The Cat of Bastet

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The handsome bronze shown on our cover is one of the most appealing of the Museum’s recent acquisitions, a life-size representation of an Egyptian cat whose ancient admirers believed her to be the embodiment of Bastet, the goddess of the town of Bast (the Greek Bubastis) in the eastern Delta. A number of such full-scale figures are known, but the Museum has never before possessed one. For some years, however, the bronze cat now at Dumbarton Oaks was on loan in our galleries, and her departure was so deeply felt by a devoted public that we have wished for more than twenty years to replace her. Now at last we have found a successor worthy to be compared with the few large figures of first quality in this country, among them the Bliss cat at Dumbarton Oaks, the Morgan cat in the Wadsworth Athenaeum, and the cat in the City Art Museum of St. Louis. Nor does it suffer beside one of the best known of all Egyptian bronzes, the Gayer-Anderson cat in the British Museum.

All large cat figures, and indeed most small ones as well, are represented in the same seated position; but there is a great difference in the styles, as well as in the skill, of the craftsmen who made them. Although the characteristics of the cat which most appealed to the ancient artists were its dignity, grace, and aloofness, the interpretations vary from the emphasis on the stylized pattern of face and ornament seen in the Gayer-Anderson example to our own completely lifelike figure, who, as we watch, we half expect will flex her front paws one after the other, then disdainfully stalk away.

As we shall see later, it is difficult to arrange these bronzes by date, but our own naturalistic figure may well be the earliest of the series. The Egyptians were famous for their representations of animals and this figure, with its graceful lines, subtle modeling, and the feeling it gives of suspended movement, is not only the portrait of a cat but a work of art. As the surface is now the pleasant soft green of antiquity we have decided not to clean it for the moment but have added a touch of brightness with a pair of ancient gold earrings of the type which once adorned its ears. Apart from its outstanding quality our cat has one feature which seems to be unique. This is the garland of lotus blossoms in low relief suspended from a high, tight collar which replaces the usual engraved necklace with a pendent amulet.

It is believed that the cat was domesticated in Egypt during the period between the Old and Middle Kingdoms, when its name, miw (f. miyet) is first recorded. But a wildcat, the caffer (Felis libyca), is indigenous to North Africa and must have been a familiar sight to the predynastic Egyptians as it prowled about the marshlands in search of young birds. The earliest tangible proof of its existence comes from Abydos, where the jawbone of a caffer was found in the remains of a predynastic settlement. The cats of the later periods included more than one subspecies, the commonest being Felis libyca bubastis, a tawny animal ringed with dark brown, with long limbs and tail and a comparatively small head; it seems to have been of a type intermediate between the caffer and the modern domestic variety.

No cats can be definitely identified among pictures from the earliest periods, but a wild cat stalking marsh birds is shown on a relief from a

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Bronze cat with gold earrings.
Height 15 inches.
Late Dynastic to early Ptolemaic period. Purchase, 1958, funds from various donors.
V Dynasty tomb (about 2500 B.C.) now in the Vatican. The next representations known to us are two paintings at Beni Hasan, some six centuries later in date, one of which is the well-known hunter illustrated on page 5. From the middle of the XVIII Dynasty (about 1450 B.C.) onward cats are frequently represented; now they have become domestic pets who sit under their master’s chair or accompany him on fowling expeditions among the papyrus thickets. Sometimes—in informal sketches on ostraka—they are shown in comical situations which may refer to legends in which Bastet and her cat figure.

The cat of the later dynastic periods is often described (by both ancient and modern writers) as gentle and playful, but it should be remembered that this was not true in the period when the Egyptian gods were taking form. The cat of the prehistoric period was an animal to be both revered and propitiated for its ferocity and rapacity, qualities which it shared with its larger relation, the lion. Cat and lion divinities, therefore, tended to be identified and confused with each other, so much so that it has been suggested that Bastet’s original animal was in reality a lioness. It has also been suggested, because she found such favor with the Libyan kings of the XXII Dynasty, that the goddess herself was of Libyan origin; in this case her animal could have been brought into Egypt from the west as the totem of the group of Libyans who began the first settlement in Bast, long before the historic period began in 3200 B.C. The totem then could possibly have been a lioness, an animal which, unlike the caffer, would not have ventured into the bogs of the Delta of its own accord.

