



CAT II. PERSIAN CAT

In western Europe and in North America, what are called “Persian cats” are a breed of longhaired domestic cats with a massive body, measuring 40 to 50 cm in length, and up to 30 cm in the height of their withers ([FIGURE 1](#)). According to the standards (Vallat, 1992, p. 121), these cats must present a strong bone structure, important muscular masses, and short, straight paws. The head is large, round and heavy, with small round ears, a bulging forehead and a not very prominent nose, which is both large and high and slightly turned-up. The eyes are large, round, well separated and very expressive. The tail is short, never more than 30 cm long, and very hairy. The fur, which provides the most remarkable character of these Persian cats, has to be thick and silky, never woolly, but soft and long, the fur of certain champions indeed reaching 12 or even 15 cm. At present, there are more than eighty known varieties of Persians in terms of the colors of their coats, their distribution and combinations: black, white, rusty, red, cream, smoke, chinchilla, tortoise-shell, two-colored, calico (chinchilla red), sable, etc. (Patin, 1992, pp. 85-92). Experts carefully distinguish the Persian cat from the so-called “Oriental” cats (Siamese, etc.), which, unlike the former, present a short fur, slender shapes, a triangular head, with almond-shaped eyes and large pointed ears. The Persian cat is the true model of the apartment and competition cat, calm, gentle and easily adaptable to different environments. Although it is an “ordinary cat,” its admirers see in it, on the contrary, with its measured movements and imposing fleece, the aristocratic cat *par excellence* (Vallat, 1992, p. 118), the “Prince of all cats” (Patin, 1992, p. 83).



The privileged position which the West has reserved for the Persian cat is confirmed both by the number of these animals presented at shows—almost a third are Persian cats—and by the prices attained for particular reasons: 3,000 euros for an “extreme” Persian (front, nose and chin on a line, nose situated at the height of the eyes) and even 6,000 euros for an extreme Persian with a sable coat. There is hence a true Western “fad” for the Persian, due to its endearing ways of curling up and its large, round eyes asking for sympathy, as well as its aspect of “luxury cat” (Delort, 1984, p. 350), its nature as a “work of art” (Moscovici, 1984), in which the breeders can work out both the color and the shape to their hearts content. As is often the case in the zoo-technical realm, the English were the ones who led the way, choosing in the 19th century the most massive ones, the roundest, and the shortest of longhaired cats. In the 20th century, the Americans even went further in accentuating the tendency by producing the extreme type of the peke face (Vallat, 1992, p. 118), a kind of “longhaired Pekinese,” whose flat nose and bulging eyes predisposed it to suffer coryza and conjunctivitis (Patin, 1992, pp. 92-93).

The Western infatuation with Persian cats is not recent. These animals were for the first time introduced in England in the early 19th century, coming from France. At this time, the English indeed called them “French cats.” Their fur was already long and silky, and their shape was short, but their body was slim and their head elongated, and in any case devoid of all those exaggerated deformations of the present (Patin, 1992, pp. 59 and 83-84). Several testimonies about Parisian life in the mid-18th century show that these cats were in fashion, under various names, in well-to-do homes, where they enjoyed a definitely privileged position, not only in comparison with other cats, but even compared with humans. This was the case, for example, with the home of Mme Helvétius, whose drawingroom was frequented by numerous celebrities, such as Voltaire, Diderot, Buffon, Montesquieu, Condillac, and Franklin. They sometimes could hardly find seats, since the latter were all occupied by “twenty enormous angoras of all colors, clad in long furry robes, no doubt to preserve their own and shield them from the cold, while preventing them from running” (witnessed by Baroness Oberkich in 1755, quoted by Simonnet, 1989, p. 102). The fashion for these cats reached the highest levels of French society, affecting even the king himself. Louis XV was particularly known for his love of cats; he especially liked a large cat with long white hair, who enjoyed relaxing in front of the fire-place of his room or on a cushion of red damascus (Simonnet, 1989, pp. 97-98).



The initiator of this fashion and its most ardent follower was Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), a counselor at the parliament of Aix-en-Provence. This astonishing person, a humanist, scholar, and passionate collector, devoted his fortune and his time to acquiring rare objects and to acclimatizing exotic plants and animals, among them cats with long hair, white, gray, “rat-haired” or “riollez” (with black and white stripes), which he ordered from Damascus. He then had them mate and sold or exchanged the young ones for other curiosities, thanks to a network of acquaintances and representatives with whom he carried on a busy correspondence. (Peiresc is said to have written some ten thousand letters, about a third of which were edited by Tamizey de Larroque, 1989; extracts in Digard, 2000.)

