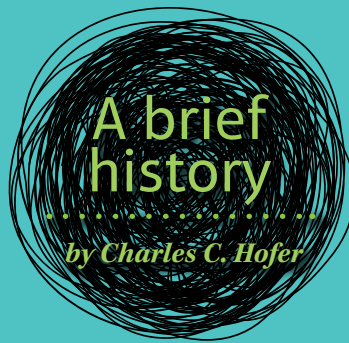


HOW TO CONQUER THE WORLD

(According to Your Cat)





This cat was buried near a human more than 9,000 years ago.

Humans and wildcats probably coexisted for many years—maybe even thousands of years—before this became an official long-term relationship.

later, when it was needed. But this storage also brought with it a terrible nuisance. Rodents like mice and rats moved in and nibbled away at the precious stores of food.

Luckily, it appears that small wild cats were not far behind . . . and they were hungry! These ferocious felines controlled the pest population by gobbling up the mice and rats. People noticed, and a beautiful friendship was born.

WIN-WIN

In the wild, many animals have close relationships that benefit each other. These relationships are called mutualisms, where one animal has something that another animal needs, and vice versa. Think about the plover bird poking around the open jaws of an enormous crocodile. This is an example of a mutualism because the activity benefits both animals. The plover gets a tasty meal of food left behind in the croc's teeth, and the crocodile gets a free teeth cleaning. Everybody wins!

Our relationship with the cat probably began as a mutualism as well. (After all, we *H. sapiens* are animals too.) Cats “worked” for us by ridding our food stores of pests. In return, cats got a nice, warm place to sleep and regular meals of mice and rats and other varmints. For the cats, it was probably much nicer than being out in the wild, constantly prowling around for food. These wild cats probably started hanging around food sheds and then eventually invited themselves into human homes.

“Cats who were tolerant of humans were more able to take advantage of the benefits—being offered food scraps and shelter,” says Mikel Maria Delgado, an animal behaviorist. She works at the School of Veterinary Medicine

In 1983, archaeologists working on the island of Cyprus found something rather unusual. Buried in the remains of an ancient settlement, they uncovered the skeleton of a human being. This, of course, wasn't all that odd. But what they found buried alongside these old bones made headlines: it was the jawbone of a small cat.

In 2004, archaeologists discovered another human and cat buried together on the same island. The archaeologists dated these bones to around 9,500 years ago. This remarkable discovery became the oldest known example of a pet cat. So was that the first pet cat ever?

Probably not. Although the Cyprus cat provided another piece of the puzzle, scientists still don't know exactly when cats were turned into pets, or domesticated. The origins of the pet cat seem to be as mysterious as the animals themselves.

CATS MOVE IN

The domestic cat can probably be traced back to the dawn of civilization, when humans first formed villages and towns and cities. Our earliest ancestors—going back about 300,000 years ago—were mostly hunters and gatherers. They wandered from place to place, following supplies of food and other resources. Then, at some point around 15,000 to 19,000 years ago, everything changed for *Homo sapiens*. For the first time, some groups of humans began farming and producing food from the land. As a result, many of our ancestors began staying in one place. Now with a reliable food source, the *H. sapiens* population boomed in areas like North Africa.

Thanks to their newly discovered farming practices, *H. sapiens* had excess rice and grains and other foods. They built storage facilities to hold this food so it could be used

When two species help each other out, scientists call the relationship a mutualism.





at the University of California, Davis. “Those cats probably had a better chance of raising their offspring successfully. Their kittens would not only inherit that tolerance of humans, but they were more likely to be socialized by humans as well.”

These first friendly felines had it all figured out.

FELIS SILVESTRIS

So who were the old-school cats that moved into our homes and onto our laps? The modern domestic cat is most likely a descendant of *Felis silvestris*, commonly called the wildcat.

Several modern species of *F. silvestris* still roam wild throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. *F. silvestris* looks a lot like your average housecat . . . just with a bit more “wild” deep in those bones.

No one knows for certain exactly when the wildcat and the domestic cat went their separate evolutionary ways. We have the evidence from the Cyprus burials, but some believe that domestication began even earlier. Wildcats were probably first domesticated around 10,000 years ago, when human civilizations began flourishing in North Africa and the Middle East.

The problem with pinpointing the exact moment of domestication hinges on the animals’ physical characteristics, such as bone structure. The skeletons of both modern domestic cats and their wildcat ancestors are so similar that archaeologists often have trouble telling the difference between the two. Cat bones dug up in ancient civilizations might be from domesticated cats, or they could be from wildcats that simply lived on the edges of new villages and cities. The truth is, humans and

MEOW-LINE

12,000 BCE

Dogs are domesticated and used as hunting companions. Quickly become “man’s best friend.”



8000 BCE

Cows are domesticated in the Middle East, and pigs are domesticated in China.



6500 BCE

The horse is domesticated in Kazakhstan.



100,000 BCE

The domestic cat’s ancestor, *F. silvestris*, roams North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.



17,000–13,000 BCE

Humans in several parts of the world settle down, begin farming, and establish civilizations. *F. silvestris* starts hanging around, feeding on rodents.

7500 BCE

A cat is buried alongside a human in Cyprus. It could have been a pet cat . . . but maybe not.



3100 BCE

Civilization in ancient Egypt begins to flourish.

wildcats probably coexisted for many years—maybe even thousands of years—before this became an official long-term relationship.

Over generations—many, many generations—wildcats became tamer and tamer as they buddied up with *H. sapiens*. Their behavior changed, and so did their fears. “This perhaps made cats more likely to associate good things (like food) with humans,” says Delgado, “and they remembered that interactions with some humans were safe and positive.”

THE EMPIRE CAT

Around 2000 BCE, ancient Egyptians began depicting cats in paintings and other artwork—definitive proof of the domestic cat at last. These pieces of art clearly show domestic cats hanging around homes and people.

In ancient Egypt, cats held a special place of honor—and they earned it. After all, this relationship between humans and cats helped establish one of the most glorious civilizations of the ancient world.

The success of ancient Egypt depended in large part on the fertile lands of the Nile River. This river’s vast flood plains turned into rich farmland that would feed a growing empire. Lots of farmed land produced lots of food, and all that food needed storing. Cats, of course, helped protect the massive food stores from rodents.

Partly because of their hard work as mousers, cats earned



a special place in Egyptian culture. They appeared in paintings and statues and other pieces of art. Some of the Egyptian gods took the form of cats too. Wealthy Egyptians even mummified their cats, likely in hopes of spending the afterlife with their beloved pets.

After conquering the Egyptian empire, the domestic cat took its rightful place in our homes. The pet cat soon spread to other civilizations. By about 2,300 years ago, the domestic cat was widespread across Europe.

And the world has never been the same since.

Charles C. Hofer is a biologist in Tucson, Arizona, where he shares a home with a descendant of *F. silvestris* named Gracie.



1250 BCE

Egyptian painting shows a man with a cat in his lap.



1200–1600 CE

In Europe, cats are associated with witchcraft. Because of widespread fear of witches, many cats are rounded up and killed.



1978 CE

The comic strip “Garfield” debuts in newspapers.



Present Day

Cat videos take over the internet.

300 BCE

Pet cats are widespread across Europe.



1800s CE

Exotic cat breeds become fashionable in Europe.



2000 CE

An estimated 35 percent of households in the United States have a pet cat. That’s about 85 million cats!

Note: all dates are approximate.