

The Cats on the Wall

Lions and house cats in Egyptian art, the family tree of the cats, and how much time the Flood story leaves to make them all from one pair

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ABSTRACT

I have cut and set stone for more than fifty years, and that trade has taken me more than once into the tombs of Egypt. This time it is not the painted people I want to talk about but the painted animals, and one animal in particular, the cat. On the walls of the Valley of the Kings the king spears lions, and in the marsh scenes a small house cat crouches under a chair or climbs the reeds after birds. The Egyptians painted lions and leopards and cheetahs and small house cats, big cats and little cats, as clearly separate animals, and they did it from the very dawn of their art, close to the time the Flood story places Noah stepping off the Ark. In this paper I set that record beside two other things. The first is what the biologists who study cats have found: that the roughly forty living species of cat belong to eight lineages that trace back through more than ten million years, and that the specialists will not even call two cats separate species unless their family lines parted at least eight hundred thousand years ago. The second is the young earth chronology, in which a single pair of cats leaves the Ark only a few centuries before these paintings and must give rise to every major cat on earth, from the tiger to the sand cat. Laying the art beside the biology beside the calendar, and putting a clock on the job, I argue that the timing does not hold. I take the best objection seriously, as long as an explanation can be given and is backed up with evidence.

Keywords: *Egyptian animal art, Felidae, cat domestication, molecular phylogeny, created kinds, post-Flood speciation, biblical chronology, Bastet, rapid diversification*

1. A stonemason among the animals on the wall

I served in Vietnam, came home, and went to work with a hammer and a chisel, and that trade has carried me around the world and more than once into Egypt, to the quarries at Aswan and into the painted tombs of the Valley of the Kings. I come at a question the way I come at any job. I bring what I know from the work, I set it against the theories, and I trust what my own eyes can see on the wall in front of me.

The painted diverse people on those walls raise one honest question about the calendar of the Flood. The painted animals raise the same one, and if anything they raise the bar. Walk through the royal tombs and you will find the king hunting lions, great maned lions drawn with real knowledge of the animal. Turn to a nobleman's tomb and in the marsh scenes you will find a small house cat, tabby-marked, crouched under a chair or climbing a papyrus stalk after birds, painted by someone who plainly kept one. Lions and house cats, on the same walls, in the same few centuries. And the Egyptians did not stop there. They knew the leopard and the cheetah, and their painters set all of these cats down as clearly different animals, big and small, fierce and tame, from the earliest days of their art. Here is the question that started nagging me, the same clock question as before. The young earth model I have been asked to take seriously says that every land animal alive came off Noah's Ark, and that the cats that came off, came as a single pair, just one kind, a few centuries before these tombs were painted. If that is so, then that one pair had to become the lion and the tiger and the leopard and the cheetah. Including the little sand cat and the house cat under the chair, all of it, in the short stretch of time between the Ark and the Egyptian painter. I have spent my life estimating how long things take. When I put a clock on this one, the numbers bothered me, and this paper is me thinking that through out loud, with the help of the people who study cats for a living and the people who date the art.

2. The cats came early, and they came already different

The first thing to get straight is when the cats show up in Egypt, because a lot hangs on it. The answer is: almost from the start, and already sorted into the different kinds we know today.

Begin with the big cats. Leonine imagery is there in the Predynastic period, before Egypt was even a single country, and buried lions have been dug up in connection with the early royal tombs at Hierakonpolis and Abydos. The lioness turns up as a goddess very early, as Sekhmet, as Mehit at Hierakonpolis, and as Bastet, whose cult can be traced to the Second Dynasty, roughly 2890 to 2686 BC, where she first appears as a lioness before she ever softens into a house cat (Malek 1993; Osborn and Osbornová 1998). The leopard is in the record too, its skin worn across the shoulders of priests, and the cheetah appears in the person of the goddess Mafdet, drawn as a spotted, long-limbed cat. These are not vague cats the artist made up and just happened to get correct. They are the particular big cats a person meets in that part of the world, each drawn as its own distinct animal.

