Slide 1 - Introduction – Splash Screen

Welcome, fellow cat enthusiast! Prepare yourself for a journey to the past as we explore how our favorite fluff evolved from a savage hunter on the plains of Africa, into our charming and beloved household lap-lounger. The domestic housecat, known as *Felis catus*, exemplifies a complex and gradual history of evolution quite distinct from other animals of domestication. If you’ve ever heard the phrase, “like taming a herd of cats,” you’ll recognize the irony in the idea that cats can bend to our will, unlike the nature of other ‘domestic’ animals such as dogs, sheep, or goats. People are often confused about whether cats are truly ‘domestic’ or ‘tame.’ This distinction is an important one that will be a central theme throughout our archaeological journey. If a young ‘wild’ species of any animal is captured at a young age, humans have the ability to give care and therefore ‘tame’ a wild animal into a trusted, modified companion. A ‘domestic’ animal, in contrast, is one in which genetic change has occurred over time throughout an entire population as humans artificially select individuals to be more tolerant and adapted to living with them.

*Felis catus* is no exception to this process. However, because they often put on airs of superiority by means of a self-aggrandizing attitude, we’re often confused if we control the cat or if the cat controls us. Who is domesticating who? Is this animal tame or domesticated? To answer these questions more fully, let’s take a journey back in time to *Felis catus’* verified wild progenitor, the African wildcat (*Felis lybica).*

Slide 2 – *Felis Lybica*

Our journey begins with the verified precursor species of *Felis catus* known as *Felis lybica,* otherwise known as the African wildcat. Studies in the taxonomic literature were controversial about who exactly was the ancestral progenitor to *Felis catus.* However, in 2007, geneticists published a highly-praised genetic assessment of 979 domestic and wild cats. Their analysis revealed that domestic cats, from Europe, the Near East, and Asia, all derive from one of two genetic subtypes of *Felis lybica –* one from Turkey, the other from Egypt*.* Scholars are still unsure whether these populations became domesticated separately and later interbred, or if one became domesticated and later interbred with another population. Regardless, evidence of *Felis catus’* ancestral lineage has been confirmed and we can readily trace its lineage across continents to *Felis lybica.* Let’s move on to a cultural history of this development from *Felis Lybica* to *Felis catus* over time.

Slide 3 – The Fertile Crescent

Our story begins in the Fertile Crescent, a region that is demarcated by modern countries spanning parts of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and fringe regions of Turkey and Iran. The region of the Fertile Crescent is widely known for the earliest evidence of Neolithic farming settlements (circa 9,000 BCE) that began to dot the various river valleys such as the Tigris and Euphrates in the north, as well as a large portion of the Nile River valley to the south. Farmers in the Fertile Crescent particularly focused on cereals, legumes such as peas and lentils, as well as animal husbandry with sheep, pigs, goats, and cattle.

The region is sometimes regarded as one of the ‘cradles of civilization,’ because a shift from mobile, hunter-gatherer societies to sedentary, agrarian ones became a defining mechanism of *Homo sapiens’* earliest forms of societal and technological advancements. By the 3rd Millennium BCE, the advent of agriculture in the region brought about developments in irrigation, writing, the wheel, and glass, as well as new cultural phenomena such as libraries, forms of organized law, and construction activities.

Farmers soon realized that a positive aspect to their practice resulted in food surpluses. In short order, farmers constructed granaries to store their produce and they soon became a major characteristic of farming villages throughout the region.

Slide 4 – The Fertile Crescent II

As farming reshaped *Homo sapiens’* behaviors and practices, so too did it reshape those of the local wildlife. As granaries were filled at the end of each harvest, rodents and insects soon wrought havoc on the sustenance. Fortunately, the farmers overseeing granaries soon realized that cats (particularly *Felis lybica)* were particularly useful in controlling these varmint and insect populations, and soon participated in a commensal relationship where both parties benefitted. Here, we have the earliest forms of cat ‘taming’ in which local populations of *Felis lybica* lived alongside humans where they could enjoy a tasty mammalian meal while humans could rest easy knowing their granaries weren’t overrun with varmints.

Slide 5 – Quick Recap

Before we move any further along in our journey, let’s take a moment to view this early dynamic between human and cat. It should be noted that this process was not particularly linear, and there are always exceptions to the archaeological record. Although the Fertile Crescent is an excellent starting point for examining this relationship, other, earlier examples of humans living alongside cats have been discovered in other regions in the world. Although Cyprus is often ‘roped in’ to the region of the Fertile Crescent, there is no doubt among archaeologists that *Felis lybica* was intentionally brought to the island for practices outside of agriculture during the Neolithic period. Click on the sites above to view more precise information about how these sites were some of our earliest examples of cats and humans living commensally.

