



<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>

**Field Museum of Natural History bulletin.**

Chicago, Field Museum of Natural History, [1930]-c1990.

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/2853>

**v. 61:1-3 (1990):** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25558>

Article/Chapter Title: The Cat and Ancient Egypt

Author(s): Frank J. Yurko

Subject(s): mammals, cat, Ancient Egypt, domestication, snakes, pest control

Page(s): Page 15, Page 16, Page 17, Page 18, Page 19, Page 20, Page 21, Page 22, Page 23

Holding Institution: University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by: University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Generated 16 April 2018 1:15 PM

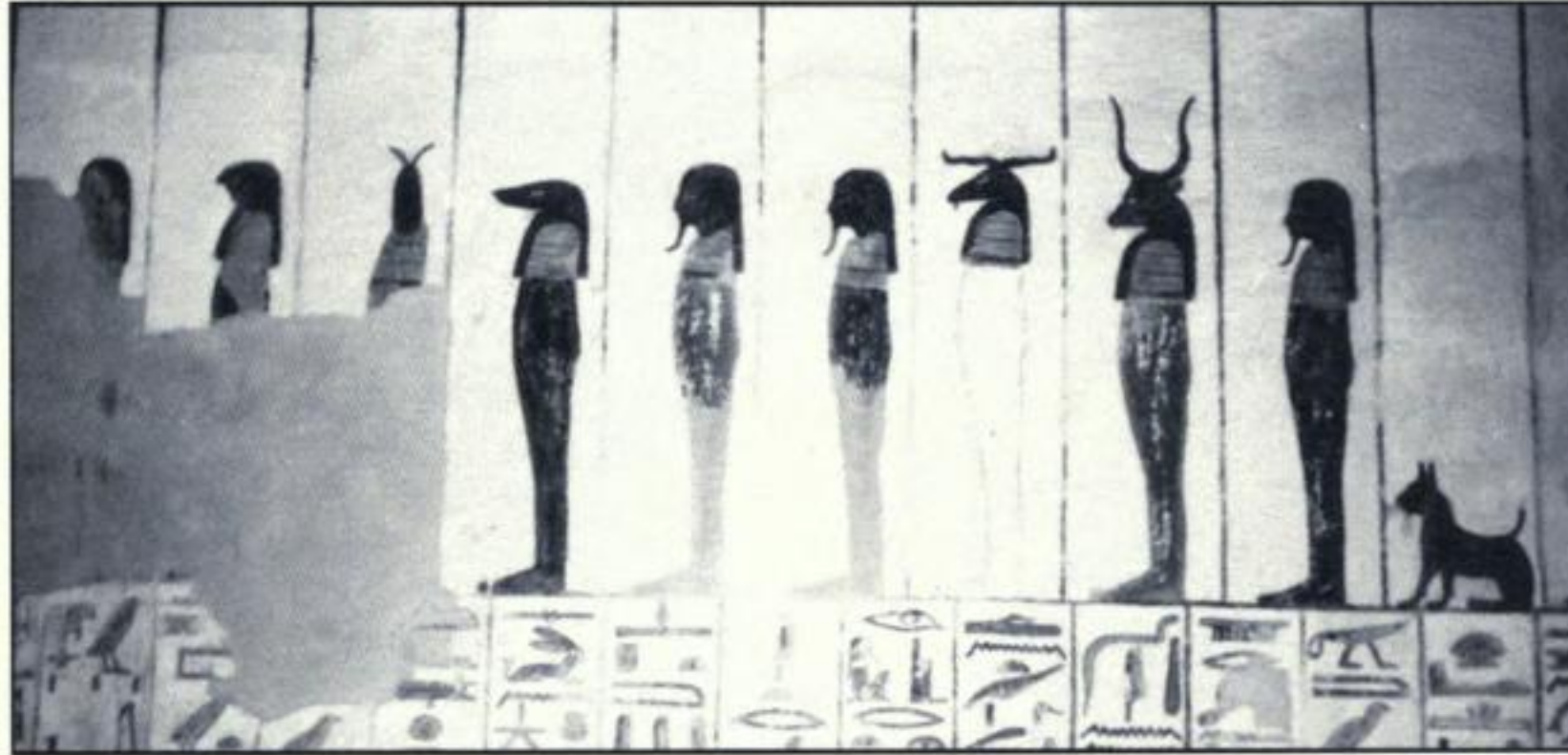
<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/pdf4/077287100025558>

This page intentionally left blank.



# The Cat and Ancient Egypt

by Frank J. Yurco, Egypt Consultant



1. The "Great Cat" (right) among the 75 other manifestations of the sun-god, Re; tomb of Pharaoh Siptah, Valley of the Kings, Thebes, Egypt; Dynasty XIX. F. J. Yurco photo.

The domestic cat, *Felis silvestris familiaris* (or *maniculata*), is a relative latecomer among the various domesticated animals associated with humankind. Representations of it won't be found in the cave and rock paintings of prehistoric Africa and Europe, nor does it appear for certain among the domesticated animals of the early Neolithic period in the Middle East. It is in ancient Egypt that the pictorial and inscriptional evidence first comes together to make certain that the domesticated cat is present; and indeed, in Egypt the cat attained a very lofty status, becoming associated with divinity in the personae of the goddess Bastet and in one manifestation of the solar deity.

Small catlike carnivores like *Felis silvestris libyca* proliferated in the North African environment of ancient times.<sup>1</sup> The Sahara has passed through cycles of dry and wet periods within recent geological time (the last 12,000 years), and during the arid periods such large carnivores as lions and leopards could not sustain themselves in that environment. Their niche was occupied by smaller carnivores, including jackals, hyenas, wild dogs, and, among felines, by several possible ancestors of the domestic cat. In the wild state, the small felines like the cat focus their hunting on small animals, birds, reptiles, and occasionally insects. As this group of prey includes rats and mice, such small felines had a natural inclination to associate with humans, especially once humans began the large-scale

storage of foods, cereal grains in particular.