Now the small cats. There is evidence for people trying to tame cats already in the Predynastic elite cemetery at Hierakonpolis, where wild felids were kept and buried with people well before the dynasties began (Van Neer, Linseele, Friedman, and De Cupere 2014). By the Middle Kingdom, around 2000 BCE, the house cat appears in tomb paintings as a pet, sitting under its owner's chair, still close to its wild form. By the New Kingdom the house cat is everywhere, most famously in the marsh scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, around 1350 BCE, where a tabby cat leaps among the birds. The point I want to nail down is simple. When the Egyptians wanted to show that a lion and a leopard and a house cat were different animals, they had the knowledge and the paint to do it, and they had it early. At the very dawn of the written and painted record, the cats are already the cats: big and small, wild and tame, each its own kind, drawn by eyewitnesses who lived with them.

3. What a cat “kind” is supposed to be

Let me state the young earth position as far as I know. On this view the created kinds of Genesis sit at roughly the level that biologists call the family. The whole cat family, the Felidae, from the lion down to the house cat, is treated as one kind, according to Answers in Genesis, the largest young earth creationist organization. The creation scientists who worked on this have argued the point in detail and concluded that the cats are very likely a single created kind (Pendragon and Winkler 2011; Lightner 2012). It follows, on their model, that Noah took just one pair of cats aboard the Ark, since they are an unclean animal and that after the Flood that single pair diversified into all the cats we now see, more than thirty species by their own count. They are clear that they do not think one kind can turn into another; a cat kind stays cats. What they need is for one cat pair to fan out into the whole family, and fast.

Put together, the claim is that a single pair of cats could become lions, leopards, cheetahs, lynxes, and house cats within a few centuries of the Ark. That is the case I now want to weigh, and to weigh it I have to lay out what the cats actually are. How could that happen so quickly?

4. What the cats actually are: the family tree and the clock in their blood

When the biologists read the cats' own DNA, here is the family they find. There are about forty living species of cat, forty wild ones plus the house cat, sorted by the international specialists into fourteen genera and eight main lineages (Kitchener et al. 2017). Those eight lineages are not a tidy recent spray. They trace back through a long radiation. The best molecular study of the whole family dates the split of the big cats, the Panthera line that holds the lion, tiger, leopard, jaguar, and snow leopard, from the rest of the cats to more than ten million years ago, with the other lineages branching off across the millions of years that followed and the house cat's own Felis line taking shape only a few million years back (Johnson et al. 2006; Li et al. 2016).

The cat family tree, drawn on a clock

Eight lineages of living cats and roughly when they split. Split depths approximate, after Johnson et al. (2006) and Li et al. (2016).

