

The ears of Syrian Saluqis

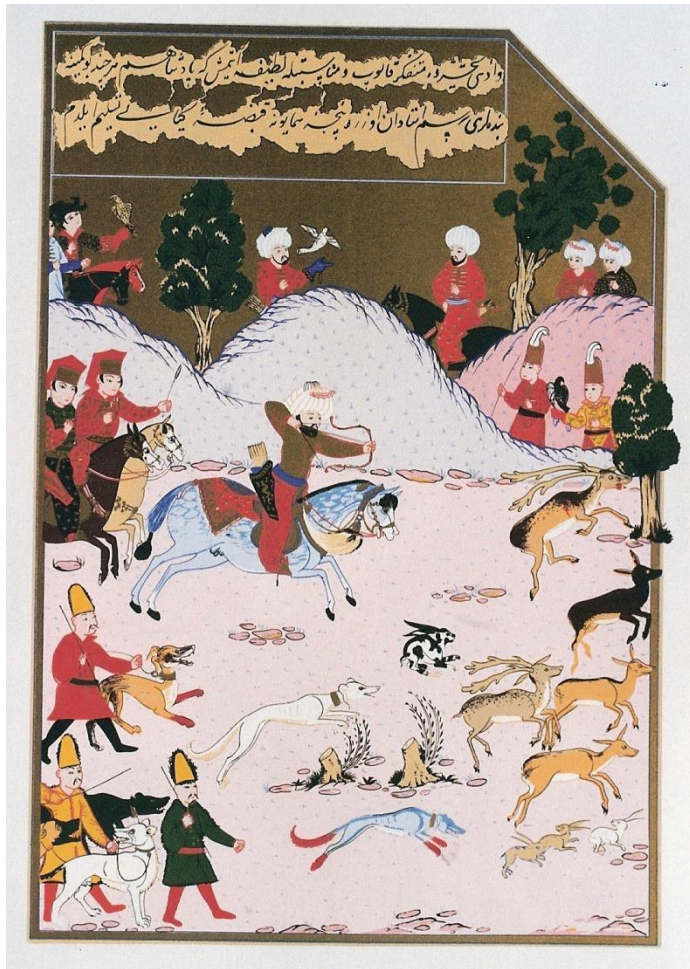
By Sir Terence Clark

People seeing Syrian Saluqis for the first time are always struck by the fact that so many have their ears cropped. Indeed some have even suggested unkindly that it must be done to disguise their faulty hang. However the existence of hounds with intact and perfectly normal ears easily gives the lie to such suggestions, so there has to be another explanation.



Two black and tan hounds at Hama, one with cropped ears and the other with intact ears.

Ear cropping is an old custom, which may even have its origins before Islam, when the ears of domestic animals were slit to show those which were not for slaughter. Certainly it was well established by the Middle Ages as can be seen in some miniatures of Persian or Ottoman nobles out hunting. In this example of the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid out hunting you can clearly see how the hounds' ears have been cropped quite short. With their hennaed feet they look exactly like the hounds of the Tai tribe that I saw near Qamishli.



Sultan Bayazid out hunting



Running hound of the Tai tribe.

However, one breeder in Hama gave a new slant on the practice. He assured me that only males had both ears cropped: whereas females had only one. Certainly I saw many examples to confirm this but by contrast I also saw examples of females with both ears cropped! So what is the truth of the matter?



Black and tan male with ear tips cropped and red bitch with only one cropped ear.

It is difficult to get to the bottom of the practice of cropping, as different people give different explanations. Some say it is for speed; others say it is for beauty; yet others say it is to prevent damage when running through thorn bushes or in fights with other dogs, foxes or even wolves; and some say it is for alertness.



Ears cropped for alertness.

All these are perfectly plausible reasons but they do not explain satisfactorily why the cropping is often done so unevenly. Sometimes the ears appear crudely mutilated so that what remains sticks out at a twisted angle.



Crudely cropped ears.

Sometimes only the tips are cut off, while at other times the ear is cut back close to the skull. And, as mentioned, sometimes only one ear is cropped.



Two puppies with recently cropped ears.

I suspect that the real reason has been lost in the mists of time and that today the breeders do it simply because it has always been done. They choose a particular style for no other reason than to distinguish their hounds from others, as a mark of identification.

These stories are part of the local folklore that is handed down from one generation to the next and really should not be examined too closely. For whatever the original reason for these and other curious customs their existence today merely serves to illustrate the continuity of a relationship between man and these hounds that has endured for centuries.