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THE COMMON GENET *(GENETTA GENETTA)* IN EUROPE: A BIOLOGICAL AND ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS[1]

LA GINETA COMÚN *(GENETTA GENETTA)* EN EUROPA: UN ANÁLISIS BIOLÓGICO Y ECOCRÍTICO

LA GENETTE COMMUNE *(GENETTA GENETTA)* : UNE ANALYSE BIOLOGIQUE ET ÉCOCRITIQUE

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Abstract: The case of the Common Genet (*Genetta genetta*; Mammalia, Carnivora) shows how comparative literature, using ecocriticism as a framework, can work in combination with natural science to address and solve some enigmas related to the presence of the species in Europe. This paper shows how literary analysis can provide appropriate answers for questions planned in the field of biology. Three interconnected

1 Acknowledgements to Professor Juliette, Vion-Dury, Comparative Literature, Sorbonne Paris Nord University, IRIS, UMR 8651, U997; to Damian O'Shea and to Professor Scott Slovic, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Idaho and Senior Scientist at the Oregon Research Institute, for their precious help and unwavering availability. Thanks, too, to Miguel Clavero, David Camps and Christian Parsy.

issues will be addressed: the origin of the genet in Europe; the cases of albinism and melanism in genets and the putative use of the species as a kind of cat in human environments. Biogeography and genetics suggest that the genet was brought to Europe by human beings, ignoring the questions of who, when, with what specific aim, and with what consequences. Biological arguments will be exposed, followed by those of comparative literature that support the science and/or suggest additional options. Thus, natural science and comparative literature enrich and complement each other in order to perform this complex case study.

Keywords: Genet (*Genetta Genetta*); Natural sciences and comparative literature; Humanities and sciences; Fauna conservation.

Resumen: El caso de la Gineta común (*Genetta genetta*; Mammalia, Carnivora) muestra cómo la literatura comparada, usando la ecocrítica como marco, puede colaborar con las ciencias naturales para abordar y resolver algunas cuestiones relativas a la presencia de la especie en el continente. Este artículo a dos voces muestra cómo las aproximaciones de la literatura y las humanidades respaldan o no las hipótesis planteadas desde la biología. Se abordan tres asuntos interconectados: el origen de la gineta en Europa, los casos de albinismo y melanismo en las ginetas, y la presunta utilización de la especie a modo de gato doméstico en entornos humanos. La biogeografía y la genética sugieren que la especie fue introducida en Europa por los humanos, pero se ignora por quiénes, cuándo, con qué propósito y con qué consecuencias. Se expondrán los argumentos biológicos, y luego los de la literatura comparada que apoyan los primeros y/o sugieren opciones adicionales. De este modo, las ciencias naturales y la literatura comparada se enriquecen y complementan mutuamente de cara a resolver este complejo caso de estudio.

Palabras-clave: Gineta (*Genetta genetta*); ciencias naturales y literatura comparada; humanidades y ciencias; conservación de la fauna.

Résumé : Le cas de la genette commune (*Genetta genetta* ; Mammalia, Carnivora) montre comment la littérature comparée, en utilisant l'écocritique comme méthode, peut travailler en collaboration avec les sciences naturelles pour aborder et résoudre certaines énigmes liées à la présence de l'espèce en Europe. Cet article à deux voix montre comment les approches de la littérature et des sciences humaines fournissent des réponses appropriées aux questions soulevées par la biologie. Trois points interconnectés seront abordés : l'origine de la genette en Europe, les cas d'albinisme et de

mélanisme chez les genettes et l'utilisation hypothétique de l'espèce comme chat dans l'environnement humain. La biogéographie et la génétique suggèrent que la genette a été introduite en Europe par l'homme, sans qu'elles sachent par qui, quand, dans quel but précis et avec quelles conséquences. Les arguments biologiques seront exposés, puis ceux de la littérature comparée qui soutiennent les premiers et/ou suggèrent des options supplémentaires. Ainsi, les sciences naturelles et la littérature comparée s'enrichissent et se complètent pour résoudre ce cas d'étude complexe.

Mots-clés : Genette (*Genetta genetta*) ; sciences naturelles et littérature comparée ; humanités et sciences ; conservation de la faune.

1. The Common Genet: An Ecocritical Research Topic[2]

The first aspect of this investigation relies on the methodologies of comparative literature, such as literature, iconography, history, and heraldry, to name a few, to analyse the relationships between Mediterranean societies and a particular animal species from prehistorical times to present time. But the subject of this thesis was not just any animal: it was the Genet (*Genetta genetta*), a strange animal, which looks like an exotic cat and fascinates people due to its hybrid appearance. It has the general appearance of a cat with stone marten head, fox ears, tail of a lemur, and speckled fur like that of a panther. Nocturnal and very discreet, the Genet is a small carnivore shrouded in mystery. Some of the greatest mysteries surrounding the Genet have concerned its origins in Europe: how, when, and by whom was it introduced? Another mystery concerns its relationship with human societies: it is said to have been domesticated in Europe in the Middle Ages. Cultural materials suggest that the Genet was present in people's homes before the cat but was then abandoned. Some legends about this small carnivore needed to be checked in order to substantiate our understanding of the place of the Genet in European society[3]. Other questions about the cultural significance of the Genet are inherent to its literary representation (for example, what is the

2 This article emerges from a series of lectures based on the collaborative research of the two authors, which began in 2009, the year when one of the authors (Virginie Muxart) initiated her work on a Ph.D. thesis in Comparative Literature.

