A Roman Lapdog:
Tails from the Provincial Capital of Carnuntum, Austria

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INTRODUCTION

Dogs of various shapes and sizes were present and traded throughout the Roman world.[1] Large working dogs were used for herding, hunting, and guarding.[2] Small lap dogs were described in some inscriptions and by classical authors as companion animals and beloved family pets.[3] These smaller dogs were frequently associated with women and children and often symbolized status and prestige as 'luxury products'.[4,5]

We report on a **complete left radius of a small, skeletally mature dog (CA-262)** recovered from a Roman cemetery at Carnuntum, Austria.

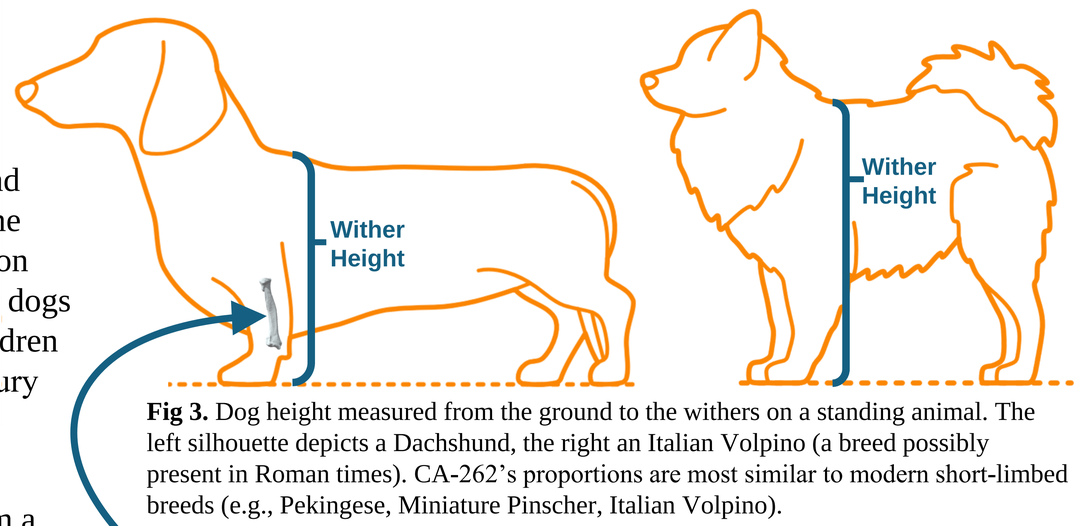
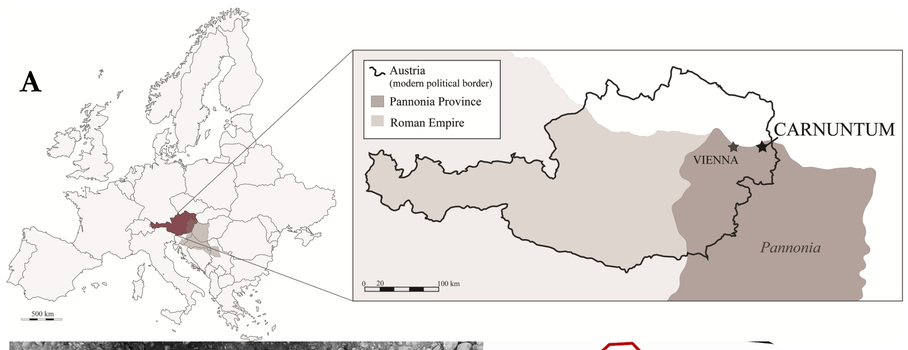


Fig 3. Dog height measured from the ground to the withers on a standing animal. The left silhouette depicts a Dachshund, the right an Italian Volpino (a breed possibly present in Roman times). CA-262's proportions are most similar to modern short-limbed breeds (e.g., Pekingese, Miniature Pinscher, Italian Volpino).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Roman *Carnuntum* (modern Austria) (Fig. 1A) was the capital of Pannonia Superior and consisted of a series of linked military fort and civilian settlements.

Dog CA-262 was found in the cemetery (1st to 4th C. AD), south of the largest civilian city. Excavations initially indicated one large feature, from which CA-262 was collected. Further excavation determined this feature was two graves with indistinguishable fill, one belonging to a juvenile and the other to a younger female. CA-262 was likely part of the upper fill of one of these graves.



