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The Boat to Cyprus

Itravel to Cyprus. Unlike Syria, this involves a safe and comfortable journey. From the scientific angle, too, Cyprus provides an excellent alternative. The whole island is a kind of outsize laboratory for early agriculture. It enables you to observe developments step by step, as clearly as in a time-lapse film.

On the mainland, where agriculture first developed, it is hard for researchers to tell whether cereals, leguminous plants, goats and sheep are wild varieties or the result of deliberate breeding and selection. It takes centuries of cultivation and breeding to develop the characteristics typical of cultivated varieties.

There is no such problem on Cyprus, which lacks nearly all the wild varieties that complicate the picture. This is because the first Cypriots arrived on the island by boat, with everything they needed for farming on board.

The story is almost like the biblical tale of Noah's ark. In the Book of Genesis, Noah takes refuge from the Flood, the result of rain that persists for 40 days and 40 nights, inundating the whole earth. God instructs him to build a huge boat, an ark, and to fill it with animals: seven males and seven females of the 'clean' sort, and a few of each of the 'unclean' sort.

There are many conceivable reasons for the first Cypriots' decision to leave their native region on the banks of the Euphrates and set off on a long, hazardous sea voyage. Floods resulting from heavy rainfall, just as in the Book of Genesis, are one possibility. At that time, immediately after the Ice Age, the sea level was rising and precipitation was increasing in many places, including northern Syria. While the rain made it easier for the first farmers to grow their crops, there may have been too much water at times.

They may also have chosen to leave their homes because the region was beginning to become overpopulated and short

of space. Agriculture almost certainly improved children's survival rate. The population would consequently have grown fast, possibly sparking competition and new conflicts.

Alternatively, the first Cypriots may simply have been driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure.

At any rate, we know they filled their boats with pigs, dogs, cats, goats, sheep and the occasional cow. They also took with them deer and foxes, which they released with a view to future hunting. It seems plausible to assume that they would have taken young animals, which it would have been easier to fit into the boats. They also took seeds with them to grow wheat and leguminous plants such as peas and chickpeas. However, there is no evidence they took vines with them, as Noah did in the Bible; wine seems to have arrived on Cyprus only a few millennia later.

They must have been well versed in building seaworthy vessels and in navigation. The voyage from northern Syria to the nearest promontory on Cyprus was over 80 kilometres (50 miles). There are researchers who believe they even mastered the art of sailing. However, the predominant theory is that they paddled open dugout canoes.

Interestingly, this voyage in the eastern Mediterranean took place at approximately the same time as when people in Scandinavia were developing their boatbuilding skills, which enabled them to settle all the way up the west coast of Sweden and Norway, as I described earlier. However, the first Cypriots' achievement is even more impressive, as they sailed over the open sea. The voyage must have taken something like 20 hours.

Once they reached Cyprus, the settlers could supplement the seeds they had brought with them with barley and lentils, which grow all over the island. They could pick pistachio nuts, figs, olives and plums from trees growing wild. Their cargo included some tools and ritual objects made of stone, but they were quick to find the best flint on the island.

I visit a number of archaeological sites on Cyprus, of which Khirokitia (also spelt Chirokoitia), designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1998, is the most fascinating.

Like most of the prehistoric settlements I visit, Khirokitia is in a beautiful location, on a south-facing slope and immediately above a river. I can glimpse the sea just a few kilometres away. Khirokitia was the site of a fairly large, densely built-up village, full of small, circular houses and surrounded by a high, thick stone wall. The round dwellings, intensely white in the sunlight, would have been visible from a long distance. Some were probably decorated on the outside with patterns executed in red pigment.

Archaeologists and local craftsmen have reconstructed a few houses and sections of walls. They have used the traditional techniques employed by Cypriots well into the twentieth century: outside walls and foundations of limestone and mortar, inside walls of sun-dried bricks mixed with chopped reeds, and flat roofs covered in turf. These building methods have remained essentially unchanged for 10,000 years, except that the houses became square after a few millennia. Locals speak with enthusiasm of how well the traditional houses are suited to the climate; turf roofs and sun-dried clay provide good protection against the heat of summer.