The first talk took place at the Primer Congreso Internacional de Literatura Comparada in Valencia (2009); the second talk, in the 9th Biennial EASLCE Conference in Granada (2022) and the last one, in the XXIV Simposio of the SELGYC in Madrid (2023).

During all the thesis, a collaboration was made naturally with the Spanish scientific community (Spanish biologists have done the most work on the Genet), and in particular with the author Miguel Delibes, who started a close relationship with this animal 55 years ago because of choosing the Genet as the subject of his graduate thesis. (See: "Nostalgia de ginetas").

3 The state of play on the Genet case is presented in the author's thesis (Virginie Muxart).

symbolism of the Genet?), but it very quickly became apparent that close collaboration with biologists was needed to get the best possible grasp of the animal in all its facets. When such research is done covering a time period dating to prehistoric times, in an area as large as we have chosen, on the knowledge and representation about an animal so little known, so stealthy by nature, it is essential to get to know it as closely as possible, not only on paper (in books and their margins) and through artifacts, but also under the microscope and in the field.

While ecocritical textual analysis provides a favourable framework for this collaboration, the multidisciplinary approach of disciplines such as comparative literature and biogeography, which are mobilised here, should not be overlooked. The optimal conditions were therefore in place for this work which shows a collaboration aiming to analyse the reasons for the presence of a mammal, the Common Genet, in Southwestern Europe and trying to solve as many riddles about the animal as possible.

2. Questions from a Biological Viewpoint

2.1. Biogeographical Introduction

The study of the distribution of plants, animals, and all other forms of life has long been a subject of attention, and the discipline that deals with these issues is called biogeography. At first, the knowledge of where one species or another lived was considered a mere curiosity, since it lacked a theoretical framework in which to interpret it. As with other branches of biology, biogeography acquired its full meaning in the light of the theory of biological evolution. In fact, the distribution patterns of living beings are important proofs of how evolution functions. Although later it would come to be known that Darwin had already speculated about it, the first contributions to the field of biogeography are attributed to Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace was a naturalist who spent four years in the Amazon rainforest and, after a brief period in Britain, travelled to the Malay Archipelago. In 1855 he collected specimens on the island of Borneo. From the territory of Sarawak, he sent a communication which would take months to arrive and to be published, to the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History of London* (Wallace 184-196). In that paper, after pointing out, among other empirical observations, that "in geography no species or genus occurs in two very distant localities without being also found in intermediate places", he presented what he considered a "law" on the origin and distribution of species: "Every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing closely allied species" (186). Essentially, he noted that species are not distributed

at random, but according to certain patterns. Alfred Russel Wallace, quite rightly, is considered the father of biogeography.

In addition to the area of origin of any taxon, it is important to consider the "dispersal capacity", determined both by the ability to move, specific to the species, and by the geographical barriers that challenge animals' movement. Many birds, for example, manage to jump barriers such as waterways, but for terrestrial vertebrates a large river or a stretch of sea can be difficult, if not impossible, obstacles to overcome. In recent times, speaking in evolutionary terms, a new factor is having a decisive influence on the distribution of species. This factor is the activity of humans, which for millennia have moved flora and fauna from one place to another. Particularly because humans have such a decisive influence on the distribution of certain species, biogeography constitutes an interesting field in which the natural sciences can fruitfully collaborate with the humanities (history, literature, folklore, etc.).

2.2. The Common Genet and its Distribution in Europe

Genets (genus *Genetta*) are mammals of the order *Carnivora* and the family *Viverridae*. They are the size of a domestic cat, with a slender body and a black-spotted coat, a typically ringed tail almost as long as head and body combined, large triangular ears, a pointed muzzle, and partly retractile claws. As with many other viverrids, they have musk and perineal glands. The taxonomy of the genus is controversial, but about 17 species have been proposed. All genet species are endemic to Africa, although, as we will see, the Common Genet is also present in Southwestern Europe and the southern portion of the Arabian Peninsula (Palomo *et al.* 330-332).

The Common Genet (from here on, simply called the Genet) is the only species of the genus distributed outside of Africa. It is common in the Iberian Peninsula and Southwestern France, and also present in most of Africa and southern Arabia. Its head and body length are about 50 cm and the tail length scarcely less. It weighs almost 2 kilograms[4]. The problem for biogeographers is that the presence of the Genet on the Iberian Peninsula was not expected, considering both its evolutionary history and its dispersal capacity.

4 Details about their appearance, their biology and their abundance and distribution in Spain can be found in Camps, David. *La Gineta* (2016) and in https://secem.es/mamiferos/atlas/genetta-genetta. Details about the Genet in France in Muxart *et al.*, "Genette commune *(Genetta genetta)* Linnaeus 1758" (2024).

Genet in Lleida, Pyrenees area © David Camps, 2012.

The evolutionary history of the *Viverridae* family includes mammals relatively similar to the Genet that are distributed exclusively in Asia and Africa. If we refer to the subfamily *Genettinae*, a fraction of the aforementioned family, it includes both true Genets (genus *Genetta*) and the very similar African linsangs or oyans (genus *Poiana*), all of them restricted to African territory (Jennings and Veron 175). What does this mean in evolutionary terms? Basically, it indicates that Genets likely originated in Africa, arriving to Europe from the neighbouring continent. Can the Genet's ability to move explain how it made the leap from Africa to Europe? There is a significant difficulty: the Strait of Gibraltar.