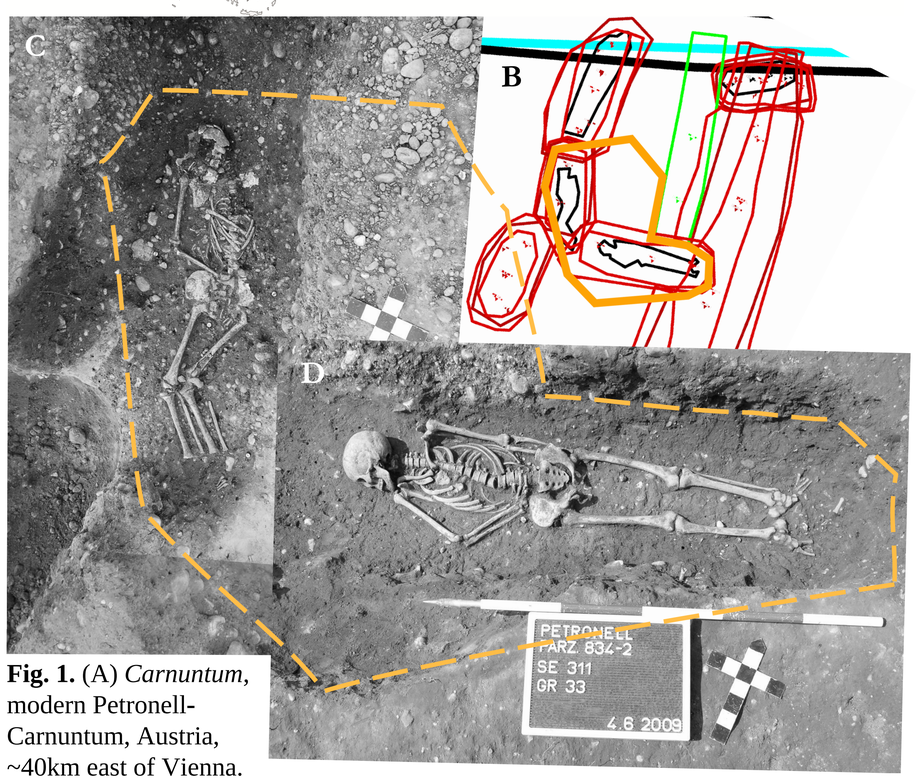


Fig. 1. (A) *Carnuntum*, modern Petronell-Carnuntum, Austria, ~40km east of Vienna. (B) The feature (orange) that contained CA-262's radius, associated with two, poorly defined graves. (C&D) The two associated human graves: a subadult individual (CA-316, to the west) and an adult (CA-311, to the south). CA-262 was recovered from the fill somewhere above these two graves; it is not possible to know its exact location (e.g., associated with the subadult, the adult, or neither [coincidental deposition]).



Fig 2. Two dog radii from Carnuntum, Austria. The left is a 'typical' sized Roman dog, the right is CA-262, a brachymelic radius. Scan the QR codes for 3D images.

SMALL DOGS in PANNONIA

Table 1. Dogs under 35 cm wither height in the province of Pannonia or modern-day Austria. CA-262 in bold orange font.

Country	Roman Province	Site	Wither Height (cm)
Austria	Raetia	Innsbruck-Wilten[12]	≥ 20+
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	23.0
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	23.0
Austria	**Pannonia**	**Carnuntum**	**24.5**
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	24.5
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	28.2
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	29.8
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	31.5
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	31.7
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	31.8
Austria	Noricum	Augustiana[14]	32.6
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	32.7
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	33.5
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	33.6
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	33.6
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	34.1
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	34.1
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	34.7
Austria	Pannonia	Carnuntum[15]	34.8
Hungary	Pannonia	Tác-Gorsium[13]	34.9

SKELETAL DESCRIPTION

Canid CA-262 is represented by an **isolated left radius** (Fig. 2); it is atypically short (**brachymelic**), broad, and features a curved and bandy diaphyseal morphology.

