EAZ Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift

EAZ 60 (1), 2026, e1770. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/RCKQ3972 • CC-BY 4.0
Submitted: 01.12.2025 | Published: 05.03.2026

Cats – Past and Present: Report on the International Conference in Rome, 19–21 November 2025

Beniamino Mecozzi

Abstract

The international conference *Cats – Past and Present: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (November 2025, Rome) brought together scholars from around the world to examine the multifaceted role of cats in human societies across time. Supported by numerous institutions and private sponsors, the event offered an up-to-date overview of current research on the domestic cat from biological, archaeological and cultural perspectives. Presentations highlighted the significance of cats in diverse cultural contexts, from ancient Egypt to Asia, Europe and the Americas. The interdisciplinary dialogue opened new research pathways and deepened understanding of the long-standing human–cat relationship. Overall, the meeting underscored the enduring scientific interest in cats as key protagonists of global cultural history.

Keywords:
cats, archaeology, genetics, palaeontology, ethnography, anthropology

Introduction

From 19 to 21 November 2025, the 1st international conference *Cats – Past and Present: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* was held at the National Research Council (CNR) and the Department Italian Institute of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University of Rome (Fig. 1). The meeting was organized by Francesca Lugli and Ivana Fiore (AIE – Italian Association for Ethnoarchaeology), in collaboration with colleagues from several institutions, including Museum of Civilizations, Sapienza University and the association 'AERM – *Archivio Eurasia Romano Mastromattei*' [*tr*. Eurasia Romano Mastromattei Archive] (Rome); the University of Ferrara; the University of Padua; the Department of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Sassari; Pompeu Fabra University and ICREA – Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (Barcelona) and the Saudi Red Sea Authority (Riyadh).

The event was financially supported by several institutions, whose contributions were fundamental to its realization: CNR – *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* [*tr*. Council of National Research]; the Saudi Red Sea Authority; Archaeopress Publishing; the *Sistema Museale di Ateneo* [*tr*. University Museum System] of the University of Ferrara; AIAZ – *Associazione Italiana di Archeozoologia* [*tr*. Italian Association of Archaeozoology]; IsIPU – *Istituto Italiano Paleontologia Umana* [*tr*. Italian Institute of Human Palaeontology] and Temple University, Rome Campus. Additional support was provided by private sponsors: Mitech Agency – Digital & Branding Agency; Rad Medica Bologna e Faenza; ES Progetti; RC Diagnostica; Xilema and SGS Beta – as well

Figure 1: Logo of the *Cats – Past and Present* conference.
Figure: I. Fiore, F. Lugli.

as by many friends who supported the event with small but valuable contributions.

The interest generated by the meeting attracted researchers specializing in a wide range of topics and coming from different continents, reflecting the enduring fascination with cats and the curiosity these animals have long inspired in humans. Across cultures and throughout history – from Ancient Egypt, where cats were revered as divine protectors, to Asia, where they were celebrated as symbols of luck and guardians of granaries, to Europe and the Americas, where they served as companions, pest controllers and even literary icons – cats have played a significant and multifaceted role in human societies worldwide. The works presented at the meeting offered an overview of the state of the art, introduced new research directions and reflected on what is currently known about the modern cat, both as a biological species and as a cultural protagonist in human history (Fig. 2).

The macro-themes of the meeting included: (1) genetics and isotopes; (2) palaeontology, archaeozoology and zoology; (3) archaeology; (4) history of art; (5) performing and visual arts; (6) ethnography, anthropology and folklore.

Genetics and isotopes

The timing and mode of cat (*Felis silvestris*) domestication remain among the most intriguing topics for palaeontologists and archaeologists. Although the African origin of the domestic cat is widely accepted, the precise timing of domestication and the subsequent dispersal of domestic cats across other continents have long remained open questions. Several contributions at the meeting addressed these issues, emphasizing how genetic data can provide crucial insights for understanding dispersal patterns, possible hybridization among different populations and subspecific (or even specific) taxonomic identification. Current data suggest that the dispersal of the domestic cat into Europe took place over the last 2000 years. Genetic evidence also shed light on past population dynamics and on Pleistocene and Holocene shifts in palaeodistribution areas, identifying the Balkan region as a key zone where European wildcat populations hybridized with Levantine ones. These findings open new perspectives for palaeon-

Figure 2: Professor Simone Pollo during his talk 'Cats, the City and Not-Just-Human Democracy' at the Council of National Research (CNR), 19 November 2025. Photo: G. Calandra.

tological and archaeozoological research, particularly for periods marked by significant climatic fluctuations that reshaped European mammalian palaeocommunities.

