



# Did Cats Come Before Cows?

The New Theory on the Domestication of Animals

There is mounting evidence that pets, including cats, have been companions to people for thousands of years longer than had previously been thought. In the Stone Age village of Hacilar, in modern Turkey, the oldest known art representing cats with their owners has been found. These terracota figures are of women holding cats to their chests and dates from over 7000 years ago, over 2500 years older than the first artistic depictions of domestic cats by the Ancient Egyptians. In addition, in 2004 archeologists discovered the oldest pet cat buried with its owner in a Stone Age village in Cyprus.

## Hunters and Gatherers

It is often assumed that owning cats and dogs is an invention of modern western society and a product of leisure time, beginning in the 16th century. However, that view is beginning to change. "Pet keeping might have preceded domestication by hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years," says Dr. Katcher, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Emeritus University of Pennsylvania, and coauthor of *Between People and Pets: The Importance of Animal Companionship*. Dr. James Serpell, in his book *In the Company of Animals*, writes that there is much evidence for this. Pet keeping is found in hunting and gathering societies still on earth today. The conventional theory is that animals were domesticated for food on farms and then later became pets. However, new theories challenge this order, with pets coming first. "The theory is that our ancestors, who were hunter-gathers, kept pets just like more recent hunter-gathers, and that these animals hung around and lived in the villages and were appreciated as more of a kind of leisure activity than anything else, and that gradually over time the economic benefits of having some of these creatures became more evident," says Dr. Serpell. It was then that people realized they could domesticate animals like cows and sheep for food and other products like milk and wool.

Today, these tribal societies are in many ways still living close to Stone Age conditions, and this indicates that pet keeping has a universal appeal and fulfills human needs no matter how "modern" or "wealthy" people may be. "These people are predominantly hunter-gathers or subsistence horticulturalists and while they may indeed have time on their hands to engage in certain leisure activities, they are not in a position to waste resources on gratuitous luxuries. Nevertheless, they seem to be prepared to invest as much time and energy and emotion in economically useless pets as the average middle-class European or North American," says Dr. Serpell. It seems that they realize there is much benefit from pet ownership, and their pets fulfill a basic need for them.

These people are not lonely, alienated, or isolated but live predominantly in communities of extended families or clans with much social support, yet they their pets still fulfil a need for them. One anthropologist, who studied the American-Indian Navaho people on their reservation, found that cats were their most popular pet, and while not seeming to fulfill any real economic need, were kept and cherished by their owners just as any urban cat lover would.

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## A Possible Origin of Pet-Keeping

In the study, "The Social Significance of Pet-Keeping Among the Amazonian Indians" by Philippe Erikson in the book *Companion Animals and Us*, Dr. Erikson explores the underlying reasons for pet-keeping by these hunter-gatherer peoples, which are similar to how our ancestors lived. He found that often after an adult animal is killed, by a male hunter for food, the baby animals will be brought back and cared for as pets and even given a new species name. For example the Capuchin Monkey is called kai'i but once they are domesticated they are referred to as maka, a completely different animal. This occurs with animals such as small wild cats like ocelots, as well as monkeys, pigs, and parrots. Interestingly, the males in the tribe are the exclusive hunters while the females have the exclusive right to care for the pets. Dr. Erikson's theory is that pet-keeping among these Indians has arisen out of a sense of guilt for the killing of a living being with a soul, and gods to protect it, and that they compensate for the killing by caring for the young.

## Help in Hunting

Evolution played an important role in our attraction to animals. Hunters that were good at spotting and killing prey animals survived. Animals that could help us learn to hunt helped us evolve.

The cat, as nature's perfect hunter, might have played an important role in helping our ancestors become better hunters. "The cat is an evolved predator. The first thing a predator has to do, as anyone who knows the cat knows, is to be still, and part of the therapeutic advantage of animals is their ability to make us be still, be calm, be gentle, and I think that helped us develop reflexes that permitted us to be a better hunter. The cat knows how to keep us still and calm in two different ways first by watching the animal's own ability to be still and watch prey, and secondly, when they're petted there is something about their purring and their stillness and gentleness that I think has a profound effect on (calming) us," says Dr. Katcher. Many years ago, the Cheetah and Caracal, a medium-size wildcat, were kept as pets, trained, and used by people in India, Iran and Africa as hunting companions.

The love between cats and humans may have come thousands of years before what is normally thought, and our cats might have helped in the domestication of farm animals which led to the establishment of modern civilization. Tell that to the next person who tells you they hate cats. They may reconsider their position.





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