



Jan. 4, 2018

Anthropologists long assumed that early man valued the dog strictly for his ability to hunt and serve as a beast of burden, traits that gave Neolithic man an edge in a harsh world.

And burials in the archaeological record of early hunter-gatherer settlements supported that view until Robert Losey, a University of Alberta anthropologist, surveyed the shores of [Lake Baikal](#), Siberia, the deepest freshwater lake in the world.

There, he found that hunter-gatherers between 5,000 and 8,000 years ago had created an extensive dog cemetery. Dogs were

buried with fancy collars, there were burials of both dog and master, some were even buried with elaborate necklaces and other jewelry.

One dog was laid to rest as if he were sleeping. In the mouth of another as placed a round pebble, maybe a toy or meaningful symbol. Some burials revealed implements such as spoons and stone knives used by their human companions.

Another canine grave revealed a dog wearing a necklace made of four red deer tooth pendants, a style also popular with the humans who buried it.

"At this time, dogs were the only animals living closely with humans, and they were likely known at an individual level, far more so than any other animal people encountered. People came to know them as unique, special individuals," Losey wrote.

"I think the hunter-gatherers here saw some of their dogs as being nearly the same as themselves, even at a spiritual level." And the burials reflect that. Each burial was unique. There was no culture-wide ritual being observed. Each dog was tenderly laid to rest as a personal expression of its human and how he or she felt about that particular dog.

This part of Eastern Siberia is a hotbed for canine burials, but the lakeside site yielded the highest, most organized concentration of them known to date.

The dogs of this hunter-gatherer society were similar to today's Siberian Huskies and Losey's analysis of his findings is that these dogs lived closely with their humans, ate the same food, shared many of the same diseases and were lovingly interred so

they could spend the afterlife with their human, too.

The diet of humans of the settlement was heavy on fish and seafood, which was less labor and time intensive than hunting game. Losey said that shoots the theory that the dogs were kept around just to help man hunt.

No, these were close companions who shared the elements, the cycle of the seasons, light and darkness, home and hearth with their humans. They were one. Ironically, with the invention of agriculture and permanent communities a short time later — advances we see as signs of higher civilization, dog burials faded from the scene. The record shows that some dogs were even eaten and many were sacrificed to gain favor with man's new gods.

So much for “civilized.”

Today, after several thousand years of this experiment with fixed communities and a kaleidoscope of cultures and societies, it looks as if many of us have come back to our senses and returned to early man's view: The dog is our most intimate and reliable friend, someone with whom to share the wind and rain, beloved companions we grieve when they leave us, dear ones we hope to be reunited with again in another place.