Finally, isotopic data shed new light on cat–human interactions. Stable isotope analyses not only provide valuable information on past environments and climatic conditions but also on trophic resources and feeding behaviour. The data presented and discussed at the meeting highlight an intimate relationship between humans and cats, showing a substantial overlap in trophic preferences and underscoring the close ecological and cultural ties that currently link the two species.

Palaeontology, archaeozoology and zoology

Although the domestic cat is now an integral element of human society, its evolutionary history is still difficult to reconstruct. This is mainly due to the rarity of its remains, a peculiar feature of carnivores, particularly small-sized species such as mustelids and small felids. As we move further back in time, the fossil record becomes increasingly sparse, complicating the study of earlier felid forms across different periods. One of the lectures at the meeting provided a comprehensive overview of the evolutionary history of cats in Europe, with a special focus on the ancestor of the wildcat. The study of fossil material also highlighted the importance of cranial findings of *Felis silvestris*, which are crucial for understanding the morphological variability of the species, currently documented by only a limited number of finds.

Paleontological and archaeozoological data further offer insights into the broader context of interaction between cats, *sensu lato*, and humans. Taphonomic analyses allow the reconstruction of how Pleistocene humans exploited animal carcasses and competed with other carnivores, including felids. This perspective provides valuable information on past human behaviour and their interactions with terrestrial ecosystems.

Finally, a zoological approach continues to be crucial for a better understanding of the ecological preferences of modern wildcat populations. Such studies highlight that wild populations are able to survive in natural habitats, often occupying areas far from urbanized contexts and maintaining stable population levels over time. Monitoring these populations represents an important step toward a comprehensive understanding of the species' adaptation to different environmental and climatic conditions.

Archaeology

Exploring the relationship between humans and cats in the past is challenging due to the diversity of geographical contexts and chronologies involved. The dynamics of interaction between people and felines are multifaceted and subtle, difficult to reconstruct in a linear manner, yet indicative of a bond that, while changing over time, appears remarkably enduring. Despite gaps in the documentation, the archaeological record consistently suggests that cats held a special place in the collective imagination of many cultures. A particularly emblematic example is the Egyptian goddess Bastet, depicted either as a cat or as an anthropomorphic figure with a feline head. Her cult, deeply rooted in ancient Egyptian religion, illustrates the symbolic importance attributed to the cat, which was associated with domestic protection, fertility and the sacred sphere. Through diplomatic and commercial contacts between Egypt and the Levant, the influence of Bastet and her iconography also spread among the Phoenicians, who adopted and reinterpreted certain elements of her worship within their own syncretic religious framework.

Following its domestication, the cat quickly became part of daily life in human communities. Archaeological evidence from Africa, Europe and Asia – including joint human–animal burials, remains found in settlements, iconographic representations and amulets – demonstrates that the role of the cat was not solely practical, related to rodent control, but also symbolic, emotional and at times ritual. The material presented during the meeting confirms the wide and early spread of the domestic cat, suggesting a complex and multilayered relationship between humans and cats.

Another aspect that remains under investigation, but is increasingly discussed, concerns the possible trade in cats in the past. Some evidence suggests that cats may have been intentionally transported along trade routes in the Mediterranean, the Near East and, later, across Eurasian networks. Merchant ships in particular, as well as caravans, may have facilitated the mobility of the species, both as animals valued for protecting stored goods and as commodities appreciated for their practical and symbolic significance.

History of art

The session on cats in art history demonstrated the constant presence of wild felines and cats in artistic representations across different geographical areas through-

out the ages. Prehistoric art, in particular, offers significant material for discussion on feline symbolism. Naturally, many questions remain unanswered, as the motivations behind ancient imagery cannot be fully reconstructed. Nevertheless, illustrations on cave walls and rock surfaces reflect what humans observed and chose to represent at the time. Among animal depictions, felines are relatively rare and are generally limited to lions and leopards, while other species appear only sporadically. Due to the simplicity of certain representations and the poor preservation of much rock and portable art, the identification of felines in the central Sahara remains uncertain. Other examples, however, are easier to interpret, such as rock art from the Altai region, where a snow leopard is clearly depicted.

Feline predators held an important place in the culture of the early nomads of the Scythian-Siberian world and Central Asia. In this context, the tattooed 'torture scene' on the right forearm of a female mummy from Pazyryk burial mound No. 5 (5th–3rd centuries BC) is particularly significant. It aligns with the broader Scythian-Siberian animal style tradition and reflects universal nomadic concepts of sacrifice and transformation.