Currently the Strait of Gibraltar separates the southwest of the European continent from the northwest of Africa, so that a land mammal cannot cross from one continent to the other by walking. This explains why European and North African mammal faunas are at present very different. But they are not entirely different, in part because the Strait of Gibraltar has not always existed. At the beginning of the Messinian period, about six million years ago, the Mediterranean Sea was a huge salt pool, in many places dry, separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a land bridge. 5.3 million years ago, suddenly, the Euro-African land bridge across Gibraltar broke. It was supposedly one of the greatest floods in the history of the Earth and its effect must have been absolutely catastrophic. One study (García-Castellanos *et al*. 778-782) estimates that the amount of water entering from the Atlantic was equivalent to a thousand times the flow of the Amazon River, and that the level of the Mediterranean rose about 10 m per day. This means that the basin was filled in a couple of years, when until now it had been thought that the process had lasted between centuries and millennia. In one way or another, once the Mediterranean and the Atlantic met, an aquatic barrier was established between Europe and

Africa, so that a terrestrial species moving from one continent to another had to do so by circumventing the Mediterranean basin on the eastern side. There is some evidence of mammal species that have followed this path, such as the black-faced dormouse (*Eliomys quercinus*) (Delibes de Castro *et al.*, "Disagreement between Morphotypes and Karyotypes" 289-292).

After the opening of the Strait of Gibraltar, some species of mammals common to both sides of the Mediterranean (north and south) became extinct, and the remaining faunas increased their differentiation. The few contacts that occurred later have occurred either through the eastern route (through the Middle East), as has been said, or through two other very different ways. One is uncertain and haphazard, and consists of arriving, for example, aboard some floating structure; the other, easier and more likely, is to be transferred by human beings. Small mammals (mice and shrews, for example) can arrive more easily by the first procedure, but larger mammals such as Genets almost inevitably require the second. Even in this case, there are two options: that humans make the transfer consciously and voluntarily (for example, in the case of domestic animals) or that they make it inadvertently (for example, animals that travel with shipments of fruit or wood). According to the review by Mike Dobson (77-88), most of the 18 species (including the black-faced dormouse, already mentioned) common to both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar would have been introduced by humans. Some, such as the rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and the field mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*), were probably transported from Europe to Africa, while others, such as the Moorish mouse (*Mus spretus*) and the Moorish hedgehog (*Atelerix algirus*), were moved in the opposite direction. Small rodents probably accompanied humans in an accidental, unnoticed way, while species such as the Gibraltar monkey (*Macaca sylvana*), brought from Africa to southern Spain, undoubtedly were transported consciously. Dobson considers it "widely accepted" that the Genet was introduced by humans from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, but he does not provide any evidence of this (83).

What could have happened? More than 5.3 million years ago, as we have seen, African terrestrial fauna could indeed move between Africa and Europe. The Genet, however, probably would not have done it at that time; in the first place, because it likely did not yet exist as a differentiated species; and secondly because fossil remains of Genets dated to the last 5 million years should appear in European sites, and they do not (Kurten 62). Another possibility is that the Genet has arrived to the Iberian Peninsula from Africa, circumventing the Mediterranean to the east, as mentioned. However, there are not intermediate populations (for example, in Southeastern and Central Europe) suggesting this dispersal. The third and more credible option, as we have said, is that

the species were carried from Africa to Europe by humans. This does not solve the problem, but merely makes it more interesting. Assuming that the transporting of Genets was not accidental, as they are not small animals, we must accept the idea that the people who did it knew what they were doing and had a reason. Who were they? When did this happen? And why? These are questions for the humanities.

3. What Does Science Teach Us about It?

Traditionally, for biologists the study of beings that lived in the past has been a field of research known as palaeontology. We have already said in relation to this that, to date, no Genet fossils have been found in Europe, which in principle allows us to rule out that the species was part of the fauna of this continent in the Quaternary. The species must have come from somewhere else.

One branch of archaeology is usually developed by naturalists. It involves the identification of animal remains in the archaeological sites and their assignment to different uses or human activities. This discipline is known as archaeozoology. The Spanish archaeozoologist Arturo Morales (512-513) found the pelvis of a Genet in a garbage dump in the Almohad levels of Mértola (Baixo Alentejo, Portugal). Contextually it was dated to the first quarter of the 13th century, shortly before the conquest of the city by the Christians. The Genet bone appeared along with several others from rats (*Rattus rattus*), which led Morales to speculate about a possible domestication of the Genet to control rats. More interesting, however, is the fact that the same author found a hare (*Lepus granatensis*) tibia that had been defleshed by humans and subsequently bitten by a Genet, which left the unmistakable mark of its first upper molar on the bone. This suggests that the carnivore fed on human food waste, as many domestic animals usually do. The finding by Morales indicates that Genets were already in Europe in the 13th century, probably coexisting in the homes of the Muslims who then lived at the Iberian Peninsula. Had they arrived with them? Did they arrive earlier? During the inventory of Genet bones carried out by Virginie Muxart, then a doctoral student, new Genet bones were found in the Morales' laboratory. Miguel Delibes and other researchers have radiocarbon-dated the remains of two Genets retrieved at prehistoric levels of Abrigo 6 of Cueva del Humo (A6H), a karstic complex in Málaga (southern Spain) (Delibes de Castro *et al.*, "New Insights" 531-539). One of the specimens was determined at a Carbon 14 age of 1310 ± 30 years BP (calibrated date: 656-773 AD), which is five centuries earlier than the specimen from Mértola. Thus, the species was certainly present in Iberia before the Almohad Muslim period, and probably before the invasion of the area by the first Muslims in the 8th century.

