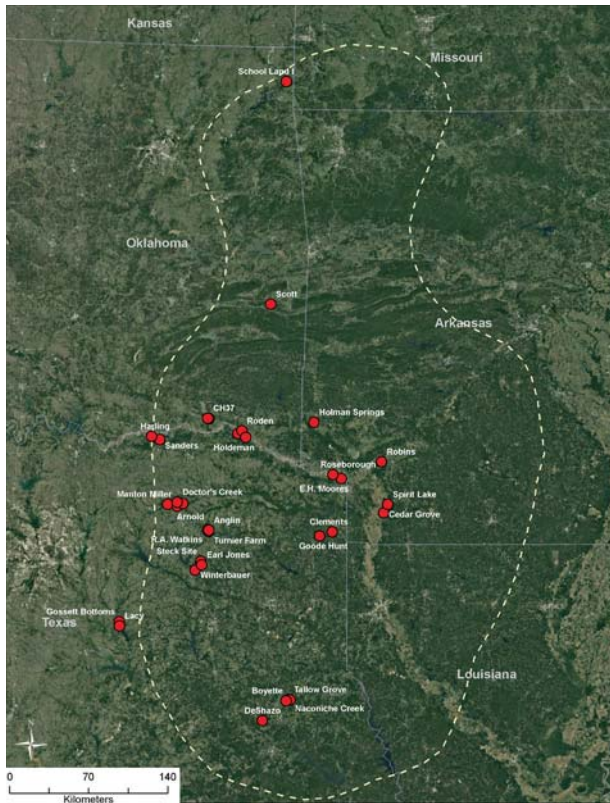


Figure 1. Distribution of the current corpus of dog burials in the Caddo area.

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