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Cats

A survey of their relationship to humans
from their first encounter to the present day

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In the Beginning was Egypt

- 1.1 The Origins of the Domestic Cat
- 1.2 Why Egypt?
- 1.3 Cats Depictions in Egyptian Art
- 1.4 The Religious Context – the Goddess Bast
 - 1.4.2 Bast’s Temple and Veneration
 - 1.4.3 The Battle of Pelusium
 - 1.4.4 The Amarna Period
 - 1.4.5 Magic Knives and other Amulets
 - 1.4.6 Mummies
- 1.5 Cats in Egyptian Medicine

The Conquest of the World

- 2.1 Asia
 - 2.1.1 China
 - 2.1.2 India
 - 2.1.2.1 Indian Literature
 - 2.1.3 The Birman Cat
 - 2.1.4 Japan
- 2.2 Europe
 - 2.2.1 The Hellenistic World
 - 2.2.2 The Roman Empire
 - 2.2.3 A New Antagonist: the Black Rat
 - 2.2.4 New Religions

Into the Darkness

- 3.1 The Germanic Tribes Conquer Europe
- 3.2 The Celts of Great Britain
- 3.3 Holy War
- 3.4 Freja
- 3.5 Cats and Monasteries
- 3.6 A Cat's Worth
- 3.7 After the Year 1000
- 3.8 From the Medieval Inquisition to Witch Trials
- 3.9 The Crisis of the 14th Century and its Consequences

Renaissance? The Long Road to Enlightenment

- 4.1 Cats and Witches
 - 4.1.1 A Long History of Popular Belief
 - 4.1.1.1 The Church Closes in on Witches
 - 4.1.2 The Witch Hunt on the British Isles
 - 4.1.3 A Recrudescence of the Hunt
 - 4.1.4 The Benendanti of Friuli
 - 4.1.5 The Witches of Liguria
 - 4.1.6 Alchemy
 - 4.1.7 A New School of Thought Sets in
- 4.2 The Venetian Republic
- 4.3 Kattenstoet in Ypres
- 4.4 Saint John's Fires
- 4.5 Cats in Art
 - 4.5.1.1 Cats... in Wood
 - 4.5.1.2 Lorenzo Lotto
 - 4.5.1.3 Barocci's Madonnas and Cats
 - 4.5.1.4 The Last Supper
- 4.5.2 Secular Painting

4.5.3 Cats in Modern Literature

4.5.3.1 Cats in Fables

4.5.3.2 Cats in Fairy Tales

4.5.4 Cats in Music

Contemporary Cats

5.1 Cats and Food

5.2 A New Way of Perceiving Cats

5.3 Famous Cat Lovers

5.4 Cats at Work

5.4.1 Hollywood, Here we Come

5.4.2 Cartoon Cats

5.4.3 Cats, another International Feline Success

5.5 Cats in Art

5.5.1 Literary Cats

Conclusion

Bibliography

Introduction

In many households nowadays there are pets of various kinds, but the world of animal lovers is divided into two main groups: those who love cats and those who love dogs. Dogs have been familiar to humans since a much earlier time than cats. There are remains of dogs in proximity to human settlements that date as long back as 50,000 years ago, while cats have allegedly approached humans less than 10,000 years ago. According to FEDIAF¹'s Facts and Figures 2014, house cats slightly outnumber house dogs in Europe. Whether they are cats or dogs though, to their owners they are always the best pets ever.

This dissertation follows cats through their history, from their first encounter with humans to the present day. They had to face many different circumstances, and they went from a very promising beginning in ancient Egypt, where they were regarded as sacred animals, through a very tough time in medieval and modern Europe, when they were hunted as witches' familiars. Their renaissance came with the developments in science that emphasised cats' cleanliness and appropriateness for living among humans, compared to other animals that were considered a breeding-ground for germs.

For better or for worse, cats have always shared their lives with that of humans, and this is underlined by the presence throughout the ages of countless evidences of this mutual acceptance. The most difficult questions to answer are: why? And: how? Why did cats give up part of their freedom and independence to humans? And why did (and still do) humans care about this cohabitation? How can these two species find mutual convenience in sharing their existence?

We can try to give an answer starting from some facts. What humans usually admire the most in cats is their purring. Mistakenly believed to be a sign of happiness or well-being, it can actually be done also by a scared cat, or a severely injured cat. Purring is still a mystery, but it is apparently part of the complex language of the cat to express 'a friendly social mood'². Kittens start purring when they are only a week

¹ The European Pet Food Industry.
<http://www.fediaf.org/> (last accessed on 27th January 2016).

² Morris, Desmond, *Catwatching. The Essential Guide to Cat Behaviour*, London, Ebony Press, 2002, p. 15.

old, and purring is the main means of communication with their mother, which purrs her contentment in return. Contrary to other bigger, wild felines¹, cats can purr both when inhaling and when exhaling, at various frequencies but at regular intervals, and the sound resulting from these vibrations has a calming and relaxing effect on their fellow humans. This is only one of the aspects valued by AAT (Animal-Assisted Therapy), a type of therapy that involves animals. It was first developed by an American child psychologist, Boris Levinson, in the 1950s-60s. He noticed that his little patients benefited from the interaction with animals. Similar observations had already been made by the most renowned Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud², who was often flanked by his dogs when working, because this apparently soothed both the patients and himself³. Levinson's studies were just the starting point of a new branch of therapy to relieve various disorders both in children and in adults that involves many different animals, mostly dogs for their natural attitude towards the human race, but also cats for their meekness, softness, but also size and cleanliness, which allow them to enter some hospital units. Pet therapy recognises the role pets have in the modern culture for human's psychological well-being and underlines how a close relationship of humans with pets can only turn out formative.

Kittens are all born blind, and their eyes start opening after 2-3 weeks. In this first phase of their lives, all kittens have grey-blue eyes – the colour would change to the definitive hue when they are about 12-18 weeks old. They depend completely on their mother during this period, at least for the first 4 weeks of their lives. Then, they start feeding on solid food, moving quite nimbly, and developing adult-age abilities and responses to external stimuli⁴. Although they are born blind, cats' eyes have always been one of the greatest attractiveness of these animals, because of their eerie glow and the sensibility of their pupils with their rapid shape changes. The glow, in particular, is due to the so called tapetum lucidum, a layer of highly reflective tissue behind their retina which they share with many other nocturnal animals. Their sense

¹ Like tigers, which can purr only with their outward breath.

² 1856-1939.

³ Fine, Aubrey H. ed., *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, London, Elsevier, 2014, foreword.

⁴ Turner, Dennis C., and Bateson, Patrick ed.s, *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

of sight is surely well developed and let them see quite well also in the dim light, though they are partly colour-blind¹. Their hearing is also exceptionally developed, more than the humans' and dogs' ones, and they can move the cups of their ears independently, to aim them to the noise source and hear better.

Another fascinating aspect of cats is their innate elegance, whether they are curled up for a nap, grooming, or walking. Most of it is due to their impressive musculature and flexibility, which allow them to move in a peculiar way that is different from most other animals. Cats walk on their toes and their retractable claws are sheathed so as not to touch the walking surface. They do not make any noise, which is very helpful when hunting. When they walk, their upright tail² helps them to balance, even on the narrowest trails. If they happen to lose their grip and fall from a height, they can instinctively twist their body so as to land on their feet – often without any harm. Their powerful hinder legs are extraordinarily useful to pounce on their preys or to run after them: cats can reach almost 50 km/h³ and they can jump up to 2 metres from a standing start. On the other hand, cats are only fit for short sprints and get quickly tired⁴. Moreover, although they are very good climbers with their hind legs pushing them up and their claws giving them a good grip, their physical structure does not help them at all when descending and they suddenly appear to be quite awkward and clumsy.

The fur of cats, which sometimes is felt like a damnation by their fellow humans because it adheres so well to tapestry and cloths in general, is a sophisticated thermal insulation but also a source of information for the animal, because every single hair follicle is reached by a dozen nerve endings. And the coat of an average cat has about 25,000 hairs per cm². These, together with the whiskers that have roots three times as deep as the other hairs, allow cats to perceive the environment around them even if deprived of other senses⁵.

¹ Steffoff, Rebecca, *Cats*, Tarrytown NY, Benchmark Books, 2004, p. 60.

² Which is actually the hindmost part of their backbone.

³ They are faster than men, who can manage less than 45 km/h at their best.

⁴ Farfour, Gadi ed., *The Cat Encyclopedia. The Definitive Visual Guide*, London, Dorling Kindersley, 2014, p. 55.

⁵ Bluhm, Detlef, *Impronte di Gatto, Nell'Arte, nella Letteratura, nella Vita dell'Uomo*, Milano, Corbaccio, 2006, ch. 3.

Socially, cats have proved to be able to adapt themselves to different situations. Although they are mostly solitary hunters, they can also live in small communities at their convenience, and often female cats cooperate in the rearing of their offspring. This multiplicity of behaviours has enabled cats to establish affectionate, long-lasting relationships with humans as well as other beings, but still to assert their freedom and their lack of an overpowering compulsion to be involved with others. Intersexual hostility is rare under natural circumstances, and in the defence of their territory they still permit trespassing to those they are in good terms with. One method cats have to mark their territory is spraying, both males and females, but it does not stop to that. They also let out many other odour signals from numerous sebaceous glands they possess in various parts of their body, from the face, to their paws and their rear. Although fights are not uncommon, cats have also developed a complex threat display of expressions, postures and vocalizations that most often than not permits to settle disputes peacefully.

The long-term relationship between cats and humans is rather astonishing when we think about the natural propensity of cats to be independent. In fact, they maintain some sort of independence even when properly tended which results, for example, in their propensity to hunting even if well fed.

In 1870, for the first time, ancient Egyptians were acknowledged their contribution in the taming of cats. It was in a book by the scholar and traveller Victor Hehn titled Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere in ihrem Übergang aus Asien nach Griechenland und Italien sowie in das übrige Europa. Historisch-linguistische Skizzen (The Wanderings of Plants and Animals from Their First Home). The connection between cats and the human race has then continued over time to the present day. Apart from the glorious start among the Egyptians where they were considered sacred (along with other animals), the aloofness of cats gave them an aura of mystery as well as of independence and they were mostly considered inconspicuous members of the household for many centuries. Only in the 16th century cats started to play a role among artists who made them the primary subjects of some of their works. They found their way into fiction and established their presence in all the various forms of art. They won the affection of many famous people over the

centuries, like the scientist Sir Isaac Newton, who postulated the law of gravity but is also believed to be the inventor of the first cat door, which permitted his beloved cats to enter and leave his study without being of too much disturb to him. They made their way to the control rooms following personalities like Theodore Roosevelt, whose cat was allowed to take part to official dinners, Sir Winston Churchill, who was often photographed with his cat on his lap, and the Clintons, whose black and white Socks had a worldwide fame thanks to the internet and whose death was announced on TV though it took place in 2009, when Barack Obama was president of the USA. In literature, cats have sometimes had nice, winsome roles like the grinning Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, or less clear ones like the cat in George Orwell's Animal Farm, that does not really take any dominant role in the story but continues with its ordinary, quiet lifestyle.

Over time, cats have peacefully invaded almost every aspect of our lives, and also the advertising industry, from the day it was born, has seized every opportunity to underline various aspects of these multifaceted animals and turn them to the advantage of a product. Apart from a general history of the evolution of the relationship between cats and humans over the centuries and an overview of the effects past events have had on it on the European soil, this dissertation offers some examples of the presence of cats in the arts. The topic is vast, and the areas of focus here have been dictated by my personal taste.

Today, we 'cat people' admire those qualities that made cats averse in the past and let them take over our houses in their pursuit of self-interest. Whether they sleep their day off on our bed¹, or bring a nearly dead mouse into our sitting room in order to play until it dies, their mix of meekness and ferocity cannot but astonish us. They are perfect little killing machines with needle-sharp claws and sharp teeth, but they can be suddenly sweet and amiable companions. This duality in their personality still earns them many enemies, too.

¹ They can spend up to 18 hours per day sleeping.

In the Beginning was Egypt¹

1.1 The Origins of the Domestic Cat

There are three distinct populations of the wild cat: the African, the European, and the Indian. The African wildcat lives all over Africa and the Arabian peninsula, with the exception of the equatorial rainforest areas. The European wildcat, which has a thicker and darker fur than the African subspecies, inhabits the coniferous and deciduous woodlands of Europe. The Indian wildcat, the smallest of the subspecies, lives in the semi-desert and steppe lands in parts of the Middle East, India, Russia, and China. All wildcats have five toes on the front feet and four on the back – all with retractable claws – and females have four pairs of mammae. The domestic housecat descended from these species. Domestic cats are known as *Felis Catus* and are now worldwide spread.

Although they cannot determine the time exactly, experts agree on the fact that the cat was first domesticated in Ancient Egypt around 2000 BC, when a proper name for this animal is first recorded. Such name was *miu* or *mii*, which does not distinguish the wild from the domesticated species and describes the whole genus, *Felis*. It simply meant: “He/She who meows”.

The modern cat that strolls about in our houses descends directly from the *Felis Silvestris Lybica*, one of the wildcat species living then in the Egyptian territory. In particular, it is said to be the closest old relative of the modern tabby cat². In fact, the *Felis Silvestris Lybica* was bigger than the modern cat, with a yellowish striped fur, congenial to hiding among the rocks and sand of the desert. One of the many reasons why that was the first cat to be tamed lies probably in the fact that it was an easy-to-tame breed. In fact, other breeds like the European wildcat are much more ferocious. The other wildcat species to be encountered in Egypt was the *Felis Chaus* (also called the swamp or jungle cat). Larger and heavier than the *Felis Silvestris Lybica*, it prefers

¹ There being many controversial versions of the dates and order of the various dynasties, I stuck to those given by Jaromir Malek in *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, London, British Museum Press, 1993 whenever possible.

² Driscoll C.A., Macdonald D.W., and O'Brien S.J., *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the USA)* June 16, 2009 vol. 106 no. Supplement 1 9971-9978.

living in marshy areas and nowadays it can still be found in the northern part of the Nile valley and about the delta.

A burial find on the island of Cyprus in 2004 suddenly questioned this opinion about the first domestication of cats. In Cyprus, an island which does not present any autochthonous feline species, the skeleton of a cat was found lying at just 40 centimetres from the body of a person of probably high status in a tomb richly furnished with various offerings dating about 7500 BC. The cat belonged to the *Felis Silvestris* species and had been buried in a position similar to that of its presumed owner. Another find about cats had been made on the island some 20 years earlier, but then it was just a jawbone and only stated the presence of the animal in Cyprus. That discovery though stated that humans of the Neolithic period were already eager of having cats with them – a feeling then probably shared by all populations who had given up to farming and had observed the usefulness of such animal, which had in turn observed the comfort of living close to the humans¹. The new founding of 2004 brought such notion to an evolution: if somebody had been buried along with a cat, either it was a tamed cat of some importance to the person buried, or the animal had some sacred high value and deserved to be buried with a human and accompany him/her in the afterlife. Objects and drawings of the Neolithic period representing cats were widespread in the Near East area, but the unearthing of the tomb with the cat surely cast a new light on the relationship between humans and the animal, which is still under investigation due to the scantiness of information regarding the period.

1.2 Why Egypt?

Much more instead can be learned from the ancient Egyptians, whose social structure was strictly bureaucratized and who left us many documents and works of art which can help us rewrite their history and understand their time. It must never be forgotten, though, that the Egyptian art was not for art's sake, and it always carried a higher meaning. Most finds therefore need interpreting and cannot be taken just as they are – they convey a higher and more complex meaning than they show. Experts

¹ www.focus.it/ambiente/i-gatti-amici-di-vecchia-data (last accessed 6th August 2015).
www.Repubblica.it/2004/d/sezioni/scienza_e_tecnologia/gattocipro/gattocipro/gattocipro.html
(last accessed 6th August 2015).

like Jaromir Malek¹ have studied such archaeological material in order to retrace also the history of cats: it is possible to date the different stages of the domestication of cats and their increasing importance for the people through their depiction in art. Unfortunately, the oldest of these representations dating around 3000 BC are so unintelligible (because broken into tiny fragments, or faded by time) that they are too uncertain and cannot be taken into serious consideration. The Egyptologists have been studying also the remains and the unearthed tombs of this people, and they as well have had something to reveal about this animal.

As well as not distinguishing lexicographically between different wild cats and the domesticated cat, the Egyptians also adopted only one image for the cat, with only minor variants, both in their artistic representations and as a hieroglyph in their writing. Under this specific form it is in fact usually to be found: a seated cat with its tail curled along its side.

All animals had great importance in the history and religion of the Ancient Egypt. All the earliest societies, and the Egyptian as well, depended almost entirely on favourable geographic and climatic factors. Egypt was a thin strip of green land in the middle of the desert, which delimited it naturally in the east-west direction. The country's northern boundary was formed by the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the marshy areas of the huge delta of the river Nile, which flows northwards. Moreover, it was separated from Nubia in the south by the first cataract of the river at Aswan, one of many formations of igneous rocks the river passes through and which made navigation impossible between its various segments. Egypt actually owed all its wealth to the presence of that river, which regularly overflowed and fertilised its valley. It was a perfect place for the human settlement, but also for the welfare of fauna, which was very rich and varied. The newly settled humans had to distinguish between those animals which were "good" to them and those which represented a menace. The biggest of these latest, also in size, was the crocodile, very common in the waters of the river, followed by the dangerous snakes. The cat, on the contrary, can be defined a friend to the new farmers, because it could kill rodents,

¹ Now retired editor of 'Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings' and Keeper of the Archive at the Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

snakes, and other small animals, without ever becoming particularly dangerous towards humans.

Hunting in the pharaonic era had become a far less relevant activity for the state's economy than agriculture. Therefore, the cat appeared as an extremely useful animal to the Egyptians, who had the difficult task of storing up the cereals and all the goods they could grow on their fertile land and save them between the floods of the Nile, or in case of meagre years. In fact the Nile overflowed every year between June and September (according to the modern Julian calendar) due to summer rains in the plateau regions of Ethiopia, but the extension of such floods could vary enormously. For example, in 1913-14 which is considered a 'lean year', 12 billion m³ of flood water swelled the river but, in 1878-79, a 'fat year', the flood reached 155 billion m³ of water¹. These floods do not submerge the Egyptian land nowadays, because of the construction of the majestic dam at Aswan, in the south of Egypt, over the twentieth century and the subsequent construction of the largest artificial lake in the world, Lake Nasser, at the border between Egypt and Sudan. Nonetheless, the floods of this river, whose representing god was called Hapi by the ancient Egyptians, were vital to the survival of animals and human beings in the area.

It was the Nile that caused the nomadic tribes strolling about its banks to develop into sedentary people given to farming and cattle-breeding instead of hunting and collecting, and then to unite into a unified state governed by one ruler shortly before 3000 BC. Its waters were actually extremely fertile, and when retreating to the riverbed they left behind an innumerable amount of stagnant shallow puddles and a deposit of rich organic silt, essential to the fertilization of the soil. The sedentary people could now plough their meadows, sow, and wait for the crops to ripe and be ready for harvesting.

In pharaonic Egypt agriculture definitely played a more vital role than hunting in the economy of the country, and it was important for that people that the crop would last as much as possible and feed them until the next good harvest. Therefore, they would stockpile their cereals in silos and stores. Unfortunately, these would

¹ <http://www.umich.edu/~kelseydb/Exhibits/AncientNubia/PhotoIntro.html>
(last accessed 20th August 2015).

attract a lot of animals who could easily feed on them and so destroy all the Egyptians had been working for. It was extremely important to preserve their stocks of food from such vermin, and this necessity encouraged the Egyptian friendship with an as yet untamed animal, the cat, which could help them in their work, and be easily satisfied with what it could get of its hunting activity. Cats naturally showed their propensity towards catching mice, rats, and other vermin such as asps and other small serpents which were a menace to people's storages. Since this natural propensity was extremely useful to the people, they just let them do. Wild cats possibly saw the granaries as ready-made killing grounds, and it is no wonder that they were given occasional scraps of food either discarded or left on purpose to encourage their return, until a kind of symbiosis was reached between the two sides, which suited both. The cats had a steady supply of food, or free access to it, and the humans had their settled area clean of vermin. From there to people's households the step was short. Cats started to get closer to the humans' stores, barns, and houses and step by step the relationship between this animal and humans became closer. For cats, the household represented an additional source of food and comfort and, in return, they surrendered some degree of their independence.

At Abydos, a sacred city which was the necropolis of the earliest royalty and situated in the low desert, west of the Nile, archaeologists have found a small tomb which they dated about 1980-1801 BC¹. In its chapel they found the skeletons of 17 cats and nearby a row of small offering pots which have been estimated to have contained milk. This would be the oldest evidence of adult cats fed by humans, being milk a kind of food which wild cats would not have had access to after been weaned. In his Library of History the Greek historian Diodorus, who visited Egypt around 60 BC, mentions that cats in Egypt were fed with bred in milk, or raw cut-up fish, and that humans made a special clucking sound to call them². Anyway, the oldest remains of a cat in Egypt come from Mostagedda, in Middle Egypt. They date sometime before ca. 4000 BC and were found in the tomb of a man (presumably a craftsman, judging from the tools he was buried with) together with the remains of a gazelle.

¹ During the 12th dynasty.

² http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/1D*.html

(last accessed 20th August 2015). Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, Book 1.83.3 – online translation.

Presumably, this was intended as food for the afterlife, while the cat found at the dead man's feet was perhaps his pet.

1.3 Cats Depictions in Egyptian Art

There are many three-dimensional objects of the Egyptian era that represent cats. The oldest of the kind is an alabaster vessel, presumably intended to hold cosmetic oil and dating back to the twelfth dynasty (1980-1801 BC), but there are also many statuettes of cats in many different poses (sleeping, stalking, just about to jump, arching their backs, etc..) found in various tombs in the big necropolises of Abydos and Thebes. Of particular interest and beauty are the gold spacer-bars from a bracelet that belonged to the queen Sobekemsaf (1648-1643 BC), each decorated with three reclining cats with crossed front paws¹.

Starting from about 1450 BC the cat regularly appears in a domestic context in Egyptian paintings on tomb walls. These paintings show how the relationship between cats and humans developed. The images on the walls are not always very realistic, but people must not forget that they were not painted for art's sake, but they had a greater value. These scenes, in fact, portrayed a wished-for reality of life after death. Moreover, the Egyptian art was subject to special rules of representation: some referred to the size of the depicted subjects, which are therefore not always easily recognizable or correspondent to reality; others involved a special effort in not leaving any unused empty space in the composition, with the insertion of simple space-fillers, that do not convey any particular meaning to the whole scene. Nonetheless, all animals in ancient Egyptian art are usually remarkably well-observed and accurately portrayed, being their representation less dependent on a 'canonized' image than was that of human figures.

At first cats were mainly depicted in hunting scenes in the marshes catching birds or fish. These seem to be pictures of good omen for the deceased who, in the afterlife, could have counted on the help of his cat friend to have food in abundance. In fact, the Egyptians believed that, when they died, not just their souls but also their bodies would have lived on, if proved just by Osiris, the god who lived in the Land

¹ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 53.

of the Dead. They believed that there was a parallel world that was similar to the one of the living but was void of pain and suffering. There could be no intermingling of the two worlds, but the gods had taught the Egyptians how to preserve a body to live on in the afterlife.

In some tombs, the cat is depicted showing its face frontally. The convention in Egyptian art of representing in paintings a cat under the chair of a sitting lady has to be reported to a later date (whereas men's figures were usually accompanied by the presence of dogs and related to outdoor activities). Some see a sexual and fertility symbolism in this tendency of matching the cat and the woman, resembling the importance of the goddess Bast as patron of these two specific features. It might be true, being symbolism in art very difficult to prove or disprove, and the more so consisting in paintings over 3,000 years old. It is much more reliable as a fact that it is also a representation of reality, being presumably the cat now very common in the household. These scenes usually depict the tomb's owner and his wife seated side by side, sometimes with their children or a priest bringing them offerings or libations. Quite common are also the banquet scenes in which, again, cats are represented under a chair. Sometimes they look just like space fillers, and sometimes they are represented together with other animals, or busy with feeding themselves. The tendency of relating the cat to the household and to the woman in the house would then have lived on to much later times, but here it asserts that the presence of the cat in the household was by that time taken for granted, and it does not pertain only to the tombs of the Theban necropolises but can also be found on several contemporary stelae (gravestones)¹.

As already stated, another typical depiction in tomb paintings is that of marsh scenes. In these scenes, cats are usually to be seen among other animals hunting birds and fish together with the tomb owner. Many scholars do not agree with a literal interpretation of this kind of scenes, being the fact that cats were used for retrieving only an unproved for speculation, though fascinating. Many experts think it more reasonable to interpret such scenes differently. In fact, in such hunting scenes, the tomb owner is usually accompanied also by his whole family – his wife and children.

¹ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, pp. 57-64.

Therefore it is more likely that the cat takes part to these hunting trips as another family component, consolidating so the thesis that at this time the cat was fully accepted as part of the household. Anyway, in Theban tombs, the coat of the cats is invariably between sandy yellow and light reddish brown with darker markings of the fur, which resembles the wildcat *Felis Silvestris Lybica*. Of a particular beauty is an artistry tomb painting dated a little later than 1400 BC now conserved at the British Museum and belonging to the Egyptian accountant Nebamun's tomb. The tomb was found in Luxor in 1820 on a now lost site and its paintings have been exposed in a completely new wing of the British Museum since 21st January 2009. The scene at issue represents an imaginary hunting trip in the marshes where Nebamun, the tomb's owner, is accompanied by his wife, standing in a papyrus canoe behind him, and his little daughter, crouched as a perfect space filler between his legs. Of course, there is also the family pet, a wondrous gilded eyed cat, which is frantic helping in the hunt. In fact, it is depicted grasping one bird with its front paws, one with its hind paws and a third with its mouth¹.

1.4 The Religious Context – the Goddess Bast

The Egyptians are altogether famous for their dotting on animals because they believed them to be manifestations of their gods: this is another good reason why cats were first domesticated in Egypt and not elsewhere, although they were present in the whole Fertile Crescent area. Nearly everybody has at least a faint idea of the Egyptians' religious cults, such as the mummification of corpses, and their reverence towards gods represented as animals, which brought them to be highly reverential towards the animals themselves. Among these gods, one is particularly important in this context: Bast. She was a goddess represented as a woman with a cat head or as a seated cat, and she was the protector of women and child bearing but also of music and joy, and cats were believed to be her manifestations². It was probably its role as a killer of rodents and snakes that made the cat eventually take on the role of a protector in Egyptian religious belief. In fact, the cult of the cat and of its goddess

¹ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 66.

² Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

Bast was extremely popular and widespread through all social classes, which wasn't the case with many other animals or gods.

There are, nonetheless, chronological problems when talking about the Egyptians. We usually think about the Ancient Egypt as a whole. What we tend to forget is that what we refer to as the Ancient Egypt is a period which actually developed over more than three thousand years – just as a unified state governed by one ruler. The developments from the cat domestication to its insertion in the gods' pantheon have to be treated, therefore, with caution. If the domestication of cats, in fact, has been dated from about 2000 BC, the cult of the cat goddess Bast is dated around 1000 BC. The whole Egyptian pantheon is actually of great importance for fully understanding this people, because they were guided by their religious belief throughout all the various aspects of their existence, including their art, their political structure, and their cultural achievements. The Egyptians worshipped a large number of gods and practiced a belief system which was part totemism, part polytheism, and part ancestor worship. Their gods sometimes had human or animal forms and sometimes were in the form of an animal-headed human, and they had human feelings, but they were much more powerful than humans. These gods were not altogether isolated from the people they had to guide and protect. On the contrary, they lived invisibly in their same world, acting through sacred sites, items, animals, and even chosen people. Moreover, the spirits of the deceased people, if properly remembered and revered, could help and guide the living from the afterlife. In Herodotus¹ words, the Egyptians were 'religious to excess, far beyond any other race of men.'²

The Egyptians' religious beliefs, anyway, changed and got modified through the centuries although it seems that some features remained the same all over the history of this people – like the existence of one sun god from the most ancient of times, probably even prior to the unification of the state (although the cult of the most well-known solar god Ra emerged only ca. 2400 BC). Some gods were worshipped only in particular towns or places while others were more broadly spread.

