

**Zoosemiotics and Animal Liminality:
On the Ambivalent Status of Dogs in Ancient Roman Culture**

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In the ancient world, as in most human societies, dogs enjoyed a unique – albeit controversial – symbolic status. Recent research focusing on classical Greece has shown that the long-lasting representation of dogs as loyal, obedient, and watchful beings has its roots in a tradition dating back to Homer, if not to Minoan-Mycenean mentality (Mainoldi 1984, Franco 2014). As Franco 2014 observed, however, this representation entailed an inherent ambiguity. Since, differently from other animals (and similarly to women), dogs were entrusted with culturally essential tasks and entered human society at the bottom of the totem pole, they frequently aroused fears and suspicions. In many literary texts, both Greek and Roman, dogs were depicted as treacherous, shameless, aggressive, and parasitic, so that *kyōn* and *canis* became common terms of reproach. The present paper focuses on the mostly neglected area of Roman cultural representations, pointing out the *liminal* status of dogs as zoosemiotic objects of literary and rhetorical relevance. As Pliny the Elder (*NH* 29.57-58) reminds us, Roman history and religion attached great importance to dogs (especially to whelps or *catuli*) as ritual instruments connected with the ideas of expiation and fertility. Yet dogs were blamed (and yearly crucified) for failing to announce the Gauls' assault on the Capitol in 390 BC. Such an ambivalent delineation also emerges from Varro's and Columella's treatments of dog breeding and is emblematically mirrored by Cicero's rhetorical re-use of folkloric materials in *Pro Roscio Amerino*, 56-57.

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