

# Archaeology find sheds new light on family pets

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A University of Leicester archaeologist has discovered a bone belonging to a late 19th-century tortoise from Stafford Castle, Staffordshire - believed to be the earliest archaeological evidence of a tortoise kept as a family pet.

As reported in *Post-Medieval Archaeology* (volume 44/1) by University of Leicester archaeologist Dr Richard Thomas, the significance of the find is in the insights it gives on the early importation of tortoises and the changing attitude of British society towards family pets.

The Stafford Castle tortoise bone was found amongst the skeletons of cats and dogs, in a context that suggests it was kept as a pet, possibly by the family who were caretakers at the castle at the time. The date of the find coincides with the late 19th-century increase in the trade of live animals and with the widespread importation of tortoises in particular.

As Dr. Thomas says, "Although we have [archaeological evidence](#) for terrapins and turtles from the 17th century, this is the first archaeological evidence we have for land tortoise in Britain. It seems very likely that this specimen was imported from North Africa or the Mediterranean; by the later 19th-century there was a dramatic rise in the commercial trade in tortoises from these regions to satisfy the growing demand for [pet animals](#)".

The morality of keeping pets was considered highly suspect in the strict religious doctrines of Medieval and Early Modern society, and although

there was an avid fascination in exotic creatures at the time, this seems to have curiously bypassed the tortoise.

Attitudes towards pets began to change in the 17th century, particularly under the famously dog-loving Stuart kings, and the reputation of the tortoise had certainly risen high enough by the early 17th century for the ill-fated Archbishop Laud to have kept one.

During the 18th and 19th centuries a more 'modern' attitude to pet animals gradually emerged. The sculptor Joseph Gott created sentimental statues of dogs during the 19th century, and in 1824 the Society (later Royal Society) for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded.

Pet burials have also been found from the period, in stark contrast to the bones of earlier domestic animals simply thrown out with the rubbish.

The discovery of the Stafford Castle [tortoise](#) bone a few years ago, now reported in Post-Medieval Archaeology, adds to the archaeological evidence that by the late 19th century ordinary families were keeping animals as pets with which there was probably some bond of affection.

As Dr. Thomas reveals, "Unfortunately, this interest in keeping exotic pet animals resulted in the capture and translocation of millions of wild tortoises each year during the 20th century. The animals were crated in ships and kept in appalling conditions; countless tortoises died during this journey and those that survived fared little better, given away as fairground prizes and kept by people with little knowledge of their upkeep. It was not until an EEC regulation in 1988, that this trade in wild tortoises was prohibited".

Provided by University of Leicester

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