¹ Greek historian (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC).

² Herodotus, *The Histories*, book II, London, Everyman's Library, 2015, p. 140.

Understanding the religious cults of the Egyptians is also complicated by the merging of aspects of one god in another, with the fusion of gods each keeping their own characteristics, or the development of the cult of one god. This was due to the fact that nearly every town and village was cult centre to at least one god, and the rise or fall in importance of that particular place determined the importance and influence of such deities over the whole country.

It must not be forgotten that the over 3,000 years of ancient Egyptian history were populated by various reigning dynasties, from different parts of the reign and sometimes even from abroad. In fact the history of the country is usually divided into three different main kingdoms, spaced out by three intermediate periods marked by great uncertainty and unstable governments, which eventually led to the Greco-Roman dynasties. Thus the cult of Bast, who was worshipped since as early as 2700 BC, rapidly increased during the 22nd and 23rd dynasties (ca. 945-715 BC) when Bubastis¹ (her cult centre) was apparently made capital of Egypt², and cats' popularity actually had its peak during the Ptolemaic Dynasty (305-30 BC), that is during a period of decline for the Egyptian civilization³. Moreover, the goddess Bast was represented with a cat head only from ca. 1000 BC, being represented before with a lioness head instead. This is probably one more reason why her relationship with another lion-headed goddess, Sekhmet, is so difficult to ascertain. Both goddesses appeared quite early among the Egyptian deities and both appear to be strictly connected to the sun god, but some believe Bast to be the "good" counterpart of the bloodthirsty Sekhmet while some completely distinguish the two goddesses, noting that they simply did not pertain to a national, uniform worship. In fact, the cult of Sekhmet was based in Memphis, while Bast was mainly worshipped in Bubastis, in the eastern delta. While Sekhmet was the protector of Pharaohs who led them in warfare, as well as a great healer, Bast was also a protector of the royal family, but in their household, and she also was the goddess of fertility, of music, dance and joy –

¹ Greek name for Per-Bastet (the house of Bast), then Tell Basta.

² According to Manetho, an Egyptian priest and historian who lived in the 3rd century BC, in the Ptolemaic period and wrote *Aegyptiaca* (*The History of Egypt*). See Van De Mieroop, Marc, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p.262.

³ Not just the cult of the cat increased in late Egypt, but most of the cults associated with animals grew substantially. This was partly due to some governmental reforms that supported them for fiscal benefits and partly to a sort of popular nationalism which united the Egyptian populace against the foreign usurpers.

although it seems that her position became more genteel after her figure was associated with the domestic cat. Somehow we can affirm that these two goddesses actually mirrored the similarities of their representing animals: playful at times, joyous and nice when at peace, but nasty and vengeful with their enemies (or preys), each one according to its own size and strength. Sekhmet was so dangerous and frightening resembling the lion's strength and ferocity as Bast was its household counterpart, protective and peaceful resembling the cat's playfulness and affection.

1.4.2 Bast's Temple and Veneration

In Bubastis, Bast had her grandest temple which, although now in ruins, is known to have had a square plant with a singular grove of tall trees inside, and be of red granite. Herodotus¹, who took Bast for the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana), described it as the most beautiful temple of all Egypt, although not the biggest, and left us many information about the whole temple compound. He said it was visible from every part of the city, because it was in a sort of valley lower than the rest of Bubastis, and it looked like an island, being surrounded by two artificial channels from the Nile which left only a small passage for the approach. Bubastis, whose first human settlements dated back to the third millennium BC, experienced a considerable growth in all fields during the whole ancient Egyptian history, being situated on one of the major routes through Egypt itself². Although destroyed once in 350 BC by the Persians the city survived until the end of the Roman period (395 AD). In spite of the obliteration of this important city by the Persians, the cult of the goddess Bast and of his protégés continued until the end of the kingdom.

The historian Diodorus Siculus³ recounts that whoever killed a cat in Egypt, whether intentionally or not, was put to death, sometimes lynched by the crowd without undergoing a proper trial. He also mentioned the fact that whoever found a dead cat on the streets, would have withdrawn far from it and cried out protestations

¹ Herodotus, *ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

² There is a local Christian Coptic legend based on this fact about the ancient well in Bubastis. It says that the holy family stopped by it on their flight to Egypt (www.bibleistrue.com/qna/pqna26.htm – last accessed on 24th August 2015)

³ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica (The Library of History)*, Book I, 83.6-9. See Murphy, Edwin, *The Antiquities of Egypt. A Translation, with Notes, of Book I of the Library of History of Diodorus Siculus*, London, Transaction Publishers, 1990, p. 169.

and lamentations that he was not anyhow involved in the death of the animal. He himself said to have been witness to one such episode: a Roman had accidentally killed a cat and the people gathered in a crowd and pursued his punishment although it might have started an international diplomatic crisis between Egypt and the Roman Empire¹.

In Herodotus recount, Bubastis also housed the primary annual festival of the Egyptians: it was held at the beginning of the harvesting season² in honour of the goddess Bast and according to him 700,000 people were present, not counting children. It was a most lascivious festival, were people used to get very noisily to Bubastis in large boats down the Nile singing and playing music, and when halting in the towns along the way some women used to swear to the women on the river banks and undress in front of them. In Bubastis then there were again a lot of music and dancing and people drank a lot of wine while this feast of fertility lasted. The debauchery of behaviour held by Egyptians on such occasion might be at the bottom of the reference to the host city in the holy Bible in no other place but in a sentence on judgement in Ezekiel 30:17: ‘The young men of Heliopolis and Bubastis will fall by the sword, and the cities themselves will go into captivity.’ Anyway the festival held in Bast’s honour took place regularly well into the Roman period and was abolished only in 390 AD³, stating somehow the end of cat worshipping.

The goddess herself was believed to be living in the temple, in the shrine, where her statue was treasured. In fact, in ancient Egypt temples dedicated to deities were regarded as homes of the deities they were dedicated to and the common people were not allowed to enter the temple – only the priests had this honour. Bast was usually depicted holding a sistrum in one hand, and often the Utchat – the all-seeing sacred eye – or a basket with kittens sometimes. The temple in Bubastis, though, was also home to the animal most sacred to Bast: the cat. By the thousand they lived lavishly about it, fed and revered as the incarnation of the goddess by the priests of Bast until

¹ In Diodorus Siculus words, the most sacred animals whose killing only deserved death were the cat and the ibis, while according to Herodotus they were the ibis and the hawk.

² As stated in the Stele of Canopus, written in hieroglyphics, hieratic (the cursive Egyptian script), and Greek – one of the most useful documents for the understanding of hieroglyphs together with the Stele of Rosetta. The time was about June.

³ Bluhm, Detlef, *Impronte di Gatto*, Milano, Casa Editrice Corbaccio, 2006, p. 24.

they passed away. A scholar and theologian of later times, Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) who was a converted Christian who travelled a lot in the Mediterranean countries, declared his great disappointment when he had the chance of visiting the Egyptian temples. He recounts they were very richly adorned, inside and outside, with precious embroideries and gems, and in the very shrine of them, there was but an animal, worshipped and pampered by a whole band of priests¹.

The pilgrims to the temple in Bubastis would leave small objects, jars of perfume, or statuettes in the form of cats as gifts to the goddess Bast. Archaeologists have found thousands of these statuettes and the majority belong to the Ptolemaic period (after 332 BC). They represent the ‘traditional hieroglyphic image of a seated cat, only with the tail neatly lying on the ground along the right side of the animal, sometimes curling round the right forepaw’² for artistic convention. Their size could vary a lot: some were large life-size sculptures, and some were just a few centimetres high. The bigger bronze ones were usually hollow while the smaller were made by solid cast. Sometimes details on the statuettes were in gold – such as the eyes, or the markings of the fur – and the cats wore gold or silver jewels around their necks or in their pierced ears and nose. Moreover, household cats were brought to the temple when they died to be embalmed and brought to sacred apposite repositories. Herodotus also wrote that in Egyptian households it was common for all the members of the family to shave their brows as a sign of mourning (although he immediately specifies that if it was the family dog who died than the family would shave their head and also the rest of the body³).

1.4.3 The Battle of Pelusium

There is actually an old legend with minor variants that refers to the deep veneration the Egyptians had towards animals in general, and cats in particular. The legend was reported also by Polyaeus, the author of Macedonian origins who wrote

¹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogus)*, Book 3, ch. 2, Orthodox E-books, p. 527.

In this text, second of his theological trilogy, Clement of Alexandria tries to develop a Christian ethic and uses the Egyptian temples as examples of embellishments which hide something useless – an animal in a temple, an empty soul in a woman.

² Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

³ The shaving of the body in mourning for the death of a dog is reported also in Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, Book 1.84.2.

Stratagems, a work dedicated to cunning victories in ancient battles. Polyaeus lived in the 2nd century AD and in book 7 of his Stratagems he recounted how the Persian king Cambyses II won the decisive battle at Pelusium in 525 BC against the Egyptians and won the country. Aware of the doting of the Egyptians on animals, ‘Cambyses ranged before his front line dogs, sheep, cats, ibises, and whatever other animals the Egyptians hold sacred. The Egyptians immediately stopped their operations, out of fear of hurting the animals...¹’ and Pelusium fell into Persian hands. The legend goes on stating that Cambyses, once the fight was over, presented himself to the Egyptian army by hurling cats he had found nearby at them, out of total contempt for their religious beliefs.

1.4.4 The Amarna Period

There was one period in Egypt’s history, when the cult of so many gods was superseded by the cult of only one of them². This religious upheaval took place when the heretic King Amenhotep IV (1353 – 1337 BC) was Pharaoh. He promoted the sole veneration of the god Aten (portrayed as a sun disc with its long rays terminating in human hands) removing all priests from their former offices, changed his name into Akhenaten (‘Radiance of the Aten’), and moved his residence to the newly founded city of Akhetaten (‘Horizon of the Aten’), the modern Amarna. This religious revolution obviously brought with it also a revolution in art and architecture, but it lasted only slightly more than 30 years. In fact, during the first years of the reign of Akhenaten’s son³, Tutankhamun (born Tutankhaten), the city of Akhetaten was abandoned and the Pharaoh and his institutional offices moved back to Thebes. During the so called ‘Amarna period’ there are not many examples of representation of cats in art, and the reason why there are altogether very few from the tombs of the

¹ Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, book 7.9, ca. 163 AD.

Online translation: www.attalus.org/translate/polyaeus (last accessed on 31st August 2015).

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/akhenaten_01.shtml (last accessed on 2nd September 2015).

On-line article by Dr Kate Spence, McDonald Post-doctoral Research Fellow in Cognitive Archaeology at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge University. Last updated 17th Feb 2011.

³ There are not many information about the Amarna period and the Kings related to it. In fact, until the discovery of his tomb, there was no evidence whatsoever of the existence of King Tutankhamun. Therefore, many things about his life (and death) are still being studied. He is only supposed to be the son of Akhenaten, although there is no certainty about this. It seems though that he did not succeed him directly, there appearing to be first a short reign of Smenkhkare. He started ruling over Egypt at the early age of nine.

whole New Kingdom (1540-1069 BC) is yet unknown. In this period, in fact, cats used to appear more often on decorative items or objects of daily use where their presence is probably due to mere aesthetic reasons.

1.4.5 Magic Knives and other Amulets

Something between religion and art concerning cats among other animals are the so-called magic knives or apotropaic wands. Magic had an important role in the everyday life of common Egyptian people and many of these knives have been found in tombs dating back to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000 – ca. 1500 BC), though the first exemplars go back to around 2800 BC¹. They ‘are curved, narrow, and flat objects, usually made of hippopotamus ivory’², with incised decorations showing mostly animals and curious creatures. The most elaborated have incisions on both sides with some inscriptions together with a multitude of weird and mostly fiendish creatures. They are supposed to have had a protective function against the dangers of everyday life and were mostly owned by women and children. In these instruments of magic the cat is usually portrayed with a raised paw holding a knife and in the act of killing a snake with it. The overcome of the serpent representing Apophis, the prime enemy of Ra, ensured the warmth of the sun continued to bless Egypt and its people. In a palette (a slab of slate) dating back to King Narmer of the earliest dynastic period, a custom is most vividly recorded: that of cutting off the heads of enemies with a large knife. Although it is not known whether this custom continued on to the pharaonic Egypt it surely represented a collective memory and an image of strength and power³.

Cats also appeared on many amulets or small objects to be worn especially by women and children or to be kept in the houses because of their apotropaic function. In particular they were held as a protection against snake-bites and scorpion-stings.

A similarly powerful role is given to the cat in *The Book of the Dead*, a collection of hymns, spells, and instructions to help the deceased in the afterlife written mainly on papyrus scrolls and set in the coffin or burial chamber of the dead

¹ Pinch, Geraldine, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995.

² Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 78.

person. They go back to the New Kingdom and derive directly from the Pyramid Texts (written on the pyramid inner walls in the Old Kingdom and available only to the members of the royal family) and the Coffin Texts (written on the coffins of the deceased mostly during the Middle Kingdom). The inscriptions of The Book of the Dead were available to anyone who could afford them and alternated with descriptive vignettes. A passage clearly links the sun god Ra to the male cat, and even gives an etymology for the word for “cat” based on the God’s cat-like enterprises in warding off his enemies. The descriptive vignette of such passage shows a big cat by a sacred tree cutting off the head of a huge snake – a transposition of the vile snake god Apophis. One of the most complete papyruses containing The Book of the Dead is that written for the scribe Ani. Ra is represented as a cat-headed god also in some wall paintings depicting its various forms, and also many demons of the underworld had a cat head¹.

1.4.6 Mummies

As is well known, the Ancient Egyptians were masters of the art of mummification. After mummifying a body and setting it down in the tomb, the Egyptians used to displace about it, in the tomb, everything the dead might have needed in the afterlife: food, drink, his working tools, and even animals to keep company. The processes of mummification were not an exclusive of the humans. The Egyptians, in fact, used to mummify also animals – of any species: there are mummies of crocodiles, gazelles, and fish, for example, and also mummified cats. Some of these animals are thought to have served as ready food for the deceased but, in the case of the cat, it seems more likely to have served as a companion in the other world. Most of the mummified cats date around the first millennium BC and there is no way to ascertain whether the animals were tamed or wild. It can only be assumed that the majority of these mummies came either from temple catteries or from ordinary households.

Bubastis had the biggest cat cemetery of Egypt, although others can be found in other big cities of the kingdom, such as Abydos or Giza. Bubastis alone contains over

¹ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, pp. 80-85.

300,000¹ cat mummies in a site about 200 m from the temple ruins and it is the oldest cat cemetery dating about 900 BC, while the others appear to be more recent, surely operative during the Ptolemaic period. Inspections on some cat mummies from Bubastis have shown severe trauma to some mummies to the head or neck, demonstrating that some of the animals did not undergo a natural death. This might have taken place in order to regulate the cat population inside the temple premises, or else in order to provide more offerings available to the growing number of pilgrims to the temple of Bast who wanted to leave a sign of their devotion to the goddess. As a matter of fact most of these are mummies of kittens that did not reach one year of age. The fact that animals were considered manifestations of deities, in fact, did not prevent them either from being killed to get nutrition, nor from economic exploitation (cattle are just an example). This apparent contradiction in terms makes our understanding of the Egyptians' religious beliefs even more complicated but it is corroborated by all the information we have of that people, of their usages and customs, and it must not be forgotten that 'there was a large diversity of religious feelings within various sections of Egyptian society'² making the religion of the poor quite different from the personal beliefs of the rich.

Scientists are still investigating the processes of mummification used for the animals. In some cases, in fact, it appears to be very accurate and similar to that used for the humans. In other cases, instead, it seems to be much faster and economical. It probably depended on the wealth of the family requesting the mummification, being it a secretive rite that only some people were into doing. In general, the best preserved mummies are believed to have been prepared as follows. First, all organs were removed from the animal, whose body was then filled with sand or packing material. The feline body was then set in a sort of a sitting position but with its hinder legs stretched close to the body and wrapped tightly with linen strips soaked in salt. At this point, the face of the cat and sometimes other markings on the body were traced with black ink on the wrappings, which could have various patterns more or less decorative. In some cases, imitating human burials, a bronze mask was put on the

¹ It is believed that all over Egypt cat mummies numbered in the millions.

² Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 74.

mummy and sometimes the mummy was then put in a wooden coffin which usually consisted of two halves and imitated the shape of the animal, or in small rectangular coffins with vaulted lids. The fact that the process of mummification was secretive and not even described in any document leaves a lot of doubts about the actual techniques used and is the reason why inspections are still being made on mummies. For sure one of the most important things to guarantee the preservation of the bodies was to assure their complete dehydration which would have kept bacteria away. Studies in fact have shown that the bodies of the animals were all somehow been smeared or soaked in salt and some other kind of resins aiming at their complete and eternal unassailability by external factors that might have provoked the degradation of their tissues¹.

The first archaeologists did not pay much, if none at all, attention to animal mummies, concentrating only on humans'. Therefore, many animal mummies were destroyed and even used as fuel or fertilizers! There are records for example of a single shipment of ancient cat remains that weighed 19 tons and is believed to have contained about 180,000 cat mummies, sent to England to be used as fertilizer. Many mummies were stored here and there without much care, and are now visibly deteriorating. The Animal Mummy Project headed by Dr. Salima Ikram, a professor of Egyptology in El Cairo, is working on the preservation of these mummies. The first aim of the project is to provide the mummies with a suitable storing place, cages and boxes with the best possible climatic parameters to preserve them from deterioration. Secondly, they are x-raying the mummies to get as many information as possible about the embalmed animals. The project has already revealed something quite interesting. In fact, apart from stating that some animals had died naturally and some had not, x-raying has also shown, without any damage to the mummies themselves, that some mummies are actually fakes. Many mummies were sold from the priests of a temple to the pilgrims to the deity (this aspect was not a prerogative to Bast and cats) and it seems that some pilgrims were actually swindled. They were sold mummies containing animals different from the one they thought they were

¹ http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/09/0915_040915_petmummies.html
(last accessed 18th September 2015).

buying, or only part of the animal, or nothing at all, just linen full of stuffing material¹. I have found no evidence of the kind concerning cats, but this might be due to the availability of the animal much different, for example, to that of a crocodile (animal sacred to the god Sobek).

In any case, after mummification, the animals were treated in many different ways depending on local conditions. Because of their big number, it was not always possible to bury them in individual tombs. In Bubastis, they were usually buried in communal brick-lined graves, or placed in large pottery jars – as happened in Abydos, too. In Dendera² specially prepared rock-cut galleries were usually set up for their deposit, but in Saqqara³ they were mostly deposited in reused, earlier tombs.

1.5 Cats in Egyptian Medicine

Last, it has to be mentioned the role the cat played in Egyptian medicine, which was at that time really famous throughout the ancient world. There was no great distinction in Ancient Egypt between a priest, a physician, and a magician, who would have some rudimental knowledge of anatomy and surgery, but would also rely on spells to heal his patients. The first and most famous of these physicians was Imhotep⁴ (2635-2595 BC), who is believed to be the author of one of the most impressive medical texts of Ancient Egypt⁵, the Edwin Smith Papyrus⁶, which lists more than 90 anatomical terms and describes 48 injuries. Some recipes are known where the fat, fur, and excrement of the tomcat, and the placenta and fur of the female cat, were used – externally or in fumigation. For example, it seems that the fat was used to relieve from stiffness, and the placenta would help to prevent hair from turning grey. The female fur, instead, was one ingredient of an ointment to sooth burns. Moreover,

¹ Loveluck, Louisa, *Scans Reveal the Secret of Animal Mummies – some even Empty of Remains*, in *The Telegraph*, 11th May 2015

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/11596859/Scans-reveal-the-secrets-of-animal-mummies-some-even-empty-of-remains.html> (last accessed 18th September 2015).

² A small town on the west bank of the Nile, now famous for its Temple complex.

³ A vast, ancient necropolis mostly famous for the step pyramid of Djoser.

⁴ A commoner by birth, he was also an architect, a priest, a sage, scribe, poet, astrologer, and first minister to the King Djoser (2630-2611 BC).

⁵ And the world's oldest surgical document, too.

⁶ The script took its name from Edwin Smith, the American antiquities collector who first purchased it from an Egyptian dealer, Mustapha Aga, in Luxor in 1862.

the fat of tomcats, rubbed over things, was supposed to keep rodents away¹. Among other remedies the Egyptians also relied a lot on dreams to find a cure for their troubles and also to predict their future. There are in fact various dream-books interpreting dreams as good or bad omens and dreaming of a big cat, for instance, meant that the dreamer expected a bumper crop².

¹ Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 72.

² Malek, Jaromir, *Ibid.*, p. 79.

The Conquest of the World

The significance of the cat was such to Egypt that laws were set that forbid the exportation of cats to other nations. Despite these laws many cats were smuggled to the neighbouring Mediterranean countries, in particular by those peoples who held most commerce with the Egyptians, like the Phoenicians who had basis on all the Mediterranean coasts and were therefore in contact with many different cultures. They appreciated this new, easy-to-tame animal for its capacity of catching mice on board their boats – which was to make the cat extremely appreciated among mariners of all times and help its propagation, in due time, all over the world – but also managed to sell cats to the other peoples as exotic beauties. It is said that the Egyptians even sent out special agents abroad in order to recollect the “stolen” sacred animals, but all in vain. Notwithstanding all their efforts, the cats were eventually propagated to all the known world. Thus the cat began to spread and be appreciated also by other peoples and in other countries, although there is no evidence that it gained anywhere that blissful status it had reached in Egypt. At first it was common only among the noble classes who could afford to buy it, but soon it spread to the whole population and became a very popular pet.

2.1 Asia

The conquests of the Macedonian army led by Alexander the Great in the IV century BC opened up direct contacts between the Mediterranean and the Far East countries, particularly India. Overseas trade took place mostly from the Egyptian ports on the Red Sea, especially Berenice, through the Indian Ocean. The Egyptians used to carry cats on their ocean-going vessels since the New Kingdom Era (16th to 11th century BC) and there is little doubt the cat reached the far shores of India first by this method. That same kind of commerce greatly increased later, during the Roman imperial era, when the Roman merchants capitalized on trade through the Egyptian Red Sea’s ports, and thus the number of cats in India and the neighbouring countries greatly increased at that time. Annually, during Augustus’ reign (27 BC –

14 AD) about 120 vessels sailed from those ports to south-eastern Asian countries¹ to obtain silks, spices, and exotic animals, let alone the overland caravans that crossed Arabia and Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf to get Indian and Chinese goods to bring to the Roman provinces.

2.1.1 China

By 500 BC cats as pets were common in China, and many say even Confucius² kept a cat as companion. Chinese farmers used also to venerate a cat goddess, Li Shou who, through her earthly manifestation, the cat, had the power to ward off evil spirits and protect crops. At harvest time, every year, they had a festival in her honour. A major task the cat had in China and the whole Far East region was to protect the precious silk cocoons.

An ancient Chinese myth relates that, at the beginning of the world, the gods had given cats the power of speech and had appointed them with the important task of taking charge of the newly created world. Three times the gods came to visit, to check how things were going on, and every time they found the cats sleeping in comfortable spots or busying themselves in chases of some pastime kind. In the end, the cats told the gods they simply had no interest in ruling the world, and so the humans where appointed the task. Therefore the gods passed the power of speech over to humans and let the cats lead their life at their leisure³.

Another legend concerning cats in China deals with the absence of the cat in the ancient Chinese zodiac. This zodiac associates each year to an animal, to the total amount of twelve. These animals are, in order: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The cat is missing from the list, and there are various fanciful versions of the story to explain the reason why. Most probably, the simple reason why the cat does not appear in the Chinese zodiac is that the zodiac is more ancient than the appearance of the cat in that region – in fact it is the fourth

¹ McLaughlin, Raoul, *Rome and the Distant East. Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, London, Continuum, 2010, p. 142.

² Confucius (551-479 BC) was a Chinese teacher, editor, politician and philosopher.

³ Sisson, Bryan, *A Budding of Secrets. A Compiling Cultural Insights Regarding Nature's Treasures*, Bloomington IN, Xlibris LLC, 2013, p. 41.

year (instead of the rabbit) in the Vietnamese calendar, which is more recent and derives directly from the Chinese one.

2.1.2 India

Very early¹ cats also reached India and unfailingly entered the Hindu pantheon as vehicle of the goddess Sashti, protectress of children, childbirth, and fertility and therefore particularly linked to women. Known since as early as the 8th century BC, Sashti was initially mostly a wrathful goddess, but with time she came to be regarded as a benevolent and protective figure. Hinduism today is still a religion which respects all living creatures believing they are minor manifestations of God, each containing a sparkle of divine, and shows therefore a particular respect for the common cats too.

2.1.2.1 Indian Literature

The cat is also one of the characters of a fable of one of the most important literary work of India, The Panchatantra². It is a collection of animal fables in verse and prose interrelated inside a multilevel framed work, like a Russian doll. It was first composed about 300 BC but the stories come from a much more ancient oral tradition. It was first written in Sanskrit (but no originals remain) and later translated into many languages as it spread to the other countries and continents. The Panchatantra is a textbook to teach the wise conduct in life. Its main frame story is about an Indian king who has three dull sons. He wants them to become wise. A Brahmin, Vishnu Sharma, is chosen to fulfil this task in six months. He succeeds in his goal teaching his pupils the fables. ‘Panchatantra’ means ‘five books’, all independent from each other, and all ‘consisting of a framing story with numerous inserted stories, told, as fit circumstances arise, by one or another of the characters in the main narrative’³. In the English version translated by Arthur W. Ryder the above mentioned fable is titled The Cat’s Judgment and presents the constant character of the animals which, for the cat, is hypocrisy. Two animals, a partridge and a rabbit, are disputing about who has

¹ By the 2nd century BC, according to Engels, Donald W., *Classical Cats: the Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 86.

² Ryder, Arthur W., *The Panchatantra of Vishnu Sharma, English Edition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1925.

³ Ryder, Arthur W., *Ibid.*, Translator’s Introduction.

the legal right to inhabit a hole. Since they can find no solution, they resolve to ask a cat, who pretends to be pious and holy but who, in the end, gains their confidence and uses it to eat them both. The Panchatantra is of particular literary interest if we consider that many fables it contains reoccur in those of the better known Greek Aesop. And in more recent times even La Fontaine, for his own admission, drew inspiration from it¹.

A more or less contemporary collection of Buddhist fables called The Jataka Tales also resemble those collected in The Panchatantra, although modified to better suit the Buddhist morality. Also first composed in India around 400 BC the fables of this collection come from the oral tradition too and refer to the previous births of the Buddha², both in human and animal form. The cat is also present in some of these fables in its usual hypocrite, subtle, and even mean character, although in some versions it is substituted by the jackal.

The fortune of the cat in Buddhist history is anyway ambivalent. According to one legend the cat disgraced itself turning up late at the funeral of the Buddha because it was taking a nap, while all the other animals were present. In another version of the story it was distracted by a mouse and stopped to chase it while on its way to the ceremony – to the same outcome. The same legends are also used to explain the absence of the cat from the animals of the Chinese Zodiac – although in this case sometimes the Buddha is substituted by the Jade Emperor and the cat was misled by the rat who didn't wake him up in order to be the first to be titled with a zodiac sign. According to this last version, cats and rats were once good friends, but they have been sworn enemies from that time onwards³. Nonetheless the cat has always been highly appreciated in Buddhist temples for its capacity of catching rodents and keeping the area clean of such vermin. In any case, Buddhism is today a religion which respects all living beings, believing they are someone's reincarnation, and won't hurt any animal. Some fundamentalist currents in fact profess vegetarianism and prohibits even to drink water which has not been deperated of the tiniest microorganism.