1. **Shillourokambos 9,5000 ya**

The site of Shillourokambos holds the earliest evidence of a commensal relationship between cats and humans. French archaeologists working at Shillourokambos uncovered a deliberate burial of *Felis lybica* adjacent to a human burial. Researchers indicate that this correlation in burials is perhaps the earliest known evidence of a ‘pet cat’ in the archaeological record. Most of our earliest and most famous history of cat domestication comes from ancient Egypt, but Shillourokambos lends a quiet hint that the domestication process may have occurred much earlier than originally theorized, predating the Egyptians by approximately 4,000 years.

URL - <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/oldest-known-pet-cat-9500-year-old-burial-found-on-cyprus?loggedin=true>

1. **Klimonas 11,000 – 10,400 ya**

Klimonas is the earliest known Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) site in Europe with similar evidence of early dog and cat domestication. Researchers from the Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle, and the University of Toulouse II-Le Mirail who directed the excavations at Klimonas have argued the date of the site to be between 11,000 to 10,400 BP. Stone tools, weapons, and buildings were found at Klimonas including evidence of wild boar hunting and early cultivation of a primitive wheat brought from the mainland. The findings at Klimonas provide evidence of sea-faring capabilities as well as participation in mobile, complex economic systems.

URL - <https://novoscriptorium.com/2019/07/24/klimonas-cyprus-the-oldest-farming-village-in-the-mediterranean-islands-11000-ybp/>

Slide 6 – The Cat-veat

As noted earlier, *Felis lybica* is the primary descendant of *Felis catus.* Although this established progenitor has been scientifically verified, humans continued to tame other various felids with little success at domestication. Leopard cats (*Priomailurus bengalensis)* in China, and jungle cats (*Felis chaus)* in Egypt are just two examples of humans’ attempt to domesticate other species with little to no success.

1. **Quanhucun 3, 200 BCE**

The Chinese village of Quanhucun exhibits evidence of just how widespread cat domestication had become well before their immortalization on reliefs in ancient Egypt. No doubt, the domestic cat’s utility in catching mice and rats in granaries provided farmers with much-needed help in preventing their harvest’s destruction. Yaowu Hu and his colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Sciences analyzed cat bones recovered at Quanhucun and found that there was no DNA evidence linking the cat species found there to the descendants of the Near Eastern Wildcat. In other words, it is likely that the inhabitants of Quanhucan participated in a commensal relationship with a wildcat species native to the local area.

URL - <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/12/131216154858.htm\>

<https://www.pnas.org/content/111/1/116>

An Egyptian Litter – Ancient Egypt and the First Domestic Cat

For our journey into the cat domestication world, it should be noted that the process of converting a wildcat into our favorite feline was no abrupt nor overnight affair. As peoples of the Fertile Crescent continued to enjoy the fruits of a commensal relationship with cats, ancient Egyptians were on their way to establishing the first truly domestic population of *Felis catus.*

The earliest written records and grand artworks of cats were born out of ancient Egypt. On many reliefs, cats appear to be hunting next to humans while others show them in various homes on tables or sitting underneath chairs. The accounts from grand reliefs to felid figurines to mummified cats, speak to a well-established narrative of cats leaving the granaries and slowly moving into Egyptian homes. Naturally, the cat achieved a divine status in Egyptian culture and provides the earliest hard evidence of cats interacting with their human counterparts.

Because the Egyptian record spans a massive 3,000 years of history, our discussion of the cat will be subdivided into the common periodization practice used to organize this rich history into digestible chunks. Particularly, we will look at the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms to trace the Egyptians’ relationship with cats.

However, it should be noted that cats were living symbiotically with humans well-before the Old Kingdom as noted by wildcat burials found in the Predynastic villages of Abydos, al-Badari, and Mostegga alongside human remains in the Nile River Valley. But the earliest historic evidence of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt during the Old Kingdom lends itself to the earliest forms of cultural appreciation for the cat as a domestic partner through various artworks and religious context.

