

25 Years Ago

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ABYSSINIANS – IN ETHIOPIA

I have been intrigued over recent months by the increasing controversy regarding the origins of the Abyssinian cat. Here, and overseas, people seem to have divided themselves into two opposing factions: There are those who believe that the Abyssinian originated in Abyssinia - which is now of course called Ethiopia - and those who discount this as "romantic nonsense", and prefer to believe that the Abyssinian is a "manufactured" breed, "invented" by British breeders in the late 19th century.

It is my belief that our modern Abyssinians do in fact descend from "Zula", the ticked cat, reportedly imported into England from Abyssinia by Mrs Barrett-Lennard in 1868.

Many writers on the Abyssinian cat have attempted to disprove this, some going so far as to claim that there are no ticked cats in Ethiopia today. I had the good fortune to visit Ethiopia for several months in 1970 and again in 1972. During these visits, I had the rare opportunity to travel widely in the highland areas of the remote north, and around Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile.

While in Ethiopia, I saw domesticated ticked cats not unlike our Abyssinians, in several areas. The majority of them would correspond to our Tawny and Cinnamon cats, but in one particular area I saw a group of "Silver" Abyssinians. These latter were the pets of the venerable abbot of a remote monastery high in the mountains, about a day's journey by donkey from the ancient, rock-hewn city of Lalibela.

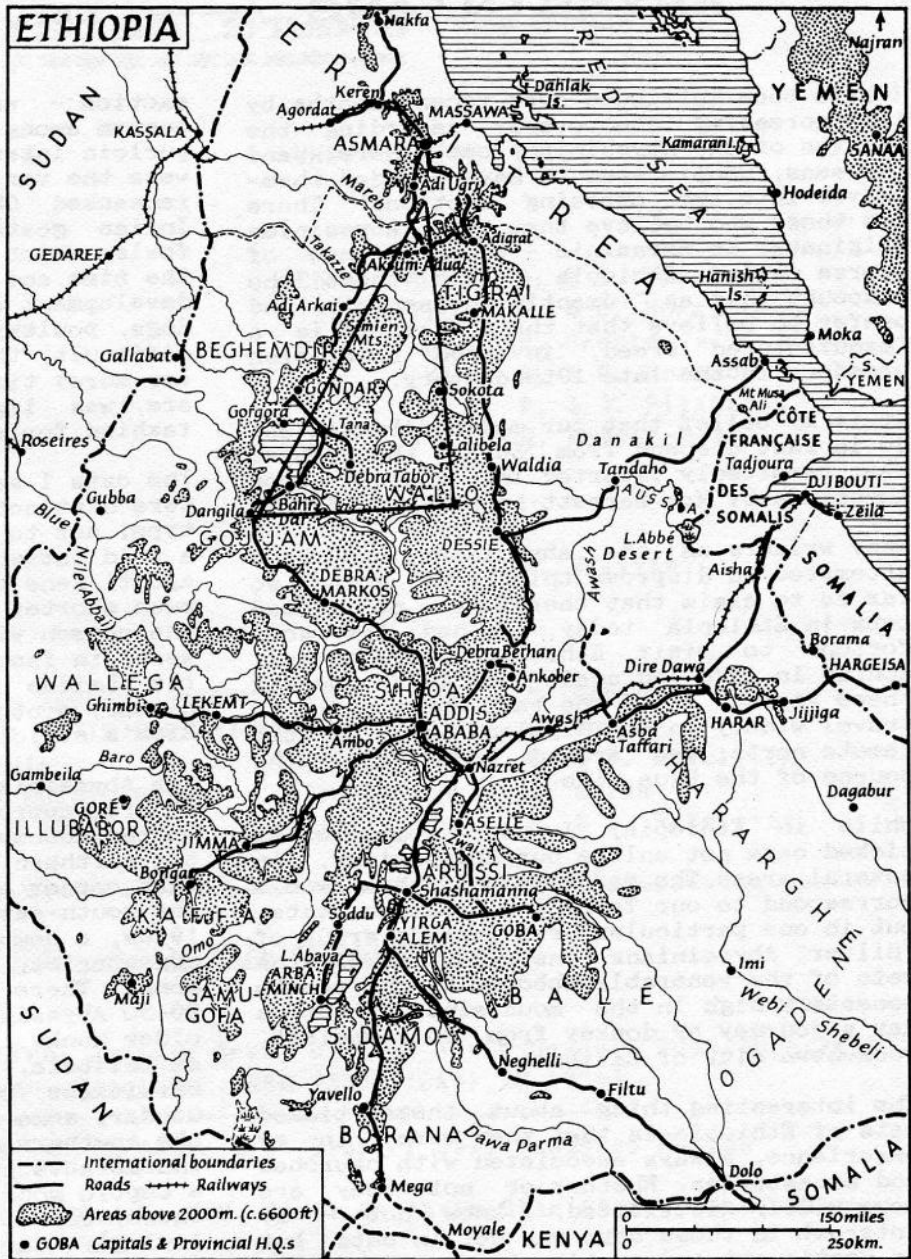
The interesting thing about these ticked cats of Ethiopia is that they were, in my experience, always associated with churches and monasteries. Whether or not they are more widely distributed, I know not - my interest in those days was not in cats but in Coptic art and architecture, and I was in Ethiopia to study churches and monasteries, not to learn about cats. I had, I am ashamed to admit, not even heard of the Abyssinian cat at that time of my life. However, I was a confirmed animal lover, and of course the cats I saw, strange and exotic, did interest me. Imagine my later surprise and delight when I learnt that people in Europe and Australia actually bred them!