¹ In his *Avertissement to the Second Compilation of Fables*, 1678.

² Siddharta Gautama Buddha was an Indian spiritual teacher who lived ca. 563-483 BC.

³ Young, Ed, *Cat and Rat: The Legend of the Chinese Zodiac*, Bicester OX, Baker and Taylor, 2009.

2.1.3 The Birman Cat

According to a famous legend the very origin of the Birman Cat – also known as the Sacred Cat of Burma – is strictly linked to a Buddhist temple in present Myanmar dedicated to the goddess of transmutation. There lived about a hundred white cats with yellow eyes among the monks. One in particular, named Sinh, was the faithful companion to an aged and sage monk, Mun Ha. One day marauders from a neighbouring country attacked the temple and the monk died while preaching in front of the goddess. Sinh then placed its paws on the corpse and gazed at the goddess: its eyes turned to deep blue, its white fur changed to a beautiful golden hew, its face, tail and legs became an earthly brown except for its paws which, having touched the holy corpse, remained of a pure white. Sinh kept contemplating the dead monk's body for a week, then let itself die, and all the other cats of the temple turned from white to the new and more majestic hew of Sinh¹.

2.1.4 Japan

Slowly, domesticated cats were introduced also on the Japanese islands, most probably via China or Korea, apparently at the same time when Buddhism reached the Japanese shores. So finally the cat had its most welcomed access to that world and gained a very respectful position among the population, as is still clear if we consider the several so called 'cat islands' which are in Japan and also the many shrines dedicated to this animal, with specially dedicated statues or displays.

At first, actually, they were only common among the aristocracy and were exchanged as precious presents, as it happened almost everywhere. In less than 500 years though they became very common and their abundant presence is well testified², and were appreciated for their ability in catching rodents and keep houses, stores and temples' libraries, where the sutras (Buddhism's sacred texts) were held, free from vermin. Their ability as mouse catchers also proved very useful in sericulture, the production of silk, which was an important industry in Japan. The

¹ Maggitti, Phil, *Birman Cats. A Complete Pet Owner's Manual*, Hauppauge NY, Barron's, 1996, p. 6.

² Frédéric, Louis, Translated by Kaethe Roth, *Japan Encyclopedia*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press Reference Library, 2002, p. 103.

domestic cat's presence at the Japanese court is reported in a fragment of Emperor Uda's diary (867-931 AD) and more diffusely in writings about the Emperor Ichijo (980-1011 AD). It is told that a Chinese aristocrat gave to the emperor a pregnant white cat, which became the emperor's most favourite pet and even gained a special rank at court. When she gave birth in the imperial palace to five pure white kittens their colour was thought to be a good omen and the emperor set rules so that the kittens were raised in all comfort¹.

Like in Europe, also in Japan cats have had alternate fortunes, although they would never undergo that persecution they were to face in the medieval western countries. At times, in some regions, they were considered akin to witches, and there are many ghost stories that state that cats can talk like humans when they reach old age, and become wicked creatures. Black cats are sometimes supposed to be curative against certain illnesses and the rare male calico cats are considered good luck charms. Cats, and the short-tailed variety in particular, have posed for many artists who depicted them in many works of art.

The short-tailed variety (the Japanese Bobtail) seems to be particularly appreciated in those lands because of very ancient folktales that have two supernatural creatures as main protagonists. One is the *bakeneko*², which was once a normal cat but then transformed, and the other one is the *nekomata*³. This second one, in particular, is very aggressive and dangerous, and has a very fearsome link with death and the underworld. It is a creature far bigger than a cat in size, that can stand on its hinder feet, and grows two tails. It is said that kittens were often cut off their tail so that they could not grow a second one in time and become a feared *nekomata*. *Bakenekos* are cats that have reached a certain age (usually over 10 years) and can now shapeshift into humans (usually old women). They are often depicted while dancing with a napkin around their forehead.⁴ The ancient folk beliefs regarding these

¹ Geyer, Georgie Anne, *When Cats Reigned like Kings. On the Trail of the Sacred Cats*, Kansas City KS, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2009, p. 129.

² Changed cat.

³ The translation is not clear. The 'mata' portion of the name may refer to its forked tail, or to its being some sort of cat reborn, or again to the fact that it lives mostly on the mountain and moves from tree to tree like a monkey.

⁴ Von Krenner, Walther G. and Jeremiah, Ken, *Creatures Real and Imaginary in Chinese and Japanese Art. An Identification Guide*, Jefferson NC, McFarland & Company, 2015, pp. 98-101.

supernatural feline creatures are now being revisited by manga and anime creators and become protagonists of ghostly, present day stories.

Nowadays there are still certain islands in the Japanese archipelago which are reserved for cats, and where dogs are not allowed to enter. They are called *Nekojima*¹ and they host huge families of cats, and are regularly visited by tourists for this characteristic. They are normally small islands with little population, where the humans used to live on their fishing and little more. Cats proved very useful in such environments and the people started worshipping them so much as to give them free access everywhere. The mutual exchange is still alive in these places, which are now prospering mainly on the tourism attracted by the numerous presence of the cats².

Typically Japanese is also the *Maneki-neko*, the beckoning cat. It is the statue of a sitting cat with a raised forepaw, in the act of inviting passersby to go towards him. Nowadays it is easily seen in shop windows and in many businesses to welcome customers, but it has an ancient history. There goes a legend about a noble man, who was one day walking in the street when he saw at the entrance to a temple a cat with a lifted paw, as if it was calling to him. Intrigued by the sight of the cat, he left the road to go towards it. Just when he moved, a sudden lightning hit the exact place where he was standing but a moment before, and he felt his life had just been saved by the beckoning cat, making it a good-luck charm ever since³.

The Japanese islands also host many shrines and temples dedicated to the cat, which are tangible examples of how much the Japanese people have been worshipping the cat over the ages. This small animal, with its aloofness, its bearing and its playfulness has conquered people of very different eras and locations.

Moreover, Japan is famous for the proliferation of the fashionable cat cafés, which are now spreading all over the world – although their birthplace was Taiwan where the first of these cafés opened in 1998. Cat cafés⁴ are cafés where customers can get their drink, sip their coffee, have a snack, in good company of many cats

¹ Cat island.

² Laidlaw, Rob, *Cat Champions: Caring for our Feline Friends*, Toronto, Pajama Press, 2013, pp. 20-21.

³ Stall, Sam, *100 Cats Who Changed Civilization: History's Most Influential Felines*, Philadelphia PA, Quirk Books, 2007, pp. 46-47.

⁴ Galloway, Lindsey, *BBC online*, 3rd April 2012.

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20120402-worldwide-weird-feline-fun-in-japans-cat-cafes>
(last accessed on 25th September 2015).

which are allowed the comfort of a bar designed to suit them to perfection. The first Japanese one opened in Osaka in 2004, but now there are over 150 all over the country. Some say that the popularity of these cafés is due to the fact that many flats in Japanese cities forbid pet ownership, so cat lovers are drawn to these places to get a furry cuddle and be relieved from the stress of urban busy life. You can now find cat cafés in many eastern and western countries¹, notwithstanding the difficulties encountered with some country laws on the vicinity of food and animals. In the USA, for example, the area where food and drink are served and that where cats are kept are completely separated. The American cat cafés also differ from others for their focus on adoption, trying to find a home to stray cats.

2.2 Europe

Regarding Europe, the cat first moved on to the countries of the Mediterranean shores, with which the Egyptians held most contacts. Although notoriously afraid of water the diffusion of cats in the world has taken place mostly by sea, at first on the fish- and mouse-laden ships of the Phoenicians, Cretans, Mycenaean and all those cruising in the Mediterranean area and dealing with the Egyptians. It was mostly on the ships of merchants, as working animal, doing its job as mouse catcher, that the domesticated cat reached every country. Cats were supposed to bring good luck at sea, so much so that along with hosting at least one on board, many ships were told to have cat-shaped prows. This ideal of the lucky cat at sea survived well into the 20th century in European folk custom.

In the most ancient representations it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between our beloved house cat and any wild cat, and it is therefore not easy to determine exactly when it became the house hunter we know today in every single context. What is sure, is that it happened, sooner or later.

¹ One opened in Turin in March 2014. Its name is MiaGola Café (Mariotti, Antonella, *La Stampa*, 21/03/2014).

2.2.1 The Hellenistic World

The oldest archaeological find that surely represents a cat found in Greece is a bas-relief on a marble block that dates back to 500 BC¹. It shows a cat facing a dog, and they seem about to have a fight. Both animals are at a leash, which demonstrates they are tamed, but not necessarily domesticated animals. The spread of the cat in ancient Greece, though, appears to have coincided with the conquest of Egypt by the Macedonian king Alexander the Great in the 3rd century BC. Before that time, they were mostly held as curiosities. The Greeks, in fact, used ferrets instead of cats for chasing mice and rats, and relegated the newly imported animals only as exotic pets and companions.

Like the Egyptians, the Greeks professed a polytheistic religion whose deities were influenced by the Egyptians' after the already mentioned conquest by Alexander the Great. In particular, the sacred mount Olympus hosted a Goddess who strictly came to resemble the Egyptian Bast: her name was Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto², and Apollo's twin sister. She was the goddess of the hunt, of wilderness, young women, childbirth and fertility. Like a cat, she was a pitiless hunter but very fond of her protégés. Like cats, she was associated to the moon and the night, in contrast with her twin brother whose figure was directly connected to the sun. Her importance is highlighted by the fact that her temple in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Greek gods, like the Roman ones and those of other ancient traditions, were gods of nature and were identified with natural items: Poseidon, for example, was not only the god of the sea, he was the sea. Even reason and wisdom were regarded as part of the natural world, and their embodiment was the goddess Athena. Cooperating with the gods had always meant cooperating with nature, and such a harmonious living was very important because it was considered one of the highest human virtues.

In general, though, the presence of cats in Greek's art and literature is very scanty, notwithstanding the numerous remains. There are only few references to cats,

¹ From Kerameikos necropolis in Athens, Greece. Now at National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Kaltsas, Nikolaos, *Sculpture in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens*, Athens, Kapon Editions, 2002, pp. 67-68.

² Daughter of Titans (the primeval race of powerful deities) she was banned by any land by Hera (Zeus's wife) when she found out about her pregnancy. See Allan, Tony, *Titans and Olympians: Greek and Roman Myth*, New York, Barnes & Noble Books, 2003, p. 176.

for example, in the writings on nature and zoology of Aristotle¹, Plutarch², Aristophanes³ and Theocritus⁴, and they all use the earlier words for ‘cat’ which are generic and not too clear. Those few, and some coins found on the Italian territory, testify anyway that the cat had at some time become a common feature in Greek households, at least the aristocratic ones, because it is portrayed with people in common, everyday scenes. The coins referred to above are the earliest sign of the presence of domesticated cats on the Italian soil. They have been found in the Greek colonies of Rhegion (modern Reggio Calabria) and Taras (modern Taranto), both founded at the beginning of the 8th century BC in southern Italy. It must not be forgotten that the southern Italian regions were then part of what the Romans would call the Magna Graecia (Great Greece) because of the presence of many Greek colonies⁵ founded from 750 BC onwards. Minted from the mid-fifth century these coins depict the founders of the two colonies (Iokastos for Rhegion and Phalantos for Taras) seated on a throne playing with a cat or with a cat by their side⁶. It can be assumed that cats were not present just in these colonies, but most probably they had already been scattered in the whole area. Other examples of the early presence of the domesticated cat in Italy come from 5th century BC Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia, a bit more to the north. Here, the paintings on the tomb walls show cats in domestic scenes. Depicted together with other felines, cats can be recognized by the colouring of their fur, resembling the classical tabby⁷.

Anyway, it becomes clear that the cat did not have a very high status among the Greeks – and the Romans as well – if we think that the Greek word generally used to

¹ Philosopher and scientist, 384 BC – 322 BC. In his *History of Animals*, he makes only brief references to cats and claims female cats are lascivious and instigate the male for mating.

² Historian, biographer and essayist, 45 – 120 AD. In *De Iside et Osiride*, for example, he compares the eyes of the cats to the phases of the moon and gives a famous weird account on the number of kittens a cat gives birth to.

³ Comic playwright, ca. 450 BC – ca. 385 BC. In *The Archanians*, a Beotian brings cats to the market in Athens to be sold together with many other different animals.

⁴ Poet born in Sicily, ca. 300 BC – ca. 260 BC. In his fifteenth Idyll, for example, he tells that ‘All cats love a cushioned couch’.

⁵ The most famous is Syrakosai (modern Siracusa) in Sicily, founded in ca. 735 BC.

⁶ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 54-56.

⁷ De Puma, Richard Daniel, and Small, Jocelyn Penny ed.s, *Murlo and the Etruscans. Art and Society in Ancient Etruria*, Madison WI, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.

define it, *gale*¹, can actually refer to many different animals, and not only the cat. The same is with the later *ailouros*, which simply means “tail waver”. The same problem of understanding arises with the Latin term *feles* which can refer to a whole lot of mouse catchers². Moreover, these terms do not distinguish between domesticated, feral and wild cats. In classical literature, therefore, we can hardly be sure most times that the animal referred to is actually a cat. Only with the advent of the late Latin term *cattus* (and the Greek *kattos*) in the IV century AD did the cat obtain a recognizable name of its own and a status to go with it.

The most famous literary production of the Greek era involving animals are Aesop’s fables. According to Herodotus, Aesop was a slave who lived on the island of Samos in the early 6th century BC, but came originally from Thrace. He was depicted as deformed: on a *kylix*³ of the 5th century BC now in the Vatican Museums he is a man with a huge, bulging head, long hair, a long dark goatee and a moustache, a hooked nose and a beer belly⁴. It might be just a caricature, but what is often documented is his death, which occurred after he was accused and condemned by Delphi’s priests, who were hostile towards him. Fables were very much in use in the ancient world to present a moral purpose, or as a satirical weapon, and the presence of animals was particularly useful to show some aspects of the humans’ behaviour. Aesop’s fables are very short and extremely sagacious, all with a moral ending, and set a basis for many authors to come, from Babrius and Phaedrus at the dawn of the Christian Era, to La Fontaine in the 17th century and Tolstoy in the 19th. With reference to the cat, we should affirm that it is not present in the common Aesop’s collection of fables, because only the *gale* is sometimes present in the fables and modern translators make the word into cat only very rarely⁵.

¹ Engels affirms that the word ‘gale’ never really meant ‘cat’, meaning instead ‘ferret’ or ‘weasel’. In his opinion, many modern translators have associated the word to the cat only to express distaste for the other animals. Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

² Cat, marten, polecat, weasel...

³ A type of wide cup to drink wine with a shallow body on a stem and two almost horizontal handles, mostly in use at symposiums. The interior part of the body was often decorated with satirical, light hearted subjects.

⁴ La Penna, Antonio, *Introduzione*, in Esopo, *Favole*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 2008, ed. by Cecilia Benedetti.

⁵ In Esopo, *Favole*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 2008, ed by Cecilia Benedetti, there are only 5 fables out of 358 whose main character is a *gale*, and it is translated as *cat* only twice.

2.2.2 The Roman Empire

In their growing desire of conquering the entire world, cats spread then to the Roman Empire. Here they were welcomed again as companion pets and their hunting capabilities were not recognised until much later.

The Romans too used the ferret to keep vermin away from their houses. The first document that reveals a change of mentality towards cats dates back to the 4th century and it was written by Palladius¹: he recommended the use of cats (defined by a word of their own for the first time in history) in artichoke beds to get rid of moles instead of weasels ('Contra talpas prodest cattos frequenter habere in mediis carduetis. Mustelas habent plerique mansuetas²').

One of the main reasons why cats came to substitute ferrets and weasels in getting rid of vermin in proximity to inhabited areas depended on their different hunting methods and their relationship to humans. Ferrets, the major rivals to cats in this 'job', are not natural human companions and must be kept caged. Moreover, they hunt by burrowing directly into the rodent's underground dens – whether they are mice, rats or rabbits – and they destroy everything in it. This method is surely effective and well suited to a rural environment, but was not acceptable in urban areas. In the Roman era, streets were often paved, and houses started being built of stone or brick which hindered the ferrets in their chase. On the contrary, cats were much more effective in such a new environment. They often hunt by ambush, and wait for their prey to pass close at ground level in order to attack it, without any need to excavate their way to the prey's den. No doubt this was an advantage also in rural areas where houses were built of wattle and daub, with beaten earthen floors. They would not destroy any wall or floor the humans had been working upon in order to free the area from vermin – with many thanks from their human companions.

Tradition has it that the domesticated cat spread to all Europe following the Roman army in its conquests. The cat was surely already present in some of these regions, like Gaul and Hispania, where it had been brought by merchants on their

¹ Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus, Palladius, a Roman writer of the 4th century AD. His most famous work is *Opus Agriculturae*, aka *De Re Rustica* where he described in details the activities of a rural Roman farm throughout the year.

² Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus, Palladius, *Opus Agriculturae*, book IV-8.4, on-line digital text: <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/palladius/agr4.html#9> (last accessed 26th September 2015).

commercial errands, but there might still be some truth in it. Brought along by soldiers to save and protect their food provisions, the domesticated cats which had originated in Egypt started interbreeding with the native cold-acclimated feral species, and gave birth to a new breed, that developed later into our common cats¹.

Anyway, in the ancient Roman world, as already seen in Egypt, cats were especially important to women, whose voices are not often heard in the elite literature produced by men². And, when the Romans made the Greek gods their own, they also found a place in their pantheon for the goddess Artemis who had her pair in Diana, goddess of the hunt, the moon and childbirth, associated with wild animals, who she could talk to in order to keep control over them. Although Diana was already a goddess with a place of her own among the Roman deities, she was at first only the goddess of hunt and wild animals. Her later association with Artemis enlarged her figure to a more prominent one.

The Roman Empire was never culturally united. The Romans did not impose their culture on the peoples they conquered: they could continue worshipping their gods, they could maintain their dressing codes, they could keep on speaking their languages and so on. And the Romans benefited from their meeting with other cultures absorbing some features from abroad and making them their own, while imposing only three main rules. The first was to be civilized. In opposition to the barbarian tribes the Roman Empire was fighting against, the 70 million inhabitants of the vast Empire had to go unarmed on the streets and criminals were severely punished. They also did not accept religions who practised cannibalism or professed human sacrifices, such as the Druids of Britannia and Gaul, which they tried to suppress. The second rule for a civilized world was to pay taxes, and the third was not to revolt against Roman rule. With no many other impositions less than 200 imperial officials governed one of the largest empires of the ancient world, with the armies generally stationed on the frontiers and therefore far from the civilian population³.

¹ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

² Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

All over the empire where the presence of the cat has been ascertained it appeared as being employed as a useful animal, appreciated for its hunting skills, treated with some consideration and often in connection to women. There are many works of art dedicated to this animal. At the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff there is a bowl (known as ‘the Snowdon bowl’) dating to the 1st century AD and found on the slopes of Mt Snowdon, in the north-west of the country, showing what looks like a cat’s head on the handle. The cat is portrayed in the Celtic curvilinear style in red glass on bronze¹. It is extremely beautiful, but the purpose of the bowl is as yet uncertain. There are also various mosaics portraying cats, the most famous of which and best preserved is now at the Naples National Archaeological Museum and comes from Pompeii – therefore it must date before 79 AD, when the city was destroyed by the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius. It resembles the typically Egyptian scenes of the hunts in the marshes, with the cat planting a paw on a bird in the top register, and staring with greedy eyes at the lower register where birds, fish and shells are depicted together with two ducks². The fur of the cat is of the typical striped, tabby kind and this, together with other pieces of mosaics which portray cats in more or less familiar contexts show that the animal was a common feature in Europe. Excavations in the gardens of the villas in Pompeii also showed that it was in use at that time too to bury the house cat in the vicinity of the home, although there is no cat among the remains above the ancient surface covered by the ashes of the erupting Vesuvius³.

Another interesting aspect of the diffusion of the cat lies in the naming of the Roman people. Without entering too deeply in the fascinating apposition of names, surnames and nicknames in Ancient Rome, it is interesting to note the invasion, especially among women, of names derived from the root *feli-*, in other words, ‘cat’. These information are especially found in inscriptions on tombstones dating mostly from the first two centuries AD. Throughout the Roman Empire names such as *Felicula* or *Felicla* (meaning ‘little cat’ or ‘kitten’) had become quite common for

¹ http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/iron_age_teachers/artefacts/snowdon_bowl/ (last accessed on 30th September 2015).

² http://cir.campania.beniculturali.it/museoarcheologico nazionale/itinerari-tematici/nel-museo/collezioni-pompei ane/RIT_RA526/?searchterm= gatto (last accessed on 30th September 2015).

³ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 107, 177.

women, although also the presence of the male *Feliculus*¹ is testified, but to a much minor extent.

The Latin world too, like the Greek, has a considerable literary tradition. Among the other writers, I would like to consider here a fabulist, Phaedrus, who derived a lot of his works directly from Aesop and other earlier writers, but also added many fables of his own to his collection. Phaedrus was a freedman, brought to Rome as a slave when still a child, probably from Thrace, and later freed by his master. He lived approximately from 18 BC to 57 AD and wrote in verse, but in his animal fables the cat is but only rarely referred to, and always as *feles*, therefore we cannot be sure if it is of domesticated cats he is writing about. Anyway, these early portrayals of the cat always occur in the context of the barnyard, together with other barnyard animals like mice or chickens. Moreover, the cat is usually typecast in fables: it is invariably a crafty predator, an opportunist who does not disdain to cheat on the other animals in order to obtain what it wants, and a terror to its preys.

2.2.3 A New Antagonist: the Black Rat

In the 1st century AD, when the Roman Empire was almost at its greatest extension, and culture was at its top, Europe had to face the diffusion of the fearsome black rat. This rat, responsible for the propagation of the bubonic plague and of many other diseases, originates in south and south-east Asia, but it is not a natural migrant. It was brought to the Mediterranean territories following the commercial exchanges and on the opposite route compared to that of the cat. It is particularly dangerous, more than other species, because it is vehicle to many epidemic diseases without succumbing to them. It tends to make its nests on top areas, like trees or roofs, and it is a very good climber. The black rat is a bit smaller than the more common brown rat, weighing an average 200 gr, with males being usually a bit bigger than females, and it can be up to 40 cm long altogether, with a tail a bit longer than the body. As already stated, it is the main carrier of the flea² that is in turn the vector to the

¹ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, p. 104.

² *Xenopsylla Cheopis*.

organism¹ that causes the bubonic plague. The infection takes place when a flea, which has fed on an infected rat, bites a human².

The black rat was a new opponent to rat catchers, among which the cat was gaining more and more respect, and was also one of their greatest natural opponents, when it fought in packs. Although they are quite skilled in killing rats, dogs were not mentioned in this context in antiquity, nor were they bred as rats predators. Like in modern times, dogs were raised as guard animals, sheep herders, house pets and they were trained for hunting, and thus would have been for many centuries to come. They were finally appreciated as ratters only in the 19th century, and were at some time even thought to be responsible for the outbreak of the plague, like in 1665 in London, when dogs (and cats) were exterminated trying to get rid of the infection, because they were thought responsible for the contagion³.

The almost total absence of the bubonic plague in classical times, notwithstanding the presence of all the virtual vectors for it, is of great interest. As it happened for dogs, also the cats' ability in keeping at bail the rat population was not always appreciated. But both the Greek and the Roman public health policies were focused on suppressing rats and mice, because their dangerousness had already been recognized. And for a good reason. In fact, black rats in particular can multiply in number very easily. They do not undergo a specific heat cycle during the year, and the female can give birth to even 10 offspring at a time, several times a year. In a very short time a couple of rats can invade a village and take over the ratters' population. The vicinity of infected rats to unwashed humans in a filthy environment can spread the disease very rapidly, especially in urbanised areas. Thus the importance of baths in the Roman period and the attention the Romans had to personal hygiene is even greater from this point of view. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that the black rat can adapt very easily to new habitats, like living in the city streets instead of in the open fields, and is omnivorous and eats almost everything, being therefore a pest for farmers because its diet is made up of seeds, fruit, small vertebrates and invertebrates.

¹ *Yersinia pestis*.

² Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, p. 17.

The climbing ability of cats has again proved valid to keep the black rats' number under control, since this kind of rats found easily access to the thatched roofs of the houses to build its nest. Once again, the burrowing ability of the ferret, although very helpful against mice and their hypogean nesting, was of no use against this new species¹.

2.2.4 New Religions

During the Roman period the cat developed in Europe that social position that would have accompanied it until the present day. It had definitely become a regular presence in households as defender from diseases and vermin, and it started to assume a relevant role also in folklore and folk customs, in addition to its position in religion, which would undergo a significant transformation. In particular, its destiny in Western Europe is strictly linked to the introduction in the area of the cult of the Egyptian cat-goddess Bast and her relationship to Isis, her parent. Ostia, the port city of Rome on the delta of the Tiber River², is believed to have been of great importance for the introduction of the Egyptian deities into Europe. Ostia was particularly important for the grain trade, whose supply in Rome depended heavily on importation from Egypt. In Ostia, as in other cities like Rome and Pompeii, there are various remains referring to the cult of Bast, as well as to Isis³, whose image breastfeeding the infant Horus seems to have influenced the early Christian artists when depicting the Virgin Mary with her son Jesus⁴.

The new Christian religion, in particular, brought many important changes to all the religious aspects of the Romans' life. This new, monotheistic religion was born from Judaism, in Iudaea, a province of the Roman Empire in the Near East. Very shortly after the death of the believed Messiah, Jesus Christ, the religion had spread to the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire, thanks to the missionary activity of his followers.

¹ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, p. 114.

² Now the site is known as Ostia Antica and lies about 3 km from the coast, due to the natural growth of the delta.

³ Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 122-124.

⁴ Reyes, E. Christopher, *In His Name*, Bloomington IN, Trafford Publishing, 2014, p. 377.

Christianity gained in popularity throughout the Roman Empire, although it experienced a lot of repression. It gained tolerance all through the Empire when Constantine claimed conversion to Christianity and built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem where Jesus's tomb was said to be. The church became the holiest place in Christendom and contributed to the holiness of the Emperor who was granted the status of 'equal to an apostle' in return. Constantine was also one of the promoters of the first Council of Nicea in 325 AD, when it was stated that Jesus was one with God the father, his equal, and of the same substance. His importance was to become even more prominent in the Middle Ages when the supposed Donation of Constantine appeared, which justified the Papal claim to temporal power. When Constantine claimed his conversion in 312 AD, however, only about 5% of the population professed some kind of Christian religion¹.

Later, when Theodosius I² was Emperor, he made his Christian Creed the official state religion, abolished the expressions of the Roman polytheistic religion turning its holidays into working days, and tolerated the destruction of the temples dedicated to the previous deities, like the Temple of Apollo in Delphi or the Serapeum³ in Alexandria. He dissolved the order of the Vestal Virgins in Rome⁴ and banned the pagan rituals of the Olympic Games in Athens, which would not be restored until the end of the 19th century (1896). With the Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD) he affirmed that the Nicene Trinitarian Christianity was the only legitimate imperial religion – all the others had to be suppressed⁵. In particular, he banned the

¹ Ehrman, Bart D., *After the New Testament: a Reader in Early Christianity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 7.

² Aka Theodosius the Great (Emperor from 379 to 395). He was the last Emperor to rule over both the eastern and the western halves of the Roman Empire.

³ Serapea were present in many cities throughout the Mediterranean area. They were temples and shrines dedicated to the god Serapis, a late Hellenistic-Egyptian goddess which mingled aspects of the Egyptian gods Osiride and Apis.