To appreciate this correspondence at its right value, we must remember that domestic cats, in the sense we mean today, were considered in the West as being quite exceptional up to the mid-18th century. Introduced as they were quite late into western Europe—in the 4th-5th centuries (Bodson, 1987; Bobis, 1991, 2000)—the cat was above all appreciated for its qualities as a predator of rodents, especially of the black rat (*Rattus rattus*), which came from Asia in the 9th century. This function demanded that the cat of that period had to be closer to the wild cat than to the purring tomcat we know today; thus people kept this useful, though dangerous and even demoniac, creature at a respectful distance and even amused themselves by mistreating it. The massive invasion, in 1727, of the grey rat or surmulot (*Rattus norvegicus*) contributed to raising this little feline to the rank of animals familiar to mankind by showing its impotence against this dangerous adversary (Delort, 1984, pp. 345-346; Thomas, 1983, pp. 142-144; Digard, 1990, pp. 120, 234-235; Bobis, 1991, p. 93). Yet Buffon wrote as late as 1753 that “the cat is an unfaithful servant which people only keep by necessity, to oppose it against another and even more uncomfortable domestic enemy” (Buffon, 1753, p. 170).

The European names for longhaired cats—Angoras, Persians, sometimes Russians, Damascenes, Himalayans, Indians, Chinese—as well as their Arabic names—*sennawr širāzi* or *qeṭṭ širāz* (from Shiraz), *qeṭṭ anqara* (from Ankara), *qeṭṭ halabi* (from Aleppo)—are so varied that we may wonder whether they correspond to real geographical origins, or else if they are merely inventions destined to heighten the value of these animals by insisting on their exotic or mysterious character (Rannou, 1986, p. 54). The long-distance trade of the longhaired cats has for several centuries made it difficult to solve the problem. The trade in cats in general appears to have been a rather widespread practice



in Islam: “no one, among the people at the market, traders, salesmen, artisans, exasperates me as much as those who devote themselves to the trade of cats,” complained al-Sindi b. Šâhak (quoted by Jāhez, 1988, p. 280); he reproached them for getting hold of stray animals and making them dizzy by rolling them in closed jars to deceive the customers. In several of his letters, the inexhaustible Peiresc mentions “cats from Ancyra or Angory” which he ordered from Damascus. Other 17th-century authors mention cats from Angora, and certain secondary sources even refer to cats from Angola! Of course, what they mean are cats from Angora, i.e. Ankara. Did they refer to these cats, by analogy with the goats of the same name, which had long been known (Planhol, 1978), merely because they had, like the former, long, thin hair, or because they really came from Anatolia? It is very difficult to answer this question with certainty. On the one hand, this provenance is often affirmed, but by secondary works: for example, Rigaud (1968, p. 105) mentions that in the 15th century “big, woolly cats” were said to have been bought from Armenian merchants at the fair of Lendit by Jean de Popincourt to contest with rats; they were born, they said, “from the sneezing of lions in Noah’s ark”: coming from Turkey, they were called “Angora cats.” On the other hand, sources considered authoritative do not mention such cats in Turkey; thus, the naturalist Pitton de Tournefort, who traveled there in 1702, does not mention longhaired cats, although he speaks of cats in general and of the love of Turks for them. Finally, a 19th-century traveler only mentions the presence of longhaired cats in the Ankara area to point out their rarity: “the breeds of animals that are remarkable for the length of their hair, such as goats and cats, do not extend within an area of more than 24 miles around Ankara” (Aucher-Eloy, 1843, pp. 68-71).

In the 18th century, the name “Persian cats” (the only one used by Montcrif, 1727, for example) appears to prevail over the name of Angora cats. The earliest mention of a Persian origin of longhaired cats is due to the Roman traveler Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652), who spent six years in Persia (1618-23). In a letter sent from Isfahan on 20 June 1620, he described “*una razza bellissima di gatti*” from the province of “Chorasân” (Khorasan); he said he had acquired four pairs to take to Rome, where he planned to return in 1626. It was not until 1628 that Peiresc heard about the Roman journey and started a correspondence with Pietro Della Valle, which apparently continued until 1634; but in it there is no mention of cats (Digard, 2000, p. 328). This leads to the conclusion that Peiresc was not aware of the find in Khorasan and/or that Della Valle had not succeeded in bringing the cats back. Otherwise, Peiresc



would not have been obliged to have his own brought from Damascus (as he mentions in a letter of 31 January 1631).

