

## Ancient Wonders

**Cats have been kept as domestic animals for thousands of years. Learn how Egyptians popularized our love for cats.**

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In our society cat owners are sometimes ridiculed for how much love they bestow on their cats. But we should remind these critics that we are not the first society to recognize the importance of the feline-human bond. Ancient Egypt, one of the greatest civilizations in history, recognized the magnificence of cats and even worshipped them as gods. Egyptians were also the first to popularize feline domestication.

### Domestic Choice

Most domesticated cats originated from African wildcats, which the Egyptians domesticated to create the housecat. The first evidence of domestication in Egypt was found in a 4000 B.C. burial site at Mostagedda. A man was found in a grave with his cat buried at his feet, intended to accompany him to the afterworld.

The domestication process in Egypt began with the establishment of agriculture, as rats became attracted to the grain stores and cats were attracted to the supply of rats. In addition, cats protected Egyptian homes from poisonous snakes, a constant and deadly threat. Eventually, a symbiotic relationship between humans and felines was established and the Egyptian housecat was born.

Cats grew in popularity as the Egyptians were captivated by their beauty and friendliness. Numerous tomb paintings, which include cats sitting under the chairs of women, depict the special feline-human relationship. Further evidence of the cat's role in Egyptian culture includes ancient cat jewelry, statues, toys, bowls and other household objects decorated with images of beloved cats. By 1450 B.C., cats lived in homes throughout Egypt.

The Egyptian love for cats is exemplified by how people behaved when a cat died. "We know from [the Greek historian] Herodotus that people were very sensitive about their cats. He reports that a Roman soldier [who] killed a cat was stoned to death by the angry Egyptians, and there are records that families would shave off their eyebrows in mourning when a cat died," says Desmond Morris, Ph.D. in zoology, and author of "Catwatching." In addition, when cats died, owners had them mummified and buried them in cat-shaped coffins.

### Feline Goddess

By 945 B.C., the cat achieved powerful status in the form of Bastet, one of the chief Egyptian goddesses. Hundreds of thousands of statues were created in her image, first as a lion-headed woman, and later as a cat-headed woman. Sometimes she carried a sistrum, a rattle to ward off evil spirits, and sometimes she was pictured with kittens. Her most familiar image was that of a regal female cat standing tall.