An Egyptian Litter II – The Old Kingdom & the First Dynasty of Egypt

Our earliest evidence of the cat in the Egyptian record is identified from the Early Dynastic Period, which is defined as the first era of unification of both Upper and Lower Egypt. The cat deity, Mafdet, is the earliest known cat-headed deity from the Egyptian Pantheon and she is often found associated with the first Dynastic Ruler of the Old Kingdom, the Pharoah Den. Egyptian art of Mafdet often portrays her wearing the skin of a cheetah and was the deification of legal justice. Although cats continued to protect granaries from varmint infestation, they also played a key role in protecting Egyptian palaces and administrative residences from scorpions, venomous snakes, and other undesirable wildlife. This quality of felid protection is likely associated with the evolution of Mafdet as the divine embodiment of justice and protection. Additionally, Mafdet’s association with Den, the first archaeologically confirmed ruler of the First Dynasty, confirms the reverence cats achieved in ancient Egyptian culture already by the Early Dynastic Period.

For more on Egyptian history: <http://www.narmer.pl/indexen.htm>

1. **Egypt – Old Kingdom – Tomb of Den at Umm El Qa’ab - 2970 BCE**

Flinders Petrie’s team who uncovered Den’s tomb at Umm El Qa’ab discovered 17 mummified cat skeletons at the site as well as small pots adjacent to them. These pots were likely filled with milk and offered to the cats buried there to enjoy in the afterlife. The burial of cats with their human counterparts was a popular funerary practice in ancient Egypt. The notion that one could be joined with one’s pet in the afterlife was a common practice among many ancient Egyptians.

An Egyptian Litter III – The Middle Kingdom, 2055 – 1650 BCE

The Middle Kingdom, also known as the Period of Reunification, follows after the end of Egypt’s first ‘dark period’ when Egyptian hegemony was divided between Heracleopolis in Lower Egypt and Thebes in Upper Egypt. The reunification of Upper and Lower Egypt was brought about by Mentuhotep II who commanded armies in small campaigns throughout Nubia as well as a restoration of Egyptian power in the strategic Sinai Peninsula. Upon the reunification of Lower and Upper Egypt, Mentuhotep II restored the cult of the ruler which made him a god during his lifetime.

Rulers during the Middle Kingdom were interested in a return to grand artworks that was lost during the First Intermediate Period between the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Much of the artworks during the Middle Kingdom placed heavy emphasis on Memphite styles that were prominent during the Fifth and Early Sixth Dynasties. Much nostalgia is palpable in the artworks where political ideologies from the Old Kingdom were revitalized. Additionally, Middle Kingdom rulers chose to be buried in pyramids made of mud brick encased with Tura limestone. This is in stark contrast to the architectural style of Old Kingdom rulers who were buried in pyramids of stone bricks.

1. **Egypt – Middle Kingdom – Baqet III -**

The burial tomb of Baqet III exhibits beautiful murals that adorn the inner shrine and catacomb. Murals depict everything from daily life hunting animals, artisans working, Nubian bowmen, and multiple wrestling scenes depicting certain techniques and positions. A painting of a cat hunting a rat was also found on the threshold mural above Baqet III’s inner tomb wall. By the Middle Kingdom, amulets with cat heads were becoming fashionable jewelry pieces and gave the adorner protection in life as well as the afterlife.

An Egyptian Litter IV – The New Kingdom & Bastet, 1550 – 1069 BCE

Considered the most prosperous time of power in ancient Egypt, the New Kingdom was characterized by major territorial expansion and some of the most famous Pharaonic rulers we recognize today (i.e. Tutankhamun, Thutmose, Amenhotep III). By the 15th c. BCE, successful Egyptian military campaigns against the Nubians in the south and Hittites in the Near East in modern-day Syria allowed for New Kingdom Pharaohs to enjoy widespread territorial acquisition. This expansion of the New Kingdom Period also resulted in widespread trade practices that the Pharaohs initiated. For example, Hatshepsut began mercantile efforts between Egypt and the land of Punt which also contributed to the New Kingdom’s widespread success.

Certain Egyptian deities also gained popularity during the New Kingdom Period. The ancient goddess Bastet, who was worshiped as early as the Second Dynasty during the Old Kingdom Period, attained greater popularity, and was worshiped in Lower Egypt at the city of Bubastis. Bastet was considered the goddess of protection, cats, perfume, fertility, and warfare to name a few. Much like Mafdet, Bastet was popular for her cat-like nature and ability to protect the peoples of Lower Egypt. By the end of the New Kingdom Period, the practice of killing cats was illegal and punishable by death.

The New Kingdom Period ended with the death of its last pharaoh, Rameses XI in 1070 BCE. As internal bickering among his offspring took effect, Egypt quickly transitioned into what became known as the Third Intermediate Period marked by economic and political decline in the Nile River Valley. The period coincides with the ‘Late Bronze Age collapse,’ which scholars have largely debated about how and why the Bronze Age terminated so rapidly. Upon Rameses XI’s death, Upper and Lower Egypt again split between *de facto* rulers, the High Priests of Amun in Thebes ruled the former, while Smendes took hegemony in the latter. By 525 BCE, Cambyses II of the Achaemenid Empire in the northeast conducted campaigns in Egypt which saw the end of native Egyptian rule in the area. With the changing of the political guard, so too did cats find themselves in new homes, cultures, and geographic locations out of Egypt.