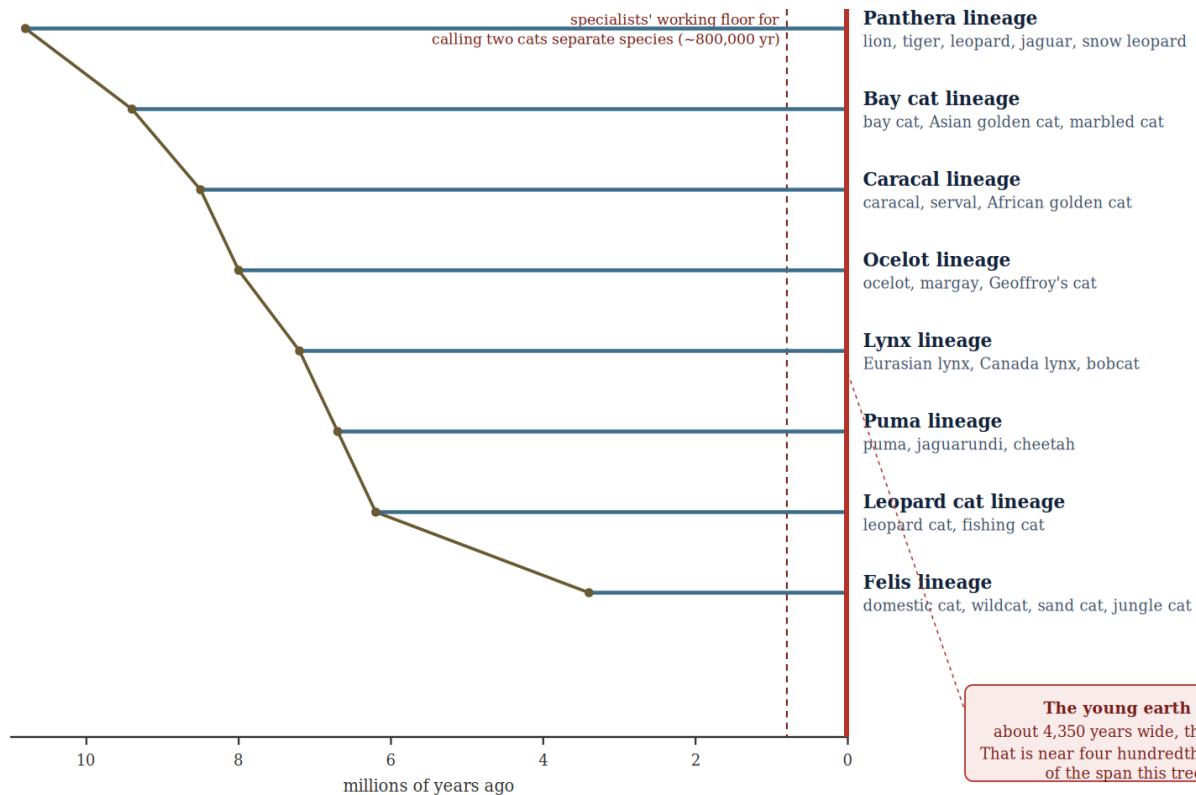


Figure 1. The cat family tree is drawn on a clock. The eight living lineages and roughly when they split, after Johnson et al. (2006) and Li et al. (2016). The dashed line marks the working floor the cat specialists themselves use, that two cats are not counted as separate species unless their lines parted something like eight hundred thousand years ago. The red line at the right edge, at zero, is the entire span the young earth model has to work with, about 4,350 years, which is nearly four hundredths of one percent of the tree. Split depths are approximate and the drawing is schematic.

Two numbers on that tree deserve a mason's attention. The first is that eight-hundred-thousand-year floor. That is not my number; it is the working threshold the cat specialists apply when they decide whether two cats even count as separate species, drawn from the divergence dates in the molecular work (Li et al. 2016, as used by Kitchener et al. 2017). By their own measure, two cats generally have to have parted company the better part of a million years ago before anyone will write them down as different species. The second number is the sheer spread of the animals. In the same family you have the sand cat and the black-footed cat, small enough to sit in your two hands at a kilogram or two, and the Siberian tiger at three hundred kilograms. That is the range one pair is being asked to produce.

And we know where the house cat itself came from, in detail. Its DNA points cleanly to the Near Eastern and North African wildcat, *Felis lybica*, and to a domestication that began in the Fertile Crescent. But this is dated to around ten thousand years ago (Driscoll et al. 2007; Ottoni et al. 2017), not 4,350. The earliest sign of a person keeping a cat is a cat deliberately buried beside a human on Cyprus dated about 9,500 years ago, an island with no wild cats of its own, so someone carried it there by boat (Vigne et al. 2004). Here is the part that matters for the clock: that wildcat ancestor still walks around today looking like a long-legged, sandy tabby, and the Egyptian cats read as the same animal. The cat did not keep changing after the record began. So this begs the question, if we do not see any change today after thousands of years of documented history, how expect such extremely rapid change just before documentation began? If we observe stasis as a theme, why expect extreme rapid change at all?

The walls of the ancient rock art shows us a stasis in cats from their first documented eye witness accounts. They do not show a single cat changing rapidly into different cat kinds over just a few centuries. They already existed and that is the conundrum for young earth creation as I see it.