Grain storage bins were appealing to small rodents, including rats and mice, and these were included among the regularly hunted prey of the small felines. This may well be how the ancestors of the domestic cat were drawn first to associate with humans. Grain storage on a large scale first appeared among the ancient Egyptians of the late Predynastic era, the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, and the peoples of the Indus Valley and China. All these civilizations produced grains on a large scale (wheat, barley, or rice) and had occasion to store surpluses, for export, or as a reserve against years of famine. It is in those civilizations, then, that the ancestors of the domestic cat likely would appear first. Indeed, at Haçilar and Jericho, sites in what are now southwestern Turkey and northern Israel, respectively, bones of small felines have been found among the remnants of early farming villages of the 6th and 5th millennia B.C.;<sup>2</sup> but whether these bones represent domesticated ancestors of the cat is uncertain. Likewise, bones of catlike felines have been found at Egyptian Predynastic sites (5000-3100 B.C.);<sup>3</sup> but again, lacking pictorial or inscriptional evidence, it is not certain which of the small feline carnivores these remains represent.

It is in Egypt that the pictorial and inscriptional archive for the domestic cat eventually becomes quite well documented. In the language of ancient Egypt, 15





2. Cat, as bailiff, brings bad boy before mouse judge; Oriental Institute limestone ostracon, painted, no. 13951; Deir el-Medinah, Egypt; Dynasty XIX-XX. Oriental Institute photo.

the word for cat is  *miw*, "meow," with a picture of a seated cat as determinative, or word classifier.<sup>4</sup> The earliest dated literary references are from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040-1786 B.C.), in the earlier part of the period.<sup>5</sup> Earlier pictorial representations do occur, but they are somewhat ambiguous. Small felines, or feline-like animals are represented on Early Dynastic (ca. 3100-2770 B.C.) objects.<sup>6</sup> The problem lies in that these depictions are not labelled *miw*, or are so fragmentary that establishing just what feline is involved is difficult.<sup>7</sup> Add to this situation the fact that the ancient Egyptians venerated a variety of felines ranging from lionesses to leopards and panthers, as well as smaller felines, and the complexity of the evidence becomes understandable.

With the coming of the Middle Kingdom period, the mystery begins to clear up. In this period, as seen above, inscriptions certainly refer to the *miw*, and the pictorial references make it certain that the domestic cat is present beyond doubt.<sup>8</sup> Once attested, the cat speedily made itself well adjusted to Egyptian culture. Besides becoming a cherished pet, it was a relentless mouser, helping to protect granaries and other food storehouses; and further, its daring in challenging ser-

pents won for it much additional veneration.

The ancient Egyptians recognized divinity in many aspects,<sup>9</sup> and various felines found themselves included in this development. Very early in pharaonic history, one such feline was recognized by the name Mafdet.<sup>10</sup> She is represented on a vase fragment, on a mud jar-sealing, and on the royal kinglist known as the Palermo Stone; usually she is shown in full feline form scampering up the pole of an execution device.<sup>11</sup> This depiction linked Mafdet with the execution of evil-doers, and in this guise she became popular in Old Kingdom religious cult. She was also known for battling serpents, and this won her great respect. Scholarly opinion is divided on whether Mafdet should be seen as the domestic cat,<sup>12</sup> as some other feline,<sup>13</sup> or as a mongoose.<sup>14</sup>

In favor of the domestic cat, Sir Alan Gardiner recounted an incident at Abydos, where a cat belonging to two English scholars working there in the 1930s, killed horned vipers, a very deadly type of serpent, by pouncing on them, holding them down with its claws, then biting them.<sup>15</sup> From my own experience in Egypt, I recall a domestic cat confronting, although not attacking, a cobra. Likewise, in religious texts the





3. Statue of Sekhmet, black granite; Temple of Mut, Karnak, Egypt; Dynasty XVIII. F. J. Yurco photo.

ancient Egyptians recognized this serpent-killing ability of the cat. Both in the funerary papyri known as *Books of the Dead* (chapter 17) and in tomb paintings of the New Kingdom Period (ca. 1570-1080 B.C.), a tomcat, titled as “the Great Cat who dwells in Heliopolis,” is depicted and described as cutting off the head of the dangerous serpent, Apophis, entwined around a Persea tree.<sup>16</sup> This tomcat, whether the short-tailed jungle cat or the domestic cat, usually is shown with a spotted coat and ringed legs and tail; he was so venerated that one of the 76 manifestations of the sun-god was represented as a tomcat (fig. 1). The ability of modern Egyptian cats to tackle vipers or other serpents lends support to the idea that the Great Tomcat of Heliopolis was indeed a domestic tomcat.<sup>17</sup> This aspect of the cat—the ability to tackle serpents—assured its status in Egypt, for while a cat that is a good mouser is both useful and desirable, a cat that takes on serpents can be, absolutely, a lifesaver.

In the New Kingdom period and later, the domestic cat achieved widespread popularity. Frequently the subject of tomb paintings, it is shown in hunting scenes helping catch marsh birds from its owner's papyrus

skiff,<sup>18</sup> or else sitting or lying down under the chair of the lady of the house.<sup>19</sup> Its position as a cherished pet is well attested. A son of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1386-1348 B.C.), Prince Thutmose, was so attached to his cat that when she died he had her embalmed and fitted out with a small sarcophagus (now in the Cairo Museum), complete with reliefs showing the cat and funerary texts.<sup>20</sup> She is called “The Osiris, Ta-Mit,” the kitty's name evidently being simply the feminine form of *miw*. At the head and foot of the sarcophagus, she is under the protection of Isis and Nephthys, so that just like a human, she was envisioned as gaining eternal life through Osiris. The prince included his own titles and name, so we learn that he was the elder brother of the



4. Head, from Sekhmet statue, black granite; Field Museum no. 31720; from Mut Temple, Karnak, Egypt; Dynasty XVIII. Dave Walsten photo.

prince who later became Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten); he was High Priest of Ptah, stationed in Memphis, and also crown prince and royal heir, but evidently predeceased his own father, Amenhotep III.

Most painted depictions of cats in the New Kingdom show them with brown tabby markings, in various attitudes and modes of behavior familiar to anyone owning a domestic cat. More and more in this period, the domestic cat was identified with Bastet, and it even entered into literature and humor. On one papyrus, cats are shown acting as servants at a mouse-king's court.<sup>21</sup> They carry baby mice wrapped in swaddling clothes and serve their mouse masters in various ways. 17





5. Miyisis, or Mahes, son of Bastet, bronze figures; cats. 30282 (left) and 30283; Late Period; negs. 8067, 8069.

Another satirical and humorous papyrus in Turin, Italy, shows cats defending a fortress under attack by a pharaoh-mouse in a chariot drawn by dogs.<sup>22</sup> In another scene on this papyrus, and on another in the British Museum, cats act as shepherds herding a flock of geese.<sup>23</sup> At the Oriental Institute in Chicago, a limestone ostrakon (fig. 2) shows a cat acting as bailiff who brings a miscreant boy into court before a mouse acting as judge. All of this suggests that the cat had secured for itself a familiar and comfortable niche in the milieu of ancient Egypt.

