

Cats in ancient egypt



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The Ancient Egyptians domesticated a large variety of animals; from everyday cattle to exotic creatures such as the peregrine falcon and the Egyptian mongoose. These animals were important to many aspects of everyday life in Ancient Egypt, from religious beliefs that the animals were associated with to their economic value and the companionship they provided. Cats are one of the many domesticated animals worth noting; they played an important role which helped define Ancient Egypt.

Cats did more than just keep the vermin population under control, they were also a symbol of femininity and sacred connotations due to their connections to the Sun God Ra and the War Goddess Bastet. The “ Miaw”, onomatopoeic word used by Ancient Egyptians to refer to cats, originated from the “ Felis chaus” or the jungle cat. During the pre-dynastic era in Ancient Egypt, three different species of cats existed, the lynx, the swamp or jungle cats and the African wild cat. The jungle cats were largest and the heaviest. The name “ Felis Chaus” is derived from the Coptic word “ shau” which means tomcat. The jungle cats roamed the marshes and swamplands in the northern Nile Valley.

These cats were had long legs but a relatively short tail and weighed around 3.5 - 6.5kgs. There are no hieroglyphics or tomb paintings found which indicated that the Egyptians differentiated from the wild cats and the domestic cats.

Osteological examinations help Egyptologists today determine the age, sex and species of cats, but the skeletal remains don't shed much light on whether the cats were wild, tamed or domesticated. Examinations revealed

that the majority of the mummified cats recovered from the earliest dynasty were found to be surprisingly larger than the general wild cats. Among the mummies, a few of the “serval cats” were found, but it is unclear if these exotic cats were native to Egypt or if they had been imported from the south. Furthermore, cross-breeding in Ancient Egypt indicate that semi-domesticated and semi-wild cats must have existed. In an ancient story from 332 BC, the infatuated protagonist agrees with the prophet of the daughter of the goddess Bastet that his children’s bodies should be thrown out of the window to be eaten by the cats roaming outside. This suggests that cats were scavenger animals.

Representations of the wild cats were missing from most reliefs and paintings in Egyptian tombs and temples during the third millennium. Although there is no definite explanation for this, one speculated theory is that “The ichneumon and genet were a more common sight in the papyrus thickets along the Nile banks at that time and that the tightly controlled repertory did not provide sufficient opportunities for the inclusion of cats,” (Malek, 44). There weren’t enough desert scenes in the Old-Kingdom to identify cats either. In the 2nd millennium, tomb paintings at Beni Hasan from 1900 BC display several small, native, wild cats. More cat representations were found in later tombs, showing almost domesticated jungle cats.

Ancient Egypt was an Agrarian society and the large amounts of grain attracted many kinds of rodents. Cats earned the respect of the Egyptians by controlling these pests. Over time, the relationship between them and the cats grew into a mutual bond. The cats destroyed the rats and mice; in

return the Egyptians fed and sheltered them. The earliest evidence of the relationship between cats and Egyptians extends to early pre-dynastic periods in the villages Al-Badari and Al-Mustangidda of Ancient Egypt.

The Mastabas in these villages had cats buried along with the Egyptians. The painting from the tomb-chapel of a 5th dynasty mastaba shows wild, jungle cats mistaken for lions and leopards. Cats weren't represented in the scenes of daily life displayed in tomb chapels of the Old Kingdom, therefore it can be inferred that cats weren't fully domesticated in the Old Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom, domestication of cats is portrayed in a 12th Dynasty relief found at Koptos, illustrating the cat as a family pet lounging underneath the chair of a woman. Seventeen skeletons of tabby cats were found along with milk offerings in a 12th Dynasty tomb at Abydos. The 12th dynasty calcite vessel, presumed to be a cosmetic container shaped in the form of a cat is believed to be the earliest 3-D representation of the cat.

In the New Kingdom domesticated cats were displayed as " Beloved pets in the homes of the wealthy;" (Houlihan, 83). Playful cats were often showed relaxing beside their owner, who were mostly women, while devouring fish or napping in tomb paintings. Queen Tiye's pet cat is displayed sitting next to her throne in an 18th dynasty tomb-chapel of Amen at Thebes. The artist who drew the painting infused a little personal humor by painting the cat with it's leg wrapped around the duck and a monkey leaping over the two. An excellently carved household cat appears on a block of limestone relief from the late 18th Dynasty tomb-chapel belonging to the treasury official Mermery. Women weren't the only cat lovers; men occasionally possessed pet cats as well.

Tuthmosis loved his pet cat so much that he had a grand stone coffin built and decorated with religious texts and images. The funeral was so elaborate that it was at one point mistaken for human one, even though it mentions the words "she-cat" 11 times in the sarcophagus. Ipuy's 19th dynasty tomb-chapel at Thebes features a perky young kitten, sitting on the owner's lap with its mother sitting beneath the chair of Ipuy's wife, sporting a golden earring. In the New Kingdom, there is only one instance of a cat with a proper name.

The tabby represented in a wall painting in an 18th dynasty tomb at Thebes was called "The pleasant one" by her mistress. Though cats had many different roles in Ancient Egypt, mouse hunting was their main value to the Ancient Egyptians and a frequent motif. The 11th Dynasty tomb at Beni Hassan displays one of the first feline motifs; it shows a tiny vignette with a cat face-to-face with a large field rat. A witty math problem from the Middle Kingdom involves 7 houses, 49 cats and 343 mice; it refers to the household cat as a mouse-catcher. A drawing of a village tabby cat with a rodent hanging from its mouth is shown in a limestone ostraca from the Ramesside period at the workers' village of Deir al-Medina in Theban Necropolis.

Household advice offered in the Ebers medical papyrus from the New Kingdom states "To prevent mice from coming near things: put cat grease on everything," (Houlihan, 83). Many ostraca and papyrus found in the Ramesside period of the New Kingdom had comical drawings of mouse chases. The idea of the existence of cat and mouse folktales and fables in Ancient Egypt is hinted at by these drawings. If a man see himself in a dream: seeing a large cat-good: it means a large harvest will come to him;"

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(Houlihan, 83). This passage comes from the New Kingdom papyrus, a reference book for the interpretation of dreams and shows the value placed upon cats in the Ancient Egyptian economy. The 12th Dynasty rock-tomb of Nomarch Khunmhotep III at Beni Hasan shows a wild cat painted among the stems of a papyrus swamp.

This early example displays the theme of cats hunting in swamplands. Cats were sometimes portrayed accompanying their owners on hunting expeditions in the marshes during the New Kingdom. The wall painting in the 12th dynasty burial chamber of the tomb of Inkerkha at Thebes depicts a menacing looking wild tom-cat, lurking in marshes. The recurrent theme of pet cats hunting their own game is illustrated on the 18th dynasty wall painting showing Nabamun's family outing at the swamplands. His guileful frisky is featured grasping three birds in his mouth and