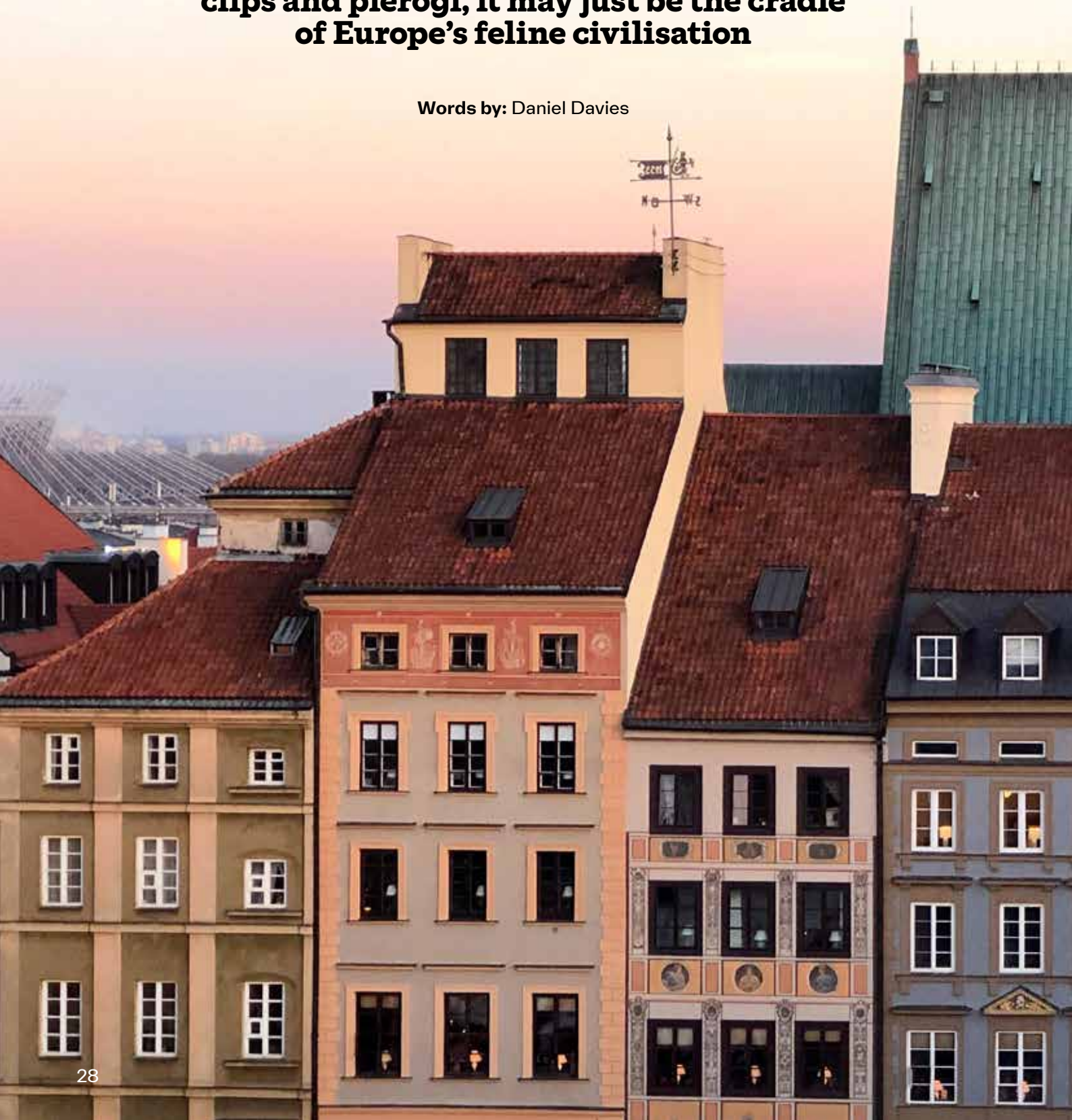

Pole cats

Poland isn't merely the birthplace of paper clips and pierogi, it may just be the cradle of Europe's feline civilisation