⁴ The Vestal Virgins were six priestesses in charge of the cult of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. They were chosen at a very early age, between 6 and 10, and had to serve the goddess for 30 years. One of their obligations was to remain virgin while on duty, live in the Roman Forum near the temple of the goddess, prepare sacred food, keep the sacred fire of the goddess alighted. The service allowed them to emancipate from their families, together with other privileges which were not available to other women.

⁵ Maraval, Pierre, *Da Costantino a Teodosio. Dalla Conversione dell'Imperatore alla Conversione dell'Impero*, in Corbin, Alain ed., *Storia del Cristianesimo*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007, pp. 47-50.

Arians which were at the time almost as diffused, because they affirmed that Jesus, the son, was inferior to God, the father because begotten by the latter¹.

Despite persecution, at the end of the Western Roman Empire in 476, most of Europe was still pagan and venerated old gods, often nature-born. The cat still held quite a high status due to its importance in keeping the area free of vermin, notwithstanding the numerous barbarian invasions and the devastation these left behind. It did not have much to gain from the spread of the new Christian religion which professed that all animals were God's creations, just like human beings, but they were subject to the latter. There is not a word on the cat in the New Testament, as there was none in the Old Testament. Some later legends try to fill the gaps. There are two in particular. One refers to Noah's ark and sustains that the cat was born from a lion's sneeze on the ark, following a request by the patriarch to get rid of the mice which had multiplied during the voyage². A second one refers to the virgin Mary and sustains that the peculiar M-shaped stripes on the head of tabbies are a reference to the name of the virgin mother and appeared first on the head of a cat who had been caressed by her. A similar legend, though, pertains the other great monotheistic religion, Islam, which originated in the 6th century in the Arabian Peninsula. In the Quran, its sacred book, there is no word on the cat, but at least it states that a believer must not hurt any animal because it was created by God. Nonetheless, in modern Islam some animals have a better social status than others. For example, the dog is considered an impure animal, while the cat is pure. It is said that the last prophet, Muhammad, was a cat lover and one day, when called to prayers, instead of waking up his cat Muezza who was sleeping on his robe he preferred to cut off a sleeve in order not to disturb its repose. When he came back from his prayers, the cat thanked him with a bow. Thus Muhammad stroked the cat on its head, and there appeared the typical M-shaped three stripes. He also endowed the cat with nine lives in succession, the ability to always land on its feet, and a place in paradise. In my opinion, since

¹ Arianism was a Christian faction which owes its name to Arius, a priest in Alexandria, who promoted the belief which was to be declared heretical. See Berndt, Guido M., and Steinacher, Roland ed.s, *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014.

² Another, minor legend regarding Noah's ark uses the patriarch's voyage to define the origin of the Manx cat, that has a notoriously very short tail (if none at all). According to this other legend, the cats turned up late at the ark's site, when Noah was already closing the entrance to it and getting ready to sail, and their tails got trapped in the door.

none of the holy books talk about the cat, the legends are only an attempt by cat-lovers devotees to combine their credo with their affection to cats.

Into the Darkness

The Roman Empire had reached its greatest extent at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. At the time of Theodosius I and its imposition of the Catholic Church as imperial religion, it was facing many problems due to its extent and the various menaces coming from the neighbouring barbarian populaces. In 285 the Emperor Diocletian¹ had split it into two parts, the Western and the Eastern Empire, in order to facilitate a more efficient administration. The Empire was continuously upset by civil wars and battles arisen by the confusion about succession to the Imperial throne, with different factions of the army sustaining this or that claimant. A big devaluation of the Roman currency provoked a bad economic crisis which drained Rome of its gold, which had become the only method of payment accepted by oriental traders². The collapse of the Empire was quick and relentless and led to the end of the biggest western empire of the time, although it would have survived in its oriental territories for one thousand more years.

3.1 The Germanic Tribes Conquer Europe

The 5th century saw the end of the Roman world. More and more often barbarian armies found their way into the Roman territory, whose frontiers were no more as well protected as in the past with the army busy in interior fights. Rome itself was sacked more than once: in 410 by the Visigoths and then again in 455 by the Vandals. The inevitable fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, under the reign of Romulus Augustus was one of the greatest turmoil of the ancient times. The importance of the date is marked by the fact that historians use it to delimit the beginning of the Middle Ages, a long and hard-to-define period of time that would continue until the discovery of the New World in 1492. Over one thousand years rich of events, but apparently culturally poor as regards Europe, suffocated between two great powers: the temporal rulers on one side in almost constant fight with each other, and the Catholic Church with its rising power on the other.

¹ He ruled from 284 to 305 AD.

² De Rosa, Gabriele and Cestaro, Antonio, *Mito. Storia. Civiltà. Vol. 1*, Bergamo, Minerva Italica, 1982, p. 280.

Cats had to adapt to the new situation. The barbarian populations were not stationary. Although they cultivated the land, they tended to exploit the territory for one season, and then move over to a new spot. They did not have an administrative system as organized as the Roman was, and they based their social life in common on completely different rules, with the predominance of personal regulation on common law. At first they were all polytheists, and only later some tribes converted to Christianity, but to the Arian current¹. They were all generally known as Germanic tribes, coming from the northern and eastern borders of the former Roman Empire. They did not establish long-lasting reigns, particularly because of their habit of dividing the territory owned by the chief between all its heirs at his death, rather than passing it all over to one designated heir. Their presence on what had been the Roman territory made at first moving through the well paved Roman roads more and more dangerous, hindering commerce on long routes. Their social organisation caused the decadence and emptying of the cities founded by the Romans, so that Europe had to go back to a mostly rural society again and some cities would completely fall into oblivion and would have to undergo re-foundation in much later times.

Cats did not lose their most amiable temper and simply re-adapted to the new situation. As hunters and mousers they could end up as being very useful allies to the new masters too. They could move at ease among isolated barns and farms as well as they did in villages and towns. Their natural ability for hunting little animals did not make them fully dependent on their human companions. Moreover, the paganism professed by the Germanic tribes held cats in quite a good position.

The most common breed in the northern, continental European regions was the species *Catus Silvestris Silvestris*, bigger and stouter than the breed originated in northern Africa, with a thicker, darker fur and more used to stand cold weather. The two races had probably already started interbreeding in the last few centuries, there being no restriction for this behaviour among cats, but the European wildcat was not as prone to being tamed. Nonetheless here too, as in other polytheistic religions in other parts of the world, the cat had gained a good and enviable position.

¹ The first to convert were the Goths, under the influence of the bishop Wulfila who translated the Bible into Gothic. See Russell, Jeffrey Burton, *Medieval Civilization*, Eugene OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.

3.2 The Celts of Great Britain

Most of the Germanic tribes had no written tradition, and what is known about them comes from recounts of the neighbouring people. For example, what we mostly know about the early Druids comes from Julius Caesar and his Commentarii de Bello Gallico¹. Thus, in general, we have quite scanty and second-hand information about this people, or what has been reconstructed from archaeological remains. Although there is not much left on written paper or paper-like materials, still we know that these people had a sound-based alphabet which they used to leave short messages on runes. For the most part they relied on oral tradition for the transmission of their stories and myths, and these were committed to writing only at a later time.

At the time, the British Isles were inhabited by tribes mostly belonging to the Celts group, originated in continental Europe and then moved to modern France first, and later beyond the British Channel. The Gauls belonged to the same social and cultural group as the Celts that migrated to Great Britain and Ireland. The Celts were a population divided into many tribes, each one with its own peculiar characteristics, as was common among Barbarians. They practised a polytheistic religion and their rites and sacrifices were carried out by priests called Druids. Apart from being the religious officiants of their tribe, they also acted as judges, sacrificers, teachers, and lore-keepers. The Celts' culture was orally transmitted and a transcription of it was registered only in later times. As was common at the time, their religious beliefs were mostly nature-based, especially as regards their female gods whose figures were connected to natural phenomena, and they held many naturalistic sites to be sacred, like particular trees, or groves, or caves, or lakes, and so on. As far as cats were concerned, their position in the Celtic society was not one of the best because the animal was very often strictly linked to the underworld and depicted as evil and even ferocious. Many legends survive from the most disparate parts of the Islands that are not always nice towards cats. One in particular comes from Scotland, and deals with the so called Cait Sith. It was a fairy creature (in some versions it was a shape-shifted

¹ Julius Caesar's first-hand account of the nine-year-long Romans' wars against the Celtic tribes then generically known as Gauls, written around 50 BC. Book 6 is of particular interest, describing Gaulish customs and religion, and the differences between the Gauls and other Germanic peoples.

witch)¹ resembling a big black cat with a white spot in the middle of its chest. It was a phantom cat that haunted the Scottish Highlands (although some versions occurred also in Ireland). It was believed to steal the souls from human corpses before these were buried. For this reason the general custom when a person died was to let the house pets out, so as to hinder them from jumping on the corpse and take the soul away, wakes were organised to keep the soul-hunter away, and no fires were lighted because the feline spirit was said to be attracted by warmth.²

Similar legends were diffused also in other parts of Europe. In southern France, for example, the monster cat was called Matagot. It was a black stray cat which could bring good luck only if properly well treated. He had to be fed with roast chicken and accompanied home without ever looking back. He had to be served first, from the owner's plate, and it would compensate its human companion with a golden coin every morning.³ The story of the Matagot is quite important for the future European literature, since it inspired the renowned fable of Puss in Boots made famous by Charles Perrault in the late 17th century.

3.3 Holy War

Between the 6th and the 8th century all the known world underwent a period of religious upheaval which would have changed history for ever. Christianity was spreading at great pace in Europe. The fashion of monasticism, both solitary and in groups which originated in the Orient, won over many believers of the newly established religion who looked for deep meditation and a more intimate approach to the divine. There appeared some of the first important monastic orders, which followed the Rule written by saint Benedict of Norcia in the first half of the 5th century. The foundation of these communities of monks following his famous motto *ora et labora*⁴ would be of extreme importance for the development of the western world throughout the Middle Ages. First of all, monasteries were often self-sufficient

¹ Monaghan, Patricia, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York, Facts on File Inc., 2004, p. 71.

² Several Scottish tribes had a cat as totem, and it appears that some warriors fought with their helmets covered in wildcats' furs, thus confiding in the animal protection. Conway, D.J., *By Oak, Ash, and Thorn. Modern Celtic Shamanism*, Saint Paul, Llewellyn Publications, 2004, p. 151.

³ Allegri, Roberto, *1001 Cose da Sapere e da Fare con il tuo Gatto*, Rome, Newton Compton, 2014.

⁴ Pray and work.

social units which operated as landmarks for the neighbouring community. Secondly, monasteries became the guardians of antique knowledge since they hosted big libraries with huge collections of classical books. The most important role of the time in such an environment was that of the amanuensis. There being no printed books, the only way to make a copy of one was by handwriting. Thus the ancient culture could be preserved and spread, also thanks to translations – although the diffusion of such books was extremely limited if we compare it to the present day.

Together with the building of new monasteries on the European soil, Christianity based its diffusion on the work of missionaries, who tried to convert people to their religion. They operated in every part of the known world, and spread the new belief among the Barbarians. Eventually, while some tribes converted to Arianism, others became Christian like the Franks, the Visigoths and the Longobards. These newly converted peoples became defenders of the Pope and the Church, which were menaced by the other barbarian tribes and by a new, warlike religion: Islam.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula thanks to the preaching of Muhammad, a Bedouin of humble origins, enriched by marriage, who declared himself the last prophet of the only god Allah. This new religion promised eternal life in paradise to those who died in battle to spread their creed. At the death of Muhammad in 632 the caliphs, chiefs of the Bedouin tribes of the Peninsula, made good use of this precept to unite their forces and enlarge their power over the neighbouring territories. Thus, from the Arabian Peninsula which had had to that time no central government and almost no towns, there spread a huge empire that in a very short time covered all territories from India to Morocco and Spain. Only 100 years after Mohammed's death the Muslims fought the Christians at Poitiers, in France, where they lost their battle for the conquest of Europe, but stayed on the Iberian Peninsula for a very long time and influenced all the Mediterranean shores with their rich culture, architecture, and customs. Later they tried also the conquest of Italy by sea, and they managed to win Sicily where they resided until the Normans arrived in the 12th century.

Starting from 1095, the rivalry of the western world against Muslims would increase with the support of the Popes calling for Crusades to the Holy Land. These

expeditions against Muslims would continue all through the Middle Ages, and would interest both cavaliers and peasants.

3.4 Freja

Among the Germanic tribes religion was mostly family based, with rites and customs changing sometimes considerably and no established religious hierarchy. As already stated it was polytheistic and nature-based, with a strong interest in magic and sometimes significant differences between peoples and between clans.

Between the 8th and the 11th century there emerged in the Scandinavian regions a group of seafarers which would have become generally famous for their worldwide explorations on board their renowned longships, with low hulls and high bows, suitable for open sea voyages. They were the Vikings, who were originally settled on the North Sea coasts of nowadays Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and who would be the first to reach the Northern American shores.

The religion they professed is now generally defined Norse religion. It was a folk religion and it was a variation of the religions practised by the Germanic tribes across most of Europe. This religion found a written description mostly after the Christianization of the area, in contraposition to it, and through myths and sagas which emphasized the Nordic past. The greatest source for the old Scandinavian mythology, which tells us about its gods and magic elements, is the Prose Edda written in the early 13th century by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic historian and poet.

Among the Gods worshipped by the northern people there was Freya, the warrior goddess of lustful love and fertility. She was extremely beautiful and was often depicted riding a chariot drawn by two big cats, with whom she shared most of her predominant characteristics. Being nice to cats was an easy way to propitiate the goddess.

Freya was also a master of the magical arts, which were of particular importance among the Nordic people. This association, though, might be the cause of the association between cats and witches, which would make the Middle Ages a tough period for many women and their feline companions.

5 Cats and Monasteries

According to many Pope Gregory I¹, who held the reins of the Roman Church from 590 to 604, was a great cat lover and authorized the presence of cats into Christian monasteries. Notwithstanding their unquestionable usefulness as mousers, it seems though that monks did not appreciate their nocturnal activities, in particular because their amorous chants were a compound to the monks' chastity vow. For this reason the first attempts in castrating cats took place in monasteries².

In the ninth century an anonymous Irish monk and scholar living in a monastery in Austria wrote what is usually referred to as the first manifestation of affection for a cat. The cat was called Pangur Ban (White Pangur in Gaelic) and the kinship between it and the monk is for ever celebrated in a poem scribbled down in a manuscript. The monk rejoiced in sharing his cell with the cat which was as busy catching mice as he was in pursuing his job. And they kept good company while never hindering each other in their doings³.

This is not the only evidence of the presence of cats in monasteries or similar. There are, in fact, some illuminations on books copied in the period representing cats, often busy in chasing mice or playing with them, and sometimes with a comic or even satirical effect. Sometimes the drawings are marginalia, added aside the text with no apparent link whatsoever with what is written. They seem to be just distractions of an illustrator, overbored with his job. They appear on books of hours, breviaries, prayer books and even bibles. There are cats playing a musical instrument, chasing rats, climbing on trees, busy in typically feline activities like licking their hinder parts, and more lascivious ones. There are big cats rode by people, and even tiny cats trapped into snails. All of these might have no significance connected to the work of art they are depicted upon, but they definitely show how common cats were, also because of the accuracy of some decorations which indicates a deep and attentive observation of the object.

¹ Aka Pope Gregory the Great.

² Bluhm, Detlef, *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

³ See *Pangur Ban*, translated by Samuel Courtald in Boylan, Clare, *The Literary Companion to Cats*, London, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, pp. 31-32.

In the 12th century in a monastery in Constantinople there lived a writer called Theodore Prodromos. His work Catomyomachia or Galeomyomachia (The Battle of Cats and Mice) is a parody of the earlier Greek tragedies, and reminds in particular of the Batrachomyomachia (The Battle of Frogs and Mice), which dates back to the 5th century BC. In the Catomyomachia a pack of mice give battle to a cat who has already exterminated many of them. The king of the mice who leads the pack pleads Zeus to assist them in the battle, and menace the God that, if they are not properly assisted, they would attack his temple and raid the offerings. Unfortunately for the mice, the battle is disastrous: the prince dies and many worthy heroes with him. While a messenger is bringing the doleful news to the queen, there is a sudden overthrow: when the battle is at its peak, a beam falls from the roof right on the king of cats and kills it. So the mice incredibly win the battle¹. This work too demonstrates what a common features cats were, and especially in connection with their eternal enemies, the mice. Moreover, the description of an upside-down world, where mice win over cats or can scoff at them, was of interest because of its obvious political implications. Although the cat was a symbol of liberty because of its predilection for being alone and its aloofness, still its ferocity towards its preys in general, and its never ending battle against mice, which it can easily win, put it into close relation to despotic domination and an ideal of tyrannical power.

Some testimony of the company cats have always kept to writers and scholars is actually unintentional. In 2011, for example, a university assistant² in Dubrovnik, Croatia, found ink stained cat paw prints across the pages of a manuscript of the 15th century. Apparently a cat has crossed over the pages at some time after the manuscript had been completed, since the markings cover the handwriting³. Another, funnier example of the feline fondness for books is described in another manuscript coming from Deventer (in the Netherlands) and now preserved at the Historical Archives in

¹ Bluhm, Detlef, *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

² His name is Emir Filipovic. His discovery was absolutely fortuitous and became known only because he tweeted a photograph of the marked manuscript to some friends. In the digital era, the retweeting of it has made the manuscript popular over the internet.

³ Andries, Kate, *Curious Cat Walks Over Medieval Manuscript*, National Geographic News, pub. 26th March 2013
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/03/130326-animals-medieval-manuscript-books-cats-history/> (last accessed 20th October 2015).

Cologne, which has a partly empty page with a visible stain on it. The amanuenses left an explanation for his leaving the page unwritten, blaming a cat that had urinated on it¹. These examples confirm the presence of cats in libraries of monasteries all over Europe. They were useful in keeping mice and rats away, which would have otherwise gnawed on papers and parchments, and were nice companions to the monks at work, although they could sometimes act up some nasty tricks.

3.6 A Cat's Worth

In the Early Middle Ages there appeared laws regarding the cat that actually show a sort of reverence for the animal. This might be due to an increased value of the cat because of a decline in number after the barbarian invasions and the general turmoil. Another factor for its renewed importance might be the outbreak of the bubonic plague in 540 in Constantinople² and its diffusion in the following years throughout Europe, to the British Isles.

An interesting collection of laws, written in Latin and generally referred to as the Laws of Hywel Dda (Howel the Good) date from the first centuries of the second millennium. They are a system of law practised in medieval Wales before it became part of the English Kingdom and codified for the first time during the reign of king Howel, died in 950. It was a Celtic law passed down orally by jurists and bards. The collection is divided into several books, each one concerning a particular group of citizens and the various aspects of life. In the part dedicated to 'The value of wild and tame' there is extensive reference to cats: the value of a kitten until it opened its eyes was a penny, and from then until it killed mice, two pence, and that of a mature cat was four pence. The value of the cat is evidently linked to its usefulness, present and future (as shows the reference to newborns). For this reason its worth would diminish

¹ The curse, in Latin, is accompanied by the drawing of hands pointing at the stain: "*Hic non defectus est, sed cattus minxit desuper nocte quadam. Confundatur pessimus cattus qui minxit super librum istum in nocte Daventrie, et consimiliter omnes alii propter illum. Et cavendum valde ne permittantur libri aperti per noctem ubi cattie venire possunt* – Here is nothing missing, but a cat urinated on this during a certain night. Cursed be the pesty cat that urinated over this book during the night in Deventer and because of it many others (cats) too. And beware well not to leave open books at night where cats can come." (at Cologne, Historisches Archiv, G.B. quarto, 249, fol 68r). <https://medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2013/02/22/paws-pee-and-mice-cats-among-medieval-manuscripts/> (last accessed 20th October 2015).

² It is the so-called plague of Justinian, after the Byzantine Emperor Justinian who was reigning at the time of the first outbreak.

if it had defective sight or hearing, and if it used to go about caterwauling. Moreover, the value changed according to its owner. If it was the cat of the king that was being stolen or killed, that was guarding his majesty's granaries, then the offender had either to render a sheep of his own or all the wheat that would be necessary to cover the cat suspended by its tail¹. Another example of the value given to the cat is, in the same law collection, the statement that, to establish a lawful village there had to be a cat among other things. No dog was required, neither a horse.

The habit of walling up cats into buildings dates back to this period. The same destiny was shared also by other animals, depending on the building and the geographical area. It is not sure whether they were buried in dead or alive, but various remains testify that the habit was quite common and continued well up into the 17th century. People thought the expedient would bring good luck to the newly built edifice, keep vermin away and protect the area from evil spirits. Quite recently, in 2011, workers busy on a hydraulic intervention discovered a cat walled up in a buried cottage². The most astounding thing is that the cottage lies in England's witching country, in Lancashire in the north west of the country, in the area famous for the Pendle witch trials³.

In Dublin's Christchurch Cathedral, instead, the mummified bodies of a cat and a rat are on display. Affectionately named Tom and Jerry, they were found in the 1850s, trapped in one of the organ's pipes and frozen in an eternal, mortal chase. Their misadventure is even mentioned in James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*⁴ (1939).

¹ Swan, Madeline, *A Curious History of Cats*, Croydon, CPI Bookmarque, 2007, p. 31. According to Detlef Bluhm such a custom was still in use in 18th-century Sweden. Bluhm, Detlef, *Ibid*.

² <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/08/pendle-witches-water-mummified-cat> (last accessed 31st October 2015).

³ The trials took place in 1612 in the Pendle district, in east Lancashire, and involved 20 people of which 10 were executed for witchcraft. Poole, Robert ed., *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002.

⁴ www.irelandtravelkit.com/the-mummified-cat-and-rat-of-christ-church-cathedral-dublin-co-dublin/ (last accessed 30th October 2015).

In *Finnegans Wake* someone is described as being '...as stuck as that cat to that mouse in that tube of that Christchurch organ...' as reported on the label to the glass shrine where the mummies rest in the crypt of the cathedral.

3.7 After the Year 1000

Most historians consider the year 1000 as a break in European history which separates the Early from the Late Middle Ages¹. Despite the apocalyptic millenarian theories², this division is due to a rebirth in many aspects of medieval life. Improvements in the working tools and in the agricultural techniques, a new enlargement of commerce and trade led to an increase in the population and to a general sense of re-civilization after the barbarian times. The whole society underwent a new reorganization with the establishment of the feudal system. At the end of the 8th century, Europe had already seen the rebirth of an Empire after the Roman one had fallen. It was the Holy Roman Empire, held by the Franks guided by Charlemagne. Although it was more a union of many different peoples than a unitary entity, still it was an attempt to restore a unique power all over the Old Continent, which was being attacked on various fronts. The Franks had converted to Christianity, so the Pope³ endorsed their reigning over the other tribes, considered them the protectors of the Church, and crowned Charles Emperor on Christmas night in year 800 in Saint Peter's basilica in Rome. The Carolingian lineage would not last long, but the Empire survived until the beginning of the 19th century.

3.8 From the Medieval Inquisition to Witch Trials

Through the 11th century and even afterwards there were still many people practicing pagan rites, especially among the peasantry. Feudal authorities, though, had started imposing Christianity on these people since the 10th century, and more often than not this imposition was carried out with a lot of violence and terror. The worship of a pagan deity was easily turned into the worship of the devil and was therefore condemned by the Inquisition. In other cases, what was considered as heresy was actually a Christian belief flourished before the Council of Nicaea.

¹ If we accept the division in only two different parts of the Middle Ages. Some divide it into three and take into consideration Early, High and Late Middle Ages.

² In various histories of the ancient past, and also in the Book of Revelation which closes the Christian New Testament, there are references to a period of 1000 years which would bring to enormous changes and destruction. Quarta, Cosimo, *Homo Utopicus. La Dimensione Storico-Antropologica dell'Utopia*, Bari, Ed. Dedalo, 2015.

³ Leo III, who was Pope from 795 to 816.

Of pre-Christian origin is the image of the cat and the fiddle, very common in the British world. It is now present in nursery rhymes, it gives the name to pubs and inns, and it is present since the Middle Ages on decorations of churches and religious buildings. It probably is a reminiscence of the Egyptian goddess Bast, who was often represented as a cat or a cat-headed woman holding a sistrum in her hand, an ancient musical instrument. Moreover, the feast dedicated to her in the sacred town of Bubastis was said to be very noisy and full of music, with people dancing and enjoying themselves, thus connecting again the cat to music.

Most of the superstitions and proverbs connected to cats also date back to this tough period cats had to undergo. All goddesses to which it was variously connected in the pagan past were somehow linked to the moon and the night, the time when cats live their outdoor life and meet caterwauling. That is supposed to be the origin, for example, of the good/bad luck of number 13 – which is the number of the yearly lunar phases. The black cat, whose only gleaming, ghastly eyes are visible at night, became the bad luck bearer we all know – except in Great Britain where it is the ghostly white cat to be unlucky. And so on...

The Middle Ages are usually perceived as ‘Dark Ages’ also for the diffusion of the inquisition tribunals and the trials to witches in the western world. It all started in 1184 under the reign of Pope Lucius III who issued a papal bull¹ mainly against the growing Catharist movement² in southern France. The persecution against Cathars, which cost even a Crusade against them in 1209³, would continue until the 14th century, when the heretic sect was supposed to have been eradicated. In those territories where the Cathar heresy was mostly spread, the people (also non-Cathar, but who had lived side by side in harmony with those who were accused of heresy, and underwent persecution together with them during the Albigensian Crusade) became more and more angry towards the Church. The attempts to suppress the heresy

¹ Ad abolendam (“For the purpose of doing away with” malignant heresies). It forced bishops to route their territories twice a year to investigate on the presence of heretics in the area. If any was found, they had to be handed over to lay tribunals.

² In very short terms, they divided the figure of God into two different ones: the good God of the New Testament and the evil one of the Old. Barber, Malcolm, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages*, London, Routledge, 2014.

³ This crusade is known as the Albigensian Crusade, from the town of Albi in southern France where the Cathars had their origin, which lasted from 1209 to 1229 and was issued by pope Innocent III.

actually brought forth a renewal of pagan rites and superstitions, which would later be the basis for a new series of abuses during the so-called witch hunt.

Another religious movement which was perceived as dangerous by the high religious spheres was that of the Waldensians¹ in northern Italy. Cathars and Waldensians among others had to be taken care of by the episcopal Inquisition which was set up by the bull.

Likewise, in the same period, a French theologian, Alain de Lille² wrote the treatise Contra Haereticus³ in which, for the first time, there is an association of the heretics to cats, which would bring to a switch in the general consideration towards these animals, who would be defamed forever after by the popular notion that heretics conducted secret rites with them. According to Alain, in fact, the Cathars owed their name to the ritual habit they had of kissing the hindquarters of a cat, which was actually the devil in disguise. As we will see, they were not the only one believed to practice such a rite.

Around 1185 a Welsh clergyman and writer, Walter Map (c. 1140 – c. 1209) wrote De Nugis Curialium⁴, a collection of anecdotes and brief stories, some from personal experience and apparently reliable, others recounted from popular rumours and farther from truth. The book contains court gossip and a little history, and among others it contains the first recorded story of English vampires. It is written in medieval Latin, and in a satirical vein and it records the nighttime gatherings of heretics. At such meetings, he wrote, a black cat would present itself to the bystanders for adoration and would be kissed on various parts of its body.

This practice of kissing animals, and especially cats, on their rear would be later attributed also to Waldesians. These accusations might have arisen from a penalty diffused in Burgundian Law⁵: if someone was guilty of stealing a dog, he was

¹ They preached renounce to worldly richness among other things and were accused of being contemptuous to the Church. Audisio, Gabriel, *The Waldensian Dissent. Persecution and Survival, c. 1170-c. 1570*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

² Aka Alanus ab Insulis (c. 1128-c. 1203).

³ Against Heretics.

⁴ Courtier's Trifles.

