

# FACTS AND SPECULATIONS

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Most authorities believe that the longhairs were the result of a mutation in the domestic cat which probably originally occurred in the Middle East, although some believe that the coat was the result of hybridization with wild felines such as the European Wild Cat and Pallas's Cat. However, the fur of the European Wild Cat is not nearly long enough to make it a very believable candidate since in appearance it is very similar to the ordinary short haired domestic cat. Pallas's Cat is much more likely since it has the most Persian head and body type plus it has the longest, thickest fur of all of the wild cats. Nevertheless, there are major differences between it and the domestic cat and the range of Pallas's Cat seems to be too far to the east from the most logical area of origin: the Middle East. For centuries Europeans referred to longhairs as Angoras or Persians which tends to support the Middle East's claim since names, legends, etc. very often have at least a kernel of truth behind them. At the very least, the names imply that the first longhairs in Europe were imported from Angora, Turkey (now Ankara) and Persia (now Iran).

According to Claire Necker in *The Natural History of the Cat* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes, 1970), Angora cats are mentioned in the 13th century French poem, "La Roman de la Rose". Unfortunately, no bibliographical information is given, so it is difficult to determine whether the reference actually appeared in the Old French original or whether it was inserted in one of the many later versions of the

work. An examination of some of the translations, including one which was deliberately accurate in terms of the original imagery, determined that it had not been included in them. The publication date of the version which mentions Angoras would be of interest since it seems improbable that the cats would have been mentioned in the poem unless its readers had been familiar with them.

*The Book of the Cat* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), edited by Michael Wright and Sally Walters, dates the introduction of the Angora into France and England in the 16th century. An excerpt taken from *Voyages de Pietro della Valle* which was included in *Histoire Naturelle, Générale, et Particulière* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1749-1803), written by Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707-1788), seems to be a primary source used by those who have attempted to determine the time of the introduction of the longhair into Europe. This excerpt is especially interesting because of its reference to Persians. Pietro della Valle (1586-1652), an Italian who traveled in Turkey, Persia, Egypt, the Orient, etc., mentioned in his book not only the Angora, but also a "species of cat" from the province of Chorazan (now Khorazan) in Persia. He described the Chorazan longhairs as being gray (a color now called blue), but much lighter on the chest and underside. He said that their coats were very long, fine, glossy, and silky and that it curled in places, especially on the chest. The cats had a long tail, carried over the back, which was cov-

ered with 5 to 6 inch long fur. Della Valle stated that the Portuguese had taken them into India and that he, himself, was planning on taking four pairs back to Europe with him.

Fernand Méry in *Le Chat. Sa Vie. Son Histoire. Sa Magie* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1966) says that Pietro della Valle was the first to introduce longhairs (undoubtedly the Persians of Chorazan) into Italy and that the Counselor Peirsec of the Aix-en-Provence Parliament was the first to take longhairs into France. Most authorities seem to agree that both Angoras and Persians were definitely in Europe at least by the 16th to the early 17th centuries, the Angoras being the first to arrive with the Persians being imported soon after.

In his section on Persians Méry also quotes a sentence from a letter written in May 1856 by Lottin de la Val which refers to Angoras in Armenia. Translated into English, it reads: "I have found this beautiful species of cat (the Angoras) on the great Armenian plateau at Erzeroum, where the climate singularly differs from that of Angora." Méry goes on to say that: "Mr. Lottin de la Val stated precisely that the Angora was the dominant variety among the cats of Kurdistan where he had encountered whites, grays, orange spotted. It was equally known in Bagdad, but in fewer numbers 'because the inhabitants objected to them chiefly as being carriers of plague'."

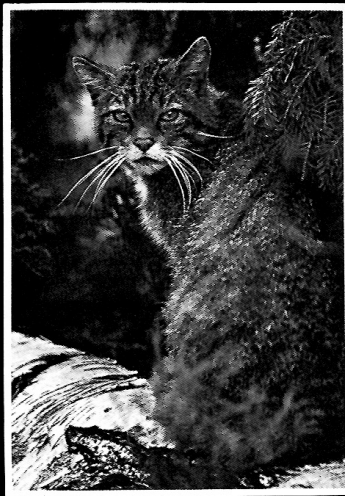
In considering the cats themselves, one can speculate that the Angora is closer in type to the original longhairs

than is the Persian since its head and body type is closer to that of the short haired domestic cat and its wild ancestors. Even the very early European Angoras and Persians differed, the Persians being heavier and having larger, broader heads with shorter noses, and thicker coats that were not as silky. It is possible that the Angora changed relatively little during the centuries following the original mutation. The changes found in the Persian probably were the result of minor mutation which became fixed in Iran, either through chance or through selective breeding.

