

Nonfiction

Directions: Read the passage below and then answer the questions that follow.

Cats in Ancient Egypt

by Rebecca Sparling

Dogs may be man's best friend, but cats occupy a special place in the hearts of many. In the United States, cats outnumber their canine counterparts by about ten million. Comic strips feature funny felines, and organizations across the country are devoted to cats. Since these animals were once worshipped as gods, it's no wonder that cats are still adored by millions of people around the world.

The furry friends that reside in many of today's households most likely evolved from the fierce African wild cat. Often found patrolling the forests and grasslands for their next meal, these creatures resemble housecats but are twice as large. Thousands of years ago, wild cats came to live on the outskirts of one of the world's first great civilizations—ancient Egypt.

The ancient Egyptians built large, prosperous cities along the Nile River. People survived on crops harvested from the fertile soil, and storehouses protected precious grains from floods, but another danger threatened the Egyptians' food supply. Mice and rats could easily travel where floodwaters could not. With the population of these pests soaring, people

worried that the deadly diseases that were carried by rodents could contaminate their food.

Fortunately, the wild cats were expert hunters who kept the rats and mice at bay. People began putting out scraps of food to encourage cats to stand guard near storehouses. The cats not only gained a steady food supply from people, but also

protection from the large predators they would normally have faced in the wild. Over time, people tamed wild cats and welcomed the felines into their homes. Paintings discovered in tombs commonly portray cats as an important part of family life in Egypt.

The cat's popularity soon transformed the creature into more than a mere house pet. Cats had not always been associated with Egyptian deities, but they eventually became tied to the goddesses Bast and Sekhmet. Bast reportedly had the body of a woman and the head of a domestic cat. She was the protector of women and children as well as the goddess of music and dance. Since cats were sacred to Bast, harming one was considered a slight against the goddess. Sekhmet, Bast's evil counterpart, represented the devastating power of the feline. Some thought that this lion-headed war goddess was cruel and vengeful, but in



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time, Sekhmet became known as the protector of humans. Together, these two goddesses symbolized opposing forces in nature.

The ancient Egyptians erected a temple honoring Bast near the town of Bubastis. Because many people believed that Bast could take the form of a cat any time she chose, cats living at the temple enjoyed a life of luxury. For this reason, Egyptian laws protected cats, and the punishment for harming a cat was extremely harsh. Thousands of people across Egypt worshipped Bast. Every year, groups journeyed to Bubastis to pay their respects to the cat goddess. For several days, people sang, danced, and presented offerings to Bast and her feline companions.

From this point, representations of cats appeared in works of art as well as in ornate pieces of jewelry. Many thought that a person wearing a cat amulet had the guarantee that Bast was looking out for his or her welfare. People's reverence for the animal ensured that the protection enjoyed by the cats in Bubastis extended to household pets. When the Greek historian Herodotus visited Egypt, he noted that a family would rescue their pet cat from their burning home before attempting to put out the fire. He also observed what happened when a pet cat died. To show that they were in mourning, family members shaved their eyebrows before mummifying their pet and placing it in a tomb.

The Egyptians' feline fascination continued for many years, but their admiration for the animal eventually caused problems. During the Battle of Pelusium, the invading Persians took advantage of the respect the Egyptians had for certain animals. The soldiers shielded themselves with several kinds of sacred animals, including cats. Because the



Egyptians believed that these animals were the living personification of their gods, they refused to fire at the Persians. The Egyptians decided to surrender rather than risk harming any of the animals.

From Egypt, housecats quickly spread all over the world. The people of Siam considered the animal sacred, and their cats lived in beautiful temples as many had in Egypt. The Japanese also have great respect for the animal. In many homes and businesses, a statue of the cat Maneki Neko welcomes guests and brings good luck. Historians have even discovered records that prove that cats traveled alongside the Pilgrims during their journey to the New World.

Though they are no longer worshipped as gods, pampered housecats still enjoy perks. Cats are more than pets to many; they are family members. Of the many contributions made by the ancient Egyptians to modern society, feline fans might argue that the domestication of cats was most important.

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- 1 Information in this article would be of **most** value to a reader who wants to
 - A learn about the different breeds of cats
 - B teach a cat to be obedient
 - C research the history of cats
 - D compare the popularity of cats and dogs
- 2 According to the article, what was the **main** reason that African wild cats were tamed?
 - F so they could hunt harmful pests
 - G so they could be worshipped
 - H so they could be used in war
 - J so they could become family pets
- 3 The **difference** between African wild cats and domesticated cats is that the African wild cat
 - A only eats plants
 - B hunts mice
 - C lives in deserts
 - D is much larger
- 4 What did the Egyptians give cats to encourage them to guard storehouses?
 - F beautiful temples
 - G pieces of jewelry
 - H leftover food
 - J mice and rats
- 5 How does the author support the idea that cats became an important part of Egyptian family life?
 - A by explaining that many families worshipped their cats
 - B by describing the cat amulets people carried for protection
 - C by making comparisons between wild and domesticated cats
 - D by emphasizing how family members mourned for their cat
- 6 The **difference** between Bast and Sekhmet is that Bast
 - F had a temple honoring her
 - G was thought to be evil
 - H looked after humans beings
 - J had the head of a lion
- 7 How did the Egyptians' love of cats become a problem?
 - A The population of the cats in Egypt got out of control.
 - B Families worried more about their cats than their children.
 - C Egyptians often ignored their other sacred animals.
 - D Enemies used the Egyptians' respect of cats against them.