⁵ The Burgundians were an ancient East Germanic tribe that had settled in south-eastern France and whose kingdom was finally absorbed by the Merovingian.

condemned to kissing the rear of the dog in public, or otherwise to pay a fine and a compensation to the dog's owner¹.

Another case of a cat as an agent of the devil comes from an Exemplum² written by the French Dominican preacher Stephen of Bourbon³. The Dominicans were very active in contrasting heresy, along with another order of mobile mendicant friars, the Franciscans. With this Exemplum Stephen recounts of the foundation of the first Dominican women house in France in 1206 in Prouille, in southern France. According to it, St Dominic de Guzman, founder of the order of the Dominicans⁴, was preaching in a town in southern France, in the very heart of the Cathar country when some women came to him for advice, about whether or not to become Cathars. After he warned them to see what lord they wanted to worship, a huge and horrible cat sprang out of nowhere, with its stinking hind well exposed. The creature was recognized as an obvious sign of the devil and scared the women back to the right creed, so much so that some of them became the first sisters of the new religious foundation⁵.

In 1233 black cats got the most direct attack by the Pope Gregory IX⁶. On 13th June he levelled a papal bull called Vox in Rama⁷, which was especially directed against them for being Satan's fellows in the newly-born German cult of the Luciferians, the devil's worshippers. The bull was an exhortation to the German temporal rulers and bishops to sustain the work of the papal inquisitor Conrad of Marburg, who had already zealously had some people to confess they were in

¹ Aberth, John, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 170.

² Pl. exempla, were a typically medieval kind of literature that consisted of moral anecdotes, often brief, used to illustrate a specific point.

³ 1190-1261. He was a Dominican inquisitor and one of the best authors of Exempla of his time. He was an historian of the medieval heresies and reported clearly on the various sects and superstitions diffused among his contemporaries.

⁴ The order of the Preaches, later known with the name Dominicans, that includes friars, nuns, sisters and lay or secular Dominicans affiliated with the order, was approved by Pope Honorius III in 1216. They are also known as the Black Friars because of the black cloak they wear over their white habit.

⁵ Waldau, Paul and Patton, Kimberley ed.s, *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science and Ethics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 109.

⁶ Papacy: 1227-1241.

⁷ "A voice is heard in Rama". It is the opening of the bull and refers to the gospel of St. Mathew 2:18 on a prophecy about the crying for the massacre of the innocents. A translation of the first part of the Latin text of the bull is available in Engels, Donald W., *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187 and it is taken up again in Tuczay, Christa, *Esoterismo e Magia nel Medioevo*, Milano, Mondolibri, 2009, pp. 74-75.

collusion with the devil, and that they worshipped him and his emissary, the black cat. The decree was particularly addressed to the bishops of Mainz¹ and Hildesheim², because it was in their dioceses that Conrad had found the satanic cult. The bull is divided into four parts. The first deals directly with the function of the cat and the obscene gestures it was made object of during celebrations, while the other three are guides for the inquisitors in proceeding with their job. On the basis of Conrad of Marburg's recounting, a ceremony is described in full that is held in order to accept new adepts to the sect. First the postulant had to kiss a toad, and then a black cat (*gattus niger*) appeared with his tail held up high, so that the postulants could kiss its rear. Following in the ceremony all presents bowed to the cat and acknowledged it as their master. Then a figure appeared, which was said to be Lucifer: the upper part of its body shone and the lower was hairy (*hispidus sicut gattus*). The rite would then continue most lasciviously with the participation of all that were present, who would proceed in copulation, often of homosexual sort.

Both the imperial house, the bishops and the Inquisitors now knew what terrible menace was trying to destabilize their Church and could act accordingly. The emperor Frederick II after his coronation in 1220 had introduced the death at stake for heresy, thus supporting ecclesiastical law with the imperial law. Torture was not officially contemplated as a tool to investigate the accused – nor was it an approved penance – but many reports testify that it was a common praxis, and the papal bull codified the work of the inquisitors and regulated the process. Only in 1252 with the bull Ad Extirpanda³ would the Pope Innocent IV⁴ authorize the Dominicans to use torture in order to obtain confessions from heretics, but only under limited and defined circumstances. The ecclesiastical tribunals could not obviously commit death penalties, and for this reason the people who were found guilty were consigned to the lay authorities. The death penalty usually consisted in being burnt at stake, because that punishment did not produce any shedding of blood. Usually, people were burnt alive only if they refused to abjure their false creed to the end and refused to convert

¹ Siegfried III von Eppstein (episcopate: 1230-1249).

² Conrad II (episcopate: 1221-1246).

³ To eradicate.

⁴ Papacy: 1243-1254.

to Catholicism. If they did, even as a last minute conversion, they were strangled and then their corpse was set on fire as an extreme form of purification. Death penalty was mostly perceived as a defeat of the Church who was not able to demonstrate its truth. There were also other forms of death penalty, like hanging, but the stake would survive as extreme punishment until 1834 and was reportedly mostly diffused in Spain and Italy.

In 1275 in Toulouse, a town in south-eastern France where the Cathars had already tried to set up a community but were restrained, for the first time a woman was condemned of witchcraft by an Inquisitor and burnt on a stake. The association between the town and the heretical sect created a strong connection between heresy and witchcraft, especially since the punishments were equal. The witch-hunt would then spread easily from France to Spain, Italy and Germany, where it would show its cruellest self.

3.9 The Crisis of the 14th Century and its Consequences

The 14th century witnessed a general worsening of the people's situation all over Europe, which embittered the feelings of suspicion towards the fellowmen and favoured the reports of presumed witches and sorcerers to the authorities. There were multiple causes to the crisis: the political instabilities and the religious upheavals, but also a climatic change and the spread of endemic mortal diseases. First of all there started a constant drop in temperatures which would later bring to the Little Ice Age of the 17th and 18th centuries, with harsher winters and scarce harvests. Between 1315 and 1317 the Great Famine involved almost all of Europe and caused a tremendous rise in prices with the subsequent impoverishment of part of the population and malnutrition among the poorest. Later, between 1347 and 1351, a vast plague epidemic spread from the Mediterranean shores northwards and reduced the population of at least one fourth. The already dramatic situation was worsened by political instability and conflicts between neighbouring countries, like the Hundred Years War between England and France. Another aspect of the crisis lied in the religious instability. As already seen, Europe was swept by innumerable religious movements, some accepted by the Catholic Church, some defined as heresy and

harshly contrasted. Moreover, in the Late Middle Ages there was the East-West Schism between the Latin western Church and the Greek oriental Church. Started in the 11th century, the gap between the two different positions towards the Christian Creed was now evidently too big to be closed. As if it wasn't enough, in the 14th century the Pope was removed from his historical seat in Rome and taken to Avignon, beyond the Alps, due to contrasts between the papacy and the French crown. Seven Popes resided in Avignon between 1309 and 1377 and later, when the Holy See was restored in Rome, there took place the election of a second Pope in Avignon, defined the Antipope. This situation ended only in 1417 with the Council of Constance and the election of Pope Martin V, recognized by all factions as the only successor to St. Peter's throne.

At that time, accusations of witchcraft, heresy, devil's worshipping, and excommunications were used as political weapons against one's adversaries. After expelling the Jews from France in 1306, in 1307 Philip IV of France¹ turned to the Knights Templar, with whom he was deeply in debts, as he was with the Jews. The Knights Templar² were an ascetic warrior order founded in 1118 to protect pilgrims to Jerusalem, conquered by the crusaders short before. They took vows of fraternity, poverty and chastity and were absolved from the sin of killing, if they only killed the Church's enemies. Together with a reputation of ferocity in battle, they were known as a very rich order, with extended real estates in many parts of Europe and the Holy Land³ and an efficient banking system they needed to have money always available when travelling. Their riches came mostly from the obligation of the monks to hand in all their wealth to the order when they joined. However, the last crusade to the Holy Land had taken place in the 1270s, so the defensive role of the Knights was lost and their wealth, which was no more needed to maintain a strong army in the Middle East, began to be eyed by the impoverished European rulers, who had difficulties draining their people of more taxes to finance their wars.

¹ Aka Philip the Fair (reigned 1286-1314).

² Founded with the name Poor knights of the Temple by the French nobleman Hugues de Payns and eight other veteran crusaders. The order was officially recognized by Pope Honorius I in 1128.

³ We can still see their distinctive circular temples and their strongly built fortresses from England to Israel.

In 1307 Philip the Fair of France ordered the arrest of the Knights, accused of heresy, witchcraft, and immorality, and he convinced the Pope Clement V (the first in Avignon) to give him permission to confiscate all their properties on his dominions – Edward II, Philip’s son-in-law, would do the same the following year in England. Here, the persecution of the Templars did not go much beyond, being torture prohibited by the common law and the tribunals composed of a number of judges and not just a single one. In the rest of Europe the tortured Templars confessed acts of sodomy, profanation of the cross, worshipping of a pagan idol called Baphomet¹, and also allegiance to the devil in the form of a black cat which they kissed in the rear. Again, the innocent black cat was made object of alliance to the devil and demonized. Although in 1312 the Pope withdrew the charges of heresy towards the order of the Templars, thirty-six of them had already died under torture and fifty-four burnt on the stake, only in France. The order was dissolved and the surviving monks could choose either to join another order or to go free. Only their Grand Master Jacques de Molay was sentenced to life imprisonment because of the confessions he made under torture, and later burnt at the stake cursing on the king and the Pope².

In such a tumultuous period, people would use any means to get rid of their adversaries. In 1317, for example, Pope John XXII from Avignon accused many of the Papal court of witchcraft. A general sense of fear was spreading among all the social classes, and the following year the Bishop of Cahors, Hugues Géraud, was burnt at the stake for attempting to kill the Pope through evil magical instruments³. The French bishop was said to have moulded a wax figure of the pope and then stabbed it in an attempt to kill the pontiff, to no avail. The peculiar fears of the pope for the maleficent arts brought him to issue various edicts and letters to European Inquisitors to be more zealous in their inquisitions, and with his bull of 1326 Super Illius Specula⁴ he equalizes the punishments for sorcerers to those inflicted to heretics. Thus, if held responsible, their riches were confiscated by the authorities,

¹ It was a goat with women’s breast and an erect penis.

² Ralls, Karen, *Knights Templar Encyclopedia: The Essential Guide to the People, Events, and Symbols of the Order of the Temple*, Franklin Lakes NJ, Career Press, 2007.

³ Nold, Patrick, *Marriage Advice for a Pope: John XXII and the Power to Dissolve*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, Introduction.

⁴ Upon His Watchtower.

they could be tortured in order to obtain a confession, their bodies had to be finally burnt to be purified. The confusion between heresy and witchcraft was now complete.

The 14th century was nonetheless inhabited also by some famous cat-lovers, among whom the Italian Francesco Petrarca stands out. He died at the age of almost 70 in a house in Arquà, near Padua, and was fond of his beloved cat, which used to keep him company and warm his feet with its body. After the poet's death, his house became a sort of a museum and in a niche on the ground floor there is still the mummy of a cat to remind everyone of Petrarca's love for the animal, adorned with an admirable poem in Latin by Antonio Quarenghi (1547-1634) as epitaph¹.

The poem reads as follows:

*Etruscus gemino vates ardebat amore:
Maximus ignis ego; Laura secundus erat.
Quid rides? divinæ illam si gratia formæ,
Me dignam eximio fecit amante fides.
Si numeros geniumque sacris dedit illa libellis
Causa ego ne sævis muribus esca forent.
Arcebam sacro vivens à limine mures,
Ne domini exitio scripta diserta forent;
Incutio trepidis eadem defuncta pavorem,
Et viget exanimi in corpore prisca fides.²*

¹ http://www.arquapetrarca.com/index.php?option=com_content&id=101&Itemid=99&lang=it
(last accessed 2nd November 2015).

² "The Tuscan poet burnt with a double love: / I was the biggest, Laura was the second. / Why are you laughing? If in her was divine beauty, / My fidelity made me worthy of such a lover. / While she gave rhythm and inspiration to the sacred papers, / I defended them from evil mice. / When alive I kept the house free of mice / So that they could not destroy my master's writings; / Now that I'm dead I still frighten them, / The old fidelity is still alive in my dead body." (My translation).

Renaissance? The Long Road to Enlightenment

From the 15th century onwards, science took over a predominant position in the development of the western world. The great naval explorations and discoveries of the end of the century and beyond were due to the studies on the form and structure of the planet, progresses in the construction of the ships, the discovery and the better use of the navigational aids. It was the age of the great inventors and innovators of the arts and crafts, from Leonardo da Vinci to Galileo Galilei, through Michelangelo Buonarroti and Nicolaus Copernicus. Around 1440, in Mainz, Johannes Gutenberg invented the revolutionary movable type printing which would have caused an unprecedented spread of books and the possibility to make culture more accessible to the masses. At the same time, the development of international trade, which had already caused the emerging of the figure of the moneychanger, led to the birth of the first modern banks, whose actions were to become more and more important for the stability of many reigns. The first half of the 16th century assisted at the birth of religious reformation movements, led by Martin Luther and others, which would change the asset of many European countries and destabilize the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation brought forth the Catholic Counter-Reformation, with the recognition of the evils infesting the Catholic Church and an attempt to cure them. It was not a case that, between the war to heresy and that to witchcraft, the first half of the 16th century saw a fading off of the intervention of the Inquisition, while the Church was busy in contrasting this new campaign against its own morality.

4.1 Cats and Witches

Alongside scientific improvements and the Western Church Reformation, a massive witch hunt would continue to claim its victims. Witch hunting was a plague that would infest the western world for over four centuries, during which thousands of people were humiliated, tortured and killed. Cats owned by these people were often killed together with their owners because they were thought to be demons in disguise which acted as familiars of the witches and helped them in their misdeeds. Women,

to whom the image of the cat has always been linked since the earliest of times, were the most affected by the hunt and so were their cats, often burnt together with them on the stake. Even the papers referring to the processes to these witches were burnt, and their instruments of witchcraft too, in order to destroy everything that was connected to those considered guilty and therefore condemned.

1.1 A Long History of Popular Belief

Cats and women had already been the main protagonists of a dubious story in Otia Imperialia (Recreation for an Emperor), an encyclopaedic work in three books written between 1209 and 1214 by the English statesman and writer Gervase of Tilbury¹. The first book is a digressive commentary of Genesis, the second is a history of humanity and the inhabited world after Noah's Flood, and the third is a collection of strange stories on unusual or phenomenal events. Gervase believed it possible for humans to shape-shift into animals, and especially cats. In particular, he reported the story of some women that were wounded during the night while transformed into cats, and the following day they would show exactly the same wounds as the animals had suffered². He was not alone in recounting such an episode: there are in fact many similar anecdotes of magical and mysterious metamorphoses at nighttime, and the resulting the following morning of people suffering the same wounds as those inflicted on the animals was taken as confirmation of the magical deed. It was believed that a witch could shape-shift into any animal she wanted, except those that were Christian symbols, like the lamb or the dove. There are therefore stories of witches transformed mostly into cats, but also toads, rabbits, horses, cows, pigs, and so on, according to the misdeed he/she was about to perform, guided by the devil. The devil itself was said to come to these people, either of its own will or because called by them, in different forms. Some were beautiful and captivating, others were foul and disgusting, according to the need. Cats and dogs were symbol of fidelity and friendship with which to persuade the victim; a horse could be used to take someone away; a mouse, a weasel or a bat could be the perfect transformation to get into

¹ Aka Gervasius Tilberiensis, c. 1150 – c. 1228. Of aristocratic origins, he travelled a lot, also in Italy, and wrote the *Otia Imperialia* for his patron, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV.

² Suckling, Nigel, *Witches*, London, FF&F, 2006, p. 37.

defended places unheeded¹. Once the persons had been won over, the devil would show its real self and assist the sorcerers in their actions.

4.1.1.1 The Church Closes in on Witches

Pope Innocent VIII² declared cats pagan animals, in connection to the devil. Such a statement spurred many devotees to harm the animals without any feeling of guilt, and the persecution of cats and their slaying ran together with that of witches. The Pope's bull Summis Desiderantes Affectibus (Desiring with Supreme Ardour)³ of 1484 supported the inquisitors' investigations in Germany to detect the presence of witches in the area, gave greater freedom than before in the use of torture during questioning, and loosed the processing rules, transferring most decisional powers to the inquisitors. Witch-hunting had been harshened and even professional witch-hunters appeared who dredged Europe in search of sorcerers and their fellows.

Although in the countryside the usefulness of cats was still highly appreciated, their position was more and more on tenterhooks because of their supposed alliance with the devil and hell's demons. The cats' mysterious aura which had fascinated people for centuries was now their biggest guilt, which often brought them to death.

In 1486 one of the most infamously famous treatises on witchcraft, the Malleus Maleficarum (the Witch Hammer) was issued and bore the signature of two Dominican inquisitors, the Alsatian Heinrich Kramer⁴ and the Swiss Jacob Sprenger⁵, who had moved the Pope earlier on to release the bull which gave them more freedom of action. It was in fact a handbook to instruct inquisitors on how to obtain confessions from the alleged witches, but it also gave practical examples of what they might have been called upon to hear. Among others, it reports the adventure of a man, who was wrongly accused of assaulting and injuring three women of his village. He defended himself in front of the judge affirming that in the alleged day of the misdeed

¹ Guaccio, Francesco Maria, *Compendium Maleficarum*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1992, p. 41. The book was first edited in its final version in 1626 by the Milanese friar as support to the Inquisition tribunals in their war against witches.

² Benedetto Caetani, pope from 1484 to 1492.

³ English translation in Kors, Alan Charles and Peters, Edward eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700. A Documentary History*, Philadelphia PA, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, pp. 177-180.

⁴ c. 1430-1505.

⁵ 1436/38-1495.

he had actually harmed three big cats by which he had been attacked while cutting wood¹. An earlier treatise on witchcraft printed in 1475 by the German Dominican writer Johannes Nider², the Formicarius (the Anthill) reports the case of a young novice afflicted by a devil which appears to him in form of a black cat to foretell him his near death unless he renounces his religious habit. The demon is so powerful that the novice needs the help of his fellow brothers to win it over³.

Witchcraft was opposed by the Church because, showing a connection to the devil, it was considered a form of heresy, because it worshipped a ‘wrong’ God, and of apostasy, because it refused Catholicism. It was also persecuted by secular tribunals whenever it implied an injury to someone, or when it was used for political reasons.

Not all parts of Europe were interested by the witch phenomenon in the same way and to the same extent. Similarly, it was not constant over time, touching its peak between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. Altogether, about 90.000 people all over Europe were processed for witchcraft, and about half of them were condemned to the death penalty⁴. Most victims of this hunt were women, as most treatises and books on witchcraft of the time affirmed that women were morally feebler than man and therefore could be won over more easily by the tempting devil. According to this misogynous vision of the woman, which was typical of the historical period, she is intellectually inferior to the man, more lascivious, passionate and superstitious. It is a vision which was typical of the medieval time, and would continue until the 18th century, when its opposite would be taken into consideration, that is, the woman’s sexual passivity.

4.1.2 The Witch Hunt on the British Isles

Various Witchcraft Acts were passed in Great Britain from the 16th century, when the islands were facing a great religious turmoil, although the country did not register many casualties for this crime. Witchcraft was in fact subject to the Common

¹ Kramer, Heinrich and Sprenger, James, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, New York, Cosimo Classics, 2007, p. 127.

² 1380-1438.

³ Bailey, Michael D., *Battling Demons. Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*, Philadelphia PA, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p. 115.

⁴ Levack, Brian P., *La Caccia alle Streghe in Europa*, Bergamo, Mondolibri, 2008, cap. 1.

Law, which did not allow torture. It was therefore more difficult for inquisitors to prove someone guilty compared to other parts of Europe, although there was no lack of trials. Death for witchcraft was introduced by the Witchcraft Act issued by Henry VIII in 1542, and it was included also in the 1563 Act during the reign of Elizabeth I, but only if the activity had caused any harm to someone. The advent on the English throne of the Scottish James Stuart, who was keen on sorcery¹, sharpened again the penalties, though not to the extent of the oldest Act². The most controversial figure in the witch hunt on the British soil was Matthew Hopkins, a witch hunter operating during the Civil War³ in the Kingdom of England who is held responsible for most of the deaths for witchcraft there. He and his fellow John Stearne used extreme measures, on the edge of torture, to extract confessions from the witches. They also wrote The discovery of Witches (Hopkins) in 1647, and A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft (Stearne) in 1648, two pamphlets that describe their activities and report some of their investigations and questionings. In some of the reported cases, cats are among the animals involved in the wicked activities of the witches.

4.1.3 A Recrudescence of the Hunt

The explosion of the hunt between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century was probably mostly due to the hard conditions people were facing at the time, which made personal conflicts increase – and also the suspicion towards witches and wizards plotting with the devil to bring misery and famine all over Europe. The old continent was actually facing an unprecedented inflation, with decreasing salaries and increasing prices, which threw many into the darkest poverty, together with a diffused crisis in trade and production, especially in the 17th century. Climatic changes brought with them a series of periodical famines, and the situation of the unemployed reached a critical level.

¹ He even wrote a treatise endorsing the practice of witch hunting called Daemonologie, published in 1597.

² Gibson, Marion ed., *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550-1750*, London, Continuum, 2003, pp. 1-7.

³ The English Civil War took place from 1642 to 1651 and resulted in the beheading of the King Charles I in 1649 and the emergence of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Anyway, people were more impressed by the magical aspects of witchcraft than its presumed connection with the devil, and for a reason. The women of the time, who were mostly hit by the accusations, were commonly involved in jobs that could be dangerous for the whole community if misconducted. They were mostly cooks, healers or midwives, all jobs which could lay them open to the charges of practicing black magic. In their activities, they could grow or collect herbs and use them to make potions and ointments. They were also thought to be sage and to know a lot of popular remedies based on natural ingredients, but strengthened with magic spells or invocations. Midwives were the most exposed to the wrath of their fellow citizens in case something went wrong with child bearing. Only women were admitted to that profession until the 18th century, when women in labour were assisted by doctors or obstetricians. Birth has always been an extremely dangerous moment both for the mothers and the babies, and at the time about one fifth of the children would not survive it, or would only live a few months. Moreover, infanticide was not rare. It was easy to detect a magical intervention of the midwife in such situations, who could incur in an accusation from the presumed offended family.

Another reason why there were more women accused of witchcraft than men lies in the fact that women were renowned for their feebleness, both physical and political, and were therefore thought to use magic to get more power – whereas men did not need it. The suspicion on women was worsened by their being widows or unmarried, because such a status would mean that they were not directly subject to a male authority, and thus they were thought to be more dangerous for the community.

Once accused, the presumed witches were questioned. Most often than not they were tortured to extract a confession out of them, or to make them disclose the name of other fellow witches. One of the most common forms of torture was the strappado: the person's wrists were tied behind his/her back. Then the person was suspended by a rope tied to the wrists and lowered several times from a height, only to be abruptly stopped before touching the ground. This operation would easily cause the dislocation of the person's shoulders, and a great and painful distress to nerves, ligaments and tendons. The accused were also searched for the devil's mark. This could be any kind of marking of the skin, such as a mole, or a scar, which was insensible to pricking. In

1586 in Montdidier, in France, a woman was hanged and strangled, and then her body was turned to ashes after she had been totally shaved and a white mark had been found on her left shoulder, carrying signs like those of the paws of a cat¹.

Cats often appeared in the processes to witches either as a personification of the devil, or as a form the witches could take over in order to reach the Sabbath, the meeting with other sorcerers. A 13-year-old girl confessed in 1606 in Riom, in France, of being regularly visited by the devil under different forms, sometimes that of a cat, sometimes of a black dog. The devil would then rub her with an ointment and lead her to the sabbath riding a broom².

Cats were sometimes also the ingredients of magical potions used by the witches to harm people around them, or potions used against them. According to Rivasseau, a French sorceress prosecuted in 1610, to exterminate a neighbouring family you had to make an ointment out of the ashes of a skinned cat, a toad, a lizard, and a viper burnt on embers, and then smear with it the family's house door. For another lethal potion, mix together a cat's brain and the blood of a red-haired man – whoever drinks it would die. To heal someone who has been bewitched, you have to bring a cat alive in a pot to a crossroad at night. Here, light a fire under the pot. When the cat dies, so will the witch, and the bewitched will be healed³.

4.1.4 The Benandanti of Friuli

A particular case is that of the Benandanti of Friuli, an Italian north-eastern region. They became officially known in 1575, when a priest reported to the inquisitors of a strange story he had heard about a man of a nearby village who could heal the bewitched. This would be the first case to be investigated in the area which involved a Benandante.

They were a secret sect of people reported to be born with the caul over their head, meaning that a portion of the birth membrane remained on the child at birth⁴.

¹ Mandrou, Robert, *Magistrati e Streghe nella Francia del Seicento*, Bari, Laterza, 1971, p. 102.

² Mandrou, Robert, *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³ Malossini, Andrea, *Le Ricette delle Streghe. Incantesimi, Sortilegi, Malefici*, Bologna, Area 51 s.r.l., 2011.

⁴ This is a quite uncommon fact, taking place in about 1 out of 80.000 births, but it does not affect the infant in any ways and the caul is instantly removed by the doctor or midwife. It is still considered as a sign of good luck and of extra-sensorial powers. For example Danny Torrance, the child protagonist of the horror novel

This would make them to participate in battles against the witches in the adult age. They could not talk about their meetings, or they would be badly beaten by the others of their group. That of the Benandanti was an agrarian cult: if they won the battle against the witches, the crops would be good that season, if they lost there would be a lean season.

The features of the Benandanti blurred their creed into being witches themselves: they could recognise witches, they knew their spells and they could heal from them.

Four times a year they were called to battle: on the Thursdays of the Ember Days¹. They were called to their duty by a familiar, and went to the battlefield only in spirit, while their bodies were left as dead. If their body was moved while their spirit was away, they would die. They fought, armed with fennel, against the malevolent witches, armed with sorghum. The battles were not the only features during their meetings: there was also dancing, and playing games, and other things. The spirit of the Benandanti reached the place appointed for their meeting riding various animals, among which there were also cats, of course. Similarly, the witches they met rode animals, often cats, or were themselves transformed into cats. The latter accused, although defending themselves as being Benandanti, described their deeds more and more often like those usually ascribed to witches, or linked to them by very strong connections: thus a woman² said she fought against a witch transformed into a black cat (the witch) while she was a white cat.³

4.1.5 The Witches of Liguria

At the same time, on the other side of northern Italy, in Liguria, there took place the famous process to witches in Triora. In that region the witches were called *bàssure* or *bazure*, depending on the various dialects of the region. In 1587 thirty-three people

The Shining by Stephen King of 1977, who can see the spirit of dead people and communicate telepathically with others like him (the hotel's chef), was born with a caul.

¹ Any of four groups of three days (always Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday) of prayer and fasting, the groups occurring after Pentecost, after the first Sunday of Lent, after the feast of St Lucy (Dec 13), and after the feast of the Holy Cross (Sept 14) (Collins Concise definition).

² Maria Panzona, tried in 1618 as described in Ginzburg, Carlo, *Stregoneria e Culti Agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1979, ch. 4.

³ The cult of the Benandanti, from its appearance to its merging with witchcraft, was fully studied by Ginzburg, Carlo, *Ibid.*

were prosecuted because held responsible of the death of many infants and of great tempests which destroyed vine crops for three years in a row. Under torture, they also confessed of conniving with the devil and of causing the death of two men¹. Although none was eventually sentenced to death at stake by the Genoese tribunal, many died during the imprisonment of consumption or because of the tortures they were subject to².

