

Cat-astrophe

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

If anyone ever did a word search of four decades' worth of these columns, it is not likely that *cat* would ever show up. I am neither pro-cat—I sneeze when one comes near—nor con-cat—I don't want to lose any cat-loving readers. I am just neglectful of felines. But a recent review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (January 14) of Donald Engels's *Classical Cats: The Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat* impels me to overcome my neglect of the creatures.

Reviewer Peter Green, like Engels an aelurophile (cat lover), wonders why the author, an economic historian, would take up the subject. Here's why: Cats have been humanity's bulwark against rodents, the main carriers of typhus and the bubonic plague as well as devourers and spoilers of needed food. A scholar investigating the logistics of Alexander the Great's army came up with these useful statistics:

An adult mouse eats about 0.14 oz (4 grams) of food per day but spoils approximately five to ten times more through its droppings and urine, or a total of 0.85-1.5 oz. (22-44 grams) per day. A 12-oz. adult black rat consumes about 4 oz. (115 grams) of food per day and also spoils about five to ten times more, a total of 24-44 oz. (680-1,250 grams). In one year, therefore, a mouse can potentially damage up to 34 lbs. (15.4kg) of food, and a rat up to 1,000 lbs. (453 kg), eating about 91 lbs. (41 kg) and spoiling 910 lbs. (412 kg.). Thus, if a cat kills about 500 rats per annum, he can prevent the potential destruction of 250 tons of human food supplies per year. This does not count the potential disease that he will prevent.

Green and Engels point out that the cat, known delightfully in Egyptian as *miu*, was associated with Isis and Diana as an object of veneration. The cat cult persisted under Christianity but "incurred ruthless persecution." Some Christians now might be virtual cat-worshippers, but long ago they killed thousands of cats, especially black cats, as "familiars" of witches.

For Christians, “whatever the pagan world did had to be wrong; Romans in particular made a fetish of frequent bathing and civilized meals, so for Christians dirt and fasting, the former in particular, acquired virtue.” Put all these factors together, and what do you get? Engels, with “ill-disguised anger,” says you get “rats running rampant, and such virulent outbreaks of plague (climaxing in the Black Death of 1346-51, when up to 20,000,000 died in Europe alone) as the ancient world, with its clean habits and protective cats, had never experienced.”

Green quotes Lactantius: “Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum”—that all religion has a potential for working evil—“but here was one evil consequence of belief that even he never anticipated.”

When Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness for wrongs perpetrated by the Catholic Church, we doubt whether he had the persecution of *cattus cattus* by dirty Christians in mind. Yet their anticat policy helped kill more people than the Crusades or the Inquisition ever did.

Good action follows repentance. If someone calls the Engels’s book to the pope’s attention, he might stroke the Vatican cat more tenderly. And I’ll stop neglecting cats as long as they don’t stop neglecting rats.