

Rational Creatures:
Examining the Cat-Dog Divide in the Medieval World

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Introduction

The spiritual chasm of status that exists between man and beast is daily put to the test by the very beasts kept in our homes. Human beings have a long history of keeping animals for one reason or another, but it has only been recently that the concept of animals purely maintained for companionship has taken center stage. This does not mean that humans throughout history have not been able to find companionship in the animals they owned; on the contrary, people have been expressing love for their animals as long as written records go back. The way in which we in the modern era categorize domestic animals and, more importantly, animal rights, however, is very different from historical perceptions of animal-human relations. Even the word “pet” did not exist in the English language until the sixteenth century; up until that point, animal companions were regarded merely by their species name (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 1). The Middle Ages in particular served as a transformative moment in the history of the “pet,” where not only was the role of the animal within man’s existence re-examined, but so, too, were the specific animals preferred by different cultures more solidly defined. As the old axiom of “man’s best friend” is so ubiquitous within the Christian consciousness today, so does Islam parallel this with the normalized presence of cats in urban centers like Istanbul – and the roots of this divergence can be found in the Medieval period, where abrupt shifts in human philosophy also had an effect on how thinkers perceived animals as man’s companions. The preference for cats in the Medieval Muslim world and dogs in the Medieval Christian world can be explained not by differences in the religions or animals themselves, but rather by a complicated blend of factors ideological, political, and social in the respective environments.

In discussing the role of cats and dogs in a given society, it is important to first designate a time and place. On the Christian side of my research, the tail end of the Medieval period – what I will designate as the 13th to 15th centuries – represents a transitional period in history where northern Europe in particular made the jump from a feudal economy centered around the farm and fiefdom unit to a mercantile one with a greater emphasis on the importance of capital. With regards to animal ownership, Europe was beginning to enter a period of greater noble consolidation of resources – practices like enclosure concentrated greater amounts of property and, yes, livestock, in the hands of a smaller group of people. Thus, I would argue this period of history, although really in the early days of the popularization of the practice of animal companionship, will paint a better picture of animal ownership as a society-wide rather than strictly noble pursuit. I am focusing on western Europe – within France and the low countries – and southern England, the portion of the British Isles with the greatest Norman influence and thus best connection to this portion of the continent. My research on the Muslim world, similarly, will focus on the Medieval era, within the confines of the Abbasid Caliphate, in particular what in the modern day is designated as Iran. With regards to the time period, however, for those aspects of my research about which I discuss scholarship in the Muslim world, I will largely be taking from the period before or during the Mongol invasion of 1206-1258, as the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 is traditionally regarded as the end of the Muslim Golden Age. Although the cultural holdovers of animal ownership for the most part transfer onward to the 15th century, the volume and proliferation of Muslim scholarship before the Mongol invasion does not continue as strongly thereafter and thus, for issues specifically concerning Muslim scholars, my research will largely concern that earlier period. By designating the *where* and *when* of this argument, forming

an image of the “pet” within society will be a much easier task; thus we can move on to outlining why this concept of pet ownership was somewhat maligned by theologians during the Medieval period.

Section I: Human exceptionalism

Before attempting any analysis of the specific animal companions chosen by Medieval people, there must first be a description of the underlying philosophy of much of human-animal relations, particularly preceding this period – human exceptionalism, an ideology that argues the place of the human within the hierarchy of beings is at its apex, with all other animals placed below and, most importantly, distinct from humans. Notably, even the language used here of referring to humans as a kind of animal and not wholly separate is contradictory to much of human exceptionalist thought. Concepts of human exceptionalism can be traced to religious influence by exploring fables of man’s dominion within religious texts and tales. Philosophical and theological texts penned during this period, too, outline what at least elites perceived to be the value of these animals in Christian and Muslim life. This ideology encouraged the pious man to evaluate animals based on their capacity to serve him, though whether or not he subscribed to that ideology was another matter. In evaluating the material remains of companion animals left behind during Britain’s Medieval period, archaeologist Richard Thomas (2005) additionally supplements his physical analysis with written records from the period pertaining to the norms at the time for animal welfare; Thomas Aquinas in particular writes that “people cannot show animals charity (love) or even friendship, because animals are not rational creatures and friendship is based on reason” (p. 93). It is the place of animals within the given hierarchy of beings that prevents any true camaraderie between human beings and themselves. Aquinas, too,