One of the methods used in this region too to detect if a person was in league with the devil was the shaving: finding a mole, or an extra nipple, or any other bump on the supposed witch's body meant that he or she were nurturing his/her servant spirits with it. Any spot was taken for a devil's seal or sign with which the person had been marked by his/her supreme master.³

In Ellera, another village in the Ligurian hinterland, the witches were said to meet in a cavern and to stroll about the village in the form of cats, in particular after the French invasion of the Napoleonic army, when the soldiers had forced them to abandon their usual resort⁴. Anyway, also in the Ligurian folklore cats were the most frequent animals in magical practices, together with cocks, wolves, scorpions, toads, bats, owls, lizards, and dogs⁵. Cats and dogs were also servant spirits: in this case they were usually black, being black a devilish colour, and they helped the witches in their wrongdoings because they were actually demons in disguise⁶.

4.1.6 Alchemy

All through the Middle Ages and in the Modern Era there was also another figure who was often identified with that of the witches, or whose deeds were easily confused with those of the witches: the alchemist. Alchemy has its roots in the most ancient times, being recognisable among almost all ancient populaces. Western alchemy usually refers to Ancient Egypt as its main source, with its profound

¹ One of them was poisoned with a concoction of a red-haired man's blood and the brain of a cat.

² Dall'Aglio, Gian Antonio, and Anghel , Federico, *Liguria*, Novara, Istituto Geografico DeAgostini, 2009, pp. 302-303.

³ Delfino, Giuseppe, and Schmucker, Aidano, *Stregoneria, Magia. Credenze e Superstizioni a Genova e in Liguria*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1973, p. 68.

⁴ Delfino and Schmucker, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ Delfino and Schmucker, *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ Delfino and Schmucker, *Ibid.*, p. 45.

knowledge of nature's powers and the importance it gave to its priests and magicians. Alchemy is a mixture of philosophy and various different sciences, which often mingled with magic: until the development of the modern sciences, with their direct application during the industrial revolution, it was the only way to reach the lore outside a Christian sphere. This hunger for wisdom of the alchemists, though, was not accepted either by the Church, which fought it since the beginning of the 14th century, or by the secular powers, who disregarded their secrecy and condemned it hard. The main goal of the alchemists was to find the philosopher's stone, with which they could have obtained the transmutation of any material into gold, they could have gained a thorough wisdom, and they would have had eternal life. Alchemists were sometimes confused with witches, prosecuted and sometimes even condemned to death.

The increased interest in witchcraft of the early modern period, and its connections to cats, led to a mounting attention towards the animal by alchemy, too, and medicine. Many cures suggested the use of different parts of a cat's anatomy, as reported by Edward Topsell¹ in his History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects of 1607. He dedicated a whole chapter of his book to the cat, from its first encounters with humans in Ancient Egypt, through the various cats' races known at the time, to his days, entrusting various previous authors. Among other things he states that eating cats was common, especially in France, and reports how to prepare its meat properly, in order to free it from its natural venomousness, due to the venomous animals the cat feeds upon (rats, mice, etc.). To treat a gout he suggested, for example, taking it from Galenus², to anoint the sick part with the fat of a cat, and blindness could be cured blowing the fine ashes of an incinerated completely black cat into the eye three times a day. The gall of a cat was instead the basic ingredient to treat convulsions and to induce a still birth, as reported from Pliny^{3,4}.

¹ An English cultured curate, c. 1572-1625.

² Galen of Pergamon, philosopher and physician of the 2nd century.

³ Pliny the Elder, Roman author of the encyclopaedic work Natural History, who died during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

⁴ Topsell, Edward, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects, Vol. I*, London, Routledge, 2013.

4.1.7 A New School of Thought Sets in

The witch hunt interested all of Europe, with some differences between countries. It strikes the most thinking of the cruelty of such a hunt if we compare it to the general idea of the historical period. Most historians in fact talk about a renaissance of arts and science which started in the 14th century, but also of a modernization of politics and of free thinking which would lead to the Modern Age and Enlightenment.

It was the era of the great explorations, which would bring the Europeans to discover new parts of the globe which they did not even know the existence of. All this discoveries took place by sea, and cats were co-protagonists of them all. Cats, in fact, continued to be embarked to save stocks from vermin: they were embarked on trading vessels to safeguard goods, but also on long-run ships to safeguard the stockpile for the crew. Thus, the cats would reach the New World with the European settlers and colonize America too, and later they would do the same in Australasia, were there was no endemic species similar to them.

Towards the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century the number of processes for witchcraft began to decrease steadily, but only few European countries issued laws that declared that witchcraft was not a crime any longer, and executions continued to take place. Holland was the first country to declare witchcraft illegal in 1610, followed by others, although some intolerance continued over the following decades, at least until the middle of the 18th century, when the last witch execution is registered, in Bavaria¹.

4.2 The Venetian Republic

From as early as 697 to 1797 Venice was the capital city of a large territory and it was a great maritime power. It surely was a cosmopolite entity, notwithstanding its many contradictions, like the construction of the first ever Jewish ghetto, and it was not touched by the infamy of the witches hunt. In fact, although some people were accused of witchcraft in its territories, none of the investigations resulted in death

¹ Swan, Madeleine, *Ibid.*, p. 96. The Bavarian witch was accused of owing three cats, which were actually demons in disguise.

penalties. Moreover, they mostly dealt with some kind of rural mystification, like of people accused of curing with herbs or divining the future. The connection of these people to the devil and its misdeeds was apparently of no interest to the Venetians¹. On the contrary, the most common familiars of these two entities, the cat, was.

The Most Serene Republic of Venice was founded in the Early Middle Ages, at the end of the 7th century, when the first doge was elected. It owed most of its wealth to the initiative of its merchants and the skill of its ship builders, and it was for decades an economic and trading power and its possession stretched on the Adriatic coasts from Italy to Dalmatia, Albany, Greece, Crete and Cyprus, and its trades were guaranteed in the ports of the Black Sea, the Middle East, Northern Africa and even Flanders.

In 1614 the Italian Pietro della Valle² embarked from Venice for a long trip that would last about 12 years to the orient. He was a man of many different interests, from music to history, he was an art and book collector, and he reported many information from his travels that disclosed the Eastern world to Europe. Among other things, he is acknowledged as the first to import the Turkish Angora breed to Europe³, admired for its long coat and plumed tail, which would become an emblem of nobility for its refined, aristocratic manners.

Like many other important cities, Venice is famous for its pigeons, who regularly invade Saint Mark's Square, the biggest and most important square of the city. It is also famous for its cats, and for the *gattare*, the people (usually women) taking care of the stray cats of the city, who regularly bring them food at dusk. Cats benefit of a good reputation in the lagoon city and have always been employed as safe guardians of stocks, which were vital to the welfare of its inhabitants. In particular, cats have always had a lot to do to help the people to get rid of rats, which have always found themselves at home in such a damp place, with a whole city standing on wooden poles, and many many things ready at hand to be gnawed away. The rats in Venice, locally defined *pantegane*, are of a particularly nasty breed and

¹ Pattacini, Alberto, *Misteri, Crimini e Storie insolite di Venezia*, Roma, Newton Compton Editori, 2013, and Brugnera, Michela and Siega, Gianfranco, *Donne Venete di Treviso, Padova e Venezia fra Storia e Leggenda*, Venezia, Ed. Manuzio 2.0, 2010, p. 110.

² 1586-1652.

³ Vitoux, Frédéric, *Passi Felpati. Dizionario Amoroso dei Gatti*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2008, p. 218-222.

can sometimes be very big, even as big as a cat¹. There were 40,000 cats in Venice before the Second World War², but there are only about 2,000 nowadays, partly looked after by DINGO, a cat welfare charity founded in Venice in 1969. Thanks to the intervention of the charity, the Venetian administration created a shelter for cats on Saint Clement Island in 1989 to assist all cats in need. When the island was sold to private citizens in 1999, the shelter moved to Malamocco, on the Lido of Venice³.

Cats were reportedly highly renowned by the Venetian merchants because of their utility, but also by the Venetian nobility because of their beauty and their haughty countenance. One of the most glorious doges, Francesco Morosini, who reigned from 1688 to his death in 1694, was allegedly fond of his kitty and always took it along to battles. Apparently, this fondness was brought forth by the ginger colour of the cat, which matched perfectly with the doge's hair. When the cat died, the doge had it embalmed with a mouse between its front paws, and its body is still preserved in the Natural History Museum in Venice.

In the 16th century Venice housed many engravers and print houses. One of these, founded by Giovan Battista Sessa the Elder had a cat in his editorial logo, with a mouse in its mouth. The logo was then carried on by Sessa's heirs. That of Sessa, though, was not the only editorial logo representing a cat, either with a mouse or crouched. Another famous one is that of Giovan Battista Bidelli, operating in Milan in the first half of the 17th century. This underlines, once again, the strong bond that links books, libraries, writers, lore, and cats.

A poor cat of Venice was the tabby which belonged to the guardians of the Saint Mark's Campanile, the bell tower that collapsed on 14th July 1902. The cat was (altogether luckily) the only victim of the collapse which took place in the morning of that summer day.

The most famous cat in the Venetian area, though, is probably the so called *gato de Ciosa*, the cat of Chioggia. Chioggia is a small town about 20 km south of Venice

¹ I can personally testify this to be true. One late evening, while walking on a *calle* close to Via Garibaldi, I saw an orange cat crouched by a wall, staring intensely in front of it. I involuntarily watched the same way, and I saw a huge rat, dark in colour and almost as big as the cat, intent on rummaging in the rubbish. I realized the cat was not getting ready to jump on a possible prey, but was frightened by it, and was waiting for the rat to go away.

² Marascutto, Pauline and Zane, Anna, *I Gatti di Venezia*, Maniago PN, Nuove edizioni dolomiti, 1990.

³ www.dingovenetia.it (last accessed on 29th December 2015).

across the lagoon. It is on the water too, and it is therefore also known as Little Venice, with its many boats, canals and bridges. The famous ‘cat’ is actually a lion but it looks very small, like a cat. Its smallness is emphasised by its standing on a high and majestic pillar in Piazza Vigo on the northeast shore of Chioggia, overlooking the lagoon, and it is the object of many different legends about its origin. Chioggia belonged to the Venetian Republic and, like all the cities of the Republic, had to have a lion, symbol of the dominating Venice. The rivalry between the two cities, though, was great and it is said that people from Chioggia did not want to spend much money for a reminder of their rulers. For this reason, they commissioned the lion to a cheap sculptor, who was cheap because not very good. Once he finished carving the lion, it did not look good at all, so he tried again, modelling the same block of Istrian stone¹. And he continued until the lion was good, ... but small. Another version of the story affirms that the people from Chioggia had it done so small on purpose, to ridicule their rivals and rulers. The Venetian version of the story talks about a cat that was fed up of being chased by the winged lions from Venice, and sought refuge in Chioggia, on the top of the majestic pillar where even the lions could not reach. The lions waited for it to come down perched on the nearby Ponte di Vigo, and they waited so long that they lost their wings and turned into marble. They are still there, facing the square were the pillar with the cat stands.²

4.3 Kattenstoet in Ypres

Nowadays, in Ypres, in north-west Belgium, a Cat Festival is held every three years, on the second Sunday of May. The tradition started in 1938 and, though stopped during World War II, it has been held ever since its end. It involves a big parade, where giant cats file in the streets of Ypres together with other gigantic figures representative of the town’s history and folklore. The event closes with the singular throwing of the cats from the town’s belfry. The cats thrown down are actually toy soft cats, and people under the tower stand with upraised hands trying to catch one.

¹ The Istrian stone is a type of limestone that characterises many constructions of the Venetian soil and, in general, on the Adriatic shores.

² Pattacini, Alberto in *Misteri, Crimini e Storie insolite di Venezia*, Rome, Newton Compton Editori, 2013, dedicates a whole chapter to *Il Gatto di Chioggia*.

This particular show has its roots in the beginning of the 15th century, when Ypres was a city which prospered thanks to the cloth industry. Cats were then employed to safeguard the stocks of wool from its collecting until the annual fair, when it was going to be sold, to keep rodents away from the stocks. Apparently though, the number of cats increased fast and when they were no more needed, they were hurled by the town jester from the tower in order to control their number¹. This cruel habit was due to the fact that cats reproduce quite easily, therefore they were always abundant in number and considered of no value. The last throwing of live cats took place in 1817, and then faded into oblivion until its facetious revival in the 20th century as a tourist attraction and a way to remember Ypres with joviality and not just as a battle field of World War I².

4.4 Saint John's Fires

Another tradition which dates back to medieval times but is still in use all over Europe and America is that occurring on the day the Church dedicates to Saint John the Baptist. Since the Gospels say that Saint John was born 6 months before his cousin Jesus, his birth is celebrated on 24th June³. The day is very close to the summer solstice, therefore the two feasts have mingled in some places in a mixture of pagan and christian festivity. In any case, bonfires are still lit as a general celebration, quite often on Saint John's Eve, the 23rd June, rather than on the very day of the festivity.

Saint John the Baptist is the patron Saint of many Italian cities, among which there is Genoa, where his ashes are believed to lie since their recovery from Asia Minor in the 11th century. The Maritime Republic, whose welfare had always been strongly linked to the sea, made him its patron in the 14th century after Saint John was held responsible of calming down a terrible storm which was bound to destroy the city port and all the ships there harboured. Nowadays bonfires are still lit on the Ligurian shores on the night of Saint John's Eve and embellished by fireworks and

¹ For more information about the Kattenstoet, see the event's internet site: www.kattenstoet.be (last accessed on 20th December 2015). The next Cat Parade (44th edition) will take place on 13th May 2018.

² Ypres was in fact destroyed during the First World War, and then reconstructed exactly as it was in its most splendid Medieval times, when it was a rich and prosperous city.

³ Celebrating the birth of the Saint instead of his death underlines the importance this Saint has in the Catholic Church. Only Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in fact, share this privilege with St John.

feasting, while the patron Saint is religiously celebrated the following day in Genoa with a pompous procession to the sea shore. Similar celebrations are held in many other parts of the Italian peninsula, from the Alps down to Sicily.

Since Medieval times and until the 18th century the Saint John's bonfire in Paris was of particular interest to our history of cats. It was held in the Place de Grève (now Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville) on the right bank of the river Seine. It was a sadly renowned site, where most of the public executions took place, hosting the gallows for people to be hanged and the pillory for those condemned to whipping. On Saint John's Eve a big bonfire was built on the square, and a sack or basket full of cats was tied to the stake. Then the fire was lit, and when it burnt the container the cats would fly in despair, mostly up the stake until they fell intoxicated by the smoke or singed, and they died screaming among the flames while the enthusiastic mob assisted. The days before the celebration, bandits would search the streets for strays (but any cat would actually be good to the purpose) to sacrifice on the bonfire, and they would get paid for their errands.¹ Anyway, Paris was not the only French town where such a celebration took place², and many other animals beyond cats were doomed to end their days in a similar way.

4.5 Cats in Art

Many people say that there is a strong link between cats and artists, because they both can look beyond reality. This capacity, in cats, had been demonized for centuries by the Church perceiving in it a connection to Evil. On the contrary, it is at the base of the fondness most artists have always shown towards this animal. There are many examples of it throughout the history of art, and in the Renaissance period, when works of art were often commissioned by the Church and had Christian subjects, cats appear quite often and the interpretation of their presence is still open to debate. I do not agree with Detlef Bluhm when he states that it was the opposition of the Church to cats that tightened the bond between them and artists who wanted to

¹ Prieur, Jean, *Gli Animali hanno un'Anima*, Rome, Ed. Mediterranee, 2006, pp. 194-196.

² Darnton, Robert, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, New York, Basic Books, 1984, pp. 83-85.

free themselves from the ecclesiastical legacy¹. In my opinion, the strong bond between cats and artists simply survived the opposition of the Church, in a diffused dualism that characterizes almost every aspect of humans' lives.

In particular after 1750 cats began to be considered as individuals and no more just as symbols or representatives of a singular category. Thus, while at first especially in sacred paintings, cats were portrayed as images of evil, in later works of art they interpreted themselves as useful rat catchers or amiable furry companions to children games, and their presence grew a lot.

4.5.1.1 Cats... in Wood

An incredibly lively life-like tabby cat is displayed on a massive inlaid bookstand in the Tuscan Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. It is a wondrous marquetry work by a monk, Fra' Raffaele da Brescia, who made it around 1520. In the plinth it presents a cat in profile with its face turned to stare at the onlooker. It is portrayed under an astounding architectural piece, a magnificent arch sustained by three rows of columns in the lower level and smaller arches in the upper level. In the background there is a quiet hill landscape with trees and houses. The cat is shown in a very natural posture, with its tail curled up over its front paws. What is most interesting about this masterpiece is the contrast between the peaceful majesty of the portrayed cat and the general idea of the link between such animal and the devil. Moreover, the fact that the cat is portrayed on a piece of furniture that holds a holy book in a consecrated church is fascinating.

Anyway, this is not the only cat present in the Benedictine Abbey. Others were portrayed, together with other animals, in the frescoes painted by Il Sodoma² in the cloister between 1505 and 1508 and representing the life of Saint Benedict. In Saint Benedict Feeds the Monks a long table is portrayed with the monks sat down to eat.

¹ Bluhm, Detlef, *Ibid.*, ch. 1.

² His real name was Giovanni Antonio Bazzi. Born in Vercelli in 1477, he died in Siena in 1549. He painted 17 frescoes illustrating the life of Saint Benedict in Monte Oliveto Maggiore. Giorgio Vasari wrote quite nastily about him and his dedication to his work and reported that the monks of the Abbey used to call him Il Mattaccio (The Madcap) due to his gaudily dressing, his attitude towards making jokes and his often dirty talking and behaving. Vasari also reported of him hosting a strange miscellany of animals in his house, from cats and dogs, to horses, crows and squirrels, and many others. Vasari, Giorgio, *Le Vite de' più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, e Architettori: Secondo et Ultimo Volume della Terza parte*, Firenze, Giunti, 1568, p. 530, also reported in Della Valle, Guglielmo, *Lettere Sanesi Sopra le Belle Arti*, Rome, Giovanni Zempel, 1786, p. 231.

In the foreground a cat, with its back arched, is facing a dog over a scrap of food on the floor. In another scene on the saint's life, Florenzo tries to Poison St. Benedict, a cat is again in the bottom front of the fresco, under the laid table, after St. Benedict has been offered a poisoned loaf by a monk who wants to kill him.

4.5.1.2 Lorenzo Lotto

A famous example of the presence of cats in Renaissance art can be found in Lorenzo Lotto¹'s Recanati Annunciation, an oil on canvas painted around 1534. The painting depicts the inside of a room with a big window opening on a loggia. On the right side there is an angel holding a white lily in his left hand with his right arm bent and pointing up, to God among the clouds. Kneeling on the left side of the painting there is the Virgin Mary with her hands raised to her face in surrender, looking straight at the onlooker. In the empty space between them, a frightened tabby cat runs away from the angel. Some want to see in the cat – the only dynamic figure in the composition – the image of the devil which runs away from the emissary of God, sensing the oncoming redemption of humanity and therefore its own end. Some others see a poor cat in distraught, upset by the sudden apparition of another person in the room. Although the first demonic version is quite attractive, this latter reading simply considers the cat a cat, and takes into consideration the normal behaviour of any household feline that would run away disturbed by the novelty. Probably, if there were a succession of paintings, we would have a second one with the cat slowly approaching the angel, sniffing at his robes, and purring in search of a cuddle.

4.5.1.3 Barocci's Madonnas and Cats

Another Annunciation with a cat is that painted between 1592 and 1596 by Federico Barocci, a painter from Urbino. In this altarpiece of the Basilica Saint Mary of the Angels in Assisi, the top register is occupied by God that looks down from the clouds to the deeds of his angel, kneeled in front of the Virgin Mary and intent giving her the news. The sacred episode is set in Urbino, whose Ducal Palace can be seen in

¹ Born in Venice in 1480, he died in Loreto around 1556. He moved a lot through Italy and worked for various clients, also in peripheral areas where he spread his style.

the background from an open window, and in an everyday context, thanks to the cat sweetly sleeping on a chair in the foreground. Barocci inserts a cat also in another sacred painting, titled Madonna of the Cat, now at the National Gallery in London. As the title by which it is mostly known forebodes¹, a cat shares the scene of this graceful painting. Set in the bedchamber of a renaissance house, it portrays the Virgin Mary with the suckling Jesus in her arms and the young John the Baptist propped up beside her on the same low stool, with Saint Joseph leaning over her shoulder to assist at the scene. The attention of them all is attracted by a cat standing on its hinder legs and playing with John, who is teasing it holding a scared goldfinch in front of its nose. Barocci painted still another Madonna of the Cat, not as famous and kept in Florence, at the Uffizi Gallery. In this case the painting, which has recently been restored and brought back to its original splendour, portrays the visit of the aged Elizabeth and Zachary with young John to the holy family. Right in the middle of the scene, a tabby cat is lying on Mary's robe milking her kittens and on the alert for the newcomers. The presence of the feeding cat, an animal that is renowned for the particular care it reserves to its offspring and for its fertility, strengthens the familiar sense of homeliness and motherhood of the whole scene and underlines the centrality of the two female figures^{2,3}.

4.5.1.4 The Last Supper

Other painters inserted cats in their works of art, and especially in the Last Supper, a subject which often sees a cat in opposition to a dog to represent the dichotomy between good and evil which accompanies the event. The last supper is a moment of particular importance to Christianity, because it provides the scriptural basis of Eucharist, the sacrament that summons the devotees to share the bread recalling Jesus Christ's body and the wine recalling his blood. It is narrated in all the

¹ The original title was The Madonna and the Child with Saint Joseph and the infant Baptist or The Holy Family with a Cat. It is an oil on canvas painted between 1577 and 1580.

² Goffredo Silvestri, *Ecco il capolavoro della gatta. Rinasce ma rimane a Firenze*, La Repubblica – Arte, 6th November 2009. The author of the article does not invest the cat with any particular, mysterious, or symbolical significance, noting that a voluptuous robe is simply the most obvious place for a cat to lie down.

³ An exponent of the art of the Catholic Counter Reformation Federico Barocci, who was born in Urbino about 1526 and died in the same city in 1612, was used to insert pets in his usually very colourful sacred paintings, but not just cats. We can see a dog, for example, in the foreground of his Madonna del Popolo (Madonna of the People) and Ultima Cena (Last Supper).

four Gospels of the New Testament, and it recounts the last supper Jesus shared with his apostles in Jerusalem before being arrested and later crucified thanks to the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. Since the Gospels of Luke and John say that Satan had entered into Judas and made a traitor out of him, a cat often appears from where Judas is sitting. The natural antagonism of dogs and cats, and the presence of both animals in common households made the rest.

One of the painters who often depicted a cat in his works was Jacopo Bassano¹, who used to draw simple country life scenes. In his L'Ultima Cena (The Last Supper), an oil on canvas which he painted in 1542 and now preserved at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, a dog is peacefully resting, curled up right in the middle front of the picture, while a nasty looking cat is sneaking in from behind Judas's stool on the right. The evilness of the cat and its league with the devil is underlined in this case both by the fact that he is hiding under the traitor's seat, and by its cruel aspect.

Also the more renowned Venetian Tintoret² depicted the Last Supper. He made seven different versions of it, for various churches around Venice. The last and most famous one, a big oil on canvas painted in 1594 for the presbytery of the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, includes a cat, but to a much different outcome than the Bassano's. Here, in the middle front of the canvas a curious ginger cat is taking a look inside a basket, while a playful dog at its heels looks ready to engage in some play with it. The daily routine they emphasize, together with the servants busy in the preparation of supper is here in contrast to the angels appearing from above and the unnatural light emanating from Jesus Christ, who is uncommonly placed on one side of the painting with his apostles.

Since the first of Tintoret's Last Supper, dated 1547 and on display in the church of San Marcuola, a cat has often been present on the scene. In San Marcuola, it is on the right side of the painting, sitting on the floor between the table with Jesus and the apostles and a figure with two children, which has been identified as Charity (while

¹ Born Jacopo Dal Ponte in 1510 in Bassano del Grappa, a town about 70 km from Venice. He worked for the Venetian Republic and died in Bassano del Grappa in 1592.

² He was born in Venice in 1518 of a dyer, thereof his nickname. His real name was thought to be Jacopo Robusti until few years ago: in 2007, in fact, Miguel Falomir, head of the department of French and Italian painting at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, revealed that his real surname was Comin, being Robusti a nickname of his father. See Falomir, Miguel ed., *Tintoretto*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2007, p. 22.

Faith is the other woman figure on the left side)¹. Another Last Supper, painted by Tintoret about 1561, normally exposed in the church of San Trovaso, was recently displayed in Milan, at the Holy See pavilion of the international Expo. The scene portrays the confused moment soon after Jesus has declared one of his apostles is going to betray him. On the left side of the painting, a cat appears from behind one of the apostles' stool², quite playfully, to emphasize the realistic sense of everyday life dictated also by the servants, the books piled up on one side, and the mantels heaped up on the handrail on the left. In the 1580 version of the Last Supper, now in the church of Santo Stefano, the table where Jesus and the apostles are performing the first Eucharist is on an upper level, while on the steps leading to it there is a man and a woman to symbolize Charity, a dog extremely attentive to what is going on, and a child who is on the contrary distracted by a cat³.

In almost all the other Last Supper painted by Tintoret, as well as in his Washing of the Feet, another event recounted in the gospel of John⁴ and pertaining to the same happening, only a dog is present.

At the Museo di San Marco in Florence there is a fresco of the Last Supper painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio⁵ about 1480. It is a most common representation of the event, with the table shown plainly and horizontally with only one apostle portrayed with its back to the onlookers, without a halo and therefore easily recognizable as Judas Iscariot. Above the heads of the commensals a rich flora is depicted, to resemble the richness of heaven, with birds flying by and a magnificent peacock. Only one animal is painted inside the dining room, instead: it is a grey cat, calmly sitting behind Judas's stool and looking straight at the spectators. Although it is a quiet and calm presence, commonly waiting for some scraps from the table, it is also disquieting in its composure, as if it were an omen of the evil events to come.

¹ Cosma, Alessandro, *Sub Specie Panis: L'Ultima Cena a Venezia del Cinquecento*, in *La Civiltà del Pane. Storia, Tecniche e Simboli dal Mediterraneo all'Atlantico, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio, (Brescia 1-6 dicembre 2014)*, Archetti, Gabriele, ed., Spoleto, Centro Studi Longobardi. Ricerche 1, 2015, pp. 1357-1382.

² Not Judas', because the traitor is on the other side of the table, fallen off his stool.

³ Cosma, Alessandro, *Ibid.*

⁴ 13:1-15.

⁵ His real name was Domenico Bigordi, born in Florence in 1449 and dead in 1494 of a pestilential fever in the same town. He came from a family of artists, and he painted three different Last Supper. The one mentioned here is his last, and the only one showing a cat. Papa, Rodolfo, *Ghirlandaio*, Firenze, Giunti, 2008. Kecks, Ronald G., *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, Firenze, OCTAVO Franco Cantini Editore, 1998. Sframeli, Maria ed., *Gatti al Museo*, Livorno, sillabe s.r.l., 2009.

4.5.2 Secular Painting

Of the same period there are many examples of secular paintings that have a cat as co-protagonist: in family portraits, together with children or, mostly, with women, or in common scenes of everyday life. It is uncommon to see a man portrayed together with a cat, since cats and women were typically linked to the house, while men were typically connected to life outdoor with dogs or horses. Moreover, the cat is usually not idealised in these paintings, but it finds its place as a realistic element, out and about in some ordinary feline activity¹.