The radius measures 7.1 cm in greatest length (GL) and 0.7 cm in smallest breadth (SD) (after von den Driesch[6]). It has a slenderness index (SI) of 10.5 (SI=[SD/GL]*100, after Martínez Sánchez et al.[5] The dog's height at the withers is estimated at 24.5 cm (after Harcourt[2]) (Fig. 3, Table 1). For comparison, the average wither height for dogs at nearby Roman Halbturn, Austria, excluding brachymel dogs, was 58.5 cm.[8] In this region, published data show that ***small* dogs averaged 29.0 cm at the withers, 4.5 cm taller than the Carnuntum dog.** CA-262's measurements are consistent with modern dwarf breeds, similar in size to a Miniature Pinscher or Pekingese.[1,7]

DISCUSSION

Evidence of dogs at Roman frontier cemeteries is not uncommon. At nearby Halbturn (Austria), dogs were buried near children, possibly as sacrifices.[5,8] However, while CA-262 was found in association with the grave fill(s) of a woman and a child, it remains unclear whether its deposition was intentional or accidental. Saliari et al.[9] note the frequent occurrence of similarly isolated dog bones in Roman Austrian contexts, though no definitive explanation has been offered for this phenomenon.

The physical remains of this very small dog at Carnuntum align with depictions of small dogs alongside humans on local grave markers (Fig 4).[9] This evidence suggests that **lapdogs were present in the civilian city of Carnuntum.** Given what we know about small dogs in the Roman world, they likely played a role not only in trade and the economy, but also in domestic life, particularly in the lives of women and children.

Small Dogs Depicted on Gravestones from *Carnuntum* (and area)

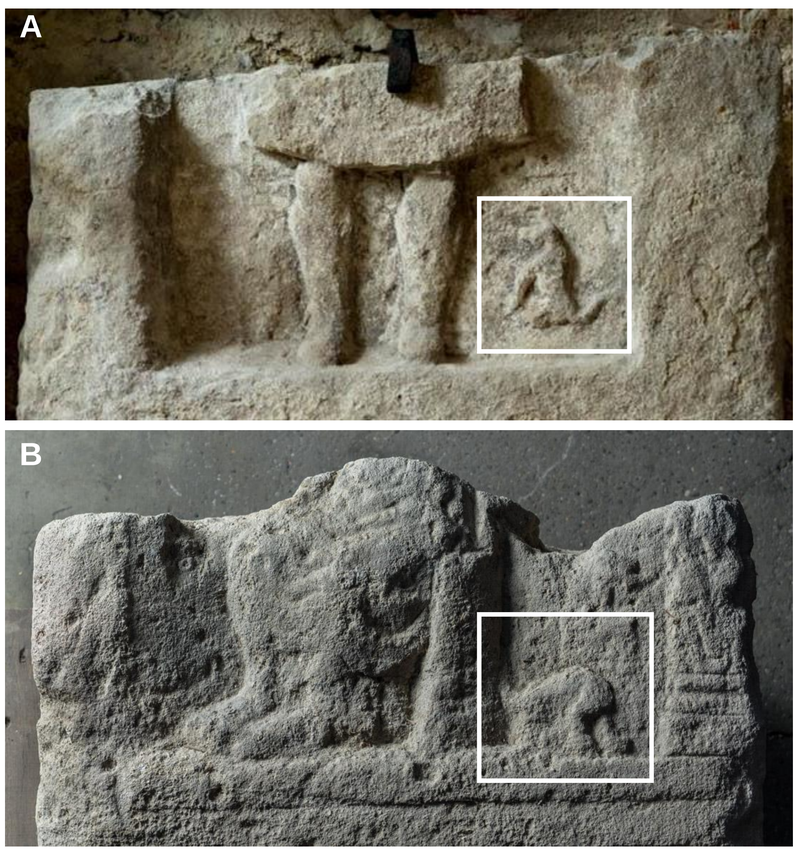


Fig 4. Dogs on funerary portrait stelae in Carnuntum and area. (A) Monument for a child (boy?) (2252-2) (Eisenstadt - Burgenländisches Landesmuseum, Photo: Ortolf Harl).[10] (B) Monument for 5 year old Marcellina, a soldier's daughter (121-2) (Landessammlungen NÖ, Archäologischer Park Carnuntum, Foto: Ortolf Harl).[11]

CA-262 shows that small dogs, valued as pets and prestige items in Roman society, were present at Carnuntum.

Reflecting on this tiny dog's life, dependant on humans for food and protection, **offers a window into everyday Roman life**. This connection, through the lens of our own relationships with pets, can allow us to **better relate to the experiences** of those who lived in this Roman frontier capital city.

Actual size

24.5cm

REFERENCES
Scan QR Code:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

RJG would like to thank the Archaeological Society of Alberta (Calgary Center), Mount Royal University and the Faculty of Arts for their support in the transportation and curation of this collection.