similar to Augustine of Hippo, was of the belief that animals did not possess immortal souls (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 3). In tandem with this doctrine, however, there exists an interesting contradiction between biblical writings and those of Medieval authors. While nearly all biblical references to dogs excluding the obscure Book of Tobit are negative, painting a picture of the stray dog's slyness, filth, and reclusiveness, 12th-century female composer Hildegard von Bingen glowingly praises the dog's natural traits of loyalty and foresight (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 8). Thus it is imperative that religious texts be examined for contradiction or difference of opinion. On the part of Muslim writings, Muslim scholar al-Damiri's account of the creation of the cat in his *Book of Animals* emphasizes "the cat's symbiotic relationship with people and (crowded) cities" and notes the importance of street cats in keeping rodent populations down (Campo 2009, p. 131). Cats were an important organism within the urban ecosystem and, more importantly, recognized as such. The Muslim world, too, being at a more mature stage of urban development than much of Christendom, had larger cities and more extensive places of learning, emphasizing the need for mousers. In the early modern period, encounters with Muslims on the part of wayfaring Europeans described the Muslim monolith as "a cruel people, who nevertheless are kind to beasts, and give alms," alternatively framing this communion with the "brute creation" as either compassionate or evidence of their inferior nature (Tlili 2018, p. 1). The vast spectrum of how kindness to the lower beings was perceived by the Medieval man was also mirrored in not only his treatment of his animals, but also his choice of animal. Evidently the principle of human exceptionalism is somewhat contradicted by human actions; as Muslim philosopher Sarra Tlili (2018) writes, this ideology is supposedly founded in concepts of human rationalism, but attempts to "corroborate claims about human exceptionalism" within religious

texts have proven futile (p. 13). It is a convoluted belief system, but one that by its very nature would fundamentally affect human-animal relations amongst the Abrahamic religions in particular.

Despite the way in which this philosophy has been used, this exceptionalism does not necessarily translate into outward disdain for animals. Despite popular opinion, at least according to the written records that regarded overindulging one's pet as unseemly, the practice was widespread enough in Christian Europe to be noted, particularly among the upper classes, whether by ladies in the home or lords in the field. Thomas (2005), again, points to rumors of England's King Henry III carrying his dog in a basket, as well as a famous, affectionate Irish monk's poem about his cat, *Pangur Bán* (p. 93). The monk in question lovingly regales observing his animal friend's mousing exploits while at his work – a marriage of the cat's utility and its capability to amuse and entertain. While one might readily conclude that the prevalence of pets amongst the upper classes was merely due to economic factors, Kathleen Walker-Meikle (2012) argues against this assumption (p. 3). In addition to noblemen, deep human-animal bonds were also common amongst noblewomen in particular, as well as clergy in seclusion. Walker-Meikle (2012) illustrates the distinction between the pet and the lord's animal as paralleling that between the "indoors" and "outdoors"; along these lines, the *Crith Gablach*, an Old Irish legal text, states that a lord should have his hunting dog, and a wife her pet dog (p. 3). This clear delineation separates animals of utility from animals of comfort, while the existing texts condemning excessive devotion for one's pets are belied by its very existence. However compelling the arguments against spoiling her dog might have been, it seems that to the lady confined at home the dog was far more so. Additionally, humanist historian Joyce Salisbury argues that "by the

late Middle Ages (after the twelfth century) the paradigm of separation of species was breaking down,” lending credence to the concept of the late Medieval era being one of transition (Salisbury 1994, p. 2). There was holdover still of the belief of a firm separation between man and beast, but both in the case of new scholarship and the practices of the average person, this framework was beginning to fade away. By examining how the people of the Medieval world engaged with and spoke about their animal companions – and by examining how they went about choosing said animals, we can gain a more complete understanding of how this change came about.

