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That's Not a Wolf: English Misconceptions and the Fate of New England's Indigenous Dogs
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Early modern English explorers and settlers in New England and elsewhere routinely mistook indigenous American dogs for wolves. This repeated misidentification arose in part from aspects of indigenous dog morphology, but it also served to denigrate Native American cultures by denying their possession of domesticated animals. Modern environmental historians have unconsciously reproduced these prejudices against indigenous dogs without critically assessing their accuracy or their function as part of the rhetoric of colonialism. Indigenous dogs have been presented as incompletely domesticated, “semiwild” creatures when in reality they were just as domesticated as their European cousins. Indigenous dogs were the most numerous nonhuman large predators in early New England, but their misidentification as wolves has caused them to be largely overlooked in the historical record. Their population plummeted over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the Native communities to which they belonged suffered from introduced disease and English aggression. English efforts both to protect livestock through a war on wolves and to control loose dogs increased pressure on dogs of indigenous heritage. In the end, the English cultural prejudice against wolfish-looking dogs that erased indigenous dogs from the historical record largely erased living indigenous dogs from the New England landscape.