Other contributions of science to the history of the Genet in Europe come from molecular genetics. One of the most fascinating facts in biology is that all living things share the same genetic code, clear proof that they descend from a single ancestor. Although the genetic code is the same, the sequences of each species, and even of each individual, are unique. In theory, a comparison of the complete molecular sequences of two individuals would make it possible to detect their level of kinship in the broad sense (for example, between an Inuit and a Maori), but the same is true when two species, or two populations within the same species, are compared. Philippe Gaubert and colleagues (Gaubert *et al.*, "Early Phases of a Successful Invasion" 523-546) analysed two small fragments of mitochondrial DNA in 134 individual Genets from almost the entire distribution area of the species; mitochondrial DNA is called this because it is contained in the mitochondria and not in the chromosomes, and is therefore transmitted only maternally. Researchers found that there exist four evolutionary lineages. One of them includes the Genets of Arabia (and perhaps from East Africa, although this has not been proven), the second includes those from southern Africa, the third from western and northwestern Africa, and the fourth and the oldest are the European Genets and those from a narrow coastal strip in northern Algeria. The authors suggest that all European Genets come from that Algerian coast, from where they would likely have been transported at different times. However, an alternative explanation is also possible: could not the Genets of the Algerian coast, like the European ones, be introduced from a yet unknown location (Muxart, *Savoirs et représentations de la genette* vol. 1 100)?

Later, Gaubert and colleagues (Gaubert *et al.*, "Comparative Phylogeography" 341-358) proved that the DNA of the Genet from Mértola belonged to the most common and widespread of the current European mitochondrial types, suggesting that the dispersal of this maternal genetic line might have been related to Muslim activities. Finally, these authors postulated no less than two independent introduction events for the species in Europe, at least one of them previous to the Muslims' arrival (Gaubert *et al.*, *Tracing Historical Introductions in the Mediterranean Basin* 1897-1913). We have analysed the Genet of Cueva del Humo using molecular techniques (Delibes de Castro *et al.*, "New Insights" 531-539). This Genet differs from individuals of the most common mitochondrial group (the one including the specimen from Mértola), being much closer to a divergent group at present restricted to Andalusia, that could correspond to the oldest Genets in Europe.

A third and more indirect research approach could derive from the unusual coat colours of the European genets. As previously said, Genets have grey fur with black spots. However, albino and especially melanistic specimens have been found in the

Iberian Peninsula, but to date not in most of the original African range of the species (Delibes de Castro *et al*., "Albino and Melanistic Genets" 95-99). The only exception is a melanistic individual recently located in the coast of Algeria (Ahmim *et al*. 448-451). This suggests that the colour variability of the Genets of the fourth lineage of Gaubert and colleagues ("Early Phases of a Successful Invasion"), the one including the European Genets and those from northern Algeria, is greater that in the other three lineages. Large phenotypic variation, including many coat-colouration variants, is characteristic of domesticated or captive-reared species (for example, minks) that have undergone artificial selection, but rare in wild animals, which are usually uniform in phenotype (Cieslak *et al*. 885-899). Thus, we must consider the possibility that the lineage of genets brought to Europe is the result of artificial selection (Genet breeding), as happens with domestic species.

In summary, although we know many things we only can speculate about the origin of European Genets. This remains a mystery, as far as science can tell us. Perhaps comparative literature and the iconographic studies can help to answer figure this out.

4. Answers from a Historical, Literary, and Artistic Viewpoint

What to do with so many research questions? Two search trails have already been sketched out above by Miguel Delibes de Castro (33-34): in particular, "L'Ordre de la Genette", mentioned in numerous books. Some representations of Genets were found in Ancient Egypt and on tapestries from the 16th century[5]. But apart from these studies, there have been no other attempts.

To do her research, Virginie Muxart had to create as exhaustive a corpus of sources as possible: textual (archival, historical, literary) and iconographic ones[6]. Thanks to the breadth and flexibility of the discipline of comparative literature, this thesis was conceivable. Comparative literature is the study of the relationship between the literatures of different languages and cultures, the relationship between literature and other art forms, and the relationship between literature and other disciplines, including the human sciences and the natural sciences. In English-speaking countries, the field is often associated with Cultural Studies. All these sources were considered as "texts"[7] (Slovic

5 On Ancient Egyptian paintings in Saqqarah (Aufrère, see below), on "The Unicorn Purifies Water", one of the tapestries of "Hunt of the Unicorn" (Freeman 78), and on two of the six pieces making up the tapestry of "The Lady and the Unicorn" (La Dame à la Licorne) in Musée de Cluny (Paris).

6 All the methods cannot be developed in this article; however, it will be in the forthcoming publication of the thesis.

7 Virginie Muxart refers to Scott Slovic's definition of "texts" in his article "Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practice Doctrine": in it, he refers to "any literary text" (160).

160) and include "other forms of artistic expression" (not only "literature") in order to find out more about the Genet (Branch and Slovic XIV).