There seems no real reason, however, to believe that the familiar cat, or caffer, was not Bastet’s animal from the beginning, associated with their divinity by the early inhabitants of Bast because it seemed to them to possess her peculiar characteristics to such an extent that it must partake of the divine spirit. (We are concerned here only with the female cat; the male cat, the Great Tom Cat, was sacred to the sun god Re.) We cannot know how the first caffer, if caffer it was, came to live in her town, but the goddess’s approval was evident, for Bast, or
Bubastis (Per-Bastet, "House of Bastet"), with a geographically and politically important position, prospered. It increased in size until the XXII Dynasty, when it reached the peak of its power, and was still one of the great Egyptian cities in the sixth century B.C. when the prophet Ezekiel foretold that "the young men of Aven [Heliopolis] and Pi-Beseth [Per-Bastet] shall fall by the sword and these shall go into captivity." But a hundred years later Herodotus was writing his famous account of the beautiful temple of Bastet at Bubastis and the great festival of the goddess held there every year. The city did not fall into decay until well into the Roman period.

Meanwhile the fame of Bastet and her cat spread, and for four thousand years the sacred enclosure at Baster's shrine was probably never without an occupant in whom the spirit of the goddess could manifest itself. These divine animals must have been selected because of special markings which presumably included a scarab-shaped spot between the ears; notice the scarab above the forehead of the Gayer-Anderson cat.

We have seen that the Egyptian word for cat first appears in the First Intermediate period (in two personal names). A small girl given a royal burial soon afterwards was also called "The Cat," probably out of respect for the goddess and not after the animal. The name of the goddess Bastet, derived from that of her town and meaning literally "She of Bast," appears much earlier. Two fragments of inscribed bowls of the I or II Dynasty (3200-2780 B.C.) from Sakkâreh are inscribed, "provisions of Bastet," and "the Elder and Priest of Bastet," and two shards of the same date from Abydos may possibly bear her name. The theory has been advanced that Bastet was a goddess of ointment, as her name is normally written with the hieroglyph which represents the bas ointment jar; but there is nothing to indicate that the town of Bast had any connection with ointment and the jar seems to be used simply because the sound bas occurs in the name. It is probable, however, that the bas jar eventually came to be associated with the goddess because of this phonetic similarity, and the jars which, in tomb paintings and reliefs, the deceased is so frequently shown holding to his nose may well be symbols of Bastet.

During the Old Kingdom we begin to find representations of the goddess. She is shown as she continues to be pictured throughout Egyptian history, as a cat-headed woman dressed in a clinging robe and carrying various charms connected with her worship. The small votive figures which become common in the late period represent her in a dress of striped material which may recall the natural markings of her animal.

In the Old Kingdom references to Bastet become much more frequent, particularly on royal monuments. Kha'ef-Rê', the builder of the Second Pyramid at Gizeh (about 2600 B.C.), described himself as "beloved of Bastet" on a doorjamb of his temple; Sahun-Rê' (about 2550 B.C.) made offerings to "Bastet, Mistress of Both Lands [Upper and Lower Egypt] in all their Places"; and a relief from the temple of Njwser-Rê' (about 2470 B.C.) showing a feline-headed goddess holding a papyrus scepter is inscribed with the names of both Bastet, "Mistress..."
of 'Ankh-towy’ (a district of Memphis) and the lion-headed Sekhmet, “the Mighty.” A recently discovered fragment from the temple of Snofru (about 2660 B.C.) shows the king touching noses with a feline-headed divinity. This unique scene is uninscribed and we cannot be certain whether it represents Bastet or Sekhmet. Nevertheless it may well bear out the suggestion advanced above: perhaps the king is here receiving the divine breath directly from Bastet herself instead of from her symbol.

Now that Bastet had found favor with the sovereigns of the Old Kingdom her name began to appear in the names of commoners. Several men called Ny-.anchor-Bastet (“Bastet is the possessor of life”) are recorded among the V Dynasty tombs at Sakkarah. Other names compounded with “Bastet” appear in the XII Dynasty (1991-1778 B.C.) and become increasingly frequent as time goes on.

Limestone relief showing a wild cat. V Dynasty.
The Vatican Museum

The earliest temple we know at Bast was discovered some years ago by Labib Habachi, excavating for the Egyptian government. This temple was built by Pepy I of the VI Dynasty (about 2400 B.C.) and was called the “Soul Temple of Pepy in Bast.” It continued in use for five or six centuries, after which it gradually fell into disrepair and was buried under debris, a fact which has preserved its foundations for us. The two hoards comprising the “Bubastis Treasure” were found directly south of this temple in 1906. They consist of gold and silver vessels presented by later pharaohs to other temples in the area and were presumably buried for safety in some time of trouble. An important part of this treasure is in our collection and will be on exhibition for a short time in the vestibule leading to the Egyptian galleries, along with our own new cat.