5. Putting a clock on the cats

Now let me put the clock on it, the way I would put a clock on a job.

Take the young earth chronology at its plain word. The traditional reading that most who hold this view use, the one Archbishop Ussher worked out from the genealogies, puts the Flood at about 2348 BCE, with the animals dispersing from the mountains of Ararat a century or so after that (Ussher 1650). Now set that against the wall. The house cat is sitting under Egyptian chairs as a painted pet by about 2000 BCE. That leaves something like three hundred and fifty years, from the Ark to the tomb, for one pair of cats to become a wild small cat tame enough to paint under a chair. And the big cats are worse for the model, not better, because the lions are already in Egyptian art in the Predynastic period, at or before the Flood date itself. The Egyptian record simply runs straight through the date the Flood is supposed to have emptied the world, with no gap, no reset, and no mention of a global flood at all.

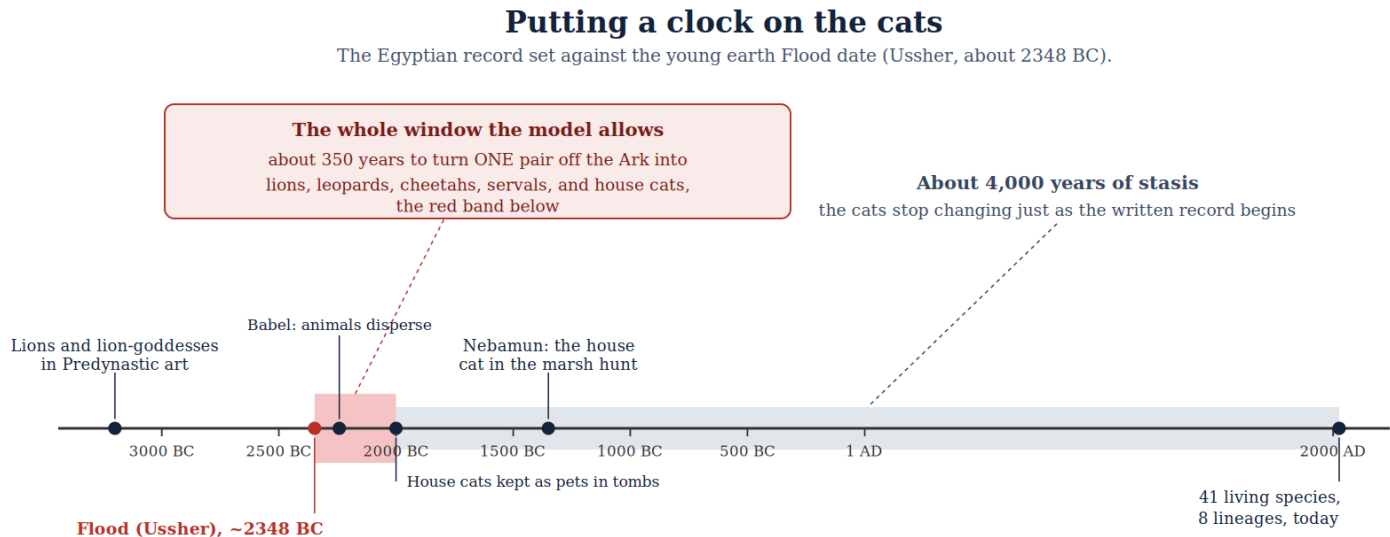


Figure 2. The same clock, laid on one line. The red band is the whole window the model allows, from the Flood at about 2348 BCE to the first house cats painted as pets around 2000 BCE, in which one pair off the Ark must become lions, leopards, cheetahs, servals, and house cats. The long gray band is the roughly four thousand years since, in which the cats hold still and no new cat species is seen to form. The lions in Predynastic art sit at or before the Flood date itself.

