**Pet Cats in Roman Villas:  
A North Yorkshire Candidate**

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***Abstract***

*The 1997 excavation of the Dalton-on-Tees Roman villa by Teesside Archaeological Society led to the recovery of a large amount of animal bone. Within the assemblage there were the remains of a feline which had suffered a massive injury to the left side of its body which it had survived. This survival would appear to provide the evidence that the status of this animal was that of a pet rather than a simple domestic cat engaged in pest control and, as such, may represent a candidate for the first recorded pet cat in Roman Yorkshire.*

**Introduction**

In 1997 the excavation of a previously unknown Romano-British villa site in the mid-Tees Valley was undertaken by Teesside Archaeological Society (TAS). This led not only to the discovery of substantial villa remains outside the then accepted villa landscape, but also to the recovery of a varied assemblage of well-preserved animal bones from a number of features (Buglass 1997).

The remains of the villa lay in arable land on the eastern side of the village of Dalton-on-Tees (NGR: NZ 3008 0822) and were buried to an average depth of less than 150mm (Brown 1998;1999; 2001). Due to the shallow nature of the site it had effectively become de-stratified through ploughing and although the material was strictly unstratified, archaeologically speaking, it was still ‘in context’, *i.e.* still in association with the features in which the material had been deposited. A similar situation was seen during the excavation at Dalton Parlours in West Yorkshire (Wrathmell and Nicholson 1990, 195).

By the end of the excavation over 3,700 animal bones or fragments of bones had been recovered from the various features across the site. These included 1,275 fragments of large animal bone and over 2,500 small animal bones. In total, 28 different species of animal were represented which included, aside from the usual domestic species (cow, sheep, pig, horse, dog and cat), seven species of small mammal, three of amphibians / reptiles, six bird species, five marine mollusc species and human bone. Of all the features on the site, the most productive for animal bone was the well which had been backfilled during or after the second century AD, and before the end of the fourth century (Gardiner 1998 *pers comm.*). The wet sieving of the well’s backfill produced 2,500 small animal bones representing 14 of the taxa mentioned above and included the remains of two cats, one of which had undergone and survived severe trauma to the left side of its body.

It is this latter specimen which this paper aims to assess as the evidence for, and likelihood of, the presence of a pet rather than of a domestic cat in Roman North Yorkshire.

**Domestication**

***Dogs and cats in prehistory***

Much has been written about the domestication of animals in general (*e.g.* Davis 1995, 126 *et seq;* O’Connor 2000, 147 *et seq.*) and it is not intended to review that process here, but rather to focus on what can be regarded as the ‘household’ domestic species (dogs and cats) and in particular cats.

Current evidence supports the notion that dogs (*Canis Lupus Familiaris*) were the first successfully domesticated animal and this is typically thought to have originated in south-east Asia (Savolainen *et al.* 2002). The earliest tangible evidence for domesticated canines has changed over recent years with new interpretations and evidence being produced to support an earlier date. The most recent evidence of a domestic dog comes from the remains at Razboinichya Cave in the Altai Mountains of Siberia (Ovdov *et al*. 2011), dated to 33,000 years before present. These remains show significant morphological differences between *Canis Lupus Familiairs* and *Canis Lupus Lupus* (wolf) (Walker *et al.* 1982; Morey 1986), indicated by variation of snout size and sizing of carnassial teeth.

On the other hand, the domestication of the cat appears to occur much later. A genetic study in 2007 concluded that domestic cats are descended from African wildcats in the Near East (*Felis silvestris lybica*)around8000 BC (National Geographic 2004). The existence of the domestic cat first appears to be exclusively in Egypt from around 4000 years ago. There is, however, evidence of wildcats cohabiting with humans as far back as 5300 years ago in Cyprus (Hu *et al*. 2013), and newer studies have found that this could date back even further to around 9000 years ago in China, in terms of commensal living (Science Daily 2013).

***Domestic cats in the Roman world***

Cats were probably introduced into the Roman world via Egypt and/or the near east, as they first appear on works of Greek art dating to the fourth and fifth centuries BC (Tonynbee 1973, 87 *et seq.*).

What appears to be the first archaeological occurrence of a domestic dog in North Yorkshire (and possibly the UK as a whole) is a Mesolithic example found at Star Carr near Scarborough (Clark 1978; Shulting and Richards 2009). Cats appear much later in the British archaeological record, with the common assumption that they were introduced during the Roman period. Cat remains have been recovered from a number of Roman sites: Bishopstone (Bell 1977, 277); Lullingstone (Meates 1979, 39; 117); Rudston (Stead 1989); Dalton Parlours (Wrathmell and Nicholson 1990, 186) and York (O’Connor 1991, 258). However, there are possible examples of domestic cats from a late Iron Age site at Gussage All Saints in Dorset (Davis 1995, 182). What cannot be determined from the remains found at all of these sites is the actual status of these animals. Where they there for pest control or as pets?

