



MEI Kaleidoscope | The Turkish Love for Cats

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In Istanbul, the cat is more than just a cat. The cat embodies the indescribable chaos, the culture and the uniqueness that is the essence of Istanbul. Without the cat, Istanbul would lose a part of its soul.¹

- Excerpt from *Kedi*, a film by Ceyda Torun

There is hardly any place in the world where an animal – a cat – is more inextricably woven into the city’s urban character and livelihood than in Istanbul.

The opening lines above, of the documentary film *Kedi* (meaning cat in Turkish), expresses just how much this is so, revealing the close human and feline relationship that has blossomed in one of the Middle East’s oldest, imperial cities.

It doesn’t take long for a visitor to Turkey’s cultural metropolis to realize how special the city’s love for cats is. In Istanbul’s sprawling landscape, cats are part of the swelling population of residents that pack the city to its brim - yet these feline inhabitants are more than welcomed in the neighborhoods. It is commonplace for people to leave food in the streets and even set up temporary shelters and veterinary clinics for them. Cats are given free rein in the city’s streets - they strut the parapets and walls of administrative buildings and lounge in the gardens of mosques. They nap indiscriminately on cars and on the windowsills of the numerous cafes that line the city’s cobbled pavements.

¹ Documentary: *Kedi*, Ceyda Torun. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5y51di>



The famous cat of Hagia Sophia, Gli.
Source: Pinterest

The Turkish love for cats is closely linked to the greater Islamic world's reverence for the felines, which can be traced back to Prophet Muhammad's time during the Golden Age of Islam. It has been narrated that the Prophet had cut off the sleeve of his prayer robe so as to not wake a sleeping cat and he had, on another occasion, allowed another cat to give birth on his cloak.² Another well-known story recounts how Muhammad was saved from a deadly snake by his companion Abu Bakar's pet cat, leading to his blessings on the cat and henceforth Muslim reverence for felines.³ There is even a popular saying in

² Gamm, Niki, "The Ottoman love for cats large and small," *Hurriyet Daily*, October 2013. <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/the-ottoman-love-for-cats-large-and-small-55694>

³ Gamm, Niki, "The Ottoman love for cats large and small," *Hurriyet Daily*, October 2013. <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/the-ottoman-love-for-cats-large-and-small-55694>

Turkey which underscores the close association of cats with Islam: “If you kill a cat and wish to avoid hell, you have to build five mosques.”⁴



Feeding street cats in the Ottoman era.
Source: Daily Sabah

Cats were also highly valued in the early Ottoman era because of their role as hunters of mice and vermin.⁵ Ottoman houses, especially those made of wood, used to be infested with bugs and mice. This led to the introduction of cats to get rid of these pesky creatures. Thus, cats were held in high regard for their ability to cleanse households from pests and were a welcome presence in Ottoman homes.

⁴ Leary, Catie, “Why cats rule in Istanbul,” *Mother Nature Network*, November 2014.
<https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/blogs/why-cats-rule-in-istanbul>

⁵ Gamm, Niki, “The Ottoman love for cats large and small,” *Hurriyet Daily*, October 2013,
<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-ottoman-love-for-cats-large-and-small-55694>



Still from *Kedi* documentary.

Source: <http://ihavecat.com/2017/02/14/kedi-much-more-than-a-documentary-about-cats-in-istanbul/>

According to Ceyda Torun, director of *Kedi*, a zoologist had shown her a cat skeleton from 3500 years ago. It had a fracture in its thigh bone that could have healed only if it had been treated and wrapped by a human.⁶ This underlines the enduring and affectionate relationships that humans have been having with animals since ancient civilizations in the region – way before cats were prized as guards against pests.

The memoirs of Baron Wenceslas Wratilow from 1599 is another proof of the Turkish love for cats and the feline's standing in early Ottoman societies. He wrote: "In Constantinople, there are also large gardens, surrounded with walls, on which cats jump and assemble, waiting for certain people to come and give them alms. For it is customary for Turks to boil and bake paunches, lights, liver and pieces of meat, and carry them in wooden buckets up and down the city, crying out 'Kedi et, kedi et' i.e. 'Cat's meat!'... and it is an undoubted truth that it is on the walls of these gardens the cats breakfast in the morning and assemble for the second time at the hour of the evening meal, in large bodies out of the whole city, and stand on the lookout; and we went purposely to these walls and listened to their caterwauling, and watched how they ran out of the houses and assembled."⁷

⁶ Bromwich, Kathryn, "Interview: I made a love letter to the city and the cats," *The Guardian*, June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jun/18/kedi-film-istanbul-street-cats>

⁷ Gamm, Niki, "The Ottoman love for cats large and small," *Hurriyet Daily*, October 2013, <http://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/the-ottoman-love-for-cats-large-and-small-55694>

There is also the story of the Turkish Van breed of cats, which by local legends, traditional folk songs and ancient artefacts, tell of how the Van cat has lived in Turkey's Lake Van region for generations before being recognized elsewhere in the world. Legend also has it that this particular breed of cats sailed aboard Noah's Ark and hopped off to swim for dry land after reaching Mount Ararat, a volcanic mountain in eastern Turkey.⁸

Legendary tales and historical accounts abound about the furry animals that have earned their place in Turkish hearts. Today, the cat and its relationship with the city have become symbols of many other values that occupy the complexity of modern Turkish society, such as femininity, loyalty and community. There is no doubt, then, that cats will continue to be respected and embraced in a region where they have co-habited amicably and symbiotically with their human counterparts for generations.

⁸ Fawcett, Kirstin, "7 Facts About Turkish Van Cats," Mental Floss, August 2016, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/83400/7-facts-about-turkish-van-cats>