Cats and women share a long-standing symbolic association evident in literature, visual arts and popular culture. The long visual tradition of depicting cats in Chinese pictorial arts – from early funerary objects to contemporary paintings – offers valuable insights into the evolving relationship between humans and domesticated felines. In Japan, this relationship reflects broader socio-cultural ideas about femininity, independence, mystery and domesticity, with cats often serving as mirrors of both idealized and transgressive forms of womanhood.

The cat examples from the museum collections provide an important perspective for interpreting the relationship between humans and cats in terms of aesthetic, representational, social and symbolic dimensions.

Furthermore, cats in children's drawings offer a valuable tool for understanding how the archetypal figure of the cat continues to captivate and fascinate across different societies.

Performing and visual arts

This session provided another perspective on cats in the arts, showing how their presence in music, ballet, theatre, cartoons and comics is a formidable reflection of the role of cats in different societies (Fig. 3). Cats in Western and Soviet cartoons and comics of the 20th century often embody playful, mischievous or clever traits, serving both as comic relief and as symbolic mirrors of human behaviour. Their recurring presence reflects cultural fascination with feline independence, agility and charm, making them enduring icons in visual storytelling. Some of the most famous Western examples include Tom from *Tom & Jerry*, Sylvester the Cat from *Looney Tunes*, Hello Kitty, Puss in Boots, Pusheen and Felix the Cat.

In Soviet cartoons, fewer cats appear, but many have become iconic characters. Among them, the Cat Matroskin of the series *Three from Prostokvashino*, based on the book *Дядя Фёдор, пёс и кот* [*tr.* Uncle Fyodor, the dog and the cat] written by children's author Eduard Uspensky (1974), stands out as one of the most popular. In this cartoon, rich with profound and poetic ideas, Matroskin is depicted as intelligent, balanced and never aggressive creature.

Ethnography, anthropology and folklore

This session featured so many examples from diverse cultures and regions summarizing them proves challenging.

Cats have played multifaceted roles in human societies across time and space, ranging from sacred companions to cultural symbols and everyday cohabitants. Although today cats are among the most common pets worldwide, perceptions of them changed over time, continuously reimagined and reinterpreted. For example, during the Medieval period in Europe, they were often associated with demons. Archaeological evidence from different regions (e.g., Italy, the Philippines, India) reveals long-standing interactions between humans and cats, while ethnographic studies in modern societies highlight the socio-technical, spiritual and symbolic dimensions of these relationships. The examples discussed during the meeting – from the Canary Islands, Indonesia and Bedouin contexts – highlight that these relationships are dynamic rather than constant. Through shifts in style, symbolism and social context, feline imagery reveals how cats moved from marginal presences to culturally significant companions, reflecting changing attitudes toward domesticity, refinement, spirituality and everyday life, particularly in China.

Another interesting point concerns the folk culture and literary material presented at the meeting, focusing on Russia, the Balkans and China, which illustrate the deep embeddedness of cats in local imagination and practices. Comparative analyses of Eastern and Western perceptions further demonstrate the diversity of feline meanings. Overall, this interdisciplinary exploration underscores the

Figure 3: A moment from the discussion held at the *Dipartimento dell'Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali* [*tr.* Department of the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies] (ISO) as part of the 'Performing & Visual Arts' session on 21 November 2025, Sapienza University of Rome. Photo: I. Fiore.

enduring and evolving significance of cats as companions, symbols and cultural agents across the globe.

Conclusion

The conference *Cats – Past and Present: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* represented an important moment of international dialogue on the many research topics related to cats. From the deep historical roots – spanning thousands of years and encompassing profound cultural transformations – cats have gradually solidified their close relationship with human communities, shifting from symbols of deities to creatures sometimes associated with the demonic. In contemporary Western culture, cats are regarded primarily as inseparable human companions, whereas in other cultures and societies they continue to embody powerful spiritual and symbolic significance.

Thanks to the conference, researchers from around the world were able to engage in meaningful scientific reflection, share ideas and diverse perspectives as well as explore the many roles cats have played across different cultures, from the Palaeolithic to the present day. The multidisciplinary nature of the conference was its greatest strength, fostering moments of profound scientific discussion and creating connections between disciplines that may seem distant but are ultimately deeply intertwined.

The 'Cats' conference was preceded by the 2018 conference *Dogs – Past and Present: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, for which both the abstracts (Fiore/Lugli 2018) and the proceedings volume (Fiore/Lugli 2023) were published. That event brought together research on dogs from multiple disciplines, becoming a valuable starting point for anyone interested in the study of dogs (see also Biagetti 2024). With this conference, it is hoped that the same goal will be achieved for cats.

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Beniamino Mecozzi
Sapienza University of Rome
Rome, Italy
beniamino.mecozzi@uniroma1.it