

Ancient Egyptian Cats

Article from 'Cats and Kittens' Magazine.

No one knows exactly when cats were first domesticated but some of our earliest recorded instances of feline domestication come from ancient Egypt. Cats probably started out as useful servants, protecting the household from pests, but in Egypt they graduated into the role of pampered companions. Many Egyptian statues show sleek, well-groomed cats, often adorned with elaborate jewellery. As the civilisation along the Nile evolved, so did the role of the cat. Cats became associated with a number of gods and goddesses, particularly Bastet. With its status in association with the deities, the cat began to be worshipped also. The murder of a cat was a capital offence and cats were mummified at death.

Domestication

On the island of Cyprus, archaeologists have found the bones of cats, mice and humans jumbled together in sites that date to around 6,000 BC. Because all three species appear on the island at the same time, scientists have concluded that the humans likely brought the other two with them. The freeloaders mice probably stowed away on the boats, riding along in stored grain or other supplies, and it seems likely the settlers brought the cats with them for the express purpose of controlling those same mice.

No one knows exactly when people began to domesticate animals, but no doubt it happened some time, and possibly a very long time, before that first verifiable instance on Cyprus. Young animals have always held considerable appeal for humans, so it's not hard to imagine that early hunters might have found orphaned offspring of the ancestors of today's housecats and taken them home to raise. Since young animals tend to bond with whoever is providing the food, domestication wouldn't be far behind.

It's also possible that some varieties of wildcat may have hung around human settlements to share in the food available, and gradually were accepted and even fed, as they demonstrated their usefulness in helping to hunt small animals, protecting stores from vermin, and discouraging snakes.

Onto Egypt

One of the most highly developed civilisations of the pre-Christian era hugged the Nile river basin of northwest Africa. Because the Nile flooded regularly and reliably, leaving behind highly fertile soil, the residents of that area had the unprecedented luxury of being able to produce food in quantities well beyond basic subsistence level. The excess could support people working in non-food-producing endeavours and eventually led to development of a class system where wealth and power began to concentrate in certain families.

By 2000 BC, the ancient Egyptians had domesticated a variety of animals, including not just the useful cattle and pigs, but cats, dogs, monkeys and some birds as well. Initially, the animals probably remained outdoors but were fed and cared for by

people in return for the practical services they could offer. The dogs were hunters and shepherds. The cats, no doubt, earned their keep by eliminating vermin.

From Pet to Prima Donna

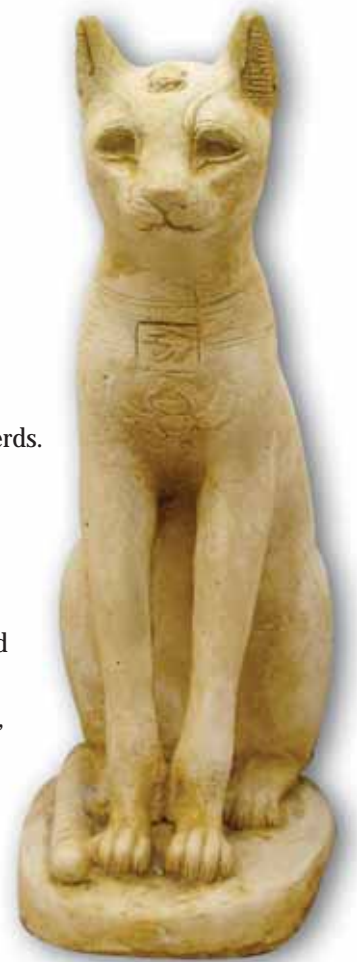
Within a few hundred years, Egyptian cats had moved beyond being just useful servants and were firmly established as companion animals, sharing house and hearth, especially in richer families. The New Kingdom, which began around 1550 BC, was a time of great wealth and power. Domesticated pets became common in households that could afford them. Considerable evidence shows that some cats, had a pretty soft time of it.

Some of the things those wealthy Egyptians had resources for were writing, painting and carving. Since they liked to create elaborately decorated tombs, they have left us extensive documentation of their history, politics and daily lives and cats feature largely in that record. A variety of tomb paintings and carvings feature scenes involving people and their pets, especially dogs and cats. Cats are shown in both semi-realistic and satirical poses. In Thebes, archaeologists have discovered a number of tomb-reliefs depicting cats crouched or sitting beneath chairs. Other images include some very plump cats, a cat eating a fish, a cat hunting with its master and grasping a goose in its paws, and many studies of cats just sitting in repose. A number of statuary pieces of cats survive and they tend to show sleek, well-groomed, well-fed felines, frequently adorned with elaborate jewellery including nose rings, earrings, collars and pectoral plates.

So far as anyone can tell, cats rarely had personal names, but were most often called by the onomatopoeic generic name, *miu*.

Becoming a God

No written records tell us exactly when or how cats became associated with the Egyptian deities, but it seems not to have taken very long (in historical terms, at least; perhaps around 500 years). Two goddesses, in particular, became associated with cats: Sekhmet, a lion-headed goddess, and Bastet, a cat goddess. They were, at times, considered twins and earlier images of Bastet show her also as having the head of a lion, though later she would always have a cat's head. Although both goddesses were associated with the sun, Sekhmet was always considered the fiercer of the two, being linked to the strong destructive heat of the desert rays, while Bastet represented the nurturing, life-giving aspect of solar warmth.



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Cats' earliest association with the deities of ancient Egypt probably began with Isis, but the link was cemented in Bastet, the daughter of Isis and Osiris. Egyptian deities had a confusing tendency to develop, overlap, fade into each other, or become associated with different ideas in different places. Both Isis and Osiris were variously sun, moon or earth deities, and Sekhmet and Bastet sometimes seem interchangeable, depending on time and location. In her capacity as a sun-goddess, Bastet also represented fertility, motherhood and beauty.