A neatly walled limestone staircase leads up to a gap in the wall. This is the way into the village, which would have enabled the villagers to check who was entering or leaving. However, it is unclear why they would have needed to do so, as there is no evidence of any violent events at that time. Cyprus must have been extremely thinly populated. An archaeologist points out that the wall encircles the western side of the settlement. It may equally well have been designed to shield the village against the strongest winds, rather than human enemies. Alternatively, it may have been intended to keep sheep, goats and pigs out of the houses.

My eyes half closed, I try to picture the scene when the village was full of people. There are fires burning in open courtyards between the houses. Women are seated in groups

in these courtyards, working with large stone mortars. I notice one particular middle-aged woman who is pounding her mortar with circular movements. She is spare and slight, with delicate features, brown eyes and dark brown hair. In fact, she resembles my paternal grandmother, Hilda. A cat lies purring at her side.

There are big, rangy cats on the prowl everywhere. People seem to treat them with a respect bordering on reverence. Though there are dogs too, they are quite small. And children abound.

From the field beyond the wall, people can be heard calling out or talking to one another. Are my ears deceiving me, or is there something reminiscent of modern Basque in their language? The people in the field are bent double. Bearing large, crescent-shaped sickles, they are gathering in sheaves of grain. Up in the mountains I spot a flock of sheep, closely guarded by a few shepherds and their small dogs.

Although visitors are forbidden from entering the reconstructed houses in Khirokitia, you can peep in through the door openings. The windows are open apertures. There is beauty in the fall of the light in the round, limewashed rooms. One of the floors contains a grave. In the grave lies a skeleton in a crouched position, weighed down by a large, heavy stone on its ribcage. The living and the dead occupied the small round houses together. The purpose of the heavy stone on the skeleton's chest, according to the archaeologists' theories, was to prevent the dead from rising.

I ask the archaeologist Carole McCartney, who has lived and worked on Cyprus for many years, why these people chose to make their houses round. 'Why not?' she replies. 'Why do we make ours square today?'

That is a reasonable question, of course. First of all, I reflect that circular houses built in stone and brick are simply a natural extension of circular tents. Nomadic people have always made such tents: a few poles in a ring, leaning in towards the apex, covered with animal skins, foliage, bark or whatever material is available. The forebears of the first

farmers must have had round tents too, which is why they continued to build round houses of stone – simply in line with tradition.

But later I read an article by two researchers working in Jordan, Ian Kuijt and Bill Finlayson, and the penny drops. I am reminded that we still have round buildings, including in Sweden. They are widespread in rural areas. Farmers use round silos for grain storage. The round buildings of the early farming cultures may also have been a type of silo.

Many of the buildings in Khirokitia and other early farming settlements on Cyprus contain the remnants of two stone plinths. Archaeologists think these supported a wooden platform. Such platforms would have served to store grain, protecting it from damp, mould and mice.

Carole McCartney thinks the earliest stone buildings had an important function as storehouses. In her view, we cannot be at all sure that people lived there all year round. At the height of summer, some people may have gone down to the sea to fish, where they may have lived in simple fishing camps of which no trace has been preserved.

She also points out that people are unlikely to have continued living in a house where they had just buried a dead family member. They may have buried the body under the floor and then left the house for at least a year, until only the skeleton was left and the air was clear again.

Ian Kuijt and Bill Finlayson, the researchers working in Jordan, take the argument a step further. They think the circular buildings served primarily as granaries – and that they were a decisive factor when people switched from hunting to farming.

Kuijt and Finlayson have examined several archaeological sites in Jordan, the most important of which, Dhra', lies in the southern Jordan Valley, near the Dead Sea. It was in use at precisely the period when people in the Middle East were beginning to make the transition from hunting and gathering

wild plants as their sole means of subsistence to farming the land.

Archaeologists at Dhra' have found a number of small buildings, all of which are circular or oval in shape. Built of stone and mudbrick, they are partly sunken into the ground. Some appear to have been primarily dwellings. However, there are also some round structures that seem to have been used as granaries. The oldest of these is about 11,300 years old.

