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The Blue Cats of Malta



Academic literature yields very little information that makes reference to the Maltese cats. The Notarial archives, usually a source of rich information, in that they describe livestock that are part of a transaction, yield no information on cats, most probably, because cats were not held to represent a significant capital. Furthermore, the available literature usually makes single line references to the Maltese cat. Nonetheless, in days gone by, Malta did have a breed of unique cats described as being of a curious dark griseous (grey/blue) colour¹ and which were highly esteemed and sought after in Sicily, and Italy.² The Maltese Blue cats were also known locally as *il-Qattus Irmiedi* (Fig. 1). The aim of this article is to present aspects associated with the breed known as the Maltese Blue cat.



Fig. 1 Duccio (photo: Dr Gloria Lauri Lucente)

The Origins

At what point the presence of cats on the Maltese islands was established and how this came about, is not clear. Wastlhuber, explains that the domestication of the cat in the Mediterranean basin originated in Egypt, but the Phoenicians followed by the Roman armies, managed to smuggle them out of Egypt and export them to Europe, as far as the British Isles, to mitigate the increasing rat problem.³ This explanation fits well with the documented findings at Għar Dalam⁴. Although the skeletal remains support the hypothesis that cats were first introduced to Malta during the Phoenician or Roman era, this does not mean that these cats are the same as the ones that were more recently known as the Maltese cats. Most probably, following the first landing of cats on the islands, over time successive shipments of cats did occur.⁵ Dispersal and migration of the domestic cat was in part due to the tradition of taking cats on board ships,

and in every port, kittens born on ships were left to settle.⁶

The Italian natural historian Ulisse Aldrovandi, writing in the late 1500s claims that originally the blue-grey “Maltese cats” (stocky body, filled chins, copper eyes and extraordinary rodent hunter) were brought from Syria and kept on the island of Malta. It is popular belief, that the first blue cats were brought from West Syria by returning Crusaders and given to monks on the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus and Malta. Most probably, their superior hunting instinct was greatly valued for their ability to rid archives and libraries of gnawing rodents and to control large, aggressive (and plague-carrying) rats. The confinement and breeding of cats in monasteries helped in keeping the genetic pool separated and helping to firmly establish the breed. To date, there is no archival evidence that monks ever received such cats.⁷

The Cat in Rural Malta

Although today these cats are a rare sight, cats with grey or blue fur must have been quiet common in Malta up to the late 1800s⁸ and enjoyed an established role within Maltese society. Cassar Pullicino includes discussions on cats often depicting them as bullies, shady or crafty old men, but at the same time serve as a reminder of tragic haste, and are particularly indestructible as they have seven souls.⁹

The house cat was given the run of the house in exchange for her hunting instincts to keep dwellings rodent free. The cat, being the queen of the house had close relationships with family members and many a painting that attempt to capture aspects of village life during the 1800s include a grey/blue coat cat (Fig. 2). Whilst these grey cats enjoyed the trust and company of the commoners, the higher classes of Maltese society are usually depicted in the company of the Bichon terrier. Whereas cats had the best seat in the house, dogs were not allowed inside and were generally kept on roof tops to act as guards or in the yards and gardens if used as hunting dogs. The different and contrasting attitudes of society towards these companion animals strikes strong similarity with the Moslem culture in which the cat is praised while the dog is deemed to be unclean.

Rural Heritage

Rural heritage is composed of the rural landscape, rural structures, rural society and livestock, whether used as beasts of burden, for production purposes or as companion animals. A quaint feature in many rural buildings that is nowadays easily overlooked is the 'toqba tal-qattusa' (Fig. 3). This hole in the exterior wall allowed the house cat to enter or exit the house

as it pleased. Jaccarini describes two types of cat holes.¹⁰ The first and more complex one allows access between the street and the dwelling. It is generally an opening of about 15 cm square or round located some four courses above street level on the façade near the front main door. This hole does not allow for a straight passage, but leads to a long and narrow tunnel that changes direction twice. A short distance beyond the external hole the tunnel turns sharply by 90 degrees and extends horizontally through the wall for a short distance and once again bends to emerge on the inside of the building. This complicated access was so constructed to avoid the possibility of the introduction of any materials by persons with wrong intent. The indirect access also decreased the passage of drafts of air from the outside to the inside of the house. A less elaborate cat hole could also be found near the entrance of the family rooms upstairs.

