

## Chapter 2

### The Great Dane's Ancestry

There is little doubt that Great Danes are an ancient breed. Evidence of Dane-like dogs have been found among the excavations of ancient Assyrian artifacts. The Assyrian culture was advanced and active in trade with other countries. It is thought that perhaps their dogs were also included in some of the exported goods as their likeness has also shown up in the artifacts of the ancient Romans and Greeks. There is a Grecian coin in the Royal Museum at Munich, which dates from the fifth century BC. It depicts a likeness of a dog which greatly resembles the Great Dane of today.

The Mastiff, Greyhound and Irish Wolfhound have all been credited as more recent ancestors of the Great Dane as we know him today. The evidence for Greyhound ancestry is apparent in the merle coloration associated with the harlequin pattern seen in the breed today. According to Earnest Hart in his book entitled, *This Is the Great Dane*, "...for the patchy dark-on-a-white-ground coloring of the harlequin variety, is a pattern derived from the Greyhound breeds throughout the Egyptian Greyhound, a direct descendent of the prototype dog, *Canis Familiaris Leineri*. The early Dane was also sometimes referred to as the "Tiger" dog, which again promoted controversy since some authorities claim the name was derived from the striped effect of brindling and others (particularly German breed historians) see the Harlequin factor as the reason for the "Tiger" title."

Because there was no "Color Code" in breeding in those days, there was a veritable 'rainbow' of colors to be found in these dogs. Fawn and blue, blue, brindle as well as the classical black and white harlequin pattern abounded. The recessive blue color was wide spread. There were interesting color patterns produced by a good deal of white which was present in fawn and brindle as well as harlequin and black. This common extension of white led to German breeders disallowing the breeding of harlequins, or dogs with a predominance of white to fawns or brindle so that the white was eventually bred out, with the exception of the occasional white mark on the chest or toes that we see today.

Germany is considered the most influential country behind the modern Great Dane, with England a close second. No one seems to know how this huge dog came to be called Great Dane as there's no evidence he was ever popular in Denmark. In Germany he was known as Deutsche Dogge. The early German Danes were huge and coarse in appearance. More like the Mastiff than the present day Great Danes.

The early Great Dane was a large and powerful hunting hound, used as an effective war dog, guard and hunter of wild boar. The forests of Germany abounded with hundreds of wild boar and large hunts were a common occurrence. Ears were cropped extremely short to prevent injury as the dog ran through heavy brush and damage from the razor sharp tusks of the boar. Today the tradition of ear cropping continues in America and

other countries where it isn't outlawed. The length has increased dramatically and gives a noble look to the head. However, it is *not* necessary to crop ears in order to show a Dane.

In 1857, the first record of a Great Dane having existed in the United States was when Mr. Francis Butler shipped his harlequin named Prince from New York to London. Prince was shown in England and a photo of him and his master appeared in the *Illustrated News*. Having seen this publication, Queen Victoria expressed interest in seeing the dog.

The first time Great Danes were shown in this country was in 1877 at the Philadelphia Grand National Show. They were then shown under the name of Siberian, or Ulm dogs. The Westminster Kennel Club offered a class for “Siberian” dogs in 1887.

The next notable show that included classes for Great Danes was held at the American Institute building in New York. Here the uncontrollable aggression of the breed was seen by all. Fights broke out both among the Danes and the other breeds in attendance. Because of this they were barred from further showing in this country. Seven years later, in 1888, they were once again allowed into an American show ring.

The Danes of the past *were* fierce and aggressive and had a temperament very different from the 'gentle giant' we know today. The temperament of these early Danes, imported directly from Germany, was so aggressive as to be almost unmanageable. Their use as hunting dogs, war dogs and guard dogs, required this type of temperament. It is a great tribute to the early American breeders to note the tremendous improvement in temperament within about 20 years of the first imports. This was achieved without losing the desired guarding behavior exhibited today by the modern Great Dane.

Today they are basically the most gentle of dogs. They should be devoted to their families, and willing to accept into their homes anyone welcomed by their owners. In most cases this is the reality. However, the genes that cause the aggression and shyness, do occasionally crop up. It is because of this that breeders must consistently select their breeding stock for GOOD temperament. Keep this in mind when you begin your own search for a dog whether for a pet or a breeding/show dog.