Words by: Daniel Davies





Cats are big in Poland. Not all as big as Gacek, the Polish street cat who sprung to global fame in 2023, but we'll come to him. Nevertheless, cat ownership in Poland is high. Numbers vary, but according to Statista, more than one in four (26%) Polish households have a cat. That puts Poland whisker to whisker with the UK, where, according to Cats Protection's CATS Report, 26% of households also have a cat. Snapski! However different our nations and languages may be, the Poles are clearly our cat-loving partners in purr.

The Great European House Cat Migration

It's fitting that the Polish word for cat is kot, as new research has revealed Poland to be the main birthplace (with Serbia) of Europe's present-day feline population. Until recently, researchers thought domestic cats first arrived in northern and central Europe from the Mediterranean in Late Antiquity, some time during the third and seventh centuries, in what scientists call 'The Great European House Cat Migration'.

But this tale took a twist in 2016 when radiocarbon dating of cat bones found in northern Poland traced them back hundreds of years earlier, to 50 AD.



Now, more recent finds in the country's south have pushed back this timeframe even further, to the Neolithic (4,330 to 2,300 BC) and Pre-Neolithic (5,990 to 5,760 BC) eras. What does this all mean? It means domesticated cats were at home in Poland an astonishing 8,000 years ago, about 4,500 years before the famously ailurophile Egyptians were busy embalming their favourite felines. No wonder Poles and cats go hand in paw.

Deep felines

Given the depth of this feline history, it's hardly surprising to find so many places across Poland with the word cat (kot) in their names. As well as the villages of Koty, Kotów, Kotuń, Kotiki and Kotowice, there are also the lakes Kotel, Kotenok and, simply, Kot – Lake Cat. How these places acquired their catty names remains as beguilingly mysterious as the creatures themselves.

But cats are writ large in urban life, too. In fact, in towns and cities all over Poland, you'll see extraordinary expressions of love for cats. For instance, in Łódź (pronounced 'Wootch'), an artist by the name of 'Raspazjan' painted a mural of a 'cat woman' sitting on top of a hair salon as part of the 'Energy of the City' street-art festival (pictured left). Another Polish artist Mariusz Bartoszewski, who uses the Banksy-style pseudonym 'Skucha', has painted cat murals on buildings throughout Poland (pictured above).





One of his best-known works can be found on Osowska Street in the capital, Warsaw, which he painted in response to a local tragedy: “There was once a fire in this building and several people died,” he says. “The building evoked such sad emotions from the local residents in the wake of this incident. So I wanted to bring these people some joy.” Sadly, the building ended up being demolished early this year and the mural with it. But plenty of Skucha’s gloriously cat-inspired art survives across buildings throughout Poland.

But if murals aren’t your thing, how about a life-sized statue instead? For a whole decade, a cat named Dante lived in an antique bookshop in the city of Wrocław (pronounced ‘Vrot-swaaf’). He was given the literary name of Dante because his favourite place to curl up for a nap was on a copy of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. But as well as being a bookish creature, he was also a friendly one. He was particularly fond of greeting customers from the windowsill as they entered the bookshop. When he died in 2015, having already been named Wrocław’s most popular cat, a statue was erected in his honour (pictured above), in his trademark place and pose. It’s now a local tradition to stroke the statue’s back and make a wish.

Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science

It’s not only bookshops that have become inseparable in people’s imaginations from their feline residents. Much larger, more famous buildings have too. And they include one of Poland’s most iconic structures, the awesome Palace of Culture and Science (Pałac Kultury i Nauki, or PKiN) in the heart of Warsaw (pictured right).