In the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom periods the domestic cat became more firmly associated with the feline deity, Bastet, mistress of Bubastis. Bastet was originally a lioness, with a cult center also at Heliopolis, where she was "daughter of Atum," and at times she was identified with Tefnut.<sup>24</sup> The existence of other feline deities, such as Sekhmet (figs. 3, 4) of

Memphis, and Pakhet of the Beni Hasan area in Middle Egypt, gave her entrance to cults in those areas, when she was identified with the resident felines. Both Pyramid Texts and a Middle Kingdom hymn associate Bastet with the crown and make her a protectress of the king and of the Two Lands (Egypt).<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the ferocity of the lioness was stressed in Bastet in these aspects. In the New Kingdom, Pharaoh Ramesses IV (1151-1145 B.C.) forbade the hunting of lions on the various feast days of Bastet.<sup>26</sup> These associations reinforced the image of Bastet as an aspect of Sekhmet, and she was even thought to have given birth to a lion deity, Miyisis, or Mahes, who became a warrior god, guardian of pharaoh and of sacred sites (fig. 5), and the one who mauls the foes of pharaoh (fig. 6).<sup>27</sup>

Bastet, though, had another nature, as shown by a text that calls her "ferocious as Sekhmet, and as peaceful as the domestic cat."<sup>28</sup> In these two guises she typifies the ability of Egyptian deities to be manifest in differing aspects, something seen in almost all the references to deities discussed here. The magnificent bronze figure of Bastet in the Field Museum's collection (no. 31642) well illustrates these dual aspects (fig. 8). Majestically seated on a throne, she has the head of a lioness, but in her right hand she holds an instrument called a sistrum, and texts on the throne identify her as Bastet. The sistrum is associated with music-making, more in keeping with the character of Hathor (fig. 9), goddess of love, music, dance, and festivity.<sup>29</sup>

Increasingly, in the Post-New Kingdom era (1080-664 B.C.), Bastet came to be associated with the domestic cat rather than the lioness. A major boost to her popularity came in Dynasty XXII-XXIII (945-712 B.C.), when pharaohs of Libyan ancestry made Bubastis, home of her principle shrine, their royal city. Large temples to Bastet were built, and she became a national ranking deity. Perhaps it was in this period that commenced the feasts and pilgrimages, replete with feasting, dancing, and merry-making, that were mentioned by Herodotus, the Greek historian, who visited Egypt in 448 B.C.<sup>30</sup> It was also in this period that vast numbers of small and medium-sized bronze images of Bastet, shown either as a female human with a cat's head, sometimes with kittens standing before her or held in a basket, or simply shown as a cat, were produced as votive gifts to the goddess (figs. 9 and 10). These have been found in areas with shrines devoted to Bastet and often are inscribed with prayers. The presence of kittens stressed another aspect of Bastet, that of protectress of family and children. That indeed was the environment in which the domestic cat was often found.





6. Miysis as a lion, mauls foes of pharaoh; wall relief, sandstone; Temple of Kom Ombo, Egypt; Roman Period. F. J. Yurco photo.

By the Late Period (664-332 B.C.) and the subsequent Ptolemaic Era (332-30 B.C.), the sanctity of Bastet was extended to cover all domestic cats. This is demonstrated in the now-growing practice of mummifying and burying all dead cats in cemeteries attached to the various shrines associated with Bastet. Vast numbers of cats were thusly interred, at Bubastis, at Memphis (where recently the enormous cemetery adjacent to Bastet's shrine has been discovered intact with thousands of mummified cats), and at Beni Hasan (whence large numbers of mummified cats were extracted in the 19th century).<sup>31</sup> Most of the Field Museum's mummified cats (fig. 11) probably came from the Beni Hasan cemetery. Yet, so numerous were the cat mummies that all but the finest were unwrapped summarily. Their linen bandages were exported to the United States during the American Civil War (1861-65) to a New England factory that turned them into linen-based paper.<sup>32</sup> The cat mummies were shipped to

England, where, pulverized, they were used as plant fertilizer!

Stories from the Ptolemaic era recount how highly cats were regarded in Egypt. According to Herodotus, if a house caught fire, the inhabitants rushed in to save the cats, or ringed it to keep the cats out.<sup>33</sup> Diodorus Siculus recounts that at Alexandria, when a visiting Roman dignitary accidentally killed a cat in 60-59 B.C., an outraged mob gathered and lynched him.<sup>34</sup>

If not earlier, then certainly in the Late Period, domesticated cats spread beyond Egypt to surrounding Mediterranean lands. Roman period mosaics and murals depict the cat. The use of cats aboard ships to keep rats under control no doubt helped Egyptian cats to spread abroad. So, many European, and by extension American cats may have some genes derived from the *miw* of ancient Egypt. Indeed, cat fanciers identify one breed, the Abyssinian, as descended directly from the cats of ancient Egypt. More certainly, the current 19





7. Above: Hathor playing castanet, column relief, sandstone; Temple of Dendera, Egypt; Roman Period. W. J. Murnane photo.