1. **Egypt –The New Kingdom– Bubastis - 943 BCE**

Bubastis or Tell-Basta in Arabic was a notable center for worshipping the goddess, Bastet who was a principal deity of the nome, a territorial division of ancient Egypt in the Lower Nile Valley. The city became a royal residence for some of the last rulers of Egypt prior to the close of the New Kingdom demarcated by the Achaemenid conquest. Bubastis was known for the veneration of Bastet and was also found to be the largest depository of mummified cat corpses in ancient Egypt. Bastet had gained so much popularity during the New Kingdom that a feast, a festival, and oracle were made popular in her honor.

1. **Egypt – The New Kingdom – Speos Artemidos**

Two temples stand at the Grotto of Artemis along the central portion of the Nile River Valley. One portion, dedicated to Seti, is adorned with decorations, while a second, later temple was attributed to Hatshepsut. It is here where Hatshepsut constructed a temple dedicated to Pakhet, another Egyptian cat goddess that was a combination of Bast and Sekhmet. Archaeologists at the site uncovered large catacombs of mummified cats where Egyptians who worshipped Pakhet would come to bury their beloved pets. Although Egyptians would often bury their cats here, Bubastis was the predominant hub of this funerary practice.

Cats of the Hellenistic Period – Moving from Egypt to Greece

Upon Alexander the Great’s conquest of much of Persia, Egypt, and the Near East in general, new dynasties and political entities were formed throughout the Mediterranean coastal regions. Alexander established a new dynasty of rulers in Egypt with his general Ptolemy I Soter who was also the Hellenistic diadochi in Macedon.

The Ptolemaic Dynasty established in Egypt brought forth a new period of foreign rule that the Nile Valley had never experienced before and came to be known as ‘Greco-Roman Egypt.’ The period is marked by heavy cultural and political exchange between the Greeks and Egypt and naturally, cats were no exception. Throughout the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Periods, many ancient Egyptians were already cohabitating in small communities throughout the southern Greek islands. As Egyptians moved further inland, their cats naturally came with them. Although cats were likely transported well before Alexander the Great’s rule, the massive amount of cultural interchange between both Greeks and Egyptians likely brought a massive number of cats with it.

Cats of the Hellenistic Period II – The Phoenicians – 500 BCE

Although cats adjoined their ancient Egyptian counterparts in the Greek islands, the Semitic Phoenician civilization of the eastern Mediterranean was likely the primary engine bringing cats into the Greek world. A major characteristic of the Phoenicians was their extensive maritime trade network, making them a dominant mercantile power for much of the first millennium BCE. After the dissolution of native Egyptian hegemony from the end of the Bronze Age collapse, Phoenicians seem to have weathered the political storm fairly well. From an archaeological perspective, no major disruptions in trade or exchange are present.

By the fifth century BCE, *Felis catus* had made its way into mainland Greece and southern Italy most likely by trade practices with the Phoenician maritime merchants. Our earliest evidence of the Greeks with *Felis catus* comes from two coins depicting Iokasto and Phalanthos playing with their pet cats.

Even though cats were being introduced to Greece and Italy at this time, they remained quite rare as house pets compared to the Egyptians. Weasels, not cats, were far more common as ‘rodent-regulators,’ and the lack of reverence for them in the Greek word, *ailouros* (thing with the wavy tail) exemplifies as such. However, over time, weasels slowly fell out of favor in Greece as cats replaced them as more pleasant to enjoy in the house. Weasels seem to have not taken to domestication as well as cats did, and therefore, they were soon replaced by their felid friends. Regardless, the cat never achieved the sort of cultic appeal they had in Egypt and textual and artistic renderings of them remained sparse.

1. **Athens – 510 – 500 BCE – Relief of a *kouros* statue**

This relief from a *kouros* statue found in Athens depicts two men sitting seated opposite of each other. The figure on the left has a leashed canine that seems to be traumatizing some sort of feline leashed by its owner on the right. This is one of an extremely rare few depictions of felines in ancient Greece. However, the evidence we do have suggests that cats had made it to the mainland of Greece and Rome by at least the 6th century BCE.

