

## Origins of the Domestic Cat

Housecats are known for being independent and inscrutable, not generally characteristics of domesticated animals. Their closest relatives, the large cats, are fierce and aggressive, hardly animals you'd want to cuddle. How did cats come to live among us, as pets and as parts of the family? The story of cat domestication is a long one, with these pets sharing the hearts and hearths of humans for centuries. There are signs of cats living with humans as far back as 8000 years ago. Cat and human bones have been found together on the island of Cyprus, indicating that the two species cohabited. Historians speculate that cats were first brought indoors to control rodents. As humans began to plant, harvest and store grain, mice and rats became an increasing problem. Cats were probably valued as hunters long before they became the adored members of the family they are today.

Approximately 4000 years ago, domestic cats appeared in Egypt. They were welcomed into the homes of humans, who were considered hosts to the animals, rather than owners. The relationship probably began as a method for keeping huge stores of grain from being eaten and tainted by smaller animals. However, domestic cats were eventually considered to be the living embodiment of the goddess Bastet, and were worshipped accordingly. Ancient tomb engravings depict Egyptians pampering their cats, and the bones of cats are found within those tombs alongside their human companions. One reason that cats don't appear to have been domesticated in other parts of the globe is that it was illegal to export them from Egypt. It was also considered a crime to kill a cat, punishable by death. During the Middle Ages in Europe, domestic cats fell out of favor. They were rumored to be the familiars, or spirits, of witches. Heretics were supposed to have prayed to the devil in the form of a black cat. We can see the leftovers of these attitudes each year on Halloween. It was also during this time that the idea arose that cats would suck the air from a newborn's nose, suffocating it. Thousands of cats were killed. There is speculation that one reason the bubonic plague spread so quickly is that there were not enough cats left in the cities to keep the rat population at bay. The early Egyptian cats were *felis lybica*, a desert species found in Africa and Arabia. Eventually they interbred with the European *felis silvestris*, and it is this genetic combination we find in the living rooms of the modern family. Cats are what biologists refer to as exploitive captives. This mutual relationship will come as no surprise to anyone who shares a home with a feline. It means that our cats use us to get what they want and need in life; shelter, food, a safe place to sleep. Although they have been domesticated, cats are never wholly dependent on humans. As any cat lover knows, our feline pets are independent, and stay with us out of affection rather than purely out of dependence.

## About the Author

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