Just as in Khirokitia, built over a millennium later, these granaries had raised wooden floors supported by plinths. In many cases the floor would have sloped – awkward in a dwelling, but practical for grain storage. Quantities of barley and oat seeds have been found next to the round buildings, together with stone mortars and storage vessels made of woven plant fibres daubed with clay to make them watertight.

Similar remains of granaries have been found at a number of other sites along the River Jordan, in northern Syria and south-eastern Turkey.

There are no definite signs that the people living in Dhra' actually cultivated grain themselves. They were probably gatherers, just as previous generations had been. They would have gone in search of barley and oats growing wild on the mountainsides, cut the stalks with flint tools and carried the sheaves home to their camp. Everyone there would have shared the food, as hunter-gatherer peoples had always done.

The difference was that the people of Dhra' had begun to develop methods for storing grain for extended periods of time, which meant they were no longer obliged to be so mobile. Increasingly, they could settle down. Young children, freed from the strenuous business of continual migration, were more likely to survive. The population grew, and the very first signs of private wealth and a class-based society began to emerge.

According to Kuijt and Finlayson, grain-storage technology was *the* most critical factor on the way to an agricultural

society. In their view, the first granaries were the threshold to civilisation.

And there were sentinels guarding that threshold.

Two things happened when people began to accumulate large stocks of grain. Firstly, the grain attracted mice. Secondly, the mice attracted cats. People had every reason to be delighted when cats began to eat the mice that were rife in their grain stores. They no doubt did all they could to encourage these cats to stay in their villages, by feeding them, playing with the kittens and even petting the full-grown cats – if the adult cats would let people stroke them.

Today, cats are the world's most common domestic animal. The domestic cat is a close relative of its wild counterpart, *Felis silvestris*. DNA studies suggest that all the domestic cats in the world are descended from a subspecies of *Felis silvestris* living in the Middle East.

It was more difficult than usual to draw up a genealogical table for the world's domestic cats, as tame cats often run off and interbreed with local wild cats. But in 2007 an extensive study was published that compared the DNA of nearly 1,000 wild and domestic cats from all over the world. The results show that the domestic cat's closest wild relatives today live in remote desert areas in the Middle East.

So cats come from the desert. Even today, many domestic cats have retained their natural camouflage colouring; they are still sandy and grey in colour, with stripes on their backs.

For a long time, archaeologists' oldest evidence of domestic cats came from the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Back in the 1940s, a mural painting nearly 4,000 years old of a cat attacking a rat was found in the grave of the provincial governor Baket III. There is also an alabaster vessel of nearly equal antiquity which skillfully depicts a cat, with eyes of rock crystal and copper.

In the necropolis of Abydos, 17 complete skeletons of cats have been found that were apparently sacrificed nearly 4,000

years ago. In recent years, Belgian archaeologists have found even more ancient burial places in Egypt containing the skeletons of cats that appear to have been tame. They were buried nearly 6,000 years ago.

During the millennia that followed, a veritable cult of the cat emerged in Egypt. A number of Egyptian goddesses were believed to take feline form. The best-known is Bastet, who symbolised motherhood and, according to some sources, fertility and sexuality as well.

Temple employees began to rear cats on a truly industrial scale. Visitors to temples could pay for a cat to be killed and mummified. The visitor could then offer up the mummified cat to the gods. Underneath the temples were long subterranean passages whose walls were lined with small niches in which these votive offerings were placed. One excavation of the temple at Bubastis revealed several thousand cat mummies.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, described about 2,450 years ago how people in the Nile Valley worshipped Bastet by holding huge processions, bathing in the Nile, drinking copious quantities of wine and sacrificing cats. That Christianity has often associated cats with the Devil may not be so strange. The early Christians, after all, were confronted by a widespread cult of the cat.

Finds made by French archaeologists in Cyprus have extended the history of the domestic cat by several millennia. When the first settlers came to Cyprus by boat, their cargo included both dogs and cats; there were no wild cats among the island's indigenous fauna.

The oldest remains of cats' bones in Cyprus date back 10,600 years. But the most significant find, from a village called Shillourokambos, is about 9,500 years old. A human being and a cat were each assigned their personal burial place, just 40 centimetres (16 inches) apart.