Having seen the cats in their native country, I was easily able to believe that Mrs Barrett-Lennard had imported the first one into England at the end of the Anglo-Abyssinian war. 1868, the date of Zula's importation, was the year in which the British military expedition left Abyssinia after the defeat and death of the Emperor Theodore. Even the name "Zula" is interesting in this context, since that is the name of the port on the Red Sea where the British expedition disembarked, and which the British force used as a base camp.

Those who are sceptical of this seem to have forgotten that there was at the time a strong interest in England in all manner of exotica - animal or otherwise - and custom among soldiers (and their ladies) to purloin interesting "souvenirs". Thus there were the various breeds of dogs stolen from ransacked Chinese palaces, the various Indian goats, and Chinese and Japanese fowls, which were brought into England at the time and which gave rise to the modern development of so many different breeds of dogs, poultry and other animals. Is it so difficult, therefore, to accept that one (or more) ticked cats, eye-catching as they are, were imported as a result of this fashion for exotic animals and birds?

The cats I saw in Ethiopia during the 1970 were distinctly domestic, and foreign in type; not to be confused with *Felis chaus*, a wild cat which also carries the agouti gene but which is distinguished by much shorter tail; nor with *Felis lybici*, the common wild cat of the region. The cats were, in fact, very like the specimen from the Leiden Natural Museum of National History pictures which illustrated Harry Blok's article. {See <http://www.nileabys.com/Histphoto.htm>, 4th item — Ed.}

The Abyssinian cats I saw were located an area approximating a triangle, as shown on the accompanying map, formed by Axum at the northern apex, Lalibela at the south-east corner and Bahr Dar near Lake Tana the south-east. At Axum there was, in the 1970s, a complex of ancient churches at monasteries, which housed several hundred monks. There was also a colony of perhaps 20-30 Abyssinian cats, cared for by the older monks. The same phenomenon occurred at



Lalibela, in the rock-hewn churches and hermitages of the troglodytes, and at Gondar, some miles south of Lake Tana. At the southern end of Lake Tana there are innumerable islands, and upon most there is a Coptic monastery or hermitage. In most of these, colonies of Abyssinian cats existed, lovingly cared for by the monks and hermits

One venerable old abbot, when I asked him why each monastery had cats, explained that it was traditional and that the mystery of the cat was "like the mystery of God".

What had interested me – then a student of Coptic and Abyssinian history – in the cats of Abyssinia initially, was that my very first encounter with a ticked cat had been many hundreds of miles away across the Red Sea, and several years before, in the oasis of Nejrán in Saudi Arabia. At the time, I was teaching there. While at Nejrán, I saw a

family group of ticked domestic cats. Strangely enough, they, too, belonged to a holy man - a Muslim this time - a Said, or descendant of the prophet Mohammad. It was the Said who first told me that the "thumb-print" on the ears of "Abyssinian" was the mark of the Prophet.

And the connection between this remote desert oasis in the south of Arabia and Ethiopia? Nejrán was once part of the vast empire of a Semitic people called the Habashi or Abaseni. The Abaseni moved from the south of Arabia to what is Ethiopia and founded the kingdom of Abyssinia which perpetuates their name. The same people, the Hbsti of ancient Egyptian inscriptions, actually ruled Egypt for several centuries. One could go on to theorize all sorts of historical and religious interconnections, but the links are as yet too tenuous. For the purpose of this article, suffice it to say that Abyssinian cats do - or did in the early 1970s - exist in the land of their supposed origin.

Whether or not they still do is open to question. The recent famine in Ethiopia most severely affected the regions in which I saw the cats, and of course the Marxist revolution which overthrew the government of Emperor Haile Selassie has forcibly closed down the churches and monasteries, dispersed the monks and persecuted those who have attempted to retain the ways of old.

It was Helen and Sidney Denham who called the Abyssinian cat the "Child of the Gods". Few Abyss-lovers would dispute this - least of all the old monk high in his remote mountain retreat, who told me that the Abyssinian was "The Beloved of God".

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