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Studies on Amerindian dogs: Taxonomic analysis of canid crania from the Northern Plains

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Abstract

Archaeological investigation of the economic role of domestic versus wild canids among late prehistoric and historic villagers in the Northern Plains has long been hindered by difficulties in reliably distinguishing between remains of different species, especially dogs (*Canis familiaris*) and wolves (*Canis lupus*). Taxonomic confusion is the result of deliberate human selection for large, strong dogs for use as draft animals, and occasional but probably consistent hybridization between dogs and wolves. Discriminant analysis is used to help identify 33 archaeological canid crania from the Northern Plains, many of which are taxonomically confusing. Reference samples for classification of these specimens consist of six groups of modern or archaeological dog, wolf and coyote (*Canis latrans*) crania from North America. Thirteen measurements are used. Analysis indicates that, relative to wolves, the dogs tend to have proportionally wide posterior

cranial vaults, short snouts and palates, steeply rising foreheads, and small teeth. Although convincing evidence for dog-wolf hybrid specimens from recent Plains archaeological contexts is lacking, the identification of such specimens probably has little practical significance with regard to canid domestication in general. Compared to dogs, a greater proportion of specimens identified as wolves exhibit evidence of butchering.



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Keywords

Northern Plains archaeology; *canis* taxonomy; dog; wolf; discriminant analysis; cranial morphology

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