In the 19th century, testimonies about the Iranian origin of these felines became more frequent and precise. In Afghanistan, wrote Elphinstone (1815, p. 144), “The cats must also be noticed, at least the longhaired species called Boorauk, as they are exported in great numbers, and everywhere called Persian cats, though they are not numerous in the country from which they are named, and are seldom or never exported thence.” Some years later, Lieutenant Irwin (1839, p. 1007) pointed out that “a variety of cat is bred in Cabul, and some parts of Toorkistan. By us it is very improperly called ‘Persian’, for very few are found in Persia, and none exported. The Cabulees call this cat bubuk [buruk?] or boorak, and they encourage the growth of his long hair by washing it with soap and combing it.” Are we to recognize, in the “boorauk” of Elphinstone and in the “boorak” of Irwin, the Persian adjective *borāq* “bristling and menacing (cat)” (Lazard, 1990, p. 55) or else *barrāq*, “brilliant, shining” (ibid.; sense confirmed by Steingass, 1892, p. 168, and by Haïm, 1969, I, p. 244), which in writing, only differs by the *tašdid* over the “r”? Even the dictionaries maintain the confusion by providing, for the longhaired cat, the terms *gorbe-ye borāq* (Naficy, 1967, p. 68; Haïm, 1969, I, p. 244), *gorbe-ye barrāq* (Steingass, 1892: 1078), and even *gorbe-ye barāq* (Desmaisons, 1913, p. 191). These hesitations are symptomatic of the obsolescence of the “Persian” cat in Iranian culture. Other 19th-century testimonies confirm the existence of a lively international trade in longhaired cats, especially from Persia to India, where they were sold to Englishmen. One of the trade routes was overland: “The long silky-furred Angora cats are annually brought to India for sale from Afghanistan, with caravans of camels, even so far as Calcutta” (Balfour, 1885, p. 605). The other, maritime route, via the Persian Gulf and the port of Bušehr, was no doubt the more important one. In 1866, among the merchandise taken on board at Bušehr, a European passenger noticed the presence of twenty splendid “cats from Isfahan” destined to be sent to Bombay (Lycklama, 1874, III, p. 54). In 1882, Jane Dieulafoy, traveling from Isfahan to Shiraz in a caravan heading for Bušehr, noticed, among other curiosities, a “merchant of cats ... an inhabitant of Yezd in Kirmania, who transported from Tauris [Tabriz] to Bombay about twenty beautiful angoras. For several years he constantly travelled between Persia and India and apparently profited from his strange commerce” (Dieulafoy, 1989, p. 335). She felt sorry for these animals and for the way they were transported on mule-back in canvas sacks.



The scarcity, if not the absence, of such cats today in Iran, as witnessed in oral and even written sources in Persian, strangely contrasts with the number and precision of Western reports. For example, the numerous cats represented on the Persian manuscripts preserved at the National Library in Paris are ordinary shorthaired cats. There is a single exception, a cat on whose tail we hardly notice the hair that is longer than that of the other cats (“Woman playing with a cat,” a painting measuring 85 x 143 mm, made by an unknown late 16th-century artist, on the back of folio 12 of the Persian supplement 1171). This silence is all the more surprising since the cat enjoys a rather privileged status in all Islamic countries, especially in comparison with the dog. Several examples of a particular feeling shown by Muslims for cats are provided by Bousquet (1958, pp. 40, 43, 44, 46), who mentions that these actions, for which the prophet himself had provided the example, are rewarded in the beyond, and their lack is punished. This cat-loving atmosphere reigns almost all over Iran, while the only Iranian cat-haters are found on the one hand among the pigeon-fanciers, for reasons that are easily comprehensible (personal communication by A. Goushegir), and on the other by the Zoroastrian minority, who consider the cat as “a creature of darkness,” “a typically Moslem animal, treacherous and selfish, now all blandishments and now suddenly scratching and biting the hand that caressed him” (Boyce, 1977, p. 63).

There thus remains the obsessive question: why have the longhaired cats, whose presence is testified (not exclusively, but mainly) in Persia up to the late 19th century (to the point that the Westerners describe them as “Persians”) disappeared from this country without leaving any significant traces, either in written sources, or in popular culture? Several leads have been explored, which, in fact, come to the same conclusion.