Superstition

Domestic cats have been considered as objects of fear and superstition in some cultures and at other times treated as revered creatures.¹¹ The following accounts depict the Maltese cats as dreaded creatures as well as heroes and saviours of Europe. An interesting account about superstitious sailors attributing storms to the Maltese cat being on board the ship was printed in 1857.¹² The weekly journal Notes and Queries of 26th September 1857, reports that the following article entitled 'Maltese Cats' was printed in the Albany Express.¹³

"That a New York merchant recently sent for a cargo of Maltese cats from that celebrated island, per schooner 'William E Callis,' of Nantucket, Captain Smith. Fifty kittens were received on board the schooner as part of the assorted cargo. On the voyage very rough weather was experienced. At



Fig 2 - Fenech, V. Late 18th and into the 19th Century Woman combing the cotton. Watercolour in Costumes Malta 1833 (Libr. Ms. 1165). Courtesy of the National Library, Valletta (Photo National Library)

first the tars attributed the rapid succession of gales to the comet; but one old sailor told the crew that it was nothing outside the vessel that occasioned the storm; that one cat was enough to send any ship to Davy Jones's locker, and as they had fifty on board, not a man of them stood a chance of setting foot on dry land again. This was enough for the superstitious crew, and the cats were immediately demanded of the captain, given up, and drowned. By a singular coincidence the storm thereupon abated. The owner of the cats has now sued the owners of the vessel for damages, laying the value of the cats at 50 dollars apiece, or 2500 dollars."

"Jack, it is well known, has his many superstitions, but this referring to Maltese cats is not one of the number. It being in my power to

say that there has not been any vessel at Malta of the name of the "William E Callis," the "fifty kittens" could not have been shipped "as part of her assorted cargo" - the "very rough weather on the voyage" could not have been "experienced" -the old tar could not have "demanded the cats of the captain to be given up and drowned" in the Atlantic - the "singular coincidence" when this was done "of the storm thereupon abating," could not have occurred : and finally, of the whole story it may be written, "si non e vero, e ben trovato." [if it is not true, it is well found], Malta ."

This very same story was published again 16 years later.¹⁴

A more colourful anecdote found on line glorifies the Maltese cat in saving Europe from

disaster.¹⁵ Just as the previous story is of dubious validity, this too cannot be verified:

“During the Historical Black Plague in Britain the Maltese cat literally saved Europe from extinction, and now you do not even see the cat on charts you see hanging in veterinarians’ offices. When the Plague first broke out, no one knew what was causing it; finally “they” figured it out: it was fleas carrying the disease. Fleas however had been around for a long time, so what was the problem? “They” also finally figured that one out. It was the cats. England had bred their cats to such magnificent size and beauty for the show ring they were no longer useful to man for their original purpose of catching, killing and eating vermin. What had happened was the British feline was no longer able, for one thing, to get into small holes where rats and mice hide. If the cat is so large and lazy to be unable to hunt, the rodents party and proliferate, which, of course means an onslaught of fleas for man to live with. Since the

fleas, even now today, carry The Black Plague, man was inundated with the Plague, as it spread like a wildfire unchecked. Remember they did not have bug spray nor cleanliness.”

“A Cargo of Cat”

Literature published during the 1800s usually makes reference to the Maltese cat within the context of it being transported out of Malta and shipped to England or America. The following anecdote entitled “A Cargo of Cat”, was published in the Wasp (San Francisco), January 3, 1885:¹⁶ “*On the 16th day of June, 1874, the ship Mary Jane sailed from Malta, heavily laden with cat. This cargo gave us a good deal of trouble. It was not in bales, but had been dumped into the hold loose. Captain Doble, who had once commanded a ship that carried coals, said he had found that plan the best. When the hold was full of cats the hatch was battened down and we felt*



Fig. 3 *It-toqba tal-qattus*

good. Unfortunately the mate, thinking the cats would be thirsty, introduced a hose into one of the hatches and pumped in a considerable quantity of water, and the cats of the lower levels were all drowned.”

From the literature reviewed, it appears that at least during the 1700s up until the late 1800s the Maltese cat was known beyond the shores of the island and occasionally clowders were shipped out to mainland Europe and also to America. While the story depicting the Maltese cats as demons has been argued to be false, the price of \$50 a piece was not contended; a hefty price to pay at the time.

The Maltese Blue Cat

Plumbe et al make reference to the Maltese cat breed that they describe as being a native of Malta, from which it derives its name;¹⁷ on the other hand Goodrich describes the Maltese cat as being of a mouse-colour with a distinguished mouse catching ability.¹⁸ It appears that by early 1900s the Maltese cat somehow lost its geographical link to the Maltese islands¹⁹ and was used exclusively to describe the blue/grey phenotype rather than breed or origin. Anon 1923²⁰ states that “here in America we have plenty scattered all over the United States, but how they gained their name of Maltese, the writer has been unable to discover, for there is no blue cat indigenous to the island of Malta.” Is it possible that the population of the Maltese Blue cats had dwindled to insignificant numbers by the 1920s?

Nowadays the term Maltese cat is used to describe any domestic cat of unknown breed with solid grey or blue short coat. The gene causing black eumelanin pigment to be diluted to blue or grey is melanophilin (MLPH). A cat with this blue phenotype will typically be d/d in genotype. This MLPH mutation (Dilution Gene),

apart from causing black cats to be blue also acts on orange coated cats to become cream.²¹

Profile of the Current Local Cat Population

Over the last 200 years, various cat breeds were imported into Malta. Originally, these imports accompanied the various British officers and officials that were detailed here as part of the British administration of the islands. More recently, cat importation involved a number of breeds that were introduced by foreign and Maltese families that were after breeding of particular cat types. These new arrivals introduced Asiatic breeds such as the Siamese and Persians. In the more recent times the importation of specific breeds has continued to develop and the possibility of various crosses with the once original local population has become more complex. The present population profile of cats in households includes a large number of breeds and crosses kept for show, if pure bred and as companion animals in the majority of cases.