Although the presence of the Genet has been confirmed on Spanish soil between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th centuries (see: Cueva del Humo), its absence in Western literature is noteworthy, until the 11th century. However, it is really from the 12th century onwards that the Genet is named with a single word that gives it the status of an active subject (in the 13th century; in Medieval Latin *geneta*, in Catalan *janete*, and in Old French *gienete* or *genete*). From the 13th century onwards, it is interesting to note how the diversity of the corpus of this research allows to make good progress in the history of the animal in the western part of the Mediterranean basin. The period with the most sources is the Middle Ages, especially the late 15th and 16th centuries.

4.1. The Humanities and Introduction of the Genet in Europe

Classical Greek authors—including Aristotle, Dioxorus, Herodotus, and Strabo—mention semi-domestic carnivores (mainly *gale* and *ictis*), but it is difficult to know which species they are referring to, and they probably called different species by the same name (*gale* and *ictis* have been translated as "weasel", "ferret", and even "polecat"). In 1999, Suzanne Amigues, following Camps and Gsell studying Herodotus, Stabo and Pliny, highlighted the possible existence of the Genet on the Iberian Peninsula between the 5th and 1st centuries BC.

Herodotus (5th century BC), in his Liber IV on the wild fauna in Cyrenaica (part of the present-day Libya colonised by the Greeks from the 7th century BC), speaks of a *gale* ("weasel") similar to those living in Tartessos, located in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula. Four centuries later, Strabo, according to the testimony of Posidonius, describes this animal from the Peninsula: "[…] it is a large cat-like animal, only with a pointed snout"[8] (Amigues 59; our translation). This description sounds like the Genet. In another passage, Strabo indicates that these *gale* were used by the inhabitants of Tartessos to hunt rabbits (Amigues 59). Finally, Pliny—a Latin author from the 1st century AD—refers to *viverrae* also used to hunt rabbits in the Balearic Islands. Even if the terms *viverrae* and *gale* are somewhat confusing, the Genet could be that *gale* of Tartessos.

Therefore, in Antiquity, it is well likely that Genets were found in Tartessos and Cyrenaica. Although archaeozoology cannot prove this for the moment (no Genet bones have been found in Cyrenaica so far), numismatics can.

8 "[…] aussi grosses que des chats (*ailouroi*) et qui leur ressemblent, sauf que leur museau est plus proéminent".

A large number of Greek coins from Cyrenaica depict the silphium, an umbelliferous plant represented before Herodotus, in the form of flower, fruit, leaf, root, often associated on coins with other animals, especially a lion's head, a gazelle and a dolphin. Hemidrachm n° 26B (dated around 500-480 BC), identified by Edward Robinson in his Catalogue of the Greek coins of Cyrenaica (1927), depicts a Genet imaged on the coin, above a piece of silphium fruit. The Genet is recognisable by its long, flexible spine, its long tail, which appears to be striped (as if to represent the rings on the Genet's tail), and its pointed snout (Muxart, *Savoirs et représentations de la genette* vol. 2 28). It is very likely that the Greek colonists discovered the Genet in Libya, absent from the entire Aegean world, and considered it as a symbol of their new homeland, as the jerboa and gazelle, which are also featured prominently on coins from Cyrenaica.

Genetic results revealed a close relationship between European Genets and those from the Algerian coast. A French legend supports this idea that the Arabs introduced the Genet to Europe. In a book about the *History of Chivalry* (Favyn 514-533) there is a whole chapter on "The Order of the Genet". It is said that after the battle of Poitiers, Charles Martel was impressed by the Genet furs that he found in large quantities in the Saracen camps, as well as live specimens of the Genet. He created a gold necklace from which hung a golden Genet enamelled in black and red, declared himself chief, and gave a necklace to each of his closest warriors. This legend seems pure invention because orders of Chivalry did not exist before the 11th century, but it is certain that André Favyn was very clearly inspired by the Genet or some literary source not yet found (perhaps a legend).

Finally, one of the possible etymologies of the Spanish word *jineta*, found in almost all dictionaries (French, Occitan, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and even German) is *jarnait* (*djerneit*/*charneit*), a word in an Arabic dialect used in Constantine, east of Algiers, and collected by Cherbonneau in 1849 (Cherbonneau 537). Cherbonneau's etymological findings correspond to the genetic results about the geographical origins of the Genet. This correlative result is encouraging.

Thus, comparative literature confirms speculations of the biologists: the Genet could have been in Spain ever since Antiquity (at least since the 5th to the 1st century BC) with a possible second migratory wave during the 7th and 8th centuries AD.

4.2. The Humanities and Genet Furs

The first sources for finding out more about Genet fur are the furrier's archives. Robert Delort investigated the general trends in Western fur fashions at the end of the Middle

Ages. The fashion for white evolved at the end of the 14th century and, by the beginning of the 15th was replaced by grey-blues, browns and blacks. Absolute black dominated in the middle of the 15th century to make way for brown-black or grey with black spots at the beginning of the Renaissance. Genet fur, which naturally comes in three varieties (common, melanistic and albino), was highly sought after (and even more so, for its musky scent) and often worn during these two centuries. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the fur of the Genet is almost always shown in its common colour.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London (museum no. T.33FF-1955)

This panel of a genet (26.6 cm x 26.6 cm) was embroidered by either Mary, Queen of Scots, or Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, using a linen canvas with silk threads between 1570 and 1585 (https://renaissanceskin.ac.uk/themes/consuming/ consulted on 28 Oct 2024).