Few Polish buildings divide opinion the way PKiN does, and not just for its size and style. Completed in 1955, Poland’s then-tallest tower (it’s still second) was designed by Soviet-Russian architect Lev Rudnev as a “gift from the Soviet Union”. But whether you see it as a symbol of Soviet oppression or an art-deco magnum opus, it’s always relied on colonies of cats to keep its cavernous corridors rodent-free. Once 60-strong, its live-in clowder has reputedly been streamlined to 19 crack mousers. But if that sounds like hard work for these moggies, rest assured that this elite unit enjoys working conditions that its predecessors could only dream of, not least cosy private quarters decorated with recreational climbing obstacles and, wait for it... pin-up puppy posters!

The King of Kaszubska Street

Evidently, there’s no shortage of famous cats in Poland. But recently, all have been eclipsed by a big new shadow on the block. And that shadow belongs to a cat who’s variously been called ‘The Kim Kardashian of the cat world’ and ‘The King of Kaszubska Street’. But his friends know him simply as Gacek (pictured far right).

Gacek (pronounced ‘Gats-ek’), which means ‘long-eared bat’ in Polish, is a chunky, free-roaming, black-and-white cat who lives in a custom-made wooden cabin on Kaszubska Street in the Pomeranian city of Szczecin (pronounced ‘Zuh-chin’). Although he’s lived there for over a decade, and is well known in the neighbourhood, his fame exploded in 2020 when a video by local news agency wSzczecinie went viral. Since then, this gentle giant has become a major tourist attraction, even beating the 12th century Pomeranian Dukes’ Castle in online reviews and pulling in ailurophiles from all over the world. “I flew from Oslo with transit in Gdańsk to see Gacek,” wrote one reviewer in August 2021, awarding him five stars.



But fame often comes with a price. For Gacek, already a larger cat, that price has been a gain in weight. A local animal shelter has now asked people not to feed him, and a sign beside his box instructs admirers to leave treats only in closed packets. Hopefully, these measures will remind people not to overfeed Gacek, or any other cat, as doing so can seriously damage their health.

Not that Gacek is fazed by his globe-trotting fans and their humble offerings. “It was worth travelling three hours to feel ignored by him,” quipped one.

In the cat house

So is it fair to say, after this whirlwind overview, that Poland’s love affair with cats is blissfully unclouded – a bed of catnip?

Not quite. The relationship took a stormier turn in 2023 when Wojciech Solarz, a biologist at the state-run Polish Academy of Sciences, added domestic cats to the academy’s 1,786-strong list of ‘alien invasive species’, on the grounds that they originally arrived in Europe from the Middle East. It seemed a particularly perverse decision, given the recent revelation that cats have been in Poland for at least eight millennia. And, hang on... didn’t human beings first arrive in Europe from Africa anyway?

Thankfully, Poland’s cat fans have been fighting back ever since. Celebrity veterinarian Dorota Suminska, author of the book *The Happy Cat*, challenged Solarz in person during a televised debate. “Ask if man is on the list of invasive alien species,” she asked, in a combative swipe.

But whatever government biologists say, Poles’ love affair with cats looks set to continue. Nowhere is this clearer than in the village of Dobra, near Szczecin. In 2017, local

authorities built a cat shelter they named Dom Kota, or ‘The Cat House’, at a cost of one million złoty (about £215,000). The shelter keeps its 100 feline residents happy with labyrinths, cat trees, little houses, scratching posts and a range of toys including balls, rods and even mechanical mice.

“There was a real need for a place like this,” says Katarzyna Hermanowicz, Director of Dom Kota. “Today, people bring us homeless cats from all over the place. We nurse the sick cats back to health, and we work to find the healthy ones real homes as soon as possible.”

Thanks to its tireless team, Dom Kota finds caring new owners for about 15 to 20 of its residents every month. It’s a story that will resonate with anyone who works or volunteers for Cats Protection, too. There’s nothing more native to Britain or Poland, it seems, than loving and caring for cats.