Besides the noticeable cat population living in households, purebreds which belong to all registered breeds and their crosses, or cats of local population extraction, Malta also has a cogent feral cat population. This feral cat population is formed mainly of shorthaired cats of all possible coat colours and shows all the various phenotypes: solid black; red and white; bicolour; tabby markings of both the blotched and mackerel types; the agouti gene in some individuals; dilution and white spotting in some of the coat genetic make ups.

Proposed Strategy to re breed the Maltese Blue Cat

The number of local blue cats is very small, probably due to the fact that there is no specific

breeding and all other coat colour types occur more frequently. The starting point to propagate blue or solid grey coats in cats is to cross parents that are solid grey or black, homozygous recessive for the agouti gene but carry the colour dilution genes.

Since most of the adult individuals in the feral colonies are neutered for control purposes, they are automatically excluded from participating as foundation stock in any attempt to rebuild a Maltese Blue cat breed. A possible way forward would be to identify all kittens that are solid grey or solid black that appear in feral colonies and to have them profiled genetically before they are neutered in order to determine if they are descendants of established breeds. The ones that show “no” relation to other breeds may be isolated and maintained separately to be included in a specifically structured breeding scheme in an attempt to establish and confirm their genetic makeup in as far as coat colours are concerned. Once a significant population of Blues is established, line breeding within the group will fix the other characteristics ranging from conformation, size, and specifications to behaviour. Such a task involves significant cat numbers being bred over a number of generations to arrive at a stage where most offspring will

conform to a breed standard. No information is available to confirm the specifications of a true breed description of the Maltese cat and the only way is to compare the breed description set during the rebreeding programme with any available photographic images of Maltese cats taken in Malta during the 1800’s.

The same source that hails the Maltese cat as the hero for saving Europe also included a description of the breed:²² *“The Maltese Cat is very small; tiny ears; tiny paws; short tail; short legs; short fur the solid colour and appearance of a gray rat; somewhat flat face with round, green eyes, with a loving expression to die for. She is an excellent mother, and the most loving, sweetest, kindest companion in the world: a real rodent-killing machine. Some ‘Englishmen’ went to Malta and brought back a shipload of these ‘Maltese’ cats. No one ever gave them a fancy name, the cat from Malta was too lowly looking, so for centuries she remained just the ‘Maltese’ cat, however, for a short time in history (my mother’s time and my youth), the lowly cat, that saved all of Europe, wound up on the American ‘charts’ as the ‘Maltese Cat’. Now she is no longer recognized anywhere, thus the lowly cat, forgotten and scorned, has disappeared from sight and history forever and ever- she is extinct.”*

Notes

- 1 Churchill and Barbot 1732, p. 623
- 2 Campbell 1739, p. 186
- 3 Wastlhuber 1991, p.2
- 4 Hunt and Schembri 1999, classify the finding of remains belonging to the brown rat, the house mouse and the cat (*Felis catus*) as falling within the period that covers the Phoenician era (c. 2700BP) to the present.
- 5 Schembri, P.J. & Lanfranco, E. 1996, p14: In the Maltese Islands, exotic species have certainly been introduced since the islands were first colonised. For example, the 'cultural layers' of the Ghar Dalam deposits have yielded the remains of black rat, brown rat, house mouse, cattle, sheep, goat, pig, cat, and chicken, amongst others (BOESSNECK & KÜVER, 1970; STORCH, 1970; 1974), while the remains of wheat, barley and lentils were found in deposits from the Ghar Dalam phase of Maltese prehistory (HELBAEK, 1966)
- 6 Wastlhuber 1991, p.3
- 7 Desmond Morris 1999,p.64
- 8 Hodgins 1858
- 9 Cassar Pullicino 1967, p.1-68
- 10 Jaccarini 2002, p. 100
- 11 Wastlhuber 1991, p.6
- 12 Anon 1857
- 13 The weekly journal Notes and Queries was a platform in which scholars and interested amateurs exchanged knowledge ("the factual rather than the speculative") on "English language and literature, lexicography, history, and scholarly antiquarianism". The "Notes" were miscellaneous findings of correspondents that the editors considered of interest to the readership. This note was about superstitious sailors attributing storms to cats being on board the ship.
- 14 Balfour 1873
- 15 <https://maltesecatpolo.wordpress.com/anecdote>
- 16 Ambrose Bierce, 2014, p. 343
- 17 Plumbe et al 1881, p. 31
- 18 Samuel Griswold Goodrich, 1859, p. 269
- 19 Simpson, 1903, p. 320-321
- 20 Anon.,1923, p. 27
- 21 Ishida et al. 2006, p. 698-705
- 22 <https://maltesecatpolo.wordpress.com/anecdote>

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