The Cat of the Roman Republic

Much like their Greek predecessors, ancient Romans also remained apathetic about the cat and its role in society and few artworks or literary pieces of the cat’s existence remain. The sparse data we do have about domestic cats from the period is typically overshadowed by Romans’ fascination with ‘big cats’ that were often killed for sport at the Roman coliseum or for their elegant hides used for fashionable clothing. Nevertheless, cats and weasels remained primary rodent hunters around Roman granaries, but both never achieved the deified status the former enjoyed in Egypt.

From a traditional Roman story about the dedication of the temple of the goddess, Libertas at Mount Aventine, Tiberius Gracchus is said to have placed a cat at her feet. Libertas, wearing a white robe with a scepter in one hand and a Phrygian cap in the other, accepted the offering and the Temple was duly blessed. Libertas and the Phrygian cap are both symbolic of freedom and independence. Traditionally, a velvet Phrygian cap was worn by liberated Roman slaves and as such, the cat at the feet of Libertas signified this freedom.

Despite this literary evidence, cats were perhaps less popular in Rome than their Greek predecessors. *Felis catus’* character traits of disobedience, individualism, and disloyalty were not necessarily the same traits admired by Roman citizens. Additionally, domestic cats were not nearly as glorious, mighty, or heroic as other animals that Romans admired and chose to depict in their artworks and literature. Romans later honored the cat, however, with the phrase *“Libertas sine Labore”* which translates as “*Liberty without labor,”* a description of how cats achieved freedom by doing nothing at all. Regardless, we do have a few more examples of cats in Roman culture than we do in Hellenistic. Above are a couple of these examples.

1. **Pompeii – Mosaic at the House of Faun – 200 BCE**

Deemed one of the largest private residences at Pompeii, the House of Faun revealed many wondrous pieces of artwork from the Samnite Period around 180 BCE. The residence underwent many natural disasters including evidence of rebuilt walls from the great earthquake in 62 CE as well as the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Pompeii is famous for its pristine artworks including mosaics and figurines, as well as well-preserved buildings and other artifacts. The preservation of these is largely due to the multiple layers of ash, completely inundating these items for over 2 millennia.

One of the mosaics uncovered depicts a cat planning its hunt underneath a bird bath presumably somewhere in the city.

The Cat of the Roman Empire – 27 BCE – 395 CE

By the Imperialization of Rome at the turn of the first century CE, cats were becoming a solidified aspect of Roman culture. A light-green cat running while looking behind itself became an emblem often put on Roman infantrymen’s shields. Cats were also accompanying many Roman legions to battle and funerary steles and sarcophagi from Roman Gaul often included artworks of cat images. Additionally, Vandals and Suevi in the northern Germanic tribes often carried cat hides that they used to cover shields and armor for protection from the sun.

By the 6th century CE, Romans had largely changed their opinion of the cat and began seeing them as virtuous for their courage and cunning attitudes. As Rome imperialized, the name *Felicula,* meaning, *little kitten* became a popular nickname for women. The name pops up in over 200 inscriptions at the thresholds of many sarcophagi. By the 6th c. CE, the name *Felis catus* was officially used for the first time to describe a little housecat. As the cat gained popularity in Roman society, they naturally moved further inland and were slowly becoming part of the wider European landscape.

The Cat of the Roman Empire – The Rise of Christianity and the Demise of the Cult of the Cat

By 380 CE, Christianity went from a cultic house-church society to the official religion of Rome. Theodosius I first uttered:

*It is our will….that none of our subjects, whether magistrates or private citizen…shall worship an inanimate idol by the sacrificing of a guiltless victim. The rites of pagan superstition, which might seem less bloody and atrocious are abolished, as highly injurious, to the truth and honor of religion… garlands, frankincense, and libation of wine are especially enumerated and condemned; the harmless claims of the domestic genius of the household gods, are included in the rigorous prescription.*

Even though a hefty fine was weighed on those practicing the old religion, Pagans continued to worship their god in secret. The continued popularity of Paganism was not lost on Theodosius I. To combat the continued veneration of the old Pagan gods, Theodosius I instituted two things that would quickly bring punishment upon detractors. First, if a judge didn’t prosecute a religious crime, he would be deemed guilty of the heresy as well. Secondly, idolatry practiced by Pagans including veneration of foreign gods such as Egyptian Isis in Rome, often included practices of cat-worship. For Theodosius I, any worship practices involved with cats would be ample evidence of heresy and therefore result in persecution.

