

The Origins of Domestic Animals



Dog



The dog seems to have been the first animal tamed by people and this happened a very long time ago and separately from all the other domestic animals. Evidence suggests that the dog was tamed at around the time that modern humans settled in Europe or Siberia in Asia. People first tamed wolves, and as they bred them to make them more tame and to encourage other aspects helpful to people, they developed an animal that was different from its wild ancestors.

Middle East

Several animals were domesticated in the Middle East during the Neolithic (“New Stone Age”), about 12,000 years ago. One of the earliest is the **sheep**. The ancestors of the sheep were hairy, rather than woolly, so people bred the woolliest animals together until they got the woolly **sheep** of



The ancestor of modern sheep would have looked like this. Image by Jörg Hempel.



today. The **rams** (males) also had huge horns, so people would have bred the animals with smallest horns in order to get the small horned **sheep** of today.

At about the same time as the **sheep**, people domesticated the ancestor of the **goat** in the Middle East. The wild ancestor of the **goat** looked very similar to the wild ancestor of the **sheep**, but with taller horns. Instead of wool, people were interested in the milk and meat of the **goat**.

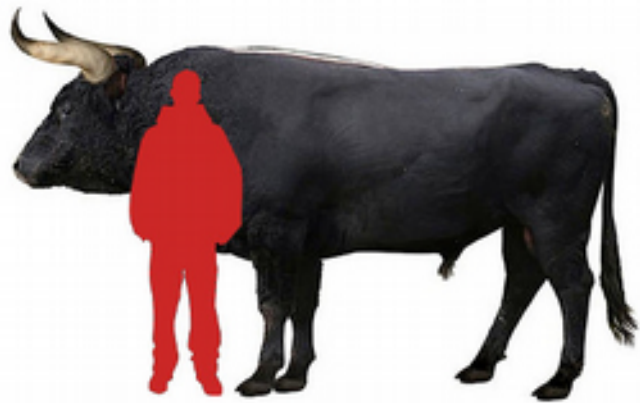


African Wildcat.

The **cat** was also tamed in the Middle East, about 10,000 years ago. Its ancestor was the African Wildcat. **Cats** were probably tamed to catch the rats and mice that wanted to eat the grain people stored.

Asia

Cattle were tamed in India, Asia about 10,000 years ago. Their wild ancestor, the **Aurochs** (“aw-rocks”) lived all over Asia, Europe and North Africa. The **Aurochs** was huge and fierce, with large horns. People must have been very brave to tame them. People were interested in the milk, the meat and the hide (to make leather). Today's **cows** are very tame compared to the **aurochs**. They are also much smaller. Thousands of years of breeding by people has turned the fierce, wild **aurochs** into the gentle domestic **cow**.



Ice Age human with Aurochs. Aurochs reconstruction by Jaap Rouwenhorst.



Red jungle fowl. Painting by Edward Neale.

Chickens were also domesticated in China, Asia. Their ancestors were birds called “**jungle fowl**” that scratched under bushes in the jungles of China, India and South-east Asia about 8,000 years ago. People were interested in the eggs and meat of these birds. The ancestors of **chickens** did not lay nearly as many eggs as modern **chickens**. The **jungle fowl** laid between 5 and 12 eggs every spring.

Pigs and **ducks** were domesticated in China, Asia. **Pigs** were tamed from **Wild Boar** about



9,000 years ago. The **Wild Boar** is also relatively large and fierce, with quite large tusks. **Ducks** were domesticated about 6,000 years ago, probably for their meat, feathers and eggs.

Wild **horses** were first tamed in Kazakhstan, Asia about 5,500 years ago. **Horses** first appeared in the Americas and travelled to Asia and Europe during ancient times, across land bridges such as Beringia. Interestingly, they became extinct in the Americas by 10,000 years ago and were reintroduced to North America after Columbus, specifically by Hernán Cortés.



Horses. Image by Mikel Ortega.