The human, of indeterminate sex, was around 30 or perhaps a little older. He or she was interred with unusually rich grave goods: a seashell, a stone pendant, a fragment of ochre and several flint tools of different kinds. A further

24 seashells were buried in a small pit right next to the grave.

While the cat was not accompanied by any gifts for the afterlife, it was clearly placed in a newly dug grave of exactly the right size and immediately covered with earth. It was a large, rangy animal – as big as wild tomcats of the subspecies living in the Middle East. About eight months old at the time of its death, it may have been killed to accompany the dead person in the neighbouring grave.

The French researchers believe the two graves demonstrate strong bonds between people and cats. Cats did not benefit people just in practical ways – by hunting mice – but also held a spiritual significance. This view of cats as possessing a spiritual status is also supported by a number of figurines made of stone and clay found in the settlements of the earliest farmers in Cyprus, Israel, Turkey and Syria. A stone cat figurine predating the cat's grave has also been found in Shillourokambos.

One can speculate as to whether the person in the grave was a shaman, a priest or a priestess, with the cat as totemic symbol and closest assistant. The two may have been associated with a combined granary and temple.

In south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria, archaeologists have found a number of large, round stone buildings that stood in the middle of villages. They were considerably larger than the houses there – up to 10 metres (33 feet) in diameter. Just as in Dhra', Jordan, some of them have been interpreted as being granaries. Hiding places containing objects of value such as flint tools, shells and greenstone beads have been found in the walls and the floor. These buildings also appear to have been places where people congregated for ritual purposes. In other words, they were a kind of early temple.

The most ancient settlement in Cyprus that we know of today is called Klimonas. People began to settle there at least 10,800 years ago. Klimonas also had a large round building in the middle of the village. Its inhabitants used flint tools whose appearance shows that their makers were probably from

northern Syria. They also brought both dogs and cats with them, as shown by finds of bones and jaws.

It is quite conceivable that the cat was the first to take the initiative when humans and cats started cohabiting. To that extent, the story of the cat resembles that of the dog; many researchers think it was dogs that domesticated us, not vice versa. But to an even greater extent than dogs, cats live in human society on their own terms. They differ in several significant ways from dogs, as well as from most other domestic animals.

Nearly all other domestic animals originally lived in herds, packs or flocks. This is why they readily know their place in a hierarchy, such as the pecking order in a henhouse, a barn or a family. Wild cats, on the other hand, live alone; they are more solitary animals that get together chiefly for mating purposes. Eleven thousand years of cohabitation with humans have only partially mitigated that trait.

Dogs, and many other domestic animals, have undergone genetic changes making them more childlike. As a result of this arrested development, they have become more like puppies, both psychologically and physically – more rounded, plumper, more good-humoured and playful, less serious and aggressive. Cats, on the other hand, have undergone relatively little genetic change since the times when they lived alone in Middle Eastern deserts. They have remained adult, retaining their wild relatives' traits far more than other domestic animals.

In fact, all this begs the question of whether cats can really be regarded as domestic animals at all. The term used by many researchers is 'semi-domesticated', 'domesticated' being the term for animals or plants bred so as to be of service to humans.

In November 2014, an international research team published a large-scale comparison between the DNA of wild and domestic cats. They identified 13 genes showing

marked differences. These genes have clearly changed in cats descended from those cohabiting with humans for the last 11,000 years. Most of the genes identified express themselves in the brain. They have an impact on fear and on the brain's reward system. Domestic cats also seem to have marginally better night vision. This may reflect an adaptation going back to the time when they used to hunt mice in dark granaries.

The researchers concluded that bold cats which enjoyed being stroked and petted had a better chance of survival around people. Initially, wild cats were attracted to human villages by food, not least the mice proliferating in the granaries. Even then, the most daring cats had an advantage, as they were not frightened off by the presence of humans. Cats that actually allowed people to scratch them behind the ears got on even better. They had a better chance of surviving and having kittens that would also be well cared for. And the more accommodating and ready to learn the kittens were, the more likely they were to live longer and have kittens of their own.

So that's the way it is. The cat's journey towards full domestication continues even today, and many are only halfway there.