The Cat of the Roman Empire – The Destruction of Rome; a Cat in Chaos – 476 CE

Protections offered by the Roman Empire were quickly dissolving as Barbarian raiders from the Germanic tribes became a constant threat to the Western Roman Empire. By 476 CE, Romulus Augustus abdicated the Roman seat of power to Odoacer, a Germanic Goth who quickly took power in Rome. For over 500 years, the Greco-Roman political and cultural systems had grown to accept the cat as part of their daily lives. Pagans in the Roman Empire who worshipped the foreign Egyptian Goddesses of Isis and Diana often practiced their veneration through worshipping the cat. Two major events would bring this practice and the wider acceptance of cats in the Roman Empire to a close. First, as mentioned earlier, Christianity’s inception as the official religion of Rome resulted in new rules that made heresy illegal including the worship of cats. Second, the utter downfall of Rome as the seat of Western power quickly brought new political and cultural shifts to the forefront. Cats were no exception to this and soon, the Dark Ages of Europe brought new distrust and disdain to our feline friend from Egypt.

Cats and the Dark Ages – 500 – 1,000 CE

The dissolution of the Roman Empire by the Goths was one aspect of incredible geopolitical changes taking place in Europe and North Africa. Although Christianity was dominating Paganism by this time, the rise of Islam created a power competition spanning central Asia to western Europe. The continued demonization of Pagan goddesses brought with it a distrust of cats as well.

A fundamental theological difference between Pagans and Christians influenced this attitude towards cats. According to the Pagan theology, all creatures had spirits or what we commonly today consider *souls.* During the Dark Ages, the common Christian belief, on the other hand, was that these souls were evil or devoid of God. This created the foundational difference between the opposing belief systems (i.e. monotheism vs. polytheism, nature vs. man, man vs. woman).

As this religious competition permeated throughout the geopolitical landscape, the Plague of Justinian brought death and increased distrust among Christians towards Pagans. Scholars estimate that roughly 5,000 people died per day between 541 – 547 CE, resulting in close to 60% of the total European population. As the Plague of Justinian wrought havoc on the population, Christians soon tied Pagans to God’s anger and, with them, cats as culprits too. The nature goddesses of Isis, Diana, Freya, and Artemis, were just a handful of pagan cults deemed heretical by the organized Christian church. Cats, were therefore quickly linked to their heretical followers and were demonized by the Christian church in short order. The rise of early Christianity was inextricably linked to the confirmation of a patriarchal society, valuing dominance, and hunter psychologies over matriarchal societies that valued goddesses associated with farming, fertility, and independence. The patriarchy of the established church brought with it submissive attitudes and roles towards women as well as a continued campaign against all heresies non-conforming to Church doctrine. This shift in religious and cultural psychology paved the way for cats to be demonized in much of Christian Europe during the Dark Ages.

Regardless, cat-caveats still dotted the Christian landscape. For instance, Pope Gregory was often thought to always have a cat in his lap and by 640 CE, St. Gertrude of Nivelles was known for her love of cats too. As plagues became commonplace among Europe, vermin were slowly beginning to be recognized as the culprit of disease that wrought havoc on European societies and cats were a perfect solution to the problem. Slowly, cats were becoming disassociated with the Pagan cults that were so inextricably linked to them and began to prance their way into the care of Christian households.

Cats and The Dark Ages II – 800 CE

By 800 CE, many churches and monasteries were beginning to establish themselves as isolated centers for literature, art, and education. As such, the disdain of cats was slowly becoming dissociated with the old Pagan religions that once was a competitive force in the culture war versus Christianity. As Christian institutions flourished independently, cats were slowly integrated into the art and literature of the religious landscape.

1. **Northumbria, Ireland – 800 CE.**

By 800 CE, the first depictions of a cat in Christian literature was found in the Book of Kells along the margins of the Lindisfarne Gospels in Northumbria, Ireland. The image depicts a cat stepping on the tail of one of two mice fighting over a communion wafer.

The Islamic Golden Age and Friendlier Attitudes towards Cats – 700 – 1,300 CE.

The cultural, economic, and scientific flourishment of Islam during this period is said to have begun during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid in 786 CE and the inauguration of the House of Wisdom or Grand Library in Baghdad. Muslims during this period showed a marked interest in incorporating scientific knowledge, literature, and art with the civilizations they had conquered. The Golden Age of Islam also saw newfound technologies that played a major role in the achievements of the period.

An easier writing system through the introduction of paper made information much more democratized than it had otherwise been to that point in time. Manufacturing parchment also had many positives over the traditional medium of papyrus. One positive included parchment’s ability to absorb ink, unlike papyrus which would make keeping records permanent and difficult to erase. Additionally, the Golden Age of Islam witnessed major breakthroughs in mathematics such as Algebra, Geometry, Calculus, and Trigonometry to name a few. Other developments in astronomy, physics, and chemistry, philosophy, and architecture brought newfound developments in its societies.