But Bast had always been the center of the worship of Bastet. Blocks inscribed with the names of Khufu and Khafref-Renef suggest that these earlier pharaohs too may have built shrines in the area. In Pepy’s own pyramid and in those
of his two successors at Sakkāre we find three references to the goddess among the texts inscribed on the walls of their burial chambers. The interpretation of the first is disputed, but it may read, “I have not slandered the king, I have not shown disrespect to Bastet.” (To translate the passage, as is sometimes done, “I have not propitiated Bastet” on the grounds that she was a hostile deity is not consistent with the fact that the king referred to himself in his Bubastite temple as “beloved of” the goddess.) In a second passage, the pharaohs refer to Bastet as their mother—“his mother Bastet has nourished him”—and in a third state that their “heart is the heart of Bastet.”

The town of Bast, meanwhile, was gaining in importance as the starting point for expeditions to the east, and its goddess prospered with it. The kings of the XII Dynasty continued building operations, Amun-em-hêt I adding a portico to the Pepy I temple as a “monument for his mother Bastet.” Other kings of the XII and XIII Dynasties, the Hyksos rulers Khyan and Apopy (about 1600 B.C.) and great pharaohs of the New Kingdom all left their names or buildings in the holy city; important officials dedicated statues of themselves in the temples and were buried in a cemetery near the temple area.

We have seen that Bastet was particularly favored by the kings of the XXII Dynasty, though according to Dr. Habachi there is no proof that her city was the capital of Egypt at this time, as has been believed. Osorkon I and his grandson Osorkon II built the sanctuary of the Great Temple and dedicated it to the goddess. A relief shows Osorkon II offering an eye amulet to Bastet with the words “I give thee every land in obeisance, I give thee all power like Ṭawt.” This is the building described by Herodotus, who visited Egypt a century before Nakht-Ḥor-ḥeb, the last of the pharaohs (350-341 B.C.), built his own addition to the Great Temple. He too is shown offering the wedjat eye to “his mother” and he calls himself “Son of Bastet” in his cartouche.

Although Bubastis remained under her special protection the worship of Bastet was not confined to one place. When she appeared in other cities Bastet was apt to be identified with or to absorb the local goddess, on the principle that the weaker divinity tended to seek support from the stronger. She seems to have had many sides to her character. Since she resembled them in appearance and temperament, and because they were divinities of nearby communities, she was most frequently identified with the lionesses Sekhmet, Tefnut, and Mehet. When a distinction was made Bastet was the “friendliest” of these goddesses. She was connected with the serpent goddess Udōt and later with Hat-Ḥor of Dendereh, who was described as “angry as Sekhmet, merry as Bastet,” and as Hat-Ḥor the happier side of her nature usually predominated. Through their connection with Hat-Ḥor, Bastet and also Udōt were believed to represent the eye of Ṭawt, and hence the beneficent power of the sun. Sekhmet and Tefnut exemplified the sun’s destructiveness. As Bastet’s fame spread she was called the “Mistress of Asher,” that is, she was associated with the mother goddess Mūt of Thebes, far to the south; she seems eventually to have been identified with all the great mother goddesses, and it was pre-eminently as a fertility goddess that she was celebrated in the later periods of Egyptian history.
The dates of Bastet’s festivals in a number of towns are recorded. For instance Hor, a military commander at Heracleopolis under Psamtek I (about 650 B.C.), wrote: “I brought out Bastet in procession to her barge at her beautiful feast of the fourth month of the second season, the fifth day until . . . .” A fragmentary statue from Bubastis says that the owner, whose name is unfortunately missing, had “made excellent monuments before her that she might appear and be pleased in all her festivals.” Ramesses IV (about 1160 B.C.) stated that he “had not netted birds nor shot fierce lions on the feast of Bastet,” though he was perhaps less generous to the goddess than his father, who had presented her with “heads of cattle, 1533; serfs, 169.” Montu-em-het, the governor of Thebes at the time of the sacking of the city by Ashurbanipal the Assyrian in 663 B.C., records how he had tried to restore its monuments: “I fashioned an august image of Bastet residing in Thebes, with carrying staves of electrum and every genuine costly stone.” As a fierce war goddess Bastet was probably given some credit for the expulsion of the enemy, and this aspect of her nature was responsible for many of the royal inscriptions which mention her. Se’n-Wosret III, for example, enjoins, “Adore the king . . . he is Bastet, protecting the Two Lands.” Amun-hotpe II writes, “His Majesty proceeded to Retenu [Palestine-Syria] on his first victorious campaign, his face terrible like that of Bastet”; and Sethy I describes himself as “valiant in the very heart of the fray, a Bastet terrible in combat.”