Section II: The dog as tool, the dog as companion

The presence of the dog as a cultural icon in Western nations with Christian foundations today is no coincidence. It is a tradition that traces back hundreds of years, the roots of which can be found in the Medieval era. To Medieval Christians, the dog was the perfect servant, perceived as not only skilled in hunting, hawking, and tracking, but also uniquely trainable and adaptable. Hildegard von Bingen went so far as to write that “the Devil hates dogs because of their loyalty to humans” (Walker-Meikle, p. 8). The practice of hunting in particular carried an almost religious significance for a lord. It is through a rigorous hunt “with strength of hounds” that the respectable Christian nobleman may not only demonstrate his strength but also use the “cultural performance” to declare his dominion as man (Crane 2013, p. 102). The dog was a primary actor in this nobility theater and, thus, sometimes spoiling on the part of the owner could be overlooked. Dog-lovers almost seemed determined to uncover more obscure reasons to praise the dog, an English book on the species and its breeds asserting a traditional belief that a dog placed to the chest will ease an ill stomach or disease of the torso by virtue of its heat (Walker-Meikle

2012, p. 7). Statements like this may seem almost comical to a modern audience, especially given the effects zoonotic viruses have had on human populations and the fact that some researchers have suggested viruses like measles were evolved from the distemper virus that was passed to humans via animals like the dog (Swabe 1999, p. 36). Nevertheless, the positive associations and language associated with dogs continue to be found in texts of this period. Irish texts frequently referred to pet dogs as *messán*, derived from the word *mess*, used to describe a favorite (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 4). Lap-dogs specifically became so popular with noblewomen that theologians of the period began to decry the spoilage of these beasts in their writing, with men like Thomas Aquinas scolding Christian people, and Christian women in particular, for treating their animals like kings. Even fiction of this period began to employ the trope of the “foolishness of excessive devotion to one’s pets” (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 4). All this is to show the important distinction made between the animal companion, or what we might today call a pet, and the livestock or just plain “animal.” The dog as an earthly symbol could be both loyal to its master and destined to beastliness, disciplined and irrational. Despite the moral quandaries of keeping a dog for friendship rather than servitude, for “can a dog know right from wrong?” attempts to either twist or ignore entirely the word of theologians abound (Crane 2013, p. 2). From an anthropological standpoint, one might argue the dog’s place of relative privilege in comparison to other animals as rooted in their very domestication – Joanna Swabe, a former researcher now involved in the Humane Society International, argues that the dog is unique in “that it was probably not domesticated specifically for food” (Swabe 1999, p. 25). In other words, while many domesticated animals like cattle and sheep might have other purposes up until inevitable slaughter for meat, dogs were instead used as aid in hunting and thus somewhat

closer to man in the hierarchy of beings. At the same time, though, I would argue this explanation does not tell the whole story, as cats were similarly not eaten and yet their representation in Medieval Christendom turned out quite differently. Nonetheless, whether the benefits are practical or fantastical, there is an attempt even by the most avid of dog-lovers to justify their appreciation through declarations of the dog's utility. Despite a clear desire by those who owned these animals to ignore recent theological doctrine, they seem to have still felt a need to honor that doctrine in some manner.

Although there is an acknowledgement of hunting dogs within Muslim texts of the Abbasid period, they do not seem to play the same role as the Christian hunting dog in nobility theater. Additionally, there is less evidence of the lap dog as can be found in Christian texts. It seems the dog, if it was owned and not a stray, was kept primarily for its capacity at hunting, even if this capability was not treated with quite the same reverence. This is not to say that Muslim hunters were cold with their dogs. On the contrary, Mamluk veterinary texts advise that the dog is an animal which requires "special attention," with the dog handler needing to give pets and strokes "in his daily care [in order] to ensure the dog's good health" (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 306). There is an acknowledgment of the dog's social nature and although these tasks are performed primarily to maintain the dog's utility, there does not seem to be evidence that they were performed begrudgingly. There were some writers who disliked dogs personally, such as Ibn Mankalī, a Mamluk who served under a number of sultans and described dogs as impure, even those used for hunting (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 306). Dogs as companion animals did exist, although more often these were hunting dogs treated more companionably by their owners; Ibn Mankalī specifically refers to cases "of dog enthusiasts

