
Pat Shipman’s *Our Oldest Companions: The Story of the First Dogs* is a fascinating and often surprising exploration of human and canine evolution. Shipman’s narrative almost immediately upends commonly held ideas about human evolution and the domestication of animals as she widens her frame beyond Europe, considers the ways that humans and dogs evolved together rather than separately or hierarchically, and integrates Australian dingoes, who are more often seen as an evolutionary outlier, into her argument about the first dogs hunting cooperatively with early humans enabling them to outcompete other large predators including Neanderthals and ensure their long-term survival. As Shipman moves through this complicated history, she provides detailed overviews of all the related scientific discoveries and analyses of the scholarly arguments, even as she disputes many of them. Her thorough presentation and detailed endnotes ensure that this book will be valuable to scholars and students, but her captivating prose will enchant all readers seeking to learn more about humans, dogs, and our long history together.

Shipman’s argument is complex, in part because she incorporates all the relevant archaeological evidence rather than dismissing entire continents as other scholars have done. She laments that an earlier generation of scholars focused on Europe and dismissed the possibility that dogs were domesticated in Asia because of racism and a later generation that dismissed the case of the dingo because it was an outlier. Shipman first suggests that evidence is building for both Europe and Asia as the site of canine domestication before presenting a case for the gradual and unintentional domestication of canines, which she argues was due to their shared ecological role as predators and the mutual benefit humans and canines found when they learned to hunt together. Shipman proposes that this cooperative hunting enabled the survival of both humans and dogs through a period of mass extinction 20,000 years ago that affected all other large predators on the European continent, concluding ‘that is the power of cooperation’ (p. 20). She then dives into the Australian case contenting that early humans in Australia, who she believes arrived in Australia before early humans arrived in Europe (p. 93) did not need to domesticate dogs to outcompete other large predators because there were not very many large predators there. Instead, Shipman presents evidence to suggest that these humans adapted and readapted to changes in the climate and ecosystem through other means (p. 124-25). Shipman presents a compelling case that two things can be true: humans and dogs survived a period of mass extinction in Europe because they cooperated and humans survived in Australia for tens of thousands of years without dogs.
Shipman presents this more complex history through captivating storytelling and an accessible but robust transmission of scholarly records and debates. She offers evidence that supports her arguments and evidence that doesn’t, and she always clearly explains why she disagrees with other scholars in cases where she does. To offer one example, Shipman discusses a scholarly debate over the dating of archaeological layers at Madjedbebe, a site in Australia. Shipman dates the oldest layers of the site to around 65,000 years ago, which would suggest that early humans reached Australia before Central Europe (p. 108). In this section, Shipman presents the arguments of scholars who are skeptical of the dating of these sites in detail. She explains that carbon dating is reliable only up to 50,000 years ago and anything older relies on OSL dating, which can be misleading if items are not located alongside their original sediment (p. 108). She also provides a related overview of James O’Connell’s counterargument, which suggests that termites burrowed in the soil and caused bioturbation that resulted in the movement of soils and artifacts (p. 108-109). Shipman follows this overview with the fact that ‘no positive evidence of the ancient presence of termite tunnels or mounds’ has been recovered at Madjedbebe so she abides by the earlier dating (p. 109). In this section, and throughout the book, Shipman’s ability to lay out all the relevant evidence and scholarship gives the reader a clear sense of the ongoing debates in the field while building trust in her analysis of the information presented.

Scholars and students of religious studies should be prepared for the relative absence of religion throughout this story of early humans and canines. For this reason, the book will work best in religious studies classrooms by providing helpful context and/or a scientific alternative to religious creation stories. Shipman engages one such story directly as she explores the case of the dingo in Australia. After presenting evidence that suggests early humans arrived in Australia tens of thousands of years before dingoes, she mentions that the Yilngayari creation myth ‘Mother and Father Dingo Make Aboriginal’ identifies dingoes as the ancestors of humans (p. 151). Shipman provides potential explanations for the inclusion of dingoes in Indigenous Australian creation myths despite their relatively recent arrival in Australia around 5,000 years ago (p. 125). Shipman cites the scholar Merryl Parker who analyzed Kundi-Djimindu dances and published myths about dingoes, and found that Europeans both reshaped some of the stories that they recorded but also that they may have misunderstood aspects of the stories because Indigenous Australians do not necessarily believe that time is linear. Shipman cites another scholar, Roland Breck, who argues that dingoes may have replaced an earlier extinct marsupial canine, thylacines, in these creation myths. So, while she rarely discusses religion, Shipman’s careful investigation of dingoes in Indigenous Australian creation myths and culture could provide a robust case study in religious studies classrooms.

Though Shipman sometimes presumes the reader is a fellow dog lover, this book is for everyone. I do not have a canine companion but I was riveted by Shipman’s narrative of how humans and dogs came to their companionship. And as both humans and dogs learn to live amidst the climate crisis, this story about our past and the ways that we adapted, changed, and cooperated to survive is more prescient than ever.

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