

The Origin of the Pyrenean Mastiff



While the origin of the Pyrenean Mastiff is not clearly known, it is generally accepted that it is descended from molosser dogs brought from Sumeria and Assyria to Spain by the Phoenicians some 3,000 years ago. Due to the remoteness of the various areas of the Pyrenees Mountains and the remainder of what is now known as Spain, the original molosser dogs developed divergently by region into several livestock guardian breeds, the Pyrenean Mastiff, the Spanish Mastiff, and the breed most closely related to the Pyrenean Mastiff, the Pyrenean Mountain Dog which is also known as the Great Pyrenees.

In the early middle ages, the area that would later become Spain was split between the Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon in the North, and the Muslim controlled areas of the south. In the wide and flat area of Castile, the smooth coated Spanish Mastiff was developed to protect sheep herds that traveled over long distances. In the Aragon

region, the less homogeneous Pyrenean Mountains developed more rugged and longer haired livestock protectors. Following the Trashumante, or formal mass migration of flocks to and from grazing grounds established by the Visigoth King Eurico in 504 A.D., herds of 1,000 head of sheep accompanied by a shepherd and five mastiffs would make the migration through the bear and wolf infested Pyrenees Mountains and foothills. Called by the area of their Trashumante source, the Navarran Mastin (also Mastin of Navarra) and the Mastin d'Aragon, these livestock protectors were highly esteemed, and as such, they received the same food allotments as the shepherds. They wore the carlanca, a spiked collar that protected their necks while engaging wolves and bears. This migration lasted well into the 18th century.



In 1659, Mazarino, the Regent of France, and Phillippe IV, King of Spain, signed a decree splitting ownership of the Pyrenean Mountains with the northern area becoming French territory, and the Southern area remaining Spanish territory. The northern, or French, area further refined their mastiff developing a white longer haired breed, the Pyrenean Mountain Dog, that possessed a more refined head and stature. The Pyrenean Mountain Dog enjoyed wide spread recognition due to its popularity and strong breeding programs, while the Spanish mastiffs in the South continued their work as livestock guardians and remained more massive, primitive, and less homogenous.



In the 1930s and 1940s, the disappearance of the wolf and bear from the Pyrenees Mountains, the new reliance on rail to transport sheep, and the Spanish Civil War followed by World War II and a scarcity of food almost led to the total loss of the Mastiffs of Aragon. Being very large and expensive to support and with no further purpose as livestock guardians, these noble dogs almost became extinct.

With the return of a pack of wolves to the Aragon region in the 1970s, there was once again a need for these dogs now known as the Pyrenean Mastiff. At the same time, a small group of enthusiasts for this breed set to work reviving it, finding approximately 100 specimens of the breed and then narrowing it down to the best 30 that most closely resembled the standard and that displayed the proper temperament and excellent health. Their breeding program resulted in today's Pyrenean Mastiff that is known for its great size, strong build, graceful movement, and its gentle non-aggressive and even temperament. Yet the Pyrenean Mastiff still possesses great fighting skills honed through centuries of protecting livestock, but will put them to use only when pressed to meet aggressive behavior to protect itself, its people, its flock, its pack or its home.

While still relatively rare, the breed has since spread throughout Western and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Russia, Australia, Japan, and on to Mexico, the USA and now Canada with somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000 worldwide. They are FCI approved and are shown successfully in the FCI affiliated clubs of most of these country's.

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The source of this information and pictures is Rafael Malo Alcrudo, the author of El Mastín del Pirineo - Guara Editorial- Zaragoza – 1982. He also has many other works on the Pyrenean Mastiff. Mr. Malo was the primary member of the initial group that is responsible for the revival of this breed. In 1977 Mr. Malo, along with Daniel Llorens Guerrero and Jaime Graus Morales, founded the Pyrenean Mastiff Club of Spain, which is affiliated with the Real Sociedad Canina de España.