[allowing] their dogs to sleep with them in the same bed and sit on their cushions” (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 75). Treatment of the Muslim hunting dog, however, differs wildly from that of the much reviled street dog. Stray dogs are still a presence in the former caliphate, with Kim Fortuny specifically citing Istanbul as home to a notable number of strays. She writes that in the modern era “the feral dog belongs to another place and another time,” a drab piece of the landscape for anyone accustomed to the city but an oddity for many tourists (Fortuny 2014, p. 272). Stray animals were also a problem in the bustling Muslim cities of the Medieval period. Muslim cities at this point were older than most Christian ones, with warmer climates that encouraged more active fauna. Stray cats, however, would receive a much warmer treatment than stray dogs, as will be elaborated upon later. It seems that while stray cats were by and large embraced, it was the perception of dogs as unclean that shut many of these charitable doors for them. Even hunting dogs were questioned due to the natural impurity of the dog; how, then, could the cleanliness of the game be assured were the dog to bite it? The hunting treatises of Mamluk chroniclers advise saying “In the name of Allah, the merciful and the compassionate” before releasing the hound in order to legitimize this practice (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 38). Unclean as dogs may have been regarded, they are only mentioned in the Quran itself five times, all in reference to their role as “guardians or conduits of grace” (Fortuny 2003, p. 275). Thus the wariness of dogs cannot be explained as entirely down to Islam as a concept or Muslim texts.

Section III: The cat as tool, the cat as companion

Returning to Christendom, we can compare the Christian role of the dog with that of the cat. In contrast to her warm personification of dogs, Hildegard von Bingen described the cat as unfaithful and loyal only to whomever will feed him; Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Manciple’s Tale*,

too, compares the wildness of the cat to a housewife, “both being captives and lustful” (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 11). Another text from this period, the fourteenth-century Spanish *Book of Good Love*, makes several comparisons between women and animals – “wild cats and peacocks” in particular – urging the reader to take moral lessons from the similarities between women and animals (Salisbury 1994, p. 157). The Medieval trope of the wild woman highlights the animalistic nature of women and their insatiability. Similar to the Medieval Christian perception of women, there is a wariness and sense of mystery surrounding cats. Salisbury remarks that it was the wildness of the housecat that made it “incompletely domesticated,” incapable of being truly tamed although men might try (Salisbury 1994, p. 14). More akin to honeybees than hunting dogs, cats could be useful to an extent, but there was a quality of unpredictability to them that made theologians unwary. Despite these concerns, however, the useful qualities that could be found in the cat were put to use as any other. As the *Pangur Bán* poem illustrates, examples of cats as friendly companions could most readily be found in the monasteries of Europe; there was a harmony to the “synchrony of scholar and cat in their house” comparable to the “knight and warhorse in combat” (Crane 2013, p. 9). Although there were misgivings about the nature of the cat, he could be useful in a very specific, sanctioned context and deference was shown to that context. A 7th-century English book of riddles proposed the following:

'I am a most faithful watchwoman, ever-vigilant in guarding the halls; in the dark nights I make my rounds of the shadowy corners — my eyes' light is not lost even in black caverns. For unseen thieves, who ravage the heaped-up grain, I silently lay snares as fatal obstacles. Though I am a roving huntress and will pry open the dens of beasts, I refuse to pursue the fleeing herds with dogs, who, yapping at me, instigate cruel battles. I take my name from a race that is hateful to me.' (Royal MS 12 C XXIII).

