

# Dogs *not* in Canada

by Ria Hörter

THE CANADIAN KENNEL CLUB RECOGNIZES 164 BREEDS, BUT THERE ARE HUNDREDS MORE WORLD-WIDE, SOME OF THEM RARELY SEEN OUTSIDE THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.

## CIRNECO DELL'ETNA

Mount Etna, known for its violent eruptions, is situated in the northeastern part of the Italian island of Sicily. This volcano is 3,323 metres high and has a circumference of more than 200 kilometres. More than once in history, the inhabitants of surrounding villages have had to run for their lives when the volcano smoked and rained ash or hot lava. One of the greatest eruptions destroyed a large part of the city of Catania in 1669. In 1971, the village of Fornazzo was struck, the lava stopping at 600 metres. Recent eruptions took place in 1996 and November 2002. Apart from being an important tourist attraction, Etna is also a place of scientific research. Volcanic soil is very fertile, so oranges, lemons, figs, grapes and olives grow on the slopes.

### A ROMAN VILLA AND AN EGYPTIAN TOMB

Images and written proof of early dog breeds are rarely found. However, here there is an exception. Visitors to the Roman Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina (Sicily) can admire wonderful mosaic floors showing realistic hunting scenes with sighthounds. The dogs are depicted with long tails, pointed muzzles and big, triangular, erect ears. The same type of dog can frequently be seen on old Sicilian coins, dating from the Greek occupation, about 600 BC.

There is no doubt Cirnechi were bred in Sicily before the start of our era. There is, however, no solid evidence to support the assumption that this type of dog was taken by Phoenicians from the Nile valley in Egypt to Sicily, during



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN FRASER

**Origin:** Roman

**Original purpose:** Hunting

**Description:** The FCI first classified the Cirneco in Group 10, Sighthounds, based on its appearance and qualities. Since 1995, the breed has been classified in Group 5 (Spitzen and primitive hunting dogs). At first sight, the Cirneco dell'Etna looks like a small Pharaoh Hound. Medium-sized, the breed is elegant and slender, but at the same time a powerful sighthound. The length of the body is equal to the height at the withers (square outline). The topline is straight, sloping from the withers to the croup. The belly is tucked up and the tail is low set. The oval head has a narrow skull and pointed muzzle, and oval-shaped eyes, but most characteristic are the big, triangular, erect, very high-set and mobile ears. The coat is smooth and comes in various colours: Isabella, fawn, variations of red with white markings on chest, feet, tail and belly. Totally white is not preferred and black is a disqualifying fault. Working gait is a gallop with intermittent trotting phases.

**Height/weight:** 46 to 50 centimetres (18 to 19-1/2 inches) for males; 42 to 45 centimetres (16-1/2 to 18 inches) for females. Weight is 10 to 12 kilograms (22 to 27 pounds) for males; eight to 10 kilograms (18 to 22 pounds) for females.

*Right: A tomb in the city of Memphis (Egypt), founded in 2950 BC.*

*Far right: Mosaic floor in the Roman Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina (Sicily), featuring two dogs with narrow heads, triangular, erect ears and long tails.*



PHOTOS: COURTESY RIA HÖRTER

their colonialization of the island. But looking at old Egyptian tombs, and especially the one in Memphis dating from thousands of years BC, one must admit that the depicted dogs are very much the same as the Cirneco of today. The dog in Memphis has the same pointed muzzle and big erect ears as one can see in the Roman villa. The similarity is amazing.

The present name of this breed appeared for the first time in 1533, in a Sicilian law. People using *cernechi* for hunting were punished, because the dogs caused too much damage to wildlife. More than 400 years later, in 1973, the Italian author of the book *Cani da Caccia (Gun-dogs)* wrote that several thousand Cernechi still existed in the area surrounding Mount Etna.

## CERNERE OR KYRENAIKOS

It is assumed that the Pharaoh Hound and the various types of the Podenco have the same ancestry as the Cirneco dell'Etna. The Pharaoh Hound and the Podenco developed on the Island of Malta and the Balears, but the resemblance among these three is still striking. The Cirneco is the smallest, probably because he lived under plain circumstances. Until some years after the Second World War, the Cirneco developed in relative isolation and that is one of the reasons the breed hardly changed. The addition of "dell'Etna" to its name can be easily explained because this breed was mainly used on the slopes of Etna for hunting rabbits and hare. Probably "Cirneco" is derived from the Latin word *cernere*, which means "searching with attention," or from the Greek word *Kyrenaikos*, "the dog from Cyrene." Cyrene was located where we now find Libya, neighbouring Egypt. This explanation supports the theory that the oldest history of the Cirneco can be found in this part of North Africa.

## SIGHTHOUND

The Cirneco developed by rigorous, natural selection. The result is a hardened, 'heat-resistant' dog that is capable of doing his work for hours, without food or drink. Today the Cirneco is still a working dog in Sicily, usually living in kennels. He can be kept as a pet, providing his owner gives him a lot of exercise. Training is not easy, because the majority still have an enormous passion for hunting. The Cirneco is a sighthound, using sight, scent and hearing. The way he works is more or less primitive: track down, outrun, catch and retrieve.

Since 1993, a working certificate has been a requirement for an Italian show champion-



ship. Field trials to test natural aptitude are held in Sicily and northern Italy, at the breed championship shows.

## DONNA AGATA

In 1932, Dr. Maurizio Migneco published an article in *Il Cacciatore Italiana*, a magazine about hunting and shooting. He stated that the Cirneco, regarded as a very old breed, was nearly extinct. The eccentric Sicilian aristocrat Donna Agata Paterno Castello dei Duchi Carcaci was also very interested in saving this breed and answered his call for help. At that time, most Cirnechi were in the hands of farmers, for whom a dog must be a good worker and there is hardly any interest in appearance. Donna Agata kept looking for good specimens, travelling to Malta where the original type had been preserved. For more than 20 years she bred Cirnechi under the prefix Aetnensis. Convinced she was breeding the correct type, she asked Guiseppe Solaro, a zoology professor, to write a breed standard (1939).

Shortly thereafter the Cirneco dell'Etna was officially recognized by the Italian Kennel Club (ENCI). Recognition by the FCI followed in 1947, and a breed club was founded in 1951 (recognized by the ENCI in 1956). The present breed standard dates from 1989 and was ratified by the FCI in 1992.



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