
HISTORY

Situated in the farthest southwest corner of Europe, Portugal borders Spain, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The country has eight national breeds; all of them were, or still are, used for work such as herding, guarding and driving cattle, and hauling in nets for the fishermen. Some of them are com-

Because of the tall, wild mountains and poor land, livestock has to be moved in groups from one pasture to another. Shepherds stay in the higher places, called brandas, from spring until the end of autumn. Because of snow and cold winds, they stay in lower places, called invernerias, from December to March. These

Cão de Castro Laboreiro

“CASTRO LABOREIRO DOG” – A CULTURAL INHERITANCE

text and illustrations by RIA HÖRTER

panion dogs as well. The names of these native breeds all derived from their geographical origin. It can be a chain of mountains (Estrela Mountain Dog), an island (Cão de Fila de São Miguel) or a village (Cão de Castro Laboreiro).

SANDALS WITH WOODEN SOLES

Castro Laboreiro is situated in the north of Portugal, in the Castro Laboreiro Mountains. He appears mainly in a zone limited by the mountains of Peneda and Suajo and the rivers Minho and Lima.

In early times the Romans founded a castle in this area, later the population developed around it and by in the Middle Ages, a little village had come into existence. Castro Laboreiro (‘village of the labourers’) is built at a height of about 4,250 feet, on a steep hill, forming a kind of a fortified village. Even today some inhabitants – the Castrejos – dress in typical clothes: sandals with wooden soles, no stockings, coarse woollen gaiters, and the head covered with a hat and mantle.

traditional migrations took place from the beginning of the eight century.

One of the reasons the Castro Laboreiro has always been a limited breed is that those seasonal migrations took place in a small area of only dozens of miles. Still, the genetic diversity was sufficient to develop a strong, healthy population. Therefore it was not necessary to keep other breeds than the homebred dogs. Due to the isolated area, the breed was kept pure, and because of the owners’ lifestyle, these dogs developed without any human intervention. Undoubtedly, the Cão de Castro Laboreiro is one of Europe’s most primitive breeds.

THE MOST DOMINANT MALE

It is assumed that all type of livestock guard dogs originate from Asia or Asia Minor and made their way through central Europe down to Spain and Portugal where they mixed with local dogs. Their development took place in the region, sometimes quite isolated, where they have been used for ages.

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*Village people of Castro Laboreiro circa 1903
They lived quite isolated; the first road to Castro was opened in the 1940s.*

For example, the first road to Castro was opened in the 1940s. Before then, one had to climb the mountains or walk the old Roman road.

The Cão de Castro Laboreiro is not a herding dog, but was originally used to protect the herd from wild animals like wolves, and cattle thieves. Most of the time they did their protecting work on their own, without a shepherd. The great number of livestock guaranteed enough work for the Castro Laboreiro and except for a bitch giving birth to her puppies, these dogs were always on duty. Only two or three puppies were raised; the others were eliminated by their owners. Most of the time, the sire was supposed to be the most domi-



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nant male of the group.

PORTUGUESE ARMED FORCES

Until recently, the Cão de Castro Laboreiro has been a natural breed - strong, brave and always willing to protect its owner's property. Unfortunately, most of the population of the town of Castro Laboreiro is now elderly, because the younger people have left for the cities, where earning money seems to be easier. Since 1954, the local priest, Aníbal Rodrigues, has organized a contest for Laboreiros, where they can show their guarding qualities, characteristics and temperament. A few other things, such as the arrival of other dogs in the region, and the reduction of local livestock, were threatening the existence of the Laboreiro. Therefore the Laboreiro got new jobs around the country, guarding farms, and city and country houses. The breed is also used in the Portuguese armed forces, more or less for the same work as the German Shepherd Dog. Now the population is quite large in Portugal and the Laboreiro is present at dog shows, but it's still a rare breed in the rest of Europe. Recently, some Laboreiros have been exported to the U.S. to protect sheep flocks from wolves and coyotes.

CULTURAL INHERITANCE

The Castro Laboreiro is one of the best guard dogs - very alert, intelligent and less stubborn than other guarding breeds. When kept in the house, socialization is extremely important. His demeanor is calm, his threatening bark frightening, but he is loyal to the family and especially to the children. In Portugal, the Laboreiro is regarded as a cultural inheritance with the right to be preserved for the future.

The breed is recognized by the Club Português de Canicultura (Portuguese Kennel Club) and has had an official standard since 1935 (FCI 1967). The breed club, the Clube do Cão de Castro Laboreiro, was founded in 1989. In 1999, about 100 dogs were en-



*The breed developed without any human intervention and it is one of Europe's most primitive breeds.
Photo by Silvia Ribeiro*

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In Portugal, the Laboreiro is regarded as a cultural inheritance with the right to be preserved for the future. Photo by Alice van Kempen

tered in the stud book, but 95 percent of the dogs living in the Castro area are not registered in the stud book. This breed shows three types: the show dog, bred according to the breed standard; the now rare livestock guard dog in the Castro Mountains; and a dog whose phenotype is a mix of Laboreiros and other dogs.

Origin: 8th-14th century Portugal.

Original purpose: Guarding livestock and watchdog, later also a companion dog.

Description: The general impression is of a robust, strong-boned, mastiff type of dog with a rectangular silhouette. The very powerful head shows lightness rather than coarseness and has a soft stop. The muzzle is shorter than the skull. The eyes are oval and colored from hazel to deep brown. The fairly high-set, almost tri-



The so-called Castrejos, inhabitants of Castro Laboreiro. Since 1954, the local priest has organized a contest for Laboreiros, where they can show their guarding qualities, characteristics and temperament.

A litter born in the stable of a goat flock. The development of the breed took place in the region, sometimes quite isolated. Photo by Silvia Ribeiro



angular ears are moderately thick and hang close and flat to the head. The short neck is carried proudly; there is no dewlap. The shoulder-upper arm is almost straight. The body is strong and compact, the back straight; the chest is oval in shape - high, broad and rather deep. The belly is rather flat, even somewhat narrow, the loins strong and wide. The legs are muscular, the feet rather rounded than long, almost cat feet. Single or double dewclaws are acceptable. The croup is slightly higher than the withers. The tail (not docked) falls to the hock; in action it is carried above the top line, but never carried downward like a hunting-horn. The coat is thick, resistant, slightly dull, smooth and very dense, in wolf colors of all shades - i.e., a mix of grey, black, some brown and yellow (a kind of black brindle). There is no undercoat. The Cão de Castro Laboreiro has an easy, rhythmical gait, legs moving parallel to the body.

His bark is quite characteristic, very loud, starting in variable, generally low tones and ending up in prolonged high-pitched sounds similar to howling.

For working dogs, the "mountain color" is preferred: greyish, in lighter and darker shades, not black, with brown or reddish - an excellent camouflage. Serious faults are a too-bony or too-fleshy head, an under- or overshot mouth, any abnormality in the tail and white markings or very different from the breed's typical colour.

Height/weight: Dogs 21.5 to 23.5 inches and bitches: 20.5 to 22.5 inches. Weight is about 88 pounds.

Info: <http://cccl.no.sapo.pt> (Portuguese breed club, in Portuguese) and www.cpc.pt (Portuguese Kennel Club, in Portuguese).