The riddle, of course, refers to a cat, as described by a monk of the era. It was written by Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, and perfectly illustrates both the cat's hunting skills and supposed haughtiness as compared to dogs. More importantly, however, it illustrates how ever-present cats were in monastic life. Returning to Walker-Meikle's division of the "indoor" and the "outdoor," scholars, like women, were very much representative of the indoor world, and cats suited that world much better than dogs. It makes sense that cats would be more readily found in places of learning; the extremely expensive manuscripts produced by these scribes would need to be protected from rodents, and pest control is a skill happily undertaken by the cat. Despite this use, the animal is strikingly different from the dog in terms of its utility; besides being warily employed as a mouser, cats are notoriously independent and untrainable – as Rudyard Kipling would write, the cat is "not a friend, and [...] not a servant," but "the Cat who walks by himself" (Nikolajeva 2009, p. 249). A Welsh legal code retained from the Medieval period describes any given cat's "qualities [as being] to see, to hear, to kill mice, to have her claws whole, to nurse and not devour her kittens," going on to point out that if the cat in question should fail in any of these duties, a third of her price must be returned to the purchaser (Crane 2013, p. 18). Although this text affords more capabilities to the cat than most, it still emphasizes the necessity of a cat to complete these tasks effectively. To the European Christian, a cat might be useful for specific subsets of society, but could never compare to the adaptability of the dog. English author Edward Topsell would in 1607 refer to the cat as an "unclean and impure beast that liveth only upon vermin and by ravening" (Thomas 2005, p. 94). This characterization of the cat on the part of a European is particularly interesting given Islam's contrasting view on the topic.

Even in simply poring through the literature, there is a marked difference between Muslim and Christian representations of cats. With regards to their cleanliness, cats were admired in the Muslim faith for their diligent grooming and hygiene. A Muslim was permitted to “eat food that cats have sampled or perform ablutions [ceremonial washing] with water from which they have drunk” (Campo 2009, p. 131). In discussing the presence of cats in Muslim Mamluk society, historian and cultural scholar Housni Alkhateeb Shehada described the cat’s utility in “keeping away vermin and snakes” as secondary to its position as “still the most popular pet in the Muslim world” (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 77). The relationship between animals and the Mamluks was particularly unique. The Mamluk, loosely translated to mean “slaves” or “property,” were a warrior caste within Abbasid society whose territories, controlled from the mid-thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, contained many a *bayṭār*, essentially that period’s version of a veterinarian, with more specific terms for those *bayṭār* who treated specific animals (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 3). The *bayṭār* could treat not only family livestock, but also what we today might describe as pets, as well. Interestingly, however, cats in Mamluk literature are more often referred to as strays, with dogs referenced as “companion animals” essentially only to defer anyone from making a dog just that. It seems the stray cat was perceived as almost a communal pet, fed and cared for by a neighborhood of people rather than an individual family. Cats, in fact, were regarded as such upstanding members of Muslim society – as far as an animal could be, anyway – that confused European visitors to Muslim city centers in the Middle Ages and beyond would remark on their seemingly universal presence. Flemish traveler Josse van Ghistele wrote during his visit to the Levant between 1481 and 1485 of his shock to discover a cat shelter in Damascus, next door to a hospital serving the needy (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p.

77). Early modern English traveler and historian Thomas Herbert, visiting Isfahan in 1628, wrote that “cats be in more request with them than dogs [...] They frequently have them in their arms, in imitation it may be of their prophet Mahomet, who usually carried a cat in his sleeve” (Floor 2003, p. 30). Herbert is probably, I would argue, referring to a popular fable regarding Muhammad. As the tale goes, a cat was dozing on the sleeve of his robe when the bells rang for prayer; rather than disturbing her, he cut off the sleeve (Campo 2009, p. 131). This story would also be referenced by German Arnold von Harff, who spotted a cat resting on the coat of a Mamluk in Cairo and, having heard the story before, waited to see if the Mamluk would leave his coat rather than disturb the cat, which he reportedly did (Alkhateeb Shehada 2013, p. 78). There are variations of the story where the cat is his famous pet, Muezza, and others where the character is not Muhammad but rather another pious Muslim, famous or nameless – regardless, the bones of the story remain the same, and it depicts the careful consideration of an animal’s comfort as a virtue rather than a vice, as was the prevailing belief amongst Christian scholars. Sarra Tlili (2018), however, rejects the conclusions some modern academics have drawn from these examples, that Islam is either a beacon of animal rights or as shamefully disregarding of animal welfare as its monotheistic siblings; more specifically, she seeks to address the apologetics literature that, as she writes, “share the preoccupation of demonstrating the tradition’s superiority in this area” (p. 3). Even within these apologetic texts one can find the principle of utility so often found within the writings of Medieval Christian scholars; a text written for a Japanese animal welfare group justifies animal society as being in Allah’s image (Gharebaghi, 62). By this logic, treating animals with respect is beneficial to the pious man; fair treatment of animals is seen as a pathway to salvation and not a right of the animals themselves.

