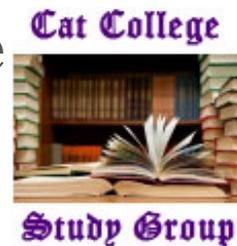




# History 401: Cat Domestication — Fertile Crescent to Mediterranean



## History 401: Cat Domestication — Fertile Crescent to Mediterranean



For millennia, cats have been close companions. They held religious significance, were depicted in art and used as pest control. Recent scientific evidence suggests these ideas began much earlier than 4,000 years ago with the **ancient Egyptians**. Pinpointing an exact date and location of feline domestication has eluded scientists partly because wildcats and domestic cats share similar skeletal structure, which has remained unchanged for thousands of years, and because our feline friend refuses to divulge all of her mysteries.

Slowly, scientists are lifting the veil of mystery surrounding feline domestication. In 1983 a cat's jawbone dating back 8,000 years was found on the island of Cyprus. The find was significant because cats were not indigenous to Cyprus and it provides evidence that humans brought the cat with them 60 to 70 km across the Mediterranean. The bone by itself, however, does not indicate whether the cat was wild, tame or domesticated.





Felis silvestris lybica. Photo by Noorderlicht.

### Species Discoveries

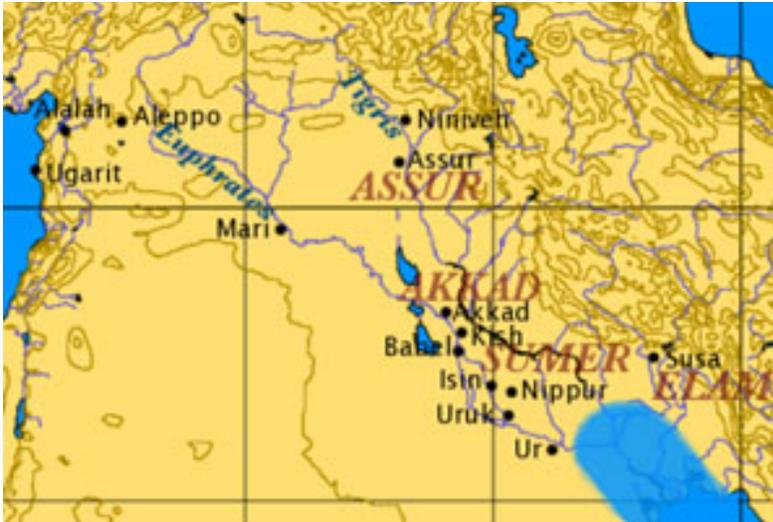
In 2004, French archaeologists found an older site on Cyprus, the Neolithic village Shillourokambos, pre-dating the previous find by 1,500 years. They unearthed a cat skeleton buried with a human skeleton, indicating a strong and special relationship developed 9,500 years ago. The cat was buried in its own carefully dug grave just 40 cm from the human, which was also buried with polished stone, ochre, 24 whole marine shells and flint tools suggesting the person had social status. Further examination of the cat skeleton showed it to be an 8-month-old African Wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*) with no signs of butchering, indicating the cat was thought of as an individual. The burial demonstrates a close, spiritual relationship between humans and *Felis silvestris lybica* in Cyprus during the 8th millennium B.C.

Stone and clay figurines 10,000 years old found in the Middle East suggest cats had spiritual significance in the early Neolithic (late Stone Age) societies and a felid figurine found in Shillourokambos pre-dates the burial site.

### Recent Breakthroughs

In 2007, geneticist Carlos Driscoll and other researchers further investigated the feline domestication mystery. Their study declared that all **domestic cats descended from *Felis silvestris*** and were domesticated 12,000 years ago — 3,000 years earlier than the Cyprus burial site — in the Middle Eastern region area known as the Fertile Crescent.





Map of Mesopotamia

Called the “cradle of civilization,” the Fertile Crescent is a sweeping arc encompassing part of Turkey, Syria, the Nile Valley and the area of modern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Here, man settled down to an agrarian lifestyle growing, harvesting and storing grains, such as wild barley. Naturally mice followed, providing a niche for the clever feline opportunist. The wild cat invited himself in for dinner — domesticated himself — and humans welcomed the pest control service. Over time, people recognized and appreciated more of the cat’s traits and gradually **wild cats became household companions**. As humans migrated through the ancient world across the Mediterranean, they took their cats with them.

Driscoll and the study’s co-authors say, “The domestication of wild species to complement human civilization stands as one of the more successful biological experiments” ever undertaken. Even though questions about feline domestication may have been answered, felines still wear a veil of mystery.