

Basset Hounds in the Balkans

On the Challenges of Dogs and Fieldwork

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Moving to a foreign country to do extended fieldwork is complicated enough on your own, but it is considerably more complex when you are accompanied by a partner or a child. And it can become a Himalayan feat of bureaucracy and coordination if your “family” includes dogs. In May 2005, I packed up and rented the house, sold the car, and moved husband, three-year-old daughter and two basset hounds to Bulgaria, where I was beginning fieldwork for a book on international Islamic aid and the Slavic Muslim minority.

Tosca and Porthos, the bassets, are sedentary city dogs and Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, is one of those European dog-loving cities. After dealing with all of the extra veterinary visits, health certificates and special plane reservations, we made it to Bulgaria. The arrangement was that the dogs would live in Sofia with my husband while my daughter and I lived four hours away in a small, majority Muslim city of about nine thousand people.

In late August, business trips and circumstances conspired so that there was no one to watch the dogs for seven days. That week coincided with an important summer festival in my fieldsite that I did not want to miss. “Why shouldn’t I bring the bassets down to the fieldsite?” I thought; my daughter and I missed them and they were always a conversation starter in Sofia.

First, my landlord needed some extra financial “reassurance” that the dogs would live out on the balcony and not inside the apartment. Second, Basset Hounds are an odd-looking breed famous for advertising the shoe brand “Hush Puppies.” They are long-bodied with short stubby legs, droopy ears, sad, sympathetic eyes, and loose, wobbly flews [upper lips]. In Sofia, most people thought the hounds were adorable, but in my fieldsite people were terrified. Wherever I walked them in town, the locals gazed at

them with horror. People stared at me as if I were walking two full-grown lions through their streets: women fled from my path, children screamed, old grandmothers swore at me in muted Bulgarian.

A helpful neighbor suggested that I walk the dogs outside of town at the abandoned soccer stadium. This seemed like the perfect solution. I would load the dogs into the car and drive them to the old soccer field, overgrown with weeds and completely enclosed by dilapidated concrete bleachers. The first three times I took them there, it was empty. Because it was enclosed, I could let them off their leashes to romp and run through the tall grass with my daughter who chased them and squealed with delight.

When we arrived on the fourth day, Porthos and Tosca knew where they were going, and I let them out of the car without their leashes. Both dogs bounded happily toward the entrance. As my daughter and I slowly followed, I spotted, in the middle of the field, something that neither of my dogs had ever seen.

Sheep!

FIELD NOTES

In the entranceway, the female basset, Tosca, stood absolutely still, transfixed by the twelve sheep grazing about ten meters away. Her tail was straight up, her right front paw lifted, her long ears cocked forward. The sheep were riveting, and I could almost see the ancient canine urges swelling up in her chest. The only animals Tosca had ever met were other dogs, cats and the occasional squirrel, but here in the flesh were relatively small white puffs of domesticated mammal that must have triggered some long forgotten hunting instinct buried under a lifetime of couch-lounging and city life. With a bark as loud and deep as a sonic boom, Tosca set off at top speed toward the sheep, followed soon after by a baying Porthos.

The scene was thus: a dozen terrified sheep fleeing around the stadium being followed by two fat dogs barking insanely after them, being chased by a furiously shouting woman (me), being pursued by a wailing and confused toddler, being followed by two hysterical Bulgari-



Tosca, the sheep chaser, allowed the author's informants to become ethnographers. Photo courtesy of Kristen Ghodsee

an shepherdesses flailing their arms in dismay.

The sheep were faster than the dogs, but the dogs were much faster than I, so I ran across the field to try to cut them off. At that moment two men appeared: one of them was throwing large stones at Tosca and the other was running toward her with an axe. I was commanding Tosca to stop, but Tosca was so deep in the throes of her sheep fascination that she kept running. The sheep finally managed to jump out of the stadium, and a well-thrown rock walloped Tosca on her shoulder. She stopped just long enough so that I got to her before the axe-wielding man did.

The two men ran up to me, shouting “What the hell was I doing bringing dogs near the sheep!”, and I breathlessly apologized and tried to explain that they had never seen sheep before.

“What do you mean they’ve never seen sheep! They are dogs!”

At this point my daughter was howling with fear and the Bulgarian women were verbally assaulting me with curses. Before I could think of what I was saying, I blurted, “They are American!”

Of all of the things the men expected me to say, I do not think they were prepared for that. Both men immediately fell silent. They stared at each other. They stared at the hounds. They stared at me. In a region of Bulgaria where few people have ever left the province, let alone the country, the very idea of

foreign dogs was stupendously absurd. But it was the only explanation I had. So I stuck to it.

“They are American dogs. They live in the city. They won’t hurt the sheep, they are just curious.”

“American dogs!?” one of the men said, “American dogs?”

Puzzled at his own utterance of this remarkable revelation, he slowly lowered his axe.

Over the next hour, I explained the path that brought two basset hounds to this abandoned soccer stadium in one of the poorest, most isolated regions in the Balkans. The two men and two women asked questions that revealed much about the community I had chosen to study: Did the dogs have passports? Did they need visas? Did they fly on the plane with us? Did they have their own seats? I described the many details of international dog travel, as well as attempting to explain why some Americans care so much about their dogs.

Slowly, I realized how thoroughly wrong it had been to bring the dogs in the field, and not only because (as I learned afterward) there are actually Islamic *fatwas* against keeping dogs as pets, but because it was deeply insulting to my informants that my two hounds enjoyed social and economic privileges systematically denied to them. On the other hand, for about an hour on one day in August, Tosca and Porthos allowed my informants to become the ethnographers, forcing me to answer questions about the many peculiarities of my own cultural practices. I had become the object of study, and they would not let me leave until all of their queries were answered. As we parted that day, I knew that I had a great story, but I was certain that my “informants” did, too. Now they could also become cultural translators as they told the tale of the crazy American and her funny-looking dogs in their own communities for years to come. ☐

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