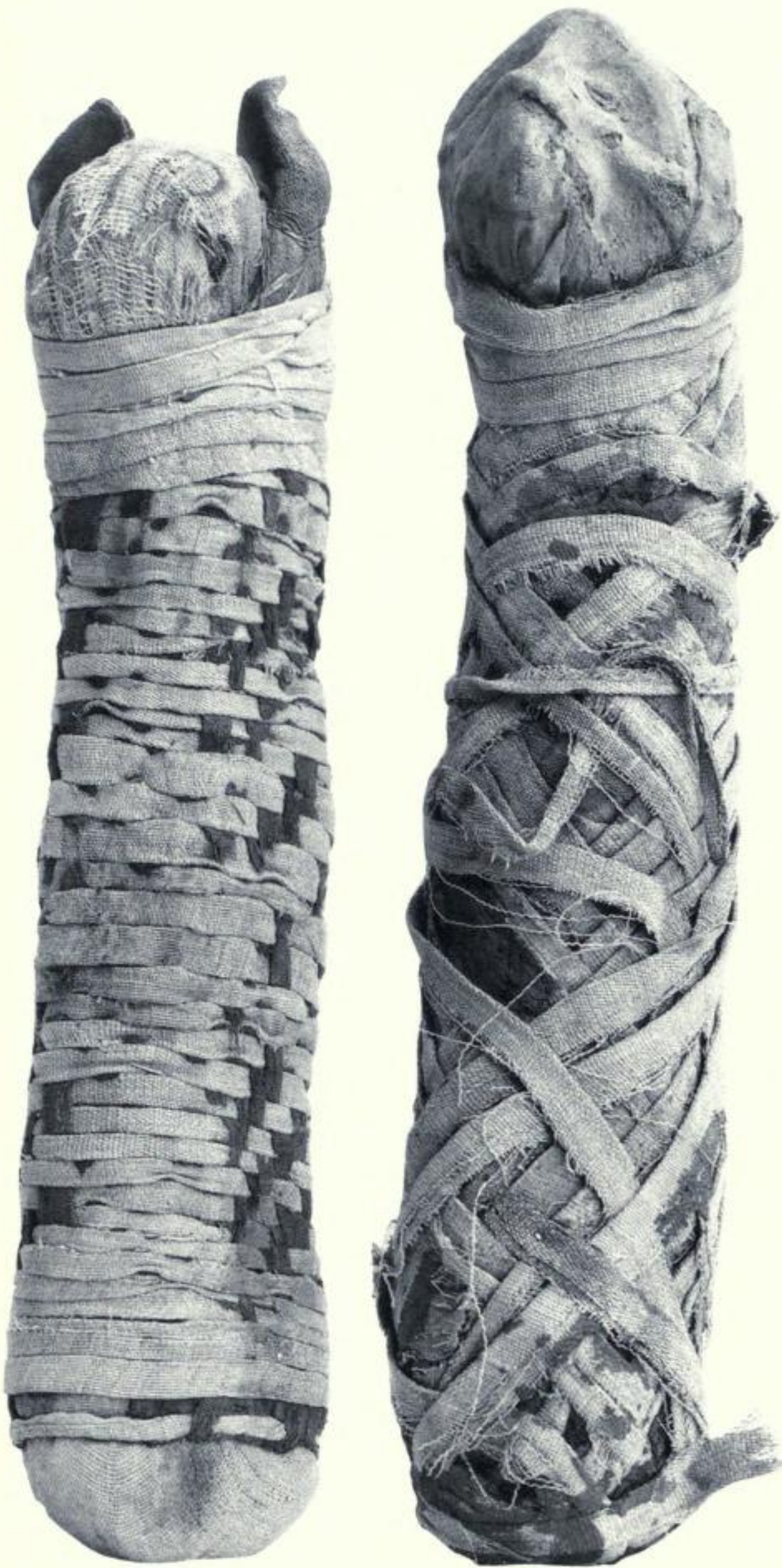
8. Left: Bastet enthroned, with lioness or panther head, bronze; cat. 31642; perhaps Dynasty XXVI; neg. 108334. Dave Walsten photo.





9. Bastet as a cat, bronze with gold, silver, and copper details; cat. 30286; perhaps Dynasty XXVI; neg. 111081. Photo by Ron Testa and Diane Alexander White.





11. Cat mummies; cats. 111503 and 111512; Ptolemaic Period; neg. 71309.



10. Left: Bastet as cat-headed female, bronze; cat. 30287; Late Period; neg. 8068. Right: Cat with kittens, votive to Bastet, bronze; cat. 30285; Late Period; neg. 1358.

fascination with the domestic cat mirrors that of ancient Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

The tameability of small felines makes it difficult to assess the question of who first domesticated the cat. Was it in one locale or in several, for small felines fill an ecological niche worldwide? Egyptian paintings and reliefs of the New Kingdom Period show us cats on board ships, and Egyptian ships were plying the Mediterranean and Red Seas from the Old Kingdom period (fig. 12) and probably earlier. The bones and statuette found at Hacilar and Jericho might argue for multiple domestication places, but the bones found in Predynastic Egyptian sites, and the presence of *Felis libyca* on the prehistoric Sahara make certain that Egypt was one of the domestication sites also. The Abyssinian breed derives from *Felis libyca*, and it is found in modern Egypt alongside more common varieties. In the Ptolemaic Period and later (after 118 B.C.), Egyptian ships sailed to India and the Far East for trade; did the *miw* accompany them on those voyages? Probably, but there are again small felines indigenous to the Far East that may have been independently domesticated.

Certainly, in Egypt proper domestic cats never lost their popularity. Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt all document their presence, and today they occur in every Egyptian city, town, and village. No doubt the continued presence of mice, rats, and serpents, and the cat's ability to tackle them all, assured its place even after the worship of Bastet waned with the spread of Christianity. **FM**



12. Egyptian ships arriving from Syria, wall relief, limestone; causeway of Unas Pyramid complex, Saqqara, Egypt; Dynasty V. F. J. Yurco photo.