When Islam is placed in direct conflict with Christianity, there is a danger that scholars may dismiss one as barbaric and inhumane while placing the other on a moral pedestal. As far as apologetics in favor of Muslim writings are concerned, Tlili (2018) points out that many of these texts, though bearing titles such as “animal welfare” and “animal rights,” are defenses of Islamic tradition rather than defenses of the animals themselves (p. 3). More importantly, this type of analysis is simplistic and fails to consider not only the complexities of the Muslim faith itself, but also the factors which have shaped Islam’s relationship with animals.

Section IV: Ideological roots

As outlined previously, the Bible as a whole portrays the dog as sneaky, unclean, and antisocial, a stunning contrast to much of Medieval Christendom’s perception of them (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 8). If the Bible is to be taken as a holy document by Church doctrine, then it cannot be said that the word of God dictates a love of dogs or, conversely, a hate for cats. Thus an argument from an essentialist perspective – that something essential about the qualities of Christianity makes it more compatible with dogs – is a flawed one. Even attempting to quantify as complex and vast a religion as Christianity or Islam in terms of essential qualities would be a futile exercise, not to mention the difficulties of sourcing those qualities. On the other hand, from a human exceptionalist perspective, it makes sense that cats would be valued less than dogs, given their apparent lesser use. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that concepts of the utility of the cat are values that we ascribe and are not necessarily fungible with true worth. Medieval Christian scholars may cite the usefulness of cats with regards to mousing and Muslim scholars with regards to cleanliness beyond that, but these are values assigned on a societal basis and do not account for values that cannot be counted –

things like companionship, as an obvious example. Barring utility as a sole explanation, there is some validity to the gender argument. Walker-Meikle remarks that to some degree there was an acknowledgment “that women and even clerics might ‘need’ [pets] for reasons of companionship, and as a remedy against loneliness and melancholy” (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 19). Noblewomen and the so-called third gender, monks, were allowed a certain degree of indulgence not granted to the primary unit of society, men, precisely because of their detachment from reality. The exclusion of much of the working poor from discussions of animal companionship and its ethics, too, may be down to the increasing animalization of both women and the poor during this period. Salisbury, again, writes of Marie of France’s twelfth-century fable exhibiting “beastialization” of the poor (Salisbury 1994, p. 153). These groups that existed on the outside of society were permitted greater lenience with regards to overindulging animals due to their already being forsaken, in a sense. Thus the line cats tread, between beast and domestic, bears a similarity to those groups of Christian society which were regarded as lesser-than. It is not a perfect or whole explanation of the demonization of cats by any means, but cats being an avatar for deviance of all sorts certainly plays a large part.

The case for animal preferences with regards to Islam tread a more political than social line. Rather than looking to answers within Islam as a religious institution, in my research it has been more efficient to examine the geo-political history of Islamic regions. An article in the *Journal of Iranian Studies* offhandedly references the “demonic character ascribed to the domesticated cat by Zoroastrianism” in contrast to the prevalence of cats as animal companions in post-Islamic Iran (Floor 2003, p. 28). Kim Fortuny (2014) elaborates upon this statement by referencing scholarly debate regarding possible political motives behind the widespread taboo