As forms of organized Islam began to take shape in the Near East and Europe, a more compassionate attitude towards cats was prevalent in their societies in contrast to their Christian counterparts. The Quran is much kinder towards cats as many stories between them and the Prophet Muhammed are found throughout the text. In one story, Mohammed passes his hand over his favorite cat, Muezza, three times to give all tabby cats their stripes and ability to land on their feet. Cats in Islamic tradition are often admired for their cleanliness and are thus allowed to enter homes and mosques without any washing of the feet…or paws for that matter.

Cats in India – 700 – 800 CE

By the 8th c. CE, cats not only came to dominate much of the European landscape, but were well on their way to Central and Eastern Asia. The Silk Road no doubt saw merchant traders bringing their cats with them on journeys across the divide and they likely found themselves in homes and traded among locals close to the trade route. By the 8th c. CE, artworks of cats in India were being made such as the stone carving at Mahabalipuram. Cats in India had varying cultural affinities and disdains. One latter example comes from a fable known as *The Devout Cat*, a story about a partridge and a hare who seek wisdom from a local cat about a dispute between the two. The cat routinely claims he cannot hear them and asks them to come closer. Over time, the distrust of the partridge and hare is met with fading wariness, and they approach the cat in hopes of receiving advice. To their dismay, the cat attacks both of them and the cat is therefore considered clever, Machiavellian, and evil.

Another negative affiliation with cats comes from Buddhism. In old age, the Buddha had eaten food thought to have been undercooked or spoiled. A mouse is sent out of Kushinagar to retrieve medicine for the ailing Buddha, only to be caught by a cat. The Buddha subsequently dies, and the unrepentant cat does not mourn his passing.

These negative affiliations with cats in India speak to their affiliation with disappointment and distrust throughout India.

Cats in Japan – 867 – 931 CE

No country, besides Egypt, has such a cultural affiliation with their cats as much as Japan. Although domestic cats were likely in Japan as early as the 6th c. CE, our first definitive record of them in Japan comes from a reference to them in diary notes kept by the Emperor Uda who ruled between 867 – 931 CE. The Emperor states that the black cat came from China in 884 and his name was Myobu no Otodo meaning Chief Lady-in-Waiting of the Inner Palace. The cat was given a special title and records indicate that cats around the Imperial Palace had red collars with white tags. By 1140, domestic cats had become commonplace in Japan and were already becoming trusted as a reliable yet independent friend.

1. **Dzhankent, Kazakhstan – 775 – 940 CE**

The early medieval city of Dzhankent adjacent to the Aral Sea intersects the northern Silk Road route linking the large trade city of Khorezm in the south to small intermittent trading settlements in the Volga as well as the 10 c. CE capital of Oghuz. By the arrival of Islam in the 8th c. CE, *Felis catus* was establishing itself as a common pet among sedentary pastoralists in the region. Dzhankent is an interesting example of how cat-keeping was a varied practice among different cultural lifestyles (i.e. sedentary vs. nomadic).

Hegemony over Dzhankent at this time was administered by the Oghuz people, originating in the Central Asian Steppe who largely participated in a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle. Oghuz elites likely oversaw trade practices in the city as it was strategically located on the northern route of the Silk Road. Dzhankent challenges the notion that pet-keeping was fundamentally a sedentary pastoralist practice. The *Felis catus* remains found at Dzhankent suggest that the people living there retained a different attitude about pet-animals than previous steppe populations. Additionally, the domestic cat remains unearthed by archaeologists at Dzhankent provide the earliest known evidence of the cats in the region on the Silk Road. The globalization taking place along the Silk Road at the time also suggests that worldviews and attitude between nomadic and urban lifestyles were rapidly changing.

Cats and the Middle Ages – 1096 – 1272 CE

By the turn of the first millennium CE, religious and political turmoil beset much of Western Europe as the persecution of non-Christians, Jews, and Muslims became common practice by the central Church authority. As Christianization of Europe became a political mission for the Catholic Church, the Black Death between 1347 and 1352 wrought one of the deadliest pandemics that the continent had ever recorded. Scholars estimate that somewhere between 75 – 200 million people died from the disease in Eurasia and North Africa. Both historical events brought forth new attitudes about cats, heresy, and witchcraft that were less potent in previous times.

The authority gained by Christianity during the Middle Ages as well as the onslaught brought about by the Black Death gave rise to accusations of witchcraft and a newfound connection to the cat. Perhaps old attitudes of cats affiliated with the Pagan gods had not wholly worn off. As the Catholic Church became the primary civil and criminal court body, witchcraft and magic was well on its way to being identified and codified in order to find detractors.

