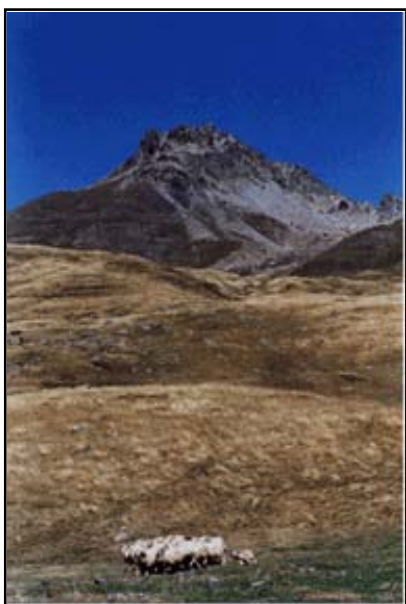
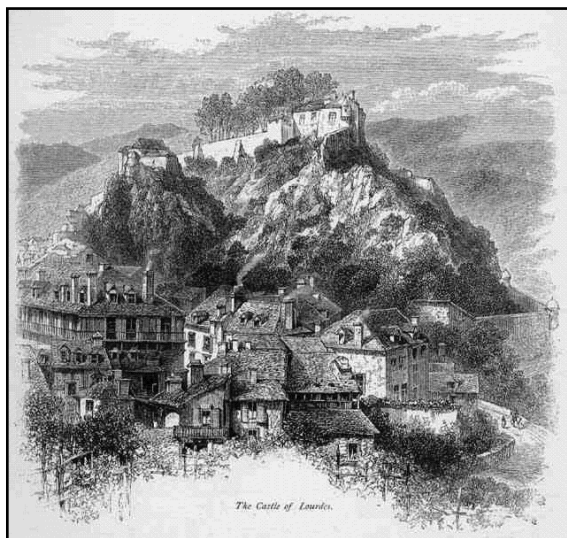


A Brief History of the Pyrenean Shepherd



Its origins lost in the mists of time, the Pyrenean Shepherd has resided in the Pyrenees Mountains of Southern France since time immemorial. Myths abound – that the breed is descended from native Pyrenean bears and foxes; and that this was the original dog of the Cro-Magnon people who painted the cave at Lascaux. What we can know is that bones of small dogs abound in Neolithic sub-fossil deposits, and that sheep and goat herding were so well developed in the Pyrenees that by 4000 BC, the ecology of the region had been transformed by overgrazing. Throughout the centuries, transhumance herding has been the mainstay of the economy of the High Pyrenees, and this ancient lifestyle persists even into the twenty-first century. Many Pyr Sheps of excellent type (but with no registered ancestors) still herd sheep every day in the Pyrenees Mountains.

Medieval accounts of life in the Pyrenees mention the dogs as constant companions; wherever the shepherd went, his little dog went too (see e.g. *Montaillou*). Beginning in the early modern period, depictions can be found in engravings, lithographs, and paintings. Noteworthy are Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* ("chien de berger de petite race"), Dartiguenave's *Costumes des Pyrenees*, and Descamps' *Le retour du berger*. It is well-known among residents of the High Pyrenees that when the Virgin Mary appeared to the young shepherdess Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in 1858, Bernadette had her little Pyrenean Shepherd by her side. Representations of the breed dating to the eighteenth century display the same ear crop that is still used today.



An important factor in developing and maintaining breed type across the centuries was that the pastoral industry relied on two breeds, the Great Pyrenees guarded the flocks against predation by bears, wolves and lynxes, whereas the Pyrenean Shepherd was used solely for herding and not for protection. This allowed selection to concentrate on maintaining a high degree of herding instinct and soundness. As the dogs did not need to defend themselves, small size was valued. Smaller dogs are quicker and more sure-footed on the windy crags. They also need less food, allowing the shepherd to keep more individual dogs, and thus a larger population of sheep – some for subsistence and some for market. Thus, the population of Pyrenean Shepherds has been consistently high across the centuries, augmenting the power of selective breeding to decrease genetic defects and maintain breed type and working ability. This also led to the stabilization of two varieties which assort independently when interbred. The Rough-Faced variety has a long or demi-long coat and some long hairs on the face (though not so profuse as to hide the eyes). The Smooth-Faced variety is less abundantly furnished and has short hair on the face.

The breed first distinguished itself outside the Pyrenees Mountains by dint of its service during WWI. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Pyrenean Shepherds gave their lives for the cause. They were used as couriers, as search and rescue dogs finding injured soldiers after battles, and to accompany guards on their rounds. J. Dhers, officer in charge of war dogs remarked the day after final victory that it was his “duty to proclaim” that, the Pyrenean Shepherd was “the most intelligent, the most cunning, the most able, and the fastest” among all the breeds used.

After the war, the *Reunion des Amateurs des Chiens Pyreneens* (RACP) was founded to preserve both the Great Pyrenees and the Pyrenean Shepherd, and this remains the French parent club today. The Pyrenean Shepherd breed (both varieties) was granted full recognition in France in 1926. This led to increased participation in both shows and herding trials. The effort was led by Bernard Senac-Lagrange, vice-president of the French Kennel Club (SCC) and a native of the High Pyrenees. RACP has had only 4 presidents, Senac-Lagrange, Charles Duconte, Guy Mansencal, and Alain Pecoult. Leadership of the club has been conservative in a thus-far highly successful effort to preserve type.



Some Pyr Sheps came to North America in the 19th century accompanying flocks of sheep imported from the Pyrenees Mountains. These dogs included Smooth-Faced blue merles that were instrumental in founding the Australian Shepherd breed. Mary Crane of Basquaerie kennels, founder of the Great Pyrenees in America, imported four Pyr Sheps in the 1930s, one being Houzard de Fontanettes from M. Senac-Lagrange, but did not breed them.

In the mid 1970s, Linda Weisser of Euzkotar kennels in Washington State, also a Great Pyrenees breeder, imported a breeding pair from Guy Mansencal's "Estaubé" kennel in France. Jouk de l'Orincois and Javotte de l'Estaubé had several litters. These pups were tremendous ambassadors for the breed, introducing many American fanciers to this unusual little French sheepdog.

In 1983, Patricia Princehouse of La Brise kennels, yet another Great Pyrenees fancier, imported Ch. Urrugne de l'Estaubé from Guy Mansencal's Estaubé kennel. In 1987 she imported additional breeding stock. With the rising number of Pyr Shep enthusiasts, Patricia and Fran Princehouse, Peggy Oba, Jean Cave Pero, and others established the Pyrenean Shepherd Club of America in 1987 with the goal of protecting individual Pyrenean Shepherds, and preserving the original breed type.

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