To start with, we have the following truism: with the Persian, it’s all in the coat—all, that is, both the drawbacks and the qualities. All those who have Persian cats agree in saying that the fur of the cat requires daily care, without which it tangles up, becomes matted and tarnished, and retains dirt. “However pretty it is to start with, a badly kept Persian provides the impression of being the most miserable animal” (Vallat, 1992, p. 120). It goes without saying that this upkeep is only possible with cats that are sufficiently domesticated to support the combing and brushing. At a time when these daily and intense manipulations had not yet entered into the habits of the cats—nor, especially, into those of their owners—it was not rare to see *Felis catus angorensis*, as the



zoologists called them at the time, as a “race much removed from the primitive type ... lazy, sleepy and grimy” (Desmaret, 1820, p. 154); especially in Persia, taking account of the use made of cats (for the predation of rodents) and the upkeep (limited to the essential) generally provided for them (Omidasalar, 1992, p. 74), one would prefer animals that did not have such drawbacks.

The second lead to explore is the exportation of longhaired cats mentioned in the sources. This subject is in a way a continuation of the preceding: what could in fact be better than finding buyers for animals that one does not want for oneself? The external demand appears to have been important enough, especially in the 19th century, to make us suppose that in various places in Iran there was breeding of longhaired cats of the type mentioned for Kabul and Turkestan by Lieutenant Irwin in 1839; this would have been speculative breeding exclusively for the export market. In any case, such activity must have been relatively marginal. One might suppose that it disappeared in Persia suddenly, when the external demand discontinued, that is, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Westerners themselves had sufficiently developed and improved the breeding to do without importing animals. We may also mention that the story of the angora goat shows a similar process: “it is sufficient ... that the demand should cease, or change its nature, to have the breed degenerate” (Planhol, 1978, p. 195).

The drawbacks of longhaired cats, from the Persian point of view, and the determinant weight thus exercised on their breeding by the external market, did not, however, exclude the fact—and this is our third lead—that these animals also had fervent and remarkable amateurs in Persia. Indeed, kings and princes—such as the Deylamite Rokn-al-Dowle (d. 976) and the Qajar Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (d. 1898)—as well as religious dignitaries—such as the great jurist ‘Emad Faqih Kermāni—were known to be particularly fond of cats and to treat them well (Omidasalar, 1992, pp. 74-75). In the entourages of the great, especially in their harems: “the cat is an object of love and of friendship (*mahabba*), especially for women. It was so familiar, so sociable (*uns*), so close to humans, so caressing (*dunuww*), so amusing. It went to bed with its masters, and slept in the same sheets with them. This was not the case with the dog or pigeon or chickens or any other animal living in company with mankind. ... The number of young girls, ladies (*rabbātu al-hijal*), young women of the harem, beautiful women (*mutahhamât*), and singing slave-girls (*qaynât*) who kiss their cats on the mouth is countless. They all say that the mouth of the cat is pleasant and wholesome, unlike wild animals (*sibâ’*) and the ruminants



(*dhawâtu al-jirra*) of the herds (*an'âm*). ... The cats are painted with henna; they have earrings (*shunûf*) and pendants (*aqrîta*) put on. They are spoiled (*yuthafu*), pampered (*yadallalu*)” (Jâhîz, 1988, pp. 278-79).

We know that in order to fully rise to the status of man’s companions, animals have to be freed from any useful production or function; they have to be fully available to human beings, serving for nothing else than keeping them company (Digard, 1990, p. 234). From this viewpoint, and paradoxically as it were, the Persian cat may merely have served by its deficiencies; its long fleece, a handicap and a dust trap for the common cat that has to survive by running after rats and mice, has on the contrary destined it to lead a life of luxury, and the care it requires has been the instrument of its promotion. So it is not surprising that only the longhaired cat found in Persian manuscripts is represented in the company of a woman.

Among the cats, the Persian thus appears as a forerunner. Just as the Conquistadores brought back with them a mania for tamed, exotic animals from South America (Sauer, 1969, p. 30), so Della Valle and Peiresc, followed by many others, imported from the East not only a new breed of cat, but also, and especially, a use for this animal—as an *objet d’art* — so far unknown in Europe. Then it only remained for Western amateurs to make the Persian cat into a *biblot* or knick-knack “torn from its original framework and function, ... stripped of its religious, social, and political attachments, [now] having become an object of trade and commerce” (Saisselin, 1990, pp. 158-59) and for it to become the “Persian” of drawing-room and shows that stirs such excitement in the contemporary West.

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