4.2.1. Melanistic Genet Fur

According to Robert Delort's studies, the melanistic Genet was very fashionable at the court of René d'Anjou[9] and at the court of the bastard of Calabre (grandson of the king, son of Jean II of Lorraine) (Delort, *Tome II* 624). Robert Delort depicts in his thesis that black Genet fur was more expensive than common Genet fur, although the price of the common Genet skin went up from 1370 until the end of the 15th century and the price of the black Genet skin was even higher. In 1490, for example, the skin of the black Genet (called "jet black") costs seven times more than the grey one. The black Genet could

9 After 1450, René d'Anjou wore velvet jackets lined with black genet.

fetch up to the price of the sable (*Martes Zibellina*) (Delort, *Tome II* 1268). It was perhaps for this reason that as early as 1485, Aliénor de Poitiers requested that the black Genet and ermine be reserved only for the nobility—for example, the descendants of kings, dukes and princes (Godefroy 258) (in England at the court of Queen Elizabeth I a century later).

Black Genet, the royal fur, was in fashion throughout the 15th century and in the first half of the 16th century, at least during the reign of François I. Indeed, he wore black Genet skins in the important procession of the shrine of Sainte-Geneviève (Châsse de Sainte Geneviève), patron saint of Paris to the church of Saint-Etienne du Mont[10]. During the procession on 21 January 1525, the king and queen both dressed in black velvet lined, for the queen, with "loupz-cerviers" (i.e. lynx) and for the king, lined with black Genet, and a taffeta belt (Pinet 100). A Genet, albeit a common one, is depicted in a stained-glass window in this church, dating from the time of François the First. This may suggest that the Genet was far more common at this time. Was it just a coincidence that the king and queen wore Genet furs in a church that depicted a Genet in the stained-glass window?

Genette (detail) in the church of Saint-Etienne du Mont (Paris) © Christian Parsy

The beauty of the black Genet is described in the chapter on the Order of the Genet of Favyn (see above). After having described this order and the collar, Favyn describes the melanistic Genet skin (Favyn 519). He says that: "The other, which is the excellent and rare one, has black skin, and shiny like satin, or black velvet: it is splashed and with red plaques and spots, which produce on the red a marvellous beauty"[11].

10 Saint-Etienne du Mont is a church located in the fifth arrondissement of Paris and the church of Saint-Etienne du Mont is the centre of the cult of Saint Geneviève, patron saint of Parisians. Abbé Edouard Pinet recounts the history of the Confrérie de Sainte-Geneviève, created in 1412 at the request of Parisians "by virtue of a papal brief and letters patent from Charles VI" (2). In 1525, permission was granted to the members, who included the most notable bourgeois of the city of Paris, to carry the Shrine in processions.

11 Our translation. «L'autre, qui est l'excellente et rare, a le poil noir, et luisant comme un Satin, ou Panne de Veloux noir : elle est marquetee, et miroüettee de placques et taches rousses, qui tirent sur le rouge d'une merveil-

A mention of the black Genet is found in Rabelais, a 16th century French philosopher. It seems that religious men and women of the famous abbey of Thélème were dressed in the most valuable furs: costumes lined with lynx, black Genets, martens of Calabres, and sable[12] (Rabelais 201).

Finally, it is in a sixteenth-century French manuscript that the first representation of a melanistic Genet ever found appears: it is Fr. 9608, on folio 11. Only a tanner's wife named Jeanne could have chosen this rare and beloved black Genet as her emblem[13].

4.2.2. Albino Genet Fur

In the case of the white Genet things are more complex. Only one mention has been found of albino Genet and it was made in the inventory of King René d'Anjou's wardrobe (Favier 262). In 1450, skins with very specific colours were used to make his clothes: "immaculate sable for necklines", "dark red sable" and also "genette blonde"[14]. More research has to be done in inventories and archives to know more about the white Genet and its use in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance times.

If the albino Genet was only mentioned once with regard to the wardrobe of King René d'Anjou, its appearance in a French novel of the Middle Ages seems exceptional. *Perceforest*, an anonymous 15th century novel, presented in six volumes, composed of 2000 verses, is a narrative about the origins of the Holy Grail, relating this topic to *La Geste d'Alexandre le Conquérant*. In Volume II of the third part, the white Genet appears in chapter XXXVII, in a heraldic context. Here is a summary: a knight called Pallidès de Hurtemer, the prince of Hurtemer, was wounded during a tournament and therefore unable to attend his next tournament, fifteen days later. In spite of his condition, he was able to travel to a neighbouring castle where the lady of the manor cured him because he absolutely wanted to go to his next tournament at the Chastel aux Pucelles. Camille, the granddaughter of King Pergamon, whom Pallidès loves, is present. Camille asks him not to take his weapons to the tournament but to use other weapons she will give him. So, on the day of the tournament, a knight (Pallidès) "who carried a knight's azure

leuse beauté».

12 In chapter LVI «Comment étaient vêtus les religieux et religieuses de Thélème» of *Gargantua*, book I: "In winter, taffeta dresses in colours as above: lynx fur, black genet, Calabrian marten, sable and other precious furs" ["En hiver, robbes de tafetas de couleurs comme dessus : fourrées de Loups Cerviers, Genettes noires, Martres de Calabres, Zibelines, et autres fourrures précieuses»].

13 This first found representation of a melanistic Genet is commented on in Virginie Muxart's thesis and mentioned in the article "Genet" in the *Atlas des mammifères sauvages de France volume 3: Carnivores et Primates* (2023). It will be the subject of a future article.