against dogs within Muslim communities; Zoroastrianism, the dominant religious power in the Middle East before the unprecedented and rapid ascension of Islam, praised and honored the dog as a spiritual creature (p. 274). In particular, there was a kind of stoic dignity lent to dogs who dug up bones, with many Zoroastrians being of the belief that these animals were spiritual guides in death. This idea would later be subverted in Muslim literature, with Saint Eulogius of Córdoba, a Christian living under Moorish Muslim rule, recounting the event of Muhammad's death, wherein "instead of angels [guiding him], dogs came and began to devour the Prophet's body," the disciples angrily decreeing that a number of the animals would be slaughtered annually in revenge henceforth (von Grunebaum 1969, p. 47). It should be noted, however, that Eulogius's story appears two hundred years after Muhammad's death; regardless of the truth of the tale, it may not have emerged until very close to the 9th century, and thus this particular parable should be taken into context as a probable later addition. As mentioned before, actual references to dogs in the Quran number few and trend toward the positive. It seems the reactionary ideology came about over time, organically weaving its way into later theological texts. Specifically, this argument places an ethnic conflict between Persians and Arabs inhabiting the same place during a time of religious upheaval as not a sole cause, but a crucial one. Fortuny compares this move to Judaism's demonization of snakes as a political attack upon more established Mesopotamian religions; as a man's choice of pet was determined largely by its utility to him, so, it seems, was the vilification of dogs and praisal of cats in Medieval Islam a tool for undermining the power of the established Zoroastrians (p. 274). As mentioned before, the Quran itself contains no condemnation of dogs as a species, and thus one cannot conclude that the taboo against dogs is inherently based in Islam or Islamic texts as a concept. The

historical evidence available to us suggests, rather, that this social norm evolved over time, shaped by its environment rather than outlined by a concrete dogma.

Conclusion

The common thread that can be surmised in evaluating treatment and perception of animals as companions is that any interested party must first separate modern ideas about pets and pet welfare from a base sense of animal wellbeing and their place within human society. As Sarra Tlili points out, arguing that an objection to the ownership of dogs is inherently an issue of animal rights and not of perceptions of animals presupposes that “dogs naturally crave human attention and would suffer if deprived of it” (Tlili 2018, p. 6). Tlili makes an excellent point that many of our perceptions of animal ownership and beyond that, animal welfare, should not be taken as a given when discussing historical roles of animals. Thomas (2005) argues that even his examination of animal remains in England should be taken with a grain of salt, given “though an animal may have been a cherished pet in life, upon death, it may have been exploited for economic gain” and this justification would not have been viewed as contradictory or immoral (p. 99). A somewhat ambiguous bit of the writings of Saint Albert the Great, interestingly, describes the manner in which a cat may lose his “boldness” if his whiskers be cut off; whether or not this is written out of concern for the cat’s wellbeing or mere observation, it should be noted that at the least there was an attempt by pet owners to understand their animals’ behavior (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 11). By contrast, however, other texts mention a common practice of singeing a cat’s tail in order to prevent it leaving the house out of apparent vanity, as exemplified by theologian Jacques de Vitry (Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 12). At first blush it might seem that the Islamic preference for cats and Christian preference for dogs is merely down to fundamental

differences between the two religions, but the true answer is a convoluted blend of factors both ideological and historical. In the same way that the duality of the cat and dog is entirely manmade, so, too, is the supposed uncompromisability of Islam and Christianity unnatural in origin. It is almost incidental that cats were the Islamic pet of choice; had dogs not been heroes of the Zoroastrian religion or had hunting with dogs been more of a status symbol amongst Muslim nobles, perhaps the outcome would have been very different. Likewise, were Mohammad not such an avid cat-lover, the *hadiths* regarding cats as the supposed “quintessential pet in Islam” may not have existed at all (Campo 2009, p. 131). Rather than viewing this history as a direct chain of cause and effect, it can be more effectively evaluated as causes intertwining and making change, not individually but in tandem. The separation placed between human beings and their animals may seem distant at present, but the bones of this utilitarian ideology flow on through the modern period, with philosophers like Descartes agreeing with Aquinas’s analogy comparing animals to the gears of a clock or Martin Heidegger “[defining] animal mentality as inferiority, not alterity” (Crane 2013, p. 50). Furthermore, this appeal to logic fundamentally rejects the factor of love in any human-animal relationship, and the reason for which Medieval people were willing to ignore theological doctrine for the sake of their “pets.” Even today, the invisible line drawn between “cat lovers” and “dog lovers” remains, though we know not why. In the modern era, there is no shame in truly viewing a beloved animal as a pet or friend, but perhaps there should be a more concerted effort to examine why an individual gravitates to one animal rather than another.

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