But Bastet did not appeal to the kings and great officials alone. The common people too could conjure with her name. One of the spells (the so-called “negative confession”) from the large collection of magic texts which is known as the Book of the Dead states, “O Bastet, who comes forth from the sanctuary, I have not winked at injustice.” The Divine Cat in her capacity as goddess of fertility and generative power was a particular deity of the home. She took a special interest in the family pet, her representative, for whom specific spells were provided in case of illness or accident. The best known of these is inscribed on the Metternich Stela, which was made during the reign of Nakht-Hor-hêb and which is now in this Museum; on this stela a cat which has been bitten by a scorpion is identified with the goddess herself and appeals to Rê to exorcise the poison.

If spells were of no avail and the cat died it might be mumified and buried like a human being. A cat of the XVIII Dynasty belonging to a prince was given a limestone sarcophagus which bears its portrait; its name was simply Ta-Miyet (“The Cat”) and it was “justified before the Great God.” The sarcophagus is inscribed with standard texts, which include the promise “The limbs of Ta-Miyet shall not be weary, they shall not be tired.” Two simple stelae of the same date are dedicated respectively to the “Beautiful Cat,” and the “Cat of the Mistress of Heaven.”

It was not until the XXII Dynasty, however, that extensive cat cemeteries began to be laid out, not only at Bubastis but at Saqqâra, Thebes, and, during the Persian period, at Beni Hasan, where the burial ground stretches along the Nile for over half a mile. Figures like that of our recently acquired cat come from these cemeteries and once acted as coffins for the sacred animals, or for those belonging to private owners who could afford a dignified burial for their pets. Over life-size figures of wood and smaller bronze and faience figures also contained bodies or bones of cats, sometimes of kittens or embryos. Unfortunately, the cemeteries have for the most part been dug by unauthorized excavators and these coffins have come to us completely unrecorded, as have most of the solid figures which were votive offerings to the goddess.

There is still another aspect of the cat related to but not covered by its association with Bastet, the goddess of war or generation, or by its place as a household favorite connected with the goddess. It was perhaps its quality of uncanniness, its love of the night, its unblinking eyes staring out of the shadows that associated it with what we should call the magical practices, as distinguished from the religious beliefs, of the Egyptians. Cats were apparently sacrificed on occasion, and perhaps the bones of such ritually killed animals were among those sealed up and buried in cat-shaped coffins. They were believed to be enemies of reptiles—a spell for driving away “all serpents” includes the words “Advance not hither, stand
still, and thou shalt eat the abominable mouse and crunch the bones of the filthy cat.” A famous story written at about the beginning of the Christian era tells how the hero Setna visited a courtesan of Bubastis who forced him to throw his children from the window, to be devoured by scavenger dogs and cats. Cats’ fat is called for in two remedies to relieve stiffness of the limbs (“grease of pig, fat of serpent, fat of ibis, fat of mouse, fat of cat, mix together and bandage therewith”); cats’ hair in a remedy for a burn, and a cat’s uterus in a prescription against gray hair. Nevertheless, all classes of the population wore little amulets in the form of or engraved with figures of Bastet’s cat to guard them against misfortune and to ensure fertility, and a classical writer describes how the Persian Cambyses gained his victory at Pelusium (525 B.C.) by putting cats in the front rank of his army so that the Egyptians refused to shoot; the author was probably misinformed, but at least he shows how fascinated their contemporaries were by the superstitions of the later Egyptians.

The position of Bubastis invited attack, and it is probable that it was laid waste in some Roman battle, so that the prophet’s gloomy forebodings were at last realized. Bastet herself was becoming absorbed into the all-embracing mother goddess Isis, but her cats were more difficult to destroy than her city. Both Wilkinson and Lane, writing in the middle of last century, told how homeless cats were still fed at public expense in several districts of Cairo—and it was possible quite recently to find peasant children in Egypt who had been “possessed” by the spirit of a cat in much the same way as the goddess of Bast first possessed the cat of her sanctuary six thousand years ago.