14 Translation of "genette blonde" and not "white" in the text.

shield with white genet"[15] appears (*Perceforest* 146; our translation). The shield astonishes everyone. Nobody knows him. He wins the tournament and marries Camille. After eight days of festivities, the couple returns to the kingdom of Hurtemer.

Why did Camille choose the white Genet for her suitor's arms? Why not the ermine, which symbolises purity? The ermine is mentioned elsewhere in the text, so there can be no confusion between the two small carnivores. The Genet has the advantage of being white from muzzle to tail while the stoat, in its winter coat, is white but with a black tail tip. Camille resembles the white Genet because she is virginal. In this way, Camille is represented by the white Genet and she has that as an emblem. Pallidès wins the tournament thanks to the symbolic power that the white Genet gives to him by Camille.

This extract in *Perceforest* where the white Genet appears would be the first in French literature where the symbolic value is highlighted (according to Virginie Muxart's investigations). Camille's white Genet choice indicates, in addition to its whiteness and purity, a symbolism specific to the animal rather than to its fur. The symbolism of the ermine at that time would normally have been sufficient for Camille to be represented[16].

4.3. The Humanities and Human-Genet Relations

A close relationship between Genets and humans could explain, at least partially, both the access of the species to Europe and the predominance of "rare" coats in the Iberian Peninsula. The collective memory has integrated the Genet as the cat of the Middle Ages, which could have been introduced as a "domestic" animal. What's more, the number of melanistic Genets found in its area of introduction suggests that the Genet had a special relationship with man, at least in the Middle Ages, when Genet skin was so widespread and used that it may have been selected by man, perhaps through breeding.

Literature (in a broad sense) and iconography provides information in this respect that biology does not have.

In Ancient Egypt there are many representations of Genets close to the hunters' boats. As Aufrère writes, they seemed to be familiar animals, companions of the hunter, in the nilotic spaces: "pleasant to see and providential scouts in the hunt with a throwing

15 "Qui portoit ung escu d'asur a une blanche jenette".

16 This passage has already been commented in an article presenting hypotheses about the symbolism of the Genet, but it was interesting to talk about it again in this article, since it deals with the albino Genet. See: Muxart, "Essai sur la valeur symbolique de la genette dans la littérature et l'art médiéval occidental" 2.

stick"[17] (Aufrère 10; our translation). So, it can be assumed that in Egypt it was considered as a tamed animal. What is said in European literature?

The oldest source found on the subject is in the 13th century encyclopaedia *De natura rerum* by Thomas de Cantimpré. In the article "De Genetha", he writes "the genet is a fairly calm animal, unless it is attacked by other animals"[18] (Cantimpré folio 17v; our translation). The Latin word *mansueta* means "gentle, calm" but also "tame" (hence its etymology!). But what is Thomas de Cantimpré's source? Is it a testimony from someone else?

The Genet bones found in Mértola (see above) in the 13th century coincide with the appearance of the Genet in *Las siete partidas*[19], a body of legislation drawn up between 1256 and 1265 by Castilian jurists under the personal supervision of the King of Castile and León, Alfonso X el Sabio. It is mentioned in Act XXIII of *Las siete partidas*: "Lion, ounce, cheetah, bear, lynx, genet, snake or other beasts that are wild by nature, having any man in his house, he must guard it and it must be caught in such a way that it does no harm"[20] (Alfonso X el Sabio 943; our translation).

So, the Genet is classified in the category of *bestia brava* along with big cats, bears, lynxes, and snakes. So, while encyclopaedists consider the Genet to be gentle and peaceful (unless it is attacked), it is also considered to be a wild animal tolerated in captivity, kept by elites who could afford to have this kind of exotic menagerie at home in Alphonsine Spanish society.

In 1511, Jean Lemaire de Belges, a poet and historian who had been received in the house of Margaret of Austria (1480-1530) in 1504, published *Les Épîtres de l'Amant vert* (*The Epistles of the Green Lover*). In the *First Epistle of the Green Lover*, the green lover (Margaret of Austria's parrot), who was actually killed by a dog when she was absent from her house, tells how, because he was very much in love with his mistress, he committed suicide by voluntarily throwing himself into a dog's mouth. He did, however, have time to rhyme an epistle to his beloved. Margaret of Austria liked the work so much that she encouraged the poet to continue. In the second epistle, the author imagined that the deceased papegai wrote to his lady from the afterlife as he had been admitted to the paradise of the beasts, where he had met the "Vermeil Spirit", the parrot of Mary

17 «agréables à voir et rabatteurs providentiels de la chasse au bâton de jet».

18 «Mansueta satis bestia est, nisi fuerit a ceteris bestiis lacessita iniuriis».

19 This law is entitled: "Como aquel que tiene el león u oso u otra bestia brava en su casa debe pechar el daño que hiciere a otro", i.e., "How anyone who has a lion, bear or any other ferocious beast in their home must pay for any harm it may do" (our translation).

20 "León u onza o león pardo u oso o lobo cerval o gineta o serpiente u otras bestias que son bravas de naturaleza teniendo algún hombre en su casa, débela guardar e debe ser presa de manera que no haga daño".

of Burgundy, Margaret of Austria's mother, who had also died tragically because of a Genet (Lemaire de Belges 31). Was it a Genet that was one of Mary of Burgundy's pets, or was it a wild Genet that wandered around the castle and took advantage of a moment of inattention on the part of Mary or the person in charge of watching over the parrot?