Opinions of cats during the Middle Ages went from gentle to harsh as people desperately attempted to explain the worsening situation in Europe at the time. By 1096, cats were still seen as granary protectors and treated with fairness. In fact, Henry I of England declared laws protecting cats including one punishing a cat-killer with a fine of 60 bushels of corn. Despite these laws, it was not uncommon to find cat furs, cat linings, cat gloves, and other cat-wears as popular clothing items in the region. Regardless, a common misconception is that peoples of the Middle Ages killed cats *en masse*. Although cats were becoming associated with the devil (see the Taigheirm for the most explicit example) and there were certainly people killing cats occasionally, no evidence exists that the Catholic Church conducted mass feline fatalities. It is likely that the utility of cats at the granaries did not outweigh the idea that cats were the culprits of the Black Death.

Cats and Witchcraft – 1272 – 1600 CE

As the Black Death slowly came to a close, cats were becoming more and more inextricably linked to Satan, devil-worship, and witchcraft. Things took a turn for the worse in 1484 when Dominican inquisitors informed Pope Innocent VIII that witchcraft was rampant in Germany. In response, Pope Innocent VIII’s decree, *Papal Bull Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* stated both witches and cats were to be burned at the stake. Three years later, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was published explaining how a) women were more likely than men to be witches, b) how to conduct investigations into witchcraft, and c) how to legally proceed with the courts to try these cases.

Distrust of women became commonplace in the Church, primarily due to an interpretation of the Biblical Genesis story suggesting women were defective because they were created from Adam’s rib as well as causing the ‘temptation of man.’ Other Biblical passages also fueled these anti-women viewpoints, and the Catholic church was quick to link them and their cats to heresy. Clearly, men feared women throughout the Middle Ages as heretical detractors; edicts from the Pope as well as publications issued from the Catholic Church provide a window into this viewpoint.

The link between cats and magic was nothing new by 1272 CE. Evidence of cats related to magic has been found as early as the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. Black cats were considered important because their blood mixed with particular herbs were extremely effective in warding off disease as well as powerful incantations.

By the end of the Middle Ages, corrupt women and cats had fallen from graced goddesses to be celebrated into feared symbols of magic, heresy, and devil-worship. However, these cultural attitudes would once again change, yet the cat would never achieve the goddess worship it had once achieved in previous times.

Cat on a Sail – The Maiden Voyage of Felines to the New World - 1500 – 1900 CE

Upon Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas, cats slowly began making their way into the New World via the Caribbean, South, Central, and North America. As part of the Columbian Exchange which saw major trade goods interchanged for the first time between both continents, cats were no exception. However, despite the continued utility of cats as vermin-controllers, cats retained many of the same associations with witchcraft that they initially received while in Europe. Many trials of witchcraft and heresy took place in the New World similarly to those in Europe. The most famous in North America was the infamous Salem Witch Trials in which 20 women were found guilty and executed for their participation in witchcraft. Many of these trials continued for over 400 years well into the 20th c. CE. In 1867 another witchcraft trial took place claiming a woman was accused of practicing witchcraft because she utilized the blood of a black cat to cure a child.

Cats Down Under – Australia, 1800 CE

The widespread distribution of cats into the Americas during the first half of the 16th c. CE saw a delayed but not less welcomed movement of cats into Australia as global trade continued to expand. By the 1800s, domestic cats were able to make their homes in Australia, feeding on local vermin populations found on the east coast of the continent. European settlers arriving in Australia likely brought these felines with them and in short order, were making themselves comfortable on the continent.

Sources

1. *Petrie, W. M. F.; Gardiner, A.; Petrie, H. & Murray, M. A. (1925). "Cats' tomb". Tombs of the Courtiers and Oxyrhynkhos. 37. London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt. p. 11*
2. Naville 1913/14, 1:536
3. **Verifying *Felis catus’* genetic ancestor, *Felis lybica****:* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5612713/>
4. **Ancient Egyptian cat burials** - <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/dozens-of-mummified-cats-found-in-ancient-egyptian-tomb-1945796>
5. **Mafdet as a justice** **deity** -Wilkinson, T. A. H. (1999). Early Dynastic Egypt. Routledge. pp. 249–251. [*ISBN*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISBN_(identifier)) [*0-203-20421-2*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/0-203-20421-2)
6. **Speos Artemidos** - <https://www.thegreatcat.org/speoartemidos-home-cat-goddess-pakhet/>
7. **Dzhankent Site -** <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-67798-6#Sec6>