In 1570 a Fleming painter, Jan Van Der Straet, better known with the Italian pseudonym Giovanni Stradano², realized for the Studiolo of Francesco I in Florence a beautiful and very realistic oil on slate called Il Laboratorio dell'Alchimista (The Alchemist's Laboratory). The Grand Duke of Tuscany was keen on alchemy, and the painter portrays him in the laboratory in rolled-up sleeves while stirring a strange substance in a pan on a stove. The laboratory is crammed with busy people, burning stoves, fuming alembics and pots. Right in the middle of the scene, partly hidden, there is a crouched ginger cat, intently observing the scene with dilated pupils. It has a quite frightened look, whereas its presence is not news. The cat is a nightly animal, just as alchemy was a nighttime activity, assisted by the moon, which is so well resembled by the growing and waning pupils of cats. The cat is also in connection to evil forces and alchemy tries to rule natural forces to go beyond them. Somehow then, the presence of a cat in an alchemist's laboratory, could even be considered like a domestic scene.³

Another cat appears in the foreground of a painting dated 1646, menacingly facing a dog. The painting is the bizarre Self-portrait of the Austrian artist Johannes Gump⁴. There are actually two versions of the painting, one preserved in a private collection in Germany, and the other exposed at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. This last one is a round shaped oil on canvas, and it is actually a triple self-portrait. The

¹ Rogers, Katharine M., *The Cat and the Human Imagination. Feline images from Bast to Garfield*, Ann Arbor MI, The University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 34.

² Giovanni Stradano was born in Bruges in 1523 but, from 1550 onwards he worked mainly in Florence for the families Medici and Pazzi. He also met and worked with Giorgio Vasari, and died in Florence in 1605.

³ Baroni Vannucci, Alessandra, *Jan Van Der Straet detto Giovanni Stradano Flandrus Pictor et Inventor*, Roma, Jandi Sapi Editori, 1997.

⁴ Very little is known about this artist, born in Innsbruck in 1626, except his self-portraits.

artist in fact portrayed himself three times: from behind, in the act of making his self-portrait, on a canvas on an easel, and in a mirror. We have thus three different views of him while, in his laboratory, he works unconcerned by the activities of the house pets¹.

Also in the Uffizi in Florence there is another beautiful oil on canvas, painted about 1725 by the Italian artist Giuseppe Maria Crespi². The work, titled Donna che Lava i Piatti (La Sguattera) (The Scullery Maid) shows a woman from behind, in a kitchen, washing the dishes. On the right side of the painting, a tabby cat is resting on a thatched chair by the fire. It is a most common view of indoor everyday life, showing the classic association of women and cats, of both and the kitchen as their most natural place in the house and, as in real life, the cat draws the attention of the viewer because of its apparent detachment.

Almost in the same period³ the French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin handed in at the Royal Academy his most famous painting, La Raie, dit aussi Intérieur de Cuisine (The Ray)⁴, which portrays a domestic scene. It is divided into two parts: on the right side of a table, there lie common instruments which pertain to the kitchen: a skimmer, a jug, a pot, a knife, and others on a white cloth. On the left, there are only subjects pertaining to the animal and vegetable world: fresh onions, two carps and some oysters. The scene is dominated by a dead ray in the middle of the painting, hanged on the wall behind the laden table, with an almost human face and a monstrously ripped body. One live element alone disturbs the stillness of the picture: a tabby cat, on the table on the left, which is tempted by the oysters.

¹ Carman, Charles H. and Hendrix, John Shannon ed.s, *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, p. 178.

² He was born in Bologna in 1665 and was a very prolific artist of his time until blindness forced his retirement, well known and appreciated in Italy and abroad. He died in 1747 in his native town. Santucci, Andrea ed., *La Mostra di Giuseppe Maria Crespi*, Bologna, Ente Bolognese Manifestazioni Artistiche Pinacoteca Nazionale, 1990, pp. 17-22.

³ In 1728.

⁴ This oil on canvas is kept at the Louvre, in Paris. Its author was born in 1699 in Paris, and rarely left the city. As a mature artist he was granted a pension by Louis XV and a studio and living quarters in the Louvre. He died in 1779. Rosenberg, Pierre ed., *L'Opera Completa di Chardin*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1983 and Rosenberg, Pierre ed., *Chardin. Il Pittore del Silenzio*, Ferrara, Ferrara Arte, 2010.

4.5.3 Cats in Modern Literature

In the 18th century the position of cats was not yet all clear. They had been considered the familiars of witches, their helpers, and in league with the devil over the past centuries. Yet their social utility, especially in the countryside, keeping the number of rats in their area under control, or keeping good company to people in their houses, was not underestimated. Among the accepted cat lovers of the period there is the French writer François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif who published in 1727 Les Chats (The History of Cats), a book in defence of cats that peruses the history of this noble animal from its Egyptian origins and underlines the cat's playfulness and independence, but also its innate elegance. The book though cost its author cruel satires and mocking, and shook his credibility as serious author.

4.5.3.1 Cats in Fables

In the same year, in England, John Gay¹ published Fifty-one Fables in Verse, among which two, the twenty-first and twenty-third, have cats as co-protagonists. The Rat-Catcher and Cats, examines the contrasts between two categories called upon to fulfil the same task. The Old Woman and her Cats, focuses on the difficulties of a witch and her familiars, to moralize on the tendency of judging people upon the company they keep².

A more famous fabulist had been, on the French soil, Jean de La Fontaine who, from 1668, had had his Fables Choises (Fables) published. Among the other animals that enliven his fables, there are a few cats too, of course, which are mostly valued for their ferocity and for their acting ability. La Fontaine re-adapted or drew inspiration from fables of the ancient times, but also added something of his own, and cats usually play a nasty part. They are often a menace to mice and rats. Conseil Tenu par les Rats (The Rats in Council Assembled) illustrates the proverb "easier said than done": a pack of rats meet in assembly to decide how to face the ferocious cat that is slaughtering them, and the proposal of attaching a bell to its neck to hear its approaching sounds good to all. Only, nobody dares doing it, and the assembly is

¹ 1688 – 1732.

² Gay, John, *Gay's Fables: In One Volume Complete*, Philadelphia PA, Mathew Carey, 1808, pp. 34-35 and pp. 37-38.

over. Le Chat et le Vieux Rat (The Cat and the Old Rat) draws inspiration both from Aesop and Phaedrus, and exalts the prudence of an old rat that alone escapes the traps set by the cat. In Le Cochet, le Chat et le Souriceau (The Cockerel, the Cat, and the Young Mouse), which moralizes on judging from one's appearance, a mother mouse instructs her unwary son not to trust the neat, beautiful, fluffy animal that is the cat, because it is a terrible enemy to their gang. In Le Rat et l'Eléphant (The Rat and the Elephant) a cat appears in the last stanza and pounces on a vain rat, suddenly stopping its prattling. In Le Chat et le Rat (The Cat and the Rat) a mouse sticks to its diffidence towards the cat's honesty, though the latter professes differently. In Le Vieux Chat et le Jeune Souris (The Old Cat and the Young Mouse) the rat-catcher gobbles up the small mouse, although it has tried to get some mercy. But rats and mice are not its only preys. In L'Aigle, la Laie et la Chatte (The Eagle, the Wild Sow, and the Cat), taken from Phaedrus' Aquila, Feles et Aper, a wicked cat peacefully shares a hollow trunk with the other animals and all their offsprings to dwell in. One day, the wicked cat tricks the other two mothers into fearing each other. They are so afraid of each other that they do not leave their dwellings any longer, and they starve to death with their litters. The cat's slyness is here taken as example of one of the bad things of the world released by Pandora. In Le Chat, la Belette, et le Petit Lupin (The Cat, the Weasel, and the Little Rabbit) we find a cat called upon to redeem a dispute between a rabbit and a weasel that has occupied its dwelling. The cat kills them both, offering a moral on the foolishness of the small states that rely on the bigger ones for justice. In Le Chat et la Renard (The Cat and the Fox) it even outwits its diabolical friend the fox sheltering on the branches of a tree, while the fox is taken by a pack of hounds on the chase¹.

4.5.3.2 Cats in Fairy Tales

The most famous literary cat of the time, though, is surely Le Chat Botté (The Master Cat, most commonly known as Puss in Boots), written by Charles Perrault².

¹ De La Fontaine, Jean, *Favole*, Milano, RCS Libri, 1997.

² He was born in Paris in 1628 of a prosperous family and died in the same city in 1703. He committed himself to various arts and crafts, assisting Jean-Baptiste Colbert, for example, in the designing and building of the magnificent palace and gardens of Versailles for Louis XIV. He published his fairy tales in his later years, using his son's name as pseudonym.

This multifaceted French scholar is considered the inventor of fairy tales, although he was not the first to recount them. The very phrase ‘fairy tale’ was actually coined by a French noblewoman, the Baroness d’Aulnoy, who published¹ in 1697 a collection in four books titled Les Contes des Fées (Fairy Tales). In the frame story, the Baroness herself reads the tales from a notebook, to some nobles, hosted in a royal mansion. At first, fairy tales were written by women, and they were very common at the French court. They were considered a low quality literary genre, because they had very popular origins. Nonetheless, fairy tales were quite diffused among the bored nobility, as courtly jokes, together with charades, riddles or proverbs. Also the Baroness d’Aulnoy wrote a fairy tale whose protagonist is a cat. It was included in her second collection of fairy tales, Les Contes nouveaux ou les Fées à la mode (New Tales or Fairies in Fashion), published in 1698, whose frame story is titled Les Nouveau Gentilhomme Bourgeois (The New Gentleman-Citizen). The second book of this collection opens with Les Chatte blanche (The White Cat) which recounts the story of an aging and mean king, who sends his three sons away on difficult and weird quests for three times. The youngest of his sons, the most amiable and beautiful one, ends up in a wonderful, rich palace, inhabited by cats, whose queen (the white cat of the title) provides him with whatever he needs to satisfy his father’s requests. In the end, the white cat proves to be an enchanting princess, struck by a nasty spell and with a sad past, but far richer than the king and very generous. She marries her prince, but also his brothers and his father would get benefits from their marriage².

Charles Perrault was the first French man to start writing fairy tales. Sensing this kind of literature as slightly degrading, he too did not use his real name when publishing the tales, in a collection titled Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé avec des Moralités (Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals), later known as Contes de ma Mère l’Oye (Tales of Mother Goose)³. The collection contained Puss in Boots. It was not, of course, his genuine work: the seven folk tales of his collection had popular origins, and belonged to the popular folklore. Puss in Boots, though, had already been

¹ Under the pseudonym of Madame D...

² De Chatelain ed., *Little Folks’ Books*, New York, Leavitt & Allen, 1857.

³ Raynard, Sophie ed., *The Teller’s Tale. Lives of the Classic Fairy Tale Writer*, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 2012, pp. 47-58.

put into writing at least twice: once by the Italian Giovanni Francesco Straparola¹, who published in Venice Le Piacevoli Notti (The Facetious Nights) about 1550, and once by the Italian Giambattista Basile², whose Lo Cunto de li Cunti (The Tale of Tales) in the Neapolitan vulgar language was published posthumously in 1636. Both are a collection of tales, nestled in a frame story³.

In Straparola, the story takes place on the Venetian island of Murano, where five people in turn every night tell a story to while away the hours more gladly, together with music and dancing. On the eleventh night, Fiordiana tells the story of a Bohemian woman, who dies in poverty and has nothing to leave to her three sons except some kitchen tools to make bread, which go to the older brothers, and a cat, which goes to the youngest. The boy's name is Costantino Fortunato and the cat proves the best of bequests because, thanks to its cunningness, it first wins food for his master from the king's table, and later the princess for his wife. As in the better known story by Perrault, the cat can talk (and it is openly described as enchanted), and offers its services to the downcast boy, who is here also mocked by his older brothers, who do not share their little wealth (the charity of others, to whom they lend the inherited kitchen tools) with him. The cat catches hares for the king, telling him they are a present from its rich master – who is here introduced by his real name, Costantino. The cat then shares with the boy the food it has access to from the king's table in reward for the proffered game. Like in Perrault's story, Costantino is handsome and can behave, but in this case he is also described as tortured by scabies and ringworm, and the cat has him to have a good bath in the river and licks him properly to help him get rid of the infections. Then the scene of the fake robbery and the near drowning takes place: in Straparola's version, the cat narrates that Costantino was going to the king's palace loaded with jewellery when some bandits deprived him of everything and threw him in the river in order to kill him. The cat's screams call the attention of the king, who sends his courtiers to help. Well dressed and

¹ c. 1480 - c. 1557.

² c. 1566 - 1632.

³ Both had been translated into French and were therefore easy accessible to the French literates. Blamires, David, *From Madame d'Aulnoy to Mother Bunch: Popularity and the Fairy Tale*, in Briggs, Julia, Butts, Dennis, and Grenby, Matthew Orville ed.s, *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2008, pp. 68-86.

refreshed at the king's expenses, Costantino looks so good the king decides to give him his daughter's hand. He is still missing a befitting dwelling, but the cat comes again to his help. Running in front of the carriage with the married couple, it imposes anyone it meets to say the lands they are treading belong to Costantino, even the castle overlooking the estate. Luckily for our heroes, the owner of that castle is away on some love errands, but he has an accident and dies¹. Soon after, the Bohemian king dies too, so the whole realm would be Costantino's and his heirs'².

Nearly a century afterwards, Basile wrote his collection of folk tales, also known as the Pentamerone, (thus remarking its resemblance to the Decameron, written three centuries before by the Tuscan Giovanni Boccaccio and developing over ten days, while Basile's work develops over five days). Here, too, the tales are nested in a frame, which gives the start to the narration of all others. The whole story is set in Naples and it lasts five days, with fifty tales recounted altogether, including the frame story. The narration that resembles Puss in Boots takes place on the second day. It is the fourth story being told that day, and the title is actually Cagliuso. There are some differences between this tale and the older one. Here, in fact, there is a destitute man (not a woman) who dies leaving to his two sons just a sieve (to the elder) and a cat (to the younger, called Cagliuso). While the boy complains because he cannot make a living out of the cat, the cat quiets him and offers to help, reassuring the boy that it can make him rich and well off. Being the story set in a coastal city, the cat goes to catch some fish for the king, or retrieves some hunters' game to present in the name of its lord Cagliuso. The king is so happy with all this attention, he wants to meet the master of the cat. On the day appointed for the visit the cat tells the king that its master has been robbed of all garments by a fugitive servant and cannot turn up at the castle, so the king sends him his clothes and underwear. They have a banquet together, during which Cagliuso feels the need to be reassured by the cat that his rags are not lost, thus warning the reader of the voidness of the boy. When Cagliuso takes its leave, the cat praises all its master's good qualities to the king, and the great riches

¹ He was going to his newly wedded wife, to fetch her and bring her to his castle, too. He dies before even reaching her abode.

² Straparola, Giovanni Francesco, *Le Tredici Piacevoli Notti*, Venezia, Giovanni de' Picchi e Fratelli, 1578, pp 267-271.

owned by its Lord in the north, and offers to show them. So the king sends some trusted men with the cat, and the cat plays the usual trick of making everyone they meet on the way say that the lands belong to Cagliuso, this time threatening them that some bandits are coming and that that name would keep them safe. Once reassured about Cagliuso's riches, the king offers him his daughter for wife, together with a great dowry. Counselling by the cat, Cagliuso buys lands in Lombardy with it, and he becomes a Baron. The festivities for the wedding last a month, after which the couple leave for their new estate, while Cagliuso thanks his cat for all it has done and promises to show his gratitude even after its death. The cat decides to put its master to the test, and pretends to be dead. At this point, Cagliuso turns out to be totally ungrateful, asking his wife to throw away the corpse. The cat, hearing his words, shows all its indignation and decides to leave his house¹.

Charles Perrault, then, put down in writing a story which had already been read for nearly 150 years. Due to its probable popular origins, there existed different versions of it, but it is nonetheless very interesting to notice that these versions had many similarities, and that they belonged to different parts of Europe². In Perrault's version, a miller dies (a man, like in Basile), who has three sons (like in Straparola), and the youngest inherits a cat. No names are given: neither the miller's nor his sons'. The cat can talk and is very cunning, and it helps his young master to reach wealth. For the first time in its literary history, though, the cat makes a specific and weird request before doing the dirty work: together with a sack, it asks its master to provide it with a pair of boots. Not a full set of four, one for each paw, but just a pair, thus convincing on the spot the readers that it can stand and walk on his hinder legs, like a human being. He is also the first tomcat of the series – *chat* being masculine, while the Baroness wrote about a *chatte*, feminine, and Straparola and Basile about a *gatta*, feminine again. The rest of the story resembles the other two. The cat catches some game for the king, and says it is a present from the Marquis of Carabas. One day, knowing that the king is going to pass by the river, it orders to its master to have a bath, and then it cries for help because the boy is drowning and pretends some thieves

¹ Basile, Giambattista, *Lo Cunto de li Cunti*, Milan, Garzanti, 1986, pp. 325-333.

² The brothers Grimm too would actually insert a version in their collection of fairy tales, though they removed it later.

have taken all his clothes. Hearing it, the king sends for help, and gives the boy some rich garments to get dressed. Thus adorned, the boy looks very handsome, and the princess really likes him. The king takes the 'marquis' in his carriage and, while they go, the cat forces the people it meets on their way to say that the lands belong to the Marquis of Carabas. When it gets to a magnificent castle, it plays a bad trick on the ogre-magician who inhabits it, and wins it over for its master and for the princess his wife, whose hand the king is willing to offer him, now he has seen how rich the Marquis of Carabas is. They would all live merrily rich ever after. The moral teaching Perrault adds to this tale deals with the importance for young people to use cunningness to reach welfare, instead of just inherit it, and the centrality of beauty and youth to be in a princess's good graces¹. What appears clear is also the mischievous behaviour of the cat: although we can appreciate its helpfulness towards the poor and desperate boy its master, and praise its wittiness in turning him into a very wealthy person, we cannot but blanch in front of its wickedness towards the poor owner of the castle, who is nastily cheated and killed without a reason, since he has done no harm to anyone in the story. The natural characteristics of the cat are again summed up in this booted example: its devotion to the master lived in total freedom of action, its hunting ability, its selfishness in its quest for prosperity, its cunningness towards apparently vulnerable preys.

The king is fooled by the sharp spirit of the cat, and offers his daughter's hand to a half-starved, penniless man, just because he is handsome and apparently rich. This is probably the aspect of the tale that better highlights its popular origins: on the one hand it suggests there is a chance for poor people to gain wealth through sagacity and a good friend, on the other hand it is a revenge taken on the ruling classes, which usually looks down on the lowest classes and have now their blue blood infected by the foulest one.

¹ Perrault, Charles, *Il Gatto con gli Stivali*, in O'Mara, Lesley ed., *Gatti d'Autore*, Rome, Newton & Compton, 2005, pp. 208-212.

4.5.4 Cats in Music

Many authors report A Catch on the Midnight Cats, of the second half of the 17th century, as the first musical composition dedicated to cats. It was apparently written by the English organist and composer Michael Wise¹ and it compares humans and cats in their search for love:

Ye cats that at midnight spit love at each other
Who best feel the pangs of a passionate lover,
I appeal to your scratches and battered fur
If the business of love be no more to pur.
Old lady Grimalkin with gooseberry eyes,
When a kitten knew something for why she was wise,
You find by experience the love fit's soon over
Pus, Pus last not long but turns to catwhore.
Men ride many miles, cats tread many tiles,
Both hazard their necks in the fray,
Only cats if they fall from a house or a wall keep their feet,
Mount their tails, mount their tails and away².

The catch is for voices only and is 'disturbed' in the background by typical cats' noises, like hissing, spitting, meowing and so on.

There is, though, another, earlier example of a musical composition where the cat is co-protagonist, together with a dog, a cuckoo and an owl. It appears, in fact, in a humoristic piece written by the Italian Benedictine monk and composer Adriano Banchieri³ called Contrappunto Bestiale alla Mente (The Counterpoint of the Animals) and it is inserted in the musical comedy Il Festino della Sera del Giovedì Grasso Avanti Cena (The Party for Fat Thursday Dinner)⁴. It dates back to 1608, and mingles Latin to vulgar. It is a composition for five voices, with an introduction in

¹ 1648-1687.

² [http://www.horntip.com/mp3/1600s/1600s--1960s_the_restoration_revised__pro_music_erotica_\(LP\)/07_a_catch_on_the_midnight_cats.htm](http://www.horntip.com/mp3/1600s/1600s--1960s_the_restoration_revised__pro_music_erotica_(LP)/07_a_catch_on_the_midnight_cats.htm)
(last accessed on 9th January 2016).

³ 1568-1634.

⁴ Somma, Bonaventura ed., *Capolavori Polifonici del secolo XVI*, vol.1, partitura n. 522, Roma, Ed. A. De Santis, 1608, p. XII.

the vulgar tongue, and then a bass singing austere in Latin but superimposed on the cries of the four animals. The text delivered in the serious Latin tongue is altogether farcical:

“Fa la la... Nobili spettatori, udrete or ora quattro belli umori: un cane, un gatto, un cucco, un chiù per spasso, far contrappunto a mente sopra un basso. Fa la la...”

Bass: “Nulla fides gobbis; similiter est zoppis. Si squerzus bonus est, super annalia scribe”¹.

Even Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart², one of the most brilliant and applauded musicians of all times and famous for his attraction to comic and burlesque, over one century afterwards (it was 1790, in Wien) would partially³ sign a composition that deals with cats and their multi-modulated meowing. It is the so-called K625, which goes under its first line Nun, liebes Weibchen (Now, dear little wife). It is a brief comic duet for bass and soprano accompanied by an orchestra, in which to the various requests of Lubano, a woodman, his wife Lubanara answers meowing, somehow bewitched⁴. The duet takes place in the second act of the opera, which is set in Arcadia and presents many magical elements.

A famous sonata that resembles a cat walking on a keyboard dates back to 1739. It was published with the name Fugue in G minor by Domenico Scarlatti⁵, and only later it became popular as the Cat's Fugue, although its author never used this name.

¹ “Fa la la... A dog, a cuckoo, a cat and a civet for fun make counterpoint at sight above a bass. Fa la la...”
“Don't put your trust on hunchbacks; the same goes for the lame. If the cross-eyed are any good at all, write it in your annals.” Alwes, Chester L., *A History of Western Choral Music. Vol. 1*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 87-88.

² 1756-1791.

³ Mozart apparently only orchestrated this duet, which is part of an opera written by Emanuel Schikaneder called Der Stein der Weisen, oder Die Zauberinsel (The Philosophers' Stone, or The Magic Island) which was the work of five composers altogether.

⁴ Nun, liebes Weibchen, ziehst mit mir, / mit mir der stillen Hütte zu. // Was redst du da? Sag's nur heraus! / Nicht wahr? Nun bleibst du gern zu Haus. // Der Teufel hol das Miaugeschrei! / sag bleibst du mir alleine treu? // O weh! O weh! Ich armer Mann! / sie ist behext, was fang ich an? // Du armes Weibchen dauerst mich, / ist keine Hilfe mehr für dich? // Vielleicht hilft Eutifronte noch. / Komm, komm, er wird uns verzeihn. (Now, dear little wife, come with me / with me back to our quiet hut. // What did you say? Speak more clearly! / Isn't it true that now you'll gladly stay at home? // The devil take your meowing! / Tell me, will you remain faithful to me alone? // Oh woe! Oh woe! I am a wretched man! / She is bewitched, what can I do? // You poor little wife, I pity you. / Is there no help for you? // Perhaps Eutifronte will still help us. / Come, he will forgive us.) Buch, David Joseph ed., *Der Stein der Weisen*, Middleton WI, A-R Editions, 2007, xlix-l.

⁵ 1685-1757.

As the legend goes, the Italian composer had a cat called Pulcinella that used to walk across his keyboard, and this gave him the tip to write down the unusual motif of this fugue. The fugue, performed with a harpsichord, has gained in popularity since the 19th century and is still very much appreciated.

Probably the best known musical piece fully dedicated to cats is the Humorous Duet for two Cats, commonly attributed to another Italian composer, Gioacchino Rossini¹ and which dates back to 1825. Its lyrics consist of a single word (Meow) repeated and variously modulated through the whole aria by two sopranos, and is still commonly performed at concerts as encore. It is a funny exercise for the singers, and for the audience too, because of the interpretation and facial distortion it usually brings forth.

In 1838 the Polish pianist and composer Fryderyk F. Chopin² published his Waltz in F major Op. 34/3, later known as the Cat's Waltz which, like Scarlatti's Fugue, is said to have been suggested by a cat walking on the keyboard of the artist's piano. Although this is only a legend and no evidence survives about the origins of the waltz, the seemingly improvisatory theme of the piece, its brevity and vivacity make the nickname very suitable.

These examples of musical pieces variously inspired by cats or dedicated to them are just a tiny extract of the world wide composition up to the 19th century. Sometimes this pieces are a demonstration of sympathy for the animal, some others they merely sprung out of annoyance arisen by the vicinity of the animal. The selection is simply dictated by my personal taste. I believe they are of particular interest because they are attractive and exciting to me – and I am no music expert, but a common listener.

¹ 1792-1868.

² 1810-1849.

Contemporary Cats

The centuries of the witches came to an end in a situation of great turmoil for all the western world. The nation states of Europe were facing many situations of uproar inside and outside their national boundaries. In 1783 England definitely lost its colonies beyond the Ocean, and in 1789 the frustration of the French population towards its noble rulers led to the blowout of the French Revolution. It would bring to the destitution and death of the royal family, along with many members of the aristocracy and their supporters. The French civil war would witness the emergence of a new military figure, that of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was bound to influence the European history of the following decades, and beyond. His campaign to Egypt, for example, brought with it a new consciousness of a glorious past, which had been lost for ages. The influence of his supremacy over most of Europe spread his sets of laws in almost every contemporary domain, thus unifying somehow the various state administrations. His revolutionary wars ended with the defeat at Waterloo and were followed by a period of Restoration of the situation as it was before the French Revolution, with the return of former reigning families on the European thrones. It was a period of wars and upheavals which was seeing in parallel also the birth of two new classes: that of the bourgeoisie and of the working class, which was crowding in the cities. In the meantime, in fact, the industrial revolution was at its highest, spurred by constant technical developments and new discoveries. The nineteenth was a century of social disquiet, with the birth of new political movements and a general consciousness raising of the involved subjects. Only one century after Napoleon's campaigns, the war boundaries would greatly enlarge with the outbreak of the First World War, followed at short distance by the Second World War and its rise in cruelty, and then the global cold war. What strikes the most in the wars of the 20th and 21st centuries is their entirety: they do not involve only the specialized armies any longer, but they affect the civilians as well and spread a sense of terror among the common people.

Cats continued to fare quite well anyways, and adapted to every new situation. They have made it through all vicissitudes quite successfully and have gained a new

blissful status in many parts of the world. Still, the new centuries have brought welfare to cats as well as to their fellow humans, but have also presented some of them with demanding owners and new fashions. This led, for example, to some people wanting to dominate them and bend them to their own needs. That is the case of cats living in flats, with no chances to go out, being declawed to stop them from scratching the furniture, which is a new form of torture in the name of modernity.

5.1 Cats and Food

Food for cats and cats as food become issues of importance in this particular age. The growing affection of people towards these animals, and the decreasing popular fears towards them, have led to an increase of both uses. Reserving special scraps of food for the house pet has always been a regular habit for a cat lover. Buying specially prepared, canned food for it is a nowadays reality. In the first half of the 19th century the city of London knew a particular figure, to whom the well-being of many cats was usually bound. It was the cat's meat man. This person would stroll the city roads with cheap cuts of horse meat to sell: the meat was not meant for humans' consumption, but for the pets'. Horses were used both for private and public transport in the city at the time, and once they grew too old, they would invariably end up as food for the other animals, together with pieces of meat which had eventually become unfit for humans to eat. Thus the cat's meat man would always have something to offer to the pets at an affordable low price. The activity of the cat's meat man was described, together with that of basically all other street traders of the time, in the work of Henry Mayhew¹, a journalist who wrote a series of articles about the poor people of London in the 1840s that were later collected in his book London Labour and the London Poor. According to him, there were 1,000 cat's meat men operating in the city, and about 300,000 cats. Most of the carriers were men, and drunkards, but there were also some women, and they all wear a sort of uniform with a blue apron and a handkerchief (or more) round their neck².