Cats breed at something like two to three years a generation, so three hundred and fifty years is on the order of a hundred and fifty generations. In that many generations the model needs one pair to throw off eight lineages and forty-odd species, spanning from a two-kilogram sand cat to a three-hundred-kilogram tiger, and to do it while the specialists who study cats say it takes the better part of a million years just to earn the title of a separate species. That is not a small stretch of the numbers. That is the clock being asked to run about a thousand times faster than anything anyone has measured.

And here is the test the job gives us for free. We have been watching cats, closely, for the whole length of the written record, about four thousand years. In all that time not one new species of cat has been seen to form. The lion Ramesses hunted is the lion on the plains today. The tabby under the Egyptian chair is the tabby on the windowsill today. If one pair really fanned out into forty species in a few centuries after the Ark, the change did not merely slow down when the record began. It stopped, completely, right on cue. A clock that runs at a blur for three hundred years and then holds perfectly still for four thousand is not a clock I would put a lot of confidence in. It asks us to trust what is unseen and unobserved. Now pile on domestication and we see even further limits. We can cross different species of cats and the variation is limited, not as openly diverse as one would expect a single cat lineage could produce. What cat species specifically was on the ark? How come that same species doesn't or can't form the diversity of species from it that creationists say it can?

6. What I think the walls are telling us

What is in front of me on those tomb walls is a world in which the lion in the king's hunt and the little cat under the chair were already old, and already separate, when the first Egyptian painter ground his ochre. The lion was a lion, the leopard a leopard, the cheetah a cheetah, and the house cat a house cat, each drawn as its own animal, from the dawn of the art and straight through the centuries after.

What the biologists tell me, reading the cats' own blood, is that those animals took a very long time to become what they are, more than ten million years for the eight lineages to branch, and the better part of a million years before any two of them earn the name of separate species. What the young earth story asks me to believe is that all of it, the lions and the leopards and the cheetahs and the sand cats and the tabby on the chair, came out of one pair in the handful of centuries between the Ark and the tomb painters, in a stretch of history where Egypt's own unbroken record shows no worldwide flood at all, and then stopped changing the very moment we started writing things down.

I do not think those things fit together. When I lay the art beside the biology beside the biblical calendar, the timing does not hold, and it does not hold by a wide margin. Not only does it give a limited window of time, it even gives a negative window for lions who appear in art dated before the flood even occurred. The simplest reading, to me, the one that does not require the clock to run at a blur and then freeze on command, is the one the science already offers: that the cats are an old family, that they became lions and leopards and house cats slowly and long ago, and that the painters of Egypt were showing us animals that took far longer to make than the story of the Ark allows. The Egyptians took their cats seriously enough to make some of them gods. Their documents regarding cats are some of the best in history and I think it is worth taking them seriously regarding the cats they documented.

7. Conclusion

I have compiled a list that I believe creationists need to answer and that I would love an answer to as well that I have not yet seen addressed. I consider a model that claims the consensus is wrong, to not be able to just give us an assertion, but to better explain along the diversity of cats explained in this paper with real data

- 1: Creationists need to show why their timeline is superior to the Egyptians.
- 2: Creationists need to show what cat “kind” was on the ark.
- 3: Creationists need to show a mutation rate that can take cats back to the ark
- 4: Creationists need to show evidence of a hypermutation to explain the early rapid diversity if that is truly how they want to explain the rapid expansion (Wood 2013).
- 5: Creationist need to explain why the extraordinary rate of diversification required after the Ark apparently ceased once cats entered the historical record, leaving thousands of years of apparent morphological stasis.
- 6: Creationists need to reconcile the proposed recent common ancestry of all cats with the deep genetic structure and eight major molecular lineages consistently recovered from modern felid genomes.
- 7: Creationists need to explain the biogeography: how descendants of one post Flood cat population reached Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, established specialized populations, and differentiated into their modern forms within the available timeframe.
- 9: Creationists need to produce a quantitative model, not simply a verbal scenario, showing generation by generation how a single Ark pair could realistically become the diversity of Felidae documented by the earliest civilizations.
- 10: Creationists need to show why their model is superior compared to the mainstream version.

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