The best known source—repeated in all the works that mention the probable "domestication" of the Genet—is that of Pierre Belon, in 1554, when he describes the menagerie of Constantinople (Belon 73v). However, Pierre Belon du Mans doesn't write *domestiquée* but *apprivoisée* and there is no historical evidence even that there were Genets in Constantinople at that time.

In iconography of the XVI Century, an example selected was pointed out by Margaret Freeman in a marginal decoration in the book *Heures à l'usage de Rome* (1498), printed by Pigouchet for Vostre: a Genet is found turning its head towards a woman picking flowers (Freeman 199). The Genet is not wearing a collar and looks familiar[21].

Woman with genet, detail of *Livre d'heures à l'usage de Rome*, imprimé par Philippe Pigouchet pour Simon Vostre, août 1498, folio x (Cl. 23940), Paris, musée de Cluny —musée national du Moyen Âge © RMN-Grand Palais (musée de Cluny - musée national du Moyen Âge) / Michel Urtado

21 Since then, the drawings in this book have been recognised as the work of Jean d'Ypres, probably the Master of the *Petites Heures of Anne of Brittany*, who created the patterns for the Lady of the Unicorn tapestry. See: the description of this book on the Musée de Cluny website (https://www.musee-moyenage.fr/collection/oeuvre/heures-a-l-usage-de-rome.html consulted on 28 Oct 2023) and Muxart, "Essai sur la valeur symbolique de la genette dans la littérature et l'art médiéval occidental" 6.

Another example selected is folio 12 of the Latin manuscript in the BNF Latin 10564, from Antwerp (Belgium, 1582). The marginal decorations do not correspond to the Latin sentences that make up the work, but those on this folio are disturbing; the Genet is associated with the domestic animals closest to man: the dog and the cat.

Finally, in the 20th century, in 1940, a French captain-veterinarian, C.J. Carpentier, wrote that he had in his quarters in Morocco very clean Genets, who slept during the day in their cages and came out at night, killing the cockroaches, mice, and snakes that dared to venture into the barracks (Thévenin 170). This recognises services that a domestic cat could well provide!

The author (Miguel Delibes) has some experience with the gentleness of Genets, as he raised some of them from a young age. He wrote about the tender moments he passed with them in his "Nostalgia de ginetas". His father, the writer Miguel Delibes, has also reported on his son's experiences with the Genet in *Un año de mi vida* (191-192).

So Comparative literature provides evidence concerning at least occasional "domestication" (or rather *apprivoisement*) of the Genet. The Genet does not seem to have been rejected in Western medieval societies. On the contrary, it seems to have been tolerated but never domesticated. It is therefore alternately close and distant and seems to emit a distance of its own, constantly playing with boundaries. Perhaps it is Montse Román, Arsenio Román and Yves Navarre who best understand the Genet's relationship with man: it will never be a cat, because it does not want to be a cat[22] (Román and Escolar 16). It flees from the care that man could give it (protection, food). It is rather a "supercat"[23] (Navarre 204-205) that carries within it the characteristics of beauty, driven to run as fast as it does, at the limit of the visible and the invisible.

As Bernard Franco, Professor of Comparative Literature at Sorbonne University, wrote about this collaboration:

> The voices of different sciences and approaches work together. In this way, interdisciplinary knowledge of the genet enables us to understand it both as a symbol and as a reality, as a subject of literary fiction and as a zoological phenomenon. Scientific knowledge enables us to understand the place the animal occupies in literary texts, which in turn enables us to measure its actual presence in Europe[24] (Franco 234; our translation).

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22 At the end of the story, the genet Yenetta says to the cat Callejero: "We are leaving. It was nice to meet you, but this is not our life. If we stay here, my kids won't learn to hunt or forage for food on their own. And, no offence, they are Genets, not stray cats!" (16; our translation) ["Nos vamos. Ha sido un placer conocerte, pero esta no es nuestra vida. Si seguimos aquí, mis hijos no aprenderán a cazar ni a buscarse solos la comida. Y, sin ánimos de ofender, ¡son ginetas, no gatos callejeros!"].

23 "The Genet appeared. Or rather 'the' Genet. A sort of 'Supercat'" ["La genette fit son apparition. Ou plutôt 'le' genette. Une sorte de Supercat"].

24 "Les voix des différentes sciences et approches se croisent. De sorte que la connaissance interdisciplinaire

Thus, the case of the Genet highlights the idea that Genetic research and archeozoology try to answer certain questions without finding satisfactory answers, but addition of Comparative literary analysis reinforces scientific theories and contributes to valuable new ones. This article aims to show how literary work can play a concrete role in complementing the work of the sciences in pursuit of the conservation of wild fauna and our environment.

If this collaboration is desirable, it must be repeated in the future, not only for the study of wild fauna but also for broader conservation efforts. It must continue not only within the laboratories but also outside, in the public arena and in the field: the collaboration would require a reaching out to the general public by way of lectures and exhibitions to raise the public's interest in such matters and to inspire the public regarding the importance of wild fauna conservation. This fruitful collaboration is a way of spurring social or individual change and calling for the protection of a place or a species (including not only the Genet but other species as well).

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de la genette permet de l'appréhender à la fois comme symbole et comme réalité, comme sujet de fiction littéraire et comme phénomène zoologique. La connaissance scientifique permet de comprendre la place que tient l'animal dans les textes littéraires, ceux-ci permettant en retour d'en mesurer la présence effective en Europe".

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