As a domestic animal, cats have been portrayed in Roman art but with nowhere near the frequency that dogs are represented (Tonynbee 1973, 87, *et seq.*), which suggests that they were less widespread as a pet. Probably the most convincing image of a cat as a pet comes from a grave stele in the Musee de Aquitaine, Bordeaux where a young child is shown holding a cat (*ibid.*). This lack of illustration, and the general paucity of cat remains in the archaeological record, could be seen to suggest that although cats were undoubtedly a common feature of the Roman world, they did not hold the status as the globally most common pet of choice, as they do in modern times. This is not to deny that there might have been many cats kept as household pets, but it may be more probable that they lived in conjunction with people more as a means of pest control than for companionship.

With domestication, a certain level of care is extended between owner and animal. Diamond (2005) states that when we have instances of humans, we are always likely to have instances of domestic animals. This level of care extended between the ‘owner’ and animal is probably the one aspect that would raise the status of a domestic cat from vermin control to that of a pet. It is the demonstrable occurrence of this care in the Dalton-on-Tees cat that makes those remains compelling evidence for a pet cat in Roman Yorkshire.

**Pest control or pet? The Evidence**

The remains of the Dalton-on-Tees cat skeleton showed two areas of dramatic pathological changes (Figs 1 and 2). These bones were the femur and humerus of the hind limb and the radius and ulna of the fore limb, all from the left side of the body.

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| **Figure 1** Cat hind limb showing loss of greater trochanter head on left humerus. © E. Houlder. | **Figure 2** Cat fore limb showing changes to radius and ulna on left humerus. © E. Houlder. |

The changes to the femur have resulted in the disappearance of the whole of the head of the thigh bone (greater trochanter head) and massive changes to the shaft as far down as the lesser trochanter. There is extensive blastic bone formation around the proximal end which appears no longer to have been active at the time of death. In addition, there is a degree of polishing of the joint surface through use (eburnation) on the inner face of the new bone growth indicating that the animal had survived the trauma and had been able to use the limb, though almost undoubtedly with a very limited range of movement. The bones from the left elbow joint show a healed fracture with changes associated with infection and a probable reduction in length. It is not possible to say definitively if it has been shortened by the trauma since only the right humerus was recovered (no ulna or radius) and therefore no direct comparison has been possible (Buglass 1997, 54 *et seq.*).

The distribution and condition of the pathology seen in this animal allows two conclusions to be drawn: the first relates to the possible nature of the injury; and the second relates to the status of the animal within the site. As all of the injuries are to the same side, and show the same degree of healing / remodelling, it would seem reasonable to propose that they occurred at the same time, or that it was an particularly unlucky cat. If the injuries were all contemporaneous, a possible cause could be as a result of being struck by a larger animal like a horse whilst hunting for food in a stable, or injury from the wheel of a cart. This leads on to the survival of the cat after what was a very serious, potentially fatal, injury. There are signs of use of the hind limb (eburnation) after the injury and the elbow is not completely fused, having a degree of articulation. Therefore, the animal survived for a period of time afterwards and it was certainly for long enough for the bone to remodel itself sufficiently to allow limited movement. This in turn implies that the animal was being cared for (or at the very least being fed) because the nature and severity of the injuries would have prevented it from hunting effectively, resulting in death from starvation before any remodelling could have taken place. In turn, this suggests the cat was probably a pet rather than a ‘domesticated’ cat living on a Roman farm. An injured farm cat would almost undoubtedly have been euthanized or abandoned to die.

**Conclusions**

In Yorkshire there have been numerous archaeological excavations that have resulted in the recording of domestic cat and dog species from the Mesolithic thorough to the modern day. Typically, these remains tend to be much more frequent from the medieval period onwards and are often encountered as part of developer-funded projects. A typical example of this is perhaps the recording of six discrete dog burials to the rear of the Golden Lion Hotel in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, during redevelopment works (On-Site Archaeology 2003, 9). The deliberate burial of whole animals in this case, in discrete and specifically dug ‘graves’, implies a greater status to the animal than simply being for protection or pest control. As a progression from this care in disposal, it can be inferred that care for an animal which had been so severely injured is such that it could not have functioned solely as an agent of pest control (*i.e.* ‘maintain its worth’ as a working animal). This would also seem to imply an elevated status beyond mere service to the owner. More simply put, is the Dalton-on-Tees cat a specific example of a curated Roman o-British pet, given the degree of care that would have been needed to aid its recovery? If so, is it possibly the first example of a *pet* cat recorded in Britain.

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