¹ Born and dead in London, 1812-1887.

² Mayhew, Henry, *London Labour and the London Poor; A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of those that Will Work, those that Cannot Work, and those that Will not Work, I vol.*, London, George Woodfall and Son, 1851, pp. 181-183 and 208.

Although in Europe the spirit of benevolence of the age towards the animal caused some improvement in their esteem, especially among the higher classes, still it must not be forgotten that animals are a source of nourishment for the omnivorous human beings. Now that the cat is no more watched with an evil eye because of its venomousness, it can also be prepared and served at table. Luckily for the feline, this does not happen too often in Europe, although there are some savoury recipes dedicated to it.

It is well known, though, that war brings famine. For nearly a century Europe was almost constantly crossed by wars, and the cities under siege could not get supplies from the surrounding country, and had to sustain themselves with whatever was available. And cats have always shown they can reproduce easily in any situation, and thus be a ready-at-hand source of food. Just ask any person who has survived a war: cats and rats were equally appreciated for food, although usually regarded as pets and pest¹.

5.2 A New Way of Perceiving Cats

The 19th and the following centuries have also been a very intensive period of technical and scientific progresses. New medical instruments to help in the diagnosis were developed, and in the United States the application of anaesthetic was discovered. The British naturalist and geologist Charles Darwin² developed his theory of evolution, and the Moravian Gregor Mendel³ established many of the rules of heredity studying the pea plants. One of the most important innovator of the period was the French chemist Louis Pasteur⁴, who developed the germ theory of disease and whose studies are at the basis of vaccination.

Among other things the discoveries of the 19th century highlighted the importance of hygiene to prevent the propagation of illnesses. Cats, with their love for cleanliness to which they devote many hours a day, licking and preening themselves, hit the headlines especially of the well-off classes.

¹ For example, Vitoux, Frédéric, *Ibid.*, p. 120 reports that during the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870 the fliers with food prices clearly included also rat and cat.

² 1809-1882.

³ 1822-1884.

⁴ 1822-1895.

In the 19th century the consideration towards the animals generally changed. In 1824 the Society for the Prevention of the Cruelty to Animals was founded in London, and received its Royal status by Queen Victoria¹ sixteen years later, thus becoming nowadays RSPCA. It has since operated in England and Wales providing health assistance to distressed animals, fighting against animal abuse and helping rescued pets to be rehomed².

Another step in the specific enhancement of cats was the final establishment of pedigrees for them, as was already common among dogs. Harrison William Weir³, a British artist, involved himself in this operation and became known as ‘The Father of the Cat Fancy’⁴. In July 1871 he organized the first cat show, which took place in London, and he was one of the judges. It was held at the Crystal Palace, a magnificent palace made of plate-glass and cast-iron, built in 1851 to host the first Great Exhibition of that year. In 1895 there would be the first American Cat Show, with the display of 150 cats in Madison Square Garden in New York City. The propagation of cat shows in the diverse nations led also to the creation of National Cat Clubs, to establish the rules for cat shows in each State. The British one was founded in 1887 by Weir, who served as its president for a few years⁵, and in 1889 he wrote a manual on the cat show organization to help spread this fancy⁶. Cat clubs define the characteristics of every single breed, which determine the participation of cats to the shows. These characteristics, though, are not unique but they vary from State to State, and add nonsense to the question of breeding ‘pure’ pedigreed animals.

The grown respect towards the cat, anyway, and the improved medical techniques, also introduced the use of female spaying. While the neutering of males was already in use, as for many other farm animals, females were usually left to themselves and continued giving birth to kittens which were often killed to avoid

¹ Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to her death in 1901, was herself an animal lover. She is reported to have had some dogs, but also cats. One in particular, her beloved angora White Heather, survived her and was then adopted by her son King Edward VII. Stall, Sam, *Ibid.*, p. 72.

² www.rspca.org.uk (last accessed 15th January 2016).

³ 1824-1906.

⁴ Hampshire, Krister; Bass, Iris; and Paximadis, Lori, *Cat Lover's Daily Companion. 365 Days of insight and Guidance for Living a Joyful Life with Your Cat*, Beverly MA, Quarry Books, 2009, p. 18.

⁵ www.nationalcatclub.co.uk (last accessed 15th January 2016).

⁶ *Our Cats and All about Them: Their Varieties, Habits and Management; and for Show, the Standard of Excellence and Beauty*, Lenox MA, Hard Press Publishing, 2012.

overpopulation¹. The practice of spaying females has improved the general welfare of cats and it allows humans to abstain from murdering fluffy kittens.

5.3 Famous Cat Lovers

The renewed affection towards cats has shown off almost everywhere, still with great exceptions. While it is reported that cats are still being eaten in some Asian regions, or their fur is used to embellish common, everyday clothes – thus meaning that house pets are spoiled for human use and abuse – it still makes people smile when we hear of some powerful person being kind to his/her furry companion. Therefore, while we can smile at Socks, the Clinton's black and white cat who was among the few to enter the White House usually crammed with dogs, or its British counterpart Churchill's cat, who used to be present even at formal gatherings, we cannot help but sneering at the Popes' cats or other powerful Church representatives'. It is well known, for example, that Cardinal Richelieu, whose fame stood out in the first half of the 17th century, loved to be surrounded by his house cats, right in the middle of the witch hunt and all its implications. But also the more recent Italian Pope Paul VI² was a cat lover and had a cat living in his Vatican apartments, and the retired German Pope Benedict XVI³ as well. They are just a small example of the new feeling of the Church towards all animals as God's creatures, typical of the 20th century – even cats, which were once so much opposed because believed to be in league with the devil.

The affection towards cats is also very diffuse among artists, who insert them in their works of art in various ways, thus showing their fondness for them. Among many others, I would like to remember the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire⁴. A contemporary of the novelist Emile Zola⁵, who is also reckoned among the cat lovers and of Alexandre Dumas⁶ with whom he founded a Feline Defence League⁷, Baudelaire dedicated various poems to cats. His passion for felines shows through them, but also in the narrations of contemporaries, according to whom

¹ Swan, Madeleine, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

² Born Giovanni Battista Enrico Antonio Maria Montini, he was Pope from 1963 to 1978.

³ Born Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, he reigned from 2005 to 2013.

⁴ He was born and died in Paris, 1821-1867.

⁵ He was born and died in Paris, 1840-1902.

⁶ 1802-1870.

⁷ Swan, Madeleine, *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Baudelaire tended to ignore anyone present if he was in the company of a cat. He was captured by such a complete devotion to his furry friends that nobody else in the world could matter¹.

Another innovation of the 19th century, photography, supplies us with many images of famous people portrayed in a domestic context with their beloved cats. I can think of Mark Twain, Henri Matisse, Ernest Hemingway and Peggy Guggenheim – just to say a few.

5.4 Cats at Work

Although many anti-cats people assert that cats are useless animals, only good to reap a sackful of hairs, there are various spots around the world where cats are actually employed to do their favourite job: ridding the place of vermin. Cats have been performing this activity for the good of human beings – together with their own amusement – since the earliest of times, and they have been employed for centuries on ships for this aim. They have also been employed by the public administration in post offices to the same purpose (with a special budget destined to their support), in train stations, and in the trenches during the wars. Useless to say that private industry has employed them as well in warehouses and depots to safeguard their stocks².

A place where they showed their ability is Cyprus. On the south coast of the Island, in the Akrotiri Peninsula, there is a small monastery whose history dates back to 327 AD, when the first little church was built there. Apparently, the whole island at the time was drought-stricken and overrun with snakes. It seemed impossible to inhabit it or to carry on any building activity. Therefore cats were brought in the hundreds to the island to get rid of the snakes and the successful survivors stayed on and continued pursuing their task, fed and drilled by the monks. The peninsula itself was even known for a time as the Cat Peninsula, and there is still a Cape of Cats to underline the importance the felines had in the area. Although the present monastery has undergone follow up reconstructions and renovations, the number of cats that

¹ Swan, Madeleine, *Ibid.*, p. 188.

² Bluhm, Detlef, *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

wander around its premises greatly outnumber the few nuns that take care of the monastery (and of the cats)¹.

The greatest Russian museum is also guarded by cats. Since 1745, when it was still the Tsar residence, Peter the Great's daughter Elizabeth of Russia required a band of fifty cats to be brought to the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg to control the rats' population. When the palace was turned into a museum in 1764 the cats remained to fulfil their task, and they were actually free to roam its richly adorned galleries. The worst period of their history was World War II, when the city was under the German siege for 900 days and the cats died, mostly killed and served for food, but the group was refunded and they still live in the basement of the palace. Nowadays they are mostly a band of stray cats which live together on the museum's premises. They are no more allowed inside the museum, which is guarded by a sophisticated alarm system, but they can be seen in the gardens showing off for tourists. Special staff is hired to take care of them, they are sustained by regular fund-raising activities and charities, and an infirmary has been set up for them too. Their number changes constantly, since people take to the Hermitage stray cats, while others go there to adopt one, but they officially number around seventy².

5.4.1 Hollywood, Here we Come

The great scientific innovations of the 19th century, and particularly in the field of optics, were at the base of the birth of the so-called seventh art, which would have become over time one of the richest worldwide industrial sectors. Many cats have been employed by the film industry over the last one hundred years. Some of them even starred as main protagonists of their films, some were co-protagonists, and some mere extras.

In the 1961 Blake Edward's Academy Awards winner³ film Breakfast at Tiffany's a ginger cat co-stars together with the beautiful Audrey Hepburn and a

¹ Hellander, Paul, *Cyprus*, London, Lonely Planet, 2003, p. 100, and Agnieszka, Majle, and Pasieczny, Robert G. ed.s, *Cyprus*, London, DK, 2006, p. 65.

² <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/06/090612-cats-video-ap.html>.

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/russias-museum-cats>.

<http://observer.com/2015/11/hermitage-museum-also-serves-as-cat-rescue-adoption-center/>.

Last accessed 23rd January 2016.

³ For Best Score and Best Original Song (Moon River).

young George Peppard. It is the companion of the fickle Holly and it actually has no name, being called just 'Cat'. Nonetheless, it appears in almost all the scenes set in Holly's flat, whether it is crammed with guests or empty for Cat to reign upon, waiting for Holly to return home from some of her errands. It draws most of the viewer's sympathy, and emphasizes the beauty of its flatmate with its aloofness and elegance. When, towards the end of the film, Holly abandons it in the streets in a bizarre attempt to run away from her life, it catalyses all the cat lovers' compassion, only relieved when Holly changes her mind and goes back to its rescue. That ginger cat was actually a real Hollywood star in the 1950s and early 60s¹. Its original name was Orangey and was renowned for its real free spirit. Nonetheless, it won a Patsy Award for this film² – the Oscars of the animal world established by the AHA (American Humane Association) to honour Hollywood's animal stars³ and bestowed from 1951 to 1986.

In 1972 Francis Ford Coppola directed the first of a famous trilogy of films, The Godfather, with an amazing cast of Hollywood stars. The opening scene of the film shows an Italian-American mafia family gathered for a wedding. The bride's father is the Godfather of the title, to whom other guests are paying their homage. He is receiving them in his study, surrounded by his most trusted friends, and he has a white and grey tabby on his lap. The cat is relentlessly in search of a cuddle, swinging and twisting between the Godfather's hands, who strokes its head from time to time. What is happening between the man and the cat is completely detached from the conversation that is going on: one of the guests is in fact asking the Godfather to commit a murder on his behalf, to vindicate an abuse suffered by his daughter. The Godfather does not want to fulfil the request, and an apparently placid argument follows – the cat actually diverts the spectators' attention from all this, and makes it appear like mere routine. When the Godfather stands up, thus looking more aggressive and powerful, he puts the cat down on his desk. The cat suddenly quiets and remains still. Although the cat's part had not been arranged and it was apparently

¹ It died in 1963.

² It would win two altogether in its career.

³ PATSY is the acronym of Picture Animal Top Star of the Year. Slide, Anthony, *The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 1043.

not even provided for by the screenplay but a sudden Brando¹'s idea, the behaviour of the cat again intensifies the meaning of the whole scene, as if it is sensing the subtle tension between the humans in the room.

A mere extra is the cat starring in another Academy Awards winner², the romantic fantasy thriller Ghost of 1990. It is the tabby owned by the once happy couple Sam and Molly, newly moved into their new flat, but whose dreams have been drastically taken to an end by Sam's sudden death following an armed mugging in the street. The cat is the protagonist of just one scene, which rests upon the old assumption that cats have strong connections with the underworld. The whole film actually runs on the edge of belief/disbelief in ghosts, spirits, psychics, poltergeists, and so on. In this case, a man (Sam's killer) intrudes the couple's flat in search of something he has not obtained with the mugging. Sam is in the house with him, but he is a ghost and cannot interact with the thug. The only one who apparently perceives his presence is the house cat. When Sam realizes his ex-partner is approaching and might be in danger, he scares the cat into attacking the man and make him flee.

5.4.2 Cartoon Cats

But the greatest success on the big screen has been achieved by cartoon cats. The first one in time was Felix, introduced by Paramount and a star of silent films. It was an anthropomorphic black cat, which could stand on two feet, use its tail at its own will and turn the exclamation or question marks added beside its head to show its surprise or incredulity into weapons. The adventures of Felix started in 1919, and only had a stop with the spread of sound cinema, when it was at the top of its celebrity. The first Felix's film was titled Feline Follies. It lasts less than 5 minutes and shows the hero that neglects its job of protecting the house from mice because enticed away by the attractive Miss Kitty. During its absence the mice ravage the house, so its owner throws it out. Going to Miss Kitty it is welcomed by a band of kittens, so Felix prefers putting an end to it all with gas. All in all, it was a very realistic cat: its round shaped body was nice and pretty, while its sharply pointed ears suggested it was a

¹ The American actor Marlon Brando played the part of the Godfather (and won an Oscar for it).

² Best Supporting Actress (Whoopi Goldberg) and Best Original Screenplay.

cunning and mischievous little pest. It was brave, clever and resourceful, and its timing and movements evoked those of the best ever silent actor, Charlie Chaplin, with whom he even shared the walking in circle when upset or distressed. Its success was particularly big because, for the first time, it was supported by a real merchandising operation made of a set of toys and various objects with its image that helped to increase its favourable outcome¹.

Felix's success led to the production, since 1939, of the comic duo Tom and Jerry, the cat and the mouse, whose stories are based on slapstick comedy. Their stories were first produced by one of Hollywood's majors, MGM, and created by a solid duo, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera. The white and grey shorthair cat Tom is always chasing the small but incredibly strong mouse Jerry who regularly outwits it and wins its case thanks to its cunningness and also luck, sometimes. The two protagonists try to inflict to each other the worst injuries, but remain somehow good friends. The cartoon has been accused of being too violent for the children's audience, although the slaughtering never ends in bloody scenes. The cat, in this case, is subjected most often than not to the mouse's vexations – as in the parallel animated cartoon-in-the-cartoon The Itchy and Scratchy Show in The Simpsons. The Itchy and Scratchy Show is part of The Crusty the Clown Show, watched by basically all the children of Springfield, where the story takes place, and the favourite of Bart and Lisa Simpson, two primary school children. Itchy is a sadistic mouse which constantly kills the unfortunate cat Scratchy, resorting to extreme and uncalled for violence. There is also another cat in this popular animated television series: it is Snowball², the Simpsons' housecat who shares the scene with Santa's Little Helper, the dog. In this case, though, Snowball is the 'real' cat of the fictional series, and behaves just like any other real pet.

On the whole, from the 20th century we assist to a spread of children's products whose protagonists are cats. The contemporary age does not care as much as it used to for order and authority, which can now be overthrown even in educational works.

¹ Bendazzi, Giannalberto, *Cartoons. Il Cinema d'Animazione 1888-1988*, Venezia, Marsilio Editori, 1988, pp. 75-77.

² There are actually various 'Snowball the cat' in the series. Many dies, but they all look the same, so that Snowball simply identifies the housecat.

Cats are a good subject when we come to that, because they are recognized that independence and supernatural connections which can lead their fellow humans into adventures of any kind whereas dogs, for example, are merely followers and companions. They might turn out to be helpful, but they are not conceded the cats' gumption.

The most charming animated cartoon cats of all times, though, surely are The Aristocats, a Walt Disney's production released in 1970 but set in 1910 Paris. Duchess and her three kittens, Marie, Berlioz, and Toulouse live with the retired opera diva Madame Adelaide Bonfamille in her rich house. The old lady decides to have her will written and to leave all her fortune to the cats until they live, and then to Edgar, the butler. Having overheard this, Edgar decides to get rid of the felines and have direct access to the inheritance, so he puts some sleeping pills in their food and brings them to the countryside where he abandons the cats. With the help of a stray, the ginger O'Malley, they manage to return to their house, meeting some very nice characters on their way. But Edgar is still intentioned to get rid of them and entraps them in a sack. Other friends of the cats come to their rescue: the house mouse and horse, and the Scat Cat gang of O'Malley's friends they have met on their errands. All together, they free Duchess and her kittens, and send the butler to Timbuktu. Madame Adelaide changes her will to exclude Edgar and found a charity to house Paris's stray cats, and adopts O'Malley that is now definitely part of the cat family.

What is interesting of this Walt Disney production is the thoroughness in the study of the various cats' characteristics. Whereas Duchess is extremely refined in the delicate way she polishes and smooths her purely white fur, the young Marie is still getting educated and appears quite spoiled though she enjoys some rough play with her brothers. Berlioz and Toulouse too share some typical cats' behaviour. Their artistic nature shows in their names and in the pleasure they get from music and messing a bit with colours and palette. They are not alone, though, because the feline universe would not be complete without the uneducated and noisy stray cats, who enliven Paris nights from the roofs of its scruffy houses.

5.4.3 Cats, another International Feline Success

In 1939 the British, American-born, future Noble prize winner T.S. Eliot¹ published a short collection of whimsical poems dedicated to cats, titled Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats². The 'Old Possum' of the title was actually the author, thus nicknamed by a fellow writer and friend, the American Ezra Pound, who intended to underline with it Eliot's innate caution and reserve³. Eliot wrote the light verse poems for some friends' children and peruses through them most characteristics of cats (and of humans alike): there is the old sage Deuteronomy, the young trickster Mr. Mefistoffeles, the working Skimbleshanks, the railway cat, but also the old and battered theatre cat Gus. Born as a pastime, practical joke, the collection was later put into music by a sold-outs composer, the Londoner Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber. His musical opened in London in 1982 and ran uninterruptedly for 21 years. The following year it also opened in Broadway, where it was rerun for 18 years in a row. It was a great worldwide success, due to the captivating music and the amazing costumes. Lloyd Webber mixes various musical styles, from pop to jazz and even some choral church music. The lyrics are partly taken directly from T.S. Eliot's texts, with little adjustments here and there and few additions. The musical, which runs under the simple title Cats, shows a group of cats in a large junkyard. They are of the Jellicle tribe, there united to perform the Jellicle ball, which takes place once a year and, after it, elect the cat that would ascend to the Heaviside Layer and be reborn into another life. Breaking the theatre's fourth wall they interact with the audience in their desire of introducing themselves as a tribe of cats, to explain who they are and what they are doing there, and that is an occasion also to present some of the bystander cats. In the end, the old Grizabella would be chosen and she alone would be reborn⁴.

¹ He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1888, but he moved to England in 1914 and was naturalized as British subject in 1927. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, and died in London in 1965.

² Eliot, T.S., *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, London, Faber and Faber, 1974.

³ North, Michael, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twelfth-century Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994. P. 77.

⁴ Marsico, Kate, *How to Analyze the Works of Andrew Lloyd Webber*, Edina MN, ABDO, 2011.

5.5 Cats in Art

The increasing fondness for cats could not but show off also in painting, where cats are presented more and more in the act of manifesting their attachment to their human friends, rather than as mere embellishing parts of the setting.

In 1868, for example, Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted Le Garçon au Chat (The Boy with the Cat). In this oil on canvas exposed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, a naked boy is depicted from the back while cuddling a cat. The cat's tail is lovingly curled around the boy's wrist, as if to embrace it, and the cat reaches out with its head towards the boy's face. The two figures effuse a warm and sensual feeling and enrich one another with their voluptuousness. The mysterious sly glance of the boy to the spectator adds some magic to the whole scene and makes it more charming.

Music of course celebrated cats too, with an infinite list of songs and compositions. Apart from the already mentioned musical Cats, completely dedicated to uncover the many aspects of cats' individualities, there are many other examples of cats in music. There is, for example, a grand production of children music displaying cats, which are children's companions at games and are regarded by children as nice, fluffy, hairy balls. Many songs are written and performed by 'serious artists' and are included in their best production.

The Italian singer-songwriter Gino Paoli, for example, issued in 1960 La Gatta (The Cat), an autobiographic song about his cat and the small attic where they lived by the sea.

A much more internationally renowned artist, Freddie Mercury, who was a notorious cat lover, wrote a ballad titled Delilah, dedicated to his tortoiseshell cat of the same name. The song was released in 1991 in Innuendo, one of the most successful albums of the British rock band Queen, of which Mercury was the lead singer. It is clearly an affectionate ode to a beloved cat, whose tender actions are emphasized

'you make me laugh, when I'm just about to cry'
but also the cruelties the cat is inclined to by nature
'you get away with murder so innocent'.

It is clearly a declaration of love towards the artist's little friend that clashes in part with the hard rock sound and the very complex musical composition of other songs of the album.

5.5.1 Literary Cats

In 1812 the Grimm brothers issued the first version of their Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales). Among the others, one of the tales was titled Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten (The Town Musicians of Bremen) which sees a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster share the scene as protagonists. They are of four different farms, and all quite old. They are mistreated by their masters, so they decide to go to Bremen together and make a living there as musicians. They would actually never arrive in Bremen. On their way through the woods they come to a cottage where some robbers have their hideout. Standing on each other's back they make such a mess at the cottage's window that the criminals run away scared to death. The four animals get into the house, have a good meal, and fall asleep. During the night, one of the bandits go back to the house. Everything seems quiet, until the cat opens its eyes and the man mistakes them for embers. Annoyed, the cat jumps at the intruder and scratches his face. Frightened and in pain the robber trips over the dog, which bites his leg. Running out of the house the man is hooped by the donkey while the rooster scares him off with a loud crow. Returning to his companions, the robber recounts that four wicked spirits have taken over their hideout, so they decide to leave the place and the four animals would live there happily for the rest of their days¹. The cat of this tale is old and weak, and prefers lying in the sun to chasing mice. Nonetheless its eyes flares like embers in the dark and its claws are sharp enough to skin a man's face. There is no allusion whatsoever to the fact that the four animals, which are no common friends, decide to embark on an enterprise together. More than this, they are willing to cooperate and they prove it climbing on each other's back when required. The only feature they have in common is the old age, and being ill-treated by their masters who sense their uselessness and would like to kill them, or at

¹ Melvezzi, Anna translator, *I Musicanti Viaggiatori*, in De La Mare, Walter, *Storie di Animali*, Milano, Longanesi, 1984, pp. 192-198.

least leave them to die. The motley gang show they might have seen better days, but they are not done for yet.

The timid but basic presence of the cat in the Grimm's tale, collected from the popular tradition, would soon develop into a more personal involvement of the authors in the cats they would tell the stories of. Over and over, writers of the last centuries have put into writing their affection for their cats, and not just in their works of fiction. Thus we learn about the American Mark Twain's cats-supplied home, and the French Colette's propensity towards them. The Noble prize winner Doris Lessing published On Cats in 2002, where she told of her experiences with her house cats. Charles, El Magnifico or Rufus, the stray that choses to be part of her family, are all described with exquisite tenderness in their definite characters, which make them as vivid as any human¹.

A nice experiment on the cat-human relation was published in the mid-20th century. 'Translated from the Feline and edited by Paul Gallico', The Silent Miaow is, as the subtitle reads, 'a manual for kittens, strays and homeless cats'. The book first appeared in American bookshops in 1964 and the 'Editor's foreword' is essential to understand the joke.

As it seems, one morning someone has left a weird manuscript at his neighbour's front door, who is a publisher, but he cannot do much of the manuscript because it is apparently cyphered. Therefore, he turns it over to Gallico, who has an interest in ciphers and some experience in decoding during the war. Luckily for all the feline world, Gallico understands the enigma: the manuscript is not written in code but it has been typewritten by a cat, that has had some difficulties typing with its paws. What is concealed under the involuntary code is a series of tips and advices given by an expert cat to all its less practised peers in need of some help to win their place into a family and obtain as much as possible from their cohabitation with humans. Unluckily, the final chapter has gone amiss, though it promised some last advice to all kittens we will never know.²

¹ Lessing, Doris, *On Cats*, London, Harper Perennial, 2008.

² Gallico, Paul, *The Silent Miaow*, London, Pan Books Ltd, 1987.

Altogether, it is a funny book that puts into writing what most cat lovers already know: they are not cat owners – it is the cat that is in command. This assumption will do, should there ever be any doubt about it, to include Paul Gallico and all those readers who appreciate his translation in the list of cat lovers.

By the way, I enjoyed every single word.

Conclusion

I love cats – that’s a fact. I like animals in general, and I appreciate all those people who can give some attention to other living beings, whether they are cats, or dogs, or canaries – I do not care. I share the opinion with many others that we, as human beings, are not the undisputed rulers of the universe. There are of course many others who do not care, and consider pets just like objects or things the humans can dispose of at their own will.

This duality of sentiments has always existed, through all historical periods. Reality is never only black or white.

With regard to cats, things do not vary. In ancient Egypt they were sacred animals and there was a special divinity who highlighted all their qualities, but they were also slaughtered in great number to serve as homages to the same deity. Their familiarity with humans had its origin there, but the capacity of cats to adapt to very different situations helped them to spread all over the world. And everywhere they had to face that same dual welcome of affection and aversion through the ages.

The most ancient populations who got in contact with cats left some proof of their proximity to this small feline that embodied the same qualities of the big predatory cats, but was well disposed towards a community life of reciprocal advantage. The natural propensity of cats to lead a solitary and independent life could be put aside in exchange for some ready-at-hand food and maybe extra cuddles.

This overview has focused mainly on Europe, and the general antipathy shown there for those animals for centuries, when they were held allegedly in league with evil forces – the witches’ familiars that assisted their owners in magical deeds. Still at that time, while some people threw them among the flames of pyres to be burnt alive, cats had some friends, in their owners at least. They fared quite well when people focused more on their usefulness as rat catchers, rather than on their aloofness and their secrecy as night wanderers.

Progress and the developments in science and scientific discoveries turned the general aversion to cats into a new consciousness of their cleanliness and suitability to indoor life. Their innate elegance did the rest to turn them into the perfect house

pets of the middle and upper classes, which paraded their social position through their possessions.

Nowadays cats benefit from the vicissitudes of their ancestors, though they still face daily contradictions. While laws are set in their defence, and penalties provided against those who treat them¹ cruelly, still many cats are abandoned by their owners or killed, sometimes with sadistic methods. The increasing interest towards animal welfare led to many laws being issued over the latest centuries in their defence. A turning point in the defence of animals came in 1978, when UNESCO² pronounced the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights³, which recognises all animals as sentient beings, and therefore tries to relieve them of indiscriminate exploitation. Many countries have a National Cat Day (17th February in Italy) and there is an International Cat Day to celebrate your cat on the internet (8th August). Social networks and the internet, in general, are crammed with lovely pictures of cats, posted by their owners or other sympathisers, though at the same time there are people who serve cat's meat at their tables or have them skinned alive to have clothes embellished with their fur.

Contradiction is one leitmotiv of history, and cats have not been immune to it, in a perpetual succession of displays of love and hate.

¹ As well as other animals.

²The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture, headquartered in Paris, which supports peace among nations through moral and intellectual solidarity.
<http://en.unesco.org/> (last accessed 2nd February 2016).

³ http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/temi/p2_6.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=226&area=cani&menu=benessere (last accessed on 2nd February 2016).

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