Bastet generally is depicted as a woman with the head of a cat, including long, sharply pointed ears. She wears a long, clingy gown and frequently carries a basket, an aegis (a small shield, sometimes bearing the head of a lion) and/or a sistrum (a kind of rattle or musical instrument). The basket may have kittens in it, the sistrum frequently has cats carved on it, and kittens may be gambolling about the goddess' feet.

Animals were never officially considered deities themselves, but they were often believed to be the embodiment of a deity, a role the cat served for Bastet (also known as Bast or Pasht). The distinction was difficult for the public to grasp, and worship of cats became common. A bronze figure shows an Egyptian priest kneeling in worship before a very large cat wearing a great deal of gold jewellery. Archaeological exploration has turned up numerous amulets of bronze, ivory, terra cotta, and lapis lazuli, among other materials, made in the form of a cat or bearing the image of a cat.

Bubastis and the Festival

The cult of Bastet and the concomitant worship of cats reached its height around 950 BC when Bastet began to take precedence over other Egyptian gods and goddesses. The main temple and centre of worship of Bastet was at the city of Bubastis on the Nile delta.

The Greek historian Herodotus, sometimes called the "Father of History" for his attempts to create an unprecedented written historical record, visited Bubastis and the temple of Bastet around 450 BC. His accounts provide a vivid description of the temple and the annual festival held there at the time. Excavations at Bubastis (now known as Tell Bastra) near the modern industrial city of Zagazig, have tended to confirm Herodotus' accounts of the area.

Bastet's temple is described as a magnificent red granite building, built in the form of a square. Walls carved with elaborate figures surrounded the sacred enclosure, a grove of huge trees, at the centre of which stood a statue of Bastet. Sacred cats lived inside the shrine and were ritually fed.

The location of the temple is still clear today, but unfortunately it appears that the main building was destroyed in antiquity, possibly by either an earthquake or foreign invasion. Centuries worth of the debris of later occupation has mostly buried the ruins, and excavation of the area has also involved untangling masses of huge stone blocks fallen on each other. The results have justified the effort, as archaeologists have uncovered magnificent pieces of monumental statuary, smaller scale carvings, and other fabulous works of art, hinting at the overwhelming sight the temple must have been in its prime.

Little is known of the rituals of the temple, but Herodotus gives a detailed account of the annual festival, describing it as the most important and popular of the 'sacred assemblies'. Thousands of people evidently made a pilgrimage to Bubastis for the festival, often travelling by boat along the Nile. (As many as 700,000, according to Herodotus, who has long been suspected of occasionally exaggerating for effect.) Along the way, and on their arrival, the pilgrims celebrated with music, singing, dancing, sacrifice and consumption of large quantities of wine.

Post Death Experiences

As a sacred animal, the death of a cat was serious business. When a household cat died, its Egyptian owners would shave their eyebrows in mourning and take the body to an embalmer for preservation. Entire graveyards devoted to cats have been found along the Nile, and elaborately wrapped, mummified cats show up regularly in tombs. Of course, cats weren't alone in being accorded this honour, as the mummified remains of other animals, including birds, dogs, baboons and crocodiles, attest. But the cats seem to have had a special place in the hearts of the people.

Egyptians took the connection of cats with the goddess so seriously that the murder of a cat was a capital offence. A Roman soldier who killed a cat was promptly lynched by the outraged locals.

Their neighbours noticed the Egyptians' reverence for cats, and at least one group, the Persians, are rumoured to have taken advantage of it. The story goes that at one time when they lay siege to an Egyptian fort, the Persian king ordered his troops to throw live cats over the walls. The unnerved Egyptians reportedly then allowed the city to be captured by the invaders rather than risk injury to the sacred animals.

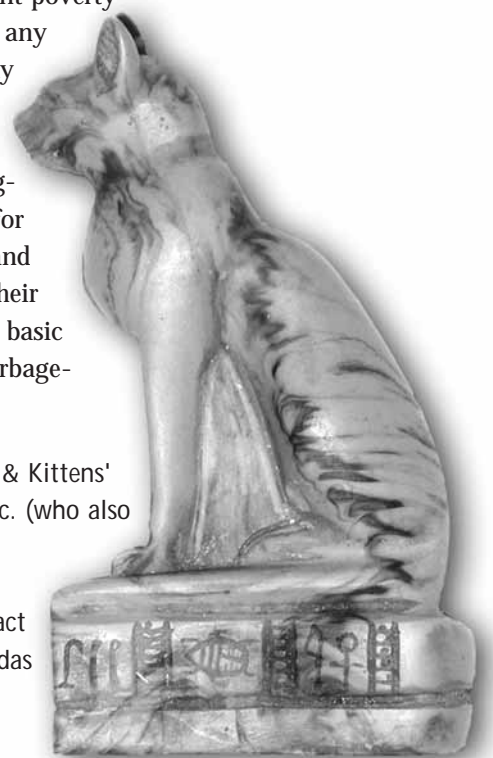
Postscript: Turnaround

Perhaps the saddest irony of the importance and stature of cats in the days of ancient Egypt was contained in a CNN report from Gayle Young in Cairo, Egypt. These days, according to the report, rampant poverty has meant that few Egyptians keep pets of any sort, and as a result, the cats of present-day Cairo are mostly homeless and forage in garbage dumps and the crowded streets of the city, begging for handouts and scrounging a meagre living. It's a sad comedown for an animal that used to be draped in gold and jewels, and even venerated as a god. But their plight also illustrates one of the cat's most basic attributes. Whether considered a god or garbage-picker, the cat is a survivor.

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