According to *The International Encyclopedia of Cats* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), Europeans started paying attention to the differences between the Angoras and the Persians around 1871, the year of the first official cat show. The Persian became more popular and the Angora disappeared in Europe. However, some Angora traits undoubtedly survived in the Persian. For example, the difference in coat type of the Angora and the Persian was noticed very early and the two breeds were interbred until quite late. This may account for the two basic coat types, long, silky, and flowing as opposed to long, thick, and fluffy, as well as the combination coats which are seen in modern Persians.

The facts and places mentioned above lead one to some interesting speculation. If one accepts that the Middle East is the most likely place of origin of the longhair, one is still dealing with quite a large area. Afghanistan has been a strong contender for the honor of being the place of origin and it certainly could have provided a suitable environment. However, if one accepts the proposition that the Angora is likely to be closer in type to the original longhairs than is the Persian, it seems strange that the longhairs of Persia, a country bordering Afghanistan, developed a different type while the longhairs of Turkey, a country located quite a distance away from Afghanistan, did not. An area more centrally located in relation to the two types would seem to be more logical.

If one looks at the map, one discovers that Kurdistan, where Lottin de la Val found longhairs to be in the majority, is centrally located in relation to Ankara, Baghdad, and Khorazan while Erzerum is "right next door". Kurdistan is a plateau and mountain region and it, or a nearby area, seems to be a logical place for the longhair mutation to have appeared and thrived. The isolation of the area would have provided the proper environment for inbreeding, as did the Isle of Man for the



The European wild cat, *Felis silvestris*. This animal is slightly smaller than the domestic cat.

Manx. The recessive would have become predominant as a result of the longhair having more survival value because of the cold. Since Kurdistan was isolated and inhabited by a relatively primitive, nomadic people, it is unlikely that the longhairs would have been taken by traders from the more populous and advanced areas of Turkey or Iran into Kurdistan. Longhair cats would hardly have been a good trade item to take to a people who were mainly concerned with marginal survival. It is easy to imagine the cats having been taken by traders from Kurdistan, or a nearby area, to the "big cities" where they would have been beautiful, and valuable, novelties. Since the longhair mutation has no lethal factors connected with it, the longhairs would have interbred with the local shorthairs and would have become quite common. The longhairs would have been called Angoras or Persians,



Pallas's cat, *Felis manul*. Pallas's cat has a heavy body with a thick, longhaired coat. It is about the size of a domestic cat.

names merely derived from the places where Europeans would have been most likely to have found the cats.

Before concluding, another, but unfortunately extinct, breed of longhair from the area around Peking (now Beijing) deserves mention. In the section on the province of Pe-che-li, China (now Hopeh) in *Histoire Générale des Voyages* (Paris: Didot, 1746-1802), edited by Antoine François Prévost (1697-1763), appears a description of a very unusual breed of longhair which deserves quotation in the original French: "Entre les animaux, on vante une espèce singulière de chats à long poil, avec des oreilles pendantes, que les Dames Chinoises aiment beaucoup". Translated into English, it reads: "Among the animals, people praise a peculiar species of long haired cats, with pendulous ears, which the Chinese ladies love very much". Buffon used this quotation in his work and stated that travelers said that the breed was called the Sumxu (pronounced Sum'-Sōō) and that it could not be improved upon when compared with the ordinary cat. He went on to say that the Sumxu was found nowhere else, that it was black or yellow, and that its fur was extremely glossy. They were rare, very expensive, and wore gold collars. Since cat ears are relatively small, it is possible that the Sumxu's pendulous ears may merely have been tipped over much like today's Scottish Fold. The description rather boggles the mind: a combination Scottish Fold/longhair.

Since the Sumxu always was rare, was limited to a single area, and became extinct even though it was highly prized, one wonders if a lethal factor or factors were connected with it that led to its eventual end. It is also interesting to speculate about how the breed came into existence and how the longhair became "mixed up" with such a strange trait as pendulous ears. Did the ear mutation originally appear on a longhair or did the Chinese deliberately breed for the combination of traits?

Although this article has not pretended to solve the mystery of the origin of the longhair, it has attempted to present some rather obscure facts and hopefully interesting speculations which may add to the general fund of information on the magnificent Persian cat and longhairs in general. Whatever its origins, the Persian has thrived and grown in popularity over many centuries and, thanks to nature and to humans, it has not gone the way of the Sumxu. How fortunate we are!