## Footnotes

1. Banks, Kimball M. *Climates, Cultures, and Cattle: The Holocene Archaeology of the Eastern Sahara* (Dallas: Dept. of Anthropology, Southern Methodist Univ., 1984), pp. 16, 51 (table III:1), 119, 164 (table V:9), and 232-233.
2. Petzsch, Hans, "Zur Problematik der Primärdomestikation der Hauskatze (*Felis Silvestris 'Familiaris'*)," in Janós Matolcsi, ed., *Domestikationforschung und Geschichte der Haustiere* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiadó, 1973), pp. 109-113; Helck, Wolfgang, "Katze," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band III (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), pp. 367-369. The Haçilar find included a statuette of a woman playing with a cat.
3. Brunton, G., and G. Caton-Thompson. *The Badarian Civilization* (London: British School of Archaeology, 1928), p. 94; Janssen, Jacques and Rosalind. *Egyptian Household Animals*, Shire Egyptology, vol. 12 (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1989), pp. 14-19.
4. Eрман, Adolf and Hermann Grapow. *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, Vol II (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1928), p. 42.
5. *Ibid*, including the feminine form, *Ta-Mit*, "Kitty" used as a personal name for a woman in Dynasty XI; see too Neville Langton, "Cats in Egypt," *The Antiquarian Quarterly* I, no. 3 (September, 1925) 69; and Paul Remeck, "A Cat in Bronze," *Field Museum of Natural History Bulletin* 46, no. 6 (June, 1975) 8-13.
6. Petrie, William M. F. *The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, Part I (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1900), p. 20, and pl. VII, no. 4; pl. XXXII, no. 39; Petrie, William M. F. *The Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties*, Part II (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901) p. 25, nos. 7 and 10, pl. VII, nos. 7 and 10.
7. The feline is identified, in fact, as Mafdet; see Lurker, Manfred. *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 78, and figure at lower left. Opinions vary about whether the domestic cat is involved here.
8. Besides Langton's article and the Wörterbuch citation (notes 4 and 5 above), see William C. Hayes. *The Scepter of Egypt*, Vol I (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1953), pp. 223-224, and fig. 140 (lower right); see too Jacques and Rosalind Janssen, *Egyptian Household Animals*, p. 16 (referring to an XIth Dynasty representation of a tomcat crouching under a chair, on a stela in the Petrie Museum, University College, London).
9. Hornung, Erik. *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, translated by John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 109-125.
10. See notes 6 and 7, above.
11. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, p. 78, figure at lower left.
12. So, Gardiner, Alan H., "The Mansion of Life and Master of King's Largess," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 24 (1938) 89-90.
13. For instance, Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, p. 76, considers Mafdet as a leopard.
14. Gardiner, 89, "The Mansion of Life and Master of King's Largess," surveying the various opinions.
15. *Ibid*, 89-90.
16. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, p. 38, figure at lower left.
17. The Egyptians themselves called him *miw '3* "Great (Tom) Cat," see for instance, Lise Manniche. *City of the Dead: Thebes in Egypt* (London: British Museum Publications, 1987), p. 64, fig. 51; Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, p. 120, fig. 12.
18. Manniche, *City of the Dead*, p. 36, fig. 28 (where the cat paws its owner in a manner familiar to all cat owners); also James, T.G.H. *Egyptian Painting in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1985), p. 27, fig. 25.
19. For instance, Jacques and Rosalind Janssen, *Egyptian Household Animals*, p. 15, fig. 8.
20. Corteggiani, Jean Pierre. *The Egypt of the Pharaohs at the Cairo Museum* (Paris: Hachette Blue Guides, 1986), no. 58, pp. 99-100, pl. on p. 100. Amenhotep III's family may have been cat lovers, see Desroches-Noblecourt, Christiane. *Tutankhamen: Life and Death of a Pharaoh* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1963), p. 118, fig. 59, where the prince's mother, Queen Tiy, is shown sitting with a cat underneath her chair.
21. See Omlin, Josef A. *Der Papyrus 55001 und seine Satirisch-Erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften*. Catalogo del Museo Egizio di Torino. Serie Prima-Monumenti e Testi, Vol. III (Torino: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1971), pl. XXb.
22. *Ibid*, pp. 30-31, pl. XI, x + 11; XIII, and XIV.
23. *Ibid*, p. 30, and pl. XI, x + 9; XIII, XIV, and XXa.
24. Otto, Eberhard, "Bastet," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* I, pp. 628-630; Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, p. 32.
25. Otto, "Bastet," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* I, pp. 628-630.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, p. 32.
28. Otto, "Bastet," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* I, p. 629.
29. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 59 and 112.
30. Herodotus. *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 125-126.
31. Conway, William Martin. *Dawn of Art in the Ancient World* (London: Percival and Co., 1891), pp. 182-183; Remeck, "A Cat in Bronze," pp. 9-10, and note 9.
32. El-Mahdy, Christine. *Mummies, Myth, and Magic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 33.
33. Herodotus, *The Histories*, p. 128.
34. Diodorus Siculus. *Diodorus on Egypt*, translated by Edwin Murphy (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1985), p. 108.
35. Recently cats surpassed dogs as the most widely kept pet in the United States; see Margaria Fichtner, "Life with a cat," *Chicago Tribune* 143, no. 21 (Jan. 21, 1990) Sect. 15, p. 15.



**The following text is generated from uncorrected OCR.**

**[Begin Page: Page 15]**

The Cat and Ancient Egypt

by Frank J. Yurco, Egypt Consultant

) . The "Great Cat " (right) among the 75 other manifestations of the sun-god. Re: tomb of Pharaoh Siptah. Valley of the Kings, Thebes. Egypt: Dynasty XIX. F.J. Yurco photo.

The domestic cat, *Felis siivestris familiaris* (or *maniculata*), is a relative latecomer among the various domesticated animals associated with human-kind. Representations of it won't be found in the cave and rock paintings of prehistoric Africa and Europe, nor does it appear for certain among the domesticated animals of the early Neolithic period in the Middle East. It is in ancient Egypt that the pictorial and inscriptional evidence first comes together to make certain that the domesticated cat is present; and indeed, in Egypt the cat attained a very lofty status, becoming associated with divinity in the personae of the goddess Bastet and in one manifestation of the solar deity.

Small catlike carnivores like *Felis silvestris libyca* proliferated in the North African environment of ancient times. ' The Sahara has passed through cycles of dry and wet periods within recent geological time (the



last 12,000 years), and during the arid periods such large carnivores as lions and leopards could not sustain themselves in that environment. Their niche was occupied by smaller carnivores, including jackals, hyenas, wild dogs, and, among felines, by several possible ancestors of the domestic cat. In the wild state, the small felines like the cat focus their hunting on small animals, birds, reptiles, and occasionally insects. As this group of prey includes rats and mice, such small felines had a natural inclination to associate with humans, especially once humans began the large-scale storage of foods, cereal grains in particular.

Grain storage bins were appealing to small rodents, including rats and mice, and these were included among the regularly hunted prey of the small felines. This may well be how the ancestors of the domestic cat were drawn first to associate with humans. Grain storage on a large scale first appeared among the ancient Egyptians of the late Predynastic era, the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, and the peoples of the Indus Valley and China. All these civilizations produced grains on a large scale (wheat, barley, or rice) and had occasion to store surpluses, for export, or as a reserve against years of famine. It is in those civilizations, then, that the ancestors of the domestic cat likely would appear first. Indeed, at Hagilar and Jericho, sites



in what are now southwestern Turkey and northern Israel, respectively, bones of small felines have been found among the remnants of early farming villages of the 6th and 5th millennia B.C.;- but whether these bones represent domesticated ancestors of the cat is uncertain. Likewise, bones of catlike felines have been found at Egyptian Predynastic sites (5000-3100 B.C.);' but again, lacking pictorial or inscriptional evidence, it is not certain which of the small feline carnivores these remains represent.

It is in Egypt that the pictorial and inscriptional archive for the domestic cat eventually becomes quite well documented. In the language of ancient Egypt,

15

#### **[Begin Page: Page 16]**

2 Cat. as bailiff, brings bad boy before mouse judge: Oriental Institute limestone ostrakon. painted, no. 13951; Deir el-Medinati, Egypt:

Dynasty XIX-XX. Oriental Institute photo-

the word for cat is *d S Ja Js5 miw*, "meow, " with a picture of a seated cat as determinative, or word classifier.\*

The earliest dated literary references are from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040- 1786 B.C. ) , in the earlier part of the period." Earlier pictorial representations do occur, but they are somewhat ambiguous. Small felines, or



felinelike animals are represented on Early Dynastic (ca. 3100-2770 B.C.) objects." The problem lies in that these depictions are not labelled miw, or are so fragmentary that establishing just what feline is involved is difficult. Add to this situation the fact that the ancient Egyptians venerated a variety of felines ranging from lionesses to leopards and panthers, as well as smaller felines, and the complexity of the evidence becomes understandable.

With the coming of the Middle Kingdom period, the mystery begins to clear up. In this period, as seen above, inscriptions certainly refer to the miw, and the pictorial references make it certain that the domestic cat is present beyond doubt.\* Once attested, the cat speedily made itself well adjusted to Egyptian culture. Besides becoming a cherished pet, it was a relentless mouser, helping to protect granaries and other food stores; and further, its daring in challenging serpents won for it much additional veneration.

The ancient Egyptians recognized divinity in many aspects,\* and various felines found themselves included in this development. Very early in pharaonic history, one such feline was recognized by the name Mafdet. "" She is represented on a vase fragment, on a mud jar-sealing, and on the royal kinglist known as the



Palermo Stone; usually she is shown in full feline form scampering up the pole of an execution device." This depiction linked Mafdet with the execution of evil-doers, and in this guise she became popular in Old Kingdom religious cult. She was also known for battling serpents, and this won her great respect. Scholarly opinion is divided on whether Mafdet should be seen as the domestic cat, ' - as some other feline, " or as a mongoose. '\*

In favor of the domestic cat. Sir Alan Gardiner recounted an incident at Abydos, where a cat belonging to two English scholars working there in the 1930s, killed homed vipers, a very deadly type of serpent, by pouncing on them, holding them down with its claws, then biting them. " From my own experience in Egypt, I recall a domestic cat confronting, although not attacking, a cobra. Likewise, in religious texts the

### **[Begin Page: Page 17]**

3. Statue of Sektimet. black granite: Temple of Mut. Karnak, Egypt: Dynasty XVI 1 1^ F. J. Yurcoptoto.

ancient Egyptians recognized this serpent-killing ability of the cat. Both in the funerary papyri known as Books of the Dead (chapter 17) and in tomb paintings of the New Kingdom Period {ca. 1570-1080 B.C.), a tom-



cat, titled as "the Great Cat who dwells in Heliopolis," is depicted and described as cutting off the head of the dangerous serpent, Apophis, entwined around a Persea tree. <sup>1\*</sup> This tomcat, whether the short-tailed jungle cat or the domestic cat, usually is shown with a spotted coat and ringed legs and tail; he was so venerated that one of the 76 manifestations of the sun-god was represented as a tomcat (fig. 1 ). The ability of modern Egyptian cats to tackle vipers or other serpents lends support to the idea that the Great Tomcat of Heliopolis was indeed a domestic tomcat. " This aspect of the cat — the ability to tackle serpents — assured its status in Egypt, for while a cat that is a good mouser is both useful and desirable, a cat that takes on serpents can be, absolutely, a lifesaver.

In the New Kingdom period and later, the domestic cat achieved widespread popularity. Frequently the subject of tomb paintings, it is shown in hunting scenes helping catch marsh birds from its owner's papyrus

skiff, " or else sitting or lying down under the chair of the lady of the house. " Its position as a cherished pet is well attested. A son of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1386-1348 B.C.), Prince Thutmose, was so attached to his cat that when she died he had her embalmed and fitted out with a small sarcophagus (now in the Cairo Museum), complete with reliefs showing the cat and funerary texts. <sup>1°</sup> She is called "The Osiris, Ta-Mit," the



kitty's name evidently being simply the feminine form oimiw. At the head and foot of the sarcophagus, she is under the protection of Isis and Nephthys, so that just like a human, she was envisioned as gaining eternal life through Osiris. The prince included his own titles and name, so we learn that he was the elder brother of the

4. Head, from Sektimet statue, black granite: Field Museum no. 31720: from Mut Temple. Karnak. Egypt: Dynasty XVIII. Dave Walsten photo.

prince who later became Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten); he was High Priest of Ptah, stationed in Memphis, and also crown prince and royal heir, but evidently predeceased his own father, Amenhotep III. Most painted depictions of cats in the New Kingdom show them with brown tabby markings, in various attitudes and modes of behavior familiar to anyone owning a domestic cat. More and more in this period, the domestic cat was identified with Bastet, and it even entered into literature and humor. On one papyrus, cats are shown acting as servants at a mouse-king's court. ^ They carry baby mice wrapped in swaddling clothes and serve their mouse masters in various ways. \ 7



5. Miyisis, or Mahes, son of Bastet, bronze figures: cats. 30282 (left) and 30283: Late Period: negs. 8067, 8069.

Another satirical and humorous papyrus in Turin, Italy, shows cats defending a fortress under attack by a pharaoh-mouse in a chariot drawn by dogs. " In another scene on this papyrus, and on another in the British Museum, cats act as shepherds herding a flock of geese." At the Oriental Institute in Chicago, a limestone ostrakon (fig. 2) shows a cat acting as bailiff who brings a miscreant boy into court before a mouse acting as judge. All of this suggests that the cat had secured for itself a familiar and comfortable niche in the milieu of ancient Egypt.

In the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom periods the domestic cat became more firmly associated with the feline deity, Bastet, mistress of Bubastis. Bastet was originally a lioness, with a cult center also at Heliopolis, where she was "daughter of Atum," and at times she was identified with Tefnut. ^^ The existence of other feline deities, such as Sekhmet (figs. 3, 4) of Memphis, and Pakhet of the Beni Hasan area in Middle Egypt, gave her entrance to cults in those areas, when she was identified with the resident felines. Both Pyramid Texts and a Middle Kingdom hymn associate



Bastet with the crown and make her a protectress of the king and of the Two Lands (Egypt) . " Clearly, the ferocity of the lioness was stressed in Bastet in these aspects. In the New Kingdom, Pharaoh Ramesses IV (1151-1145 B.C.) forbade the hunting of lions on the various feast days of Bastet.^ These associations reinforced the image of Bastet as an aspect of Sekhmet, and she was even thought to have given birth to a lion deity, Miyisis, or Mahes, who became a warrior god, guardian of pharaoh and of sacred sites (fig. 5), and the one who mauls the foes of pharaoh (fig. 6)."

Bastet, though, had another nature, as shown by a text that calls her "ferocious as Sekhmet, and as peaceful as the domestic cat."" In these two guises she typifies the ability of Egyptian deities to be manifest in differing aspects, something seen in almost all the references to deities discussed here. The magnificent bronze figure of Bastet in the Field Museum's collection (no. 31642) well illustrates these dual aspects (fig. 8). Majestically seated on a throne, she has the head of a lioness, but in her right hand she holds an instrument called a sistrum, and texts on the throne identify her as Bastet. The sistrum is associated with music-making, more in keeping with the character of Hathor (fig. 9), goddess of love, music, dance, and festivity.^

Increasingly, in the Post-New Kingdom era ( 1080-



664 B.C. ) , Bastet came to be associated with the domestic cat rather than the lioness. A major boost to her popularity came in Dynasty XXII-XXIII (945-712 B.C.), when pharaohs of Libyan ancestry made Bubastis, home of her principal shrine, their royal city. Large temples to Bastet were built, and she became a national ranking deity. Perhaps it was in this period that commenced the feasts and pilgrimages, replete with feasting, dancing, and merry-making, that were mentioned by Herodotus, the Greek historian, who visited Egypt in 448 B.C. " It was also in this period that vast numbers of small and medium-sized bronze images of Bastet, shown either as a female human with a cat's head, sometimes with kittens standing before her or held in a basket, or simply shown as a cat, were produced as votive gifts to the goddess (figs. 9 and 10). These have been found in areas with shrines devoted to Bastet and often are inscribed with prayers. The presence of kittens stressed another aspect of Bastet, that of protectress of family and children. That indeed was the environment in which the domestic cat was often found.

**[Begin Page: Page 19]**

wmiy^mmm ^^^^^^

6. Miyisis as a lion, mauls foes of pharaoh; wall relief, sandstone; Temple of Kom Ombo, Egypt: Roman Period. F. J. Yurco photo.



By the Late Period (664-332 B.C.) and the subsequent Ptolemaic Era (332-30 B.C.), the sanctity of Bastet was extended to cover all domestic cats. This is demonstrated in the now-growing practice of mummifying and burying all dead cats in cemeteries attached to the various shrines associated with Bastet. Vast numbers of cats were thusly interred, at Bubastis, at Memphis (where recently the enormous cemetery adjacent to Bastet's shrine has been discovered intact with thousands of mummified cats), and at Beni Hasan (whence large numbers of mummified cats were extracted in the 19th century)." Most of the Field Museum's mummified cats (fig. 11 ) probably came from the Beni Hasan cemetery. Yet, so numerous were the cat mummies that all but the finest were unwrapped summarily. Their linen bandages were exported to the United States during the American Civil War (1861-65) to a New England factory that turned them into linen-based paper." The cat mummies were shipped to England, where, pulverized, they were used as plant fertilizer!

Stories from the Ptolemaic era recount how highly cats were regarded in Egypt. According to Herodotus, if a house caught fire, the inhabitants rushed in to save the cats, or ringed it to keep the cats out." Diodorus



Siculus recounts that at Alexandria, when a visiting Roman dignitary accidentally killed a cat in 60-59 B.C., an outraged mob gathered and lynched him.<sup>1</sup>

If not earlier, then certainly in the Late Period, domesticated cats spread beyond Egypt to surrounding Mediterranean lands. Roman period mosaics and murals depict the cat. The use of cats aboard ships to keep rats under control no doubt helped Egyptian cats to spread abroad. So, many European, and by extension American cats may have some genes derived from the miiv of ancient Egypt. Indeed, cat fanciers identify one breed, the Abyssinian, as descended directly fi-om the cats of ancient Egypt. More certainly, the current

19

**[Begin Page: Page 20]**

7. Above: har, or p, a, : : g Castanet,

column relief, sandstone: Temple

of Dendera. Egypt: Roman Period.

W. J. Mumane photo.

8. Lett: Bastet enthroned, with



lioness or panther head, bronze: cat.

31642: perhaps Dynasty XXVI: neg.

108334 Dave Walsten photo.

20

**[Begin Page: Page 21]**

9. Bastet as a cat, bronze with gold, silver, and copper details: cat. 30286; perhaps Dynasty XXVI; neg. 1 1 1081.  
Photo by Ron Testa and 21

Diane Alexander White.

**[Begin Page: Page 22]**

1 1. Cat mummies: cats. 1 1 1503 and 1 1 1512: Ptolemaic Period: neg  
71309.

22

10. Left: Bastet as cat-tieaded female, bronze: cat. 30287: Late  
Period: neg. 8068. Right: Cat with kittens, votive to Bastet, bronze:  
cat 30285: Late Period: neg 1358.

fascination with the domestic cat mirrors that of



ancient Egypt. "

The tameability of small felines makes it difficult to assess the question of who first domesticated the cat. Was it in one locale or in several, for small felines fill an ecological niche worldwide? Egyptian paintings and reliefs of the New Kingdom Period show us cats on board ships, and Egyptian ships were plying the Mediterranean and Red Seas from the Old Kingdom period (fig. 12) and probably earlier. The bones and statuette found at Hacilar and Jericho might argue for multiple domestication places, but the bones found in Predynastic Egyptian sites, and the presence of *Felis libyca* on the prehistoric Sahara make certain that Egypt was one of the domestication sites also. The Abyssinian breed derives from *Felis libyca*, and it is found in modern Egypt alongside more common varieties. In the Ptolemaic Period and later (after 118 B.C.), Egyptian ships sailed to India and the Far East for trade; did the miw accompany them on those voyages? Probably, but there are again small felines indigenous to the Far East that may have been independently domesticated.

Certainly, in Egypt proper domestic cats never lost their popularity. Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt all document their presence, and today they occur in every Egyptian city, town, and village. No doubt the continued presence of mice, rats, and serpents, and the cat's ability to tackle them all, assured



its place even after the worship of Bastet waned with  
the spread of Christianity. FM

**[Begin Page: Page 23]**

12. Egyptian ships arriving from

Syria, wall relief, limestone;

causeway of Unas Pyramid complex.

Saqqara, Egypt: Dynasty V.

F. J. Yurco photo.

»? »

mUtm

m

Footnotes

1 . Banks, Kimball M. *Climates, Cultures, and Cattle: The  
Holocene Archaeology of the Eastern Sahara* (Dallas: Dept. of  
Anthropology, Southern Methodist Univ., 1984), pp. 16, 51 (table  
111:1), 119, 164 (table V:9), and 232-233.



2. Petzsch, Hans. "Zur Problematik der Primardomestikation der Hauskatze {Felis Silvestris 'Familiaris'}." in Janos Matolcsi, ed., Domestikationforschung und Geschichte der Haustiere (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1973), pp. 109-113; Heick, Wolfgang, "Katze," in Lexikon der Agyptologie. Band III (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), pp. 367-369. The Hagilar find included a statuette of a woman playing with a cat.

3. Brunton, G., and G. Caton-Thompson. The Badarian Civilization {London . British School of Archaeology, 1928), p. 94; Janssen, Jacques and Rosalind. Egypt.an Household Animals. Shire Egyptology, vol. 12 (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1989), pp. 14-19.

4. Erman, Adolf and Hermann Grapow. Worterbuch der Agyptischen Sprache. Vol 11 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1928), p. 42.

5. Ibid, including the feminine form, Ta-Mit. "Kitty" used as a personal name for a woman in Dynasty XI; see too Neville Langton, "Cats in Egypt," The Antiquarian Quarterly\, no, 3 (September, 1925) 69; and Paul Remecki, "A Cat in Bronze," Field /Museum of Natural History Bulletin 46. no. 6 (June, 1975) 8-13.

6. Petrie, William M. F. The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty, Part I (London; Egypt Exploration Fund, 1900), p. 20, and pi. VII, no. 4; pi. XXXII, no. 39; Petrie, William M. F, The Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties. Part II (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901) p. 25,



nos. 7 and 10, pi. VII, nos. 7 and 10.

7. The feline is identified, in fact, as Mafdet; see Lurker, Manfred.

The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 78, and figure at lower left. Opinions vary about whether the domestic cat is involved here.

8. Besides Langton's article and the Worterbuch citation (notes 4 and 5 above), see William C. Hayes. The Scepter of Egypt. Vol I (New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1953), pp. 223-224, and fig. 1 40 (lower right); see too Jacques and Rosalind Janssen, Egyptian Household Animals, p. 16 (referring to an XIth Dynasty representation of a tomcat crouching under a chair, on a stela in the Petrie Museum, University College, London).

9. Hornung, Erik. Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, translated by John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 109-125,

1 0. See notes 6 and 7 above.

1 1 . Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, p. 78, figure at lower left.

12. So, Gardiner, Alan H., "The Mansion of Life and Master of King's Largess," Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 24 (1938) 89-90.

13. For instance, Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt. p. 76, considers Mafdet as a leopard.



14. Gardiner, 89, "The Mansion of Life and Master of King's

Largess, ' surveying the various opinions.

15. Ibid, 89-90.

16. Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, p. 38, figure

at lower left.

17. The Egyptians themselves called him miw '3 "Great (Tom)

Cat," see for instance, LiseManniche. Crty o/ f/ie Dead.- Thebes in

Egypt (London: British Museum Publications, 1987), p. 64, fig. 51 ;

Hornung, Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, p. 120, fig. 12.

18. Manniche, C/fyo/^he Dead, p. 36, fig. 28 (where the cat paws

its owner in a manner familiar to all cat owners); also James, T.G.H.

Egyptian Painting in the British Museum (London: British Museum,

1985), p. 27 fig. 25.

19. For instance, Jacques and Rosalind Janssen, Egyptian House-

hold Animals, p. 15, fig. 8.

20. Corteggiani, Jean Pierre. The Egypt of the Pharaohs at the

Cairo Museum (Paris: Hachette Blue Guides, 1986), no. 58, pp. 99-

100, pi. on p. 100. Amenhotep III's family may have been cat lovers,

see Desroches-Noblecourt, Christiane. Tutankhamen: Life and

Death of a Pharaoh (New York; New York Graphic Society, 1963),



p. 118, fig. 59, where the prince's mother. Queen Tiy, is shown sitting with a cat underneath her chair.

21 . See Omiin, Josef A. Der Papyrus 55001 und seine Satirisch-Erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften. Catalogo del Museo Egizio di Torino. Serie Prima-Monumenti e Testi, Vol. III (Torino: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1971 ), pi. XXb.

22. Ibid. pp. 30-31 , pi. XI, X -I- 11 ; XIII, and XIV.

23. Ibid, p. 30, and pi. XI, x-i-9; XIII, XIV, and XXa.

24. Otto, Eberhard, "Bastet," Lexikon der Agyptologie \, pp. 628-630; Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, p. 32.

25. Otto. "Bastet," Lexikon der Agyptologie \, pp. 628-630.

26. Ibid.

27.

28.

29.

and 112

30. Herodotus. rA7e/-//stones, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore; Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 125-126.



31 . Conway, William Martin. Dawn of Art in the Ancient World  
(London; Percivaltand Co., 1891), pp. 182-183; Remeczki, "A Cat in  
Bronze, " pp. 9-10, and note 9.

32. El-Mahdy. Christine, Mummies. Myth, and Magic {London:  
Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 33.

33. Herodotus, The Histories, p. 128.

34. Diodorus Siculus. Diodorus on Egypt, translated by Edwin  
Murphy (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1985), p. 108.

35. Recently cats surpassed dogs as the most widely kept pet in  
the United States; see Margaria Fichtner, "Life with a cat," Chicago  
Tribune ^ 43. no. 2^ (Jan. 21, 1990) Sect. 15, p. 15.

Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, p. 32.

Otto, "Bastet, " Lexikon der Agyptologie \, p. 629.

Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, pp. 59