

Cypriot Cat

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When did humans first become cat people? For a long time, scientists thought that the ancient Egyptians of about 2000 BC were the first people to domesticate cats, which they did in order to protect crops and dwellings from mice and other rodents. Cats were so revered in ancient Egypt that they even had their own goddess, Bastet (a female goddess of protection with a cat's head). Now, an archaeological excavation on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus has uncovered evidence that people have been enjoying the company of felines for at least 9,500 years.

Archaeologist Jean-Denis Vigne of the Paris Natural History Museum and his colleagues were conducting an ongoing archaeological excavation in Cyprus when they discovered the skeleton of a cat buried beside a human. They reported their finding in the April 9, 2004 issue of the journal *Science*. The cat skeleton was found intact, in the same level of sediment as the human skeleton and about half a meter (15 inches) away from it. Both skeletons were facing west. The cat showed no signs of having been butchered, indicating that this particular kitty was not a menu item. Other items found in and near the grave, such as polished stones, shells, flints and stone axes, suggest that its human occupant held an elevated position in life, perhaps as a chief or shaman. The cat was of the species *Felis silvestris*, somewhat larger than today's housecats, and was approximately 8 months old at the time of its death. The gravesite is dated at about 7,500 BC.

The discovery of the cat and human buried next to each other is significant because it suggests that humans had domesticated cats—and were enjoying their companionship—at least 5,000 years earlier than scientists had thought. The cat may have even been killed and buried to accompany its master into the afterlife. "In lieu of finding a bell around its neck, this is about as solid evidence as one can have that cats held a special place in the lives and afterlives of residents of this site," Melinda A. Zeder, a zooarchaeologist at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, who was not connected with the study, told *Science*.

There are no indigenous feline species on Cyprus, so cats must have been imported from the mainland. (Previous finds in the dig have revealed that other non-native animals were brought over as well, including foxes, dogs, sheep, pigs, goats, cattle, and even deer.) These early Cypriot settlers, probably from Turkey, had already developed agriculture and were likely using cats to protect their crops, just as the Egyptians would do thousands of years later. But the fact that a cat was buried alongside a person of high social status is strong evidence that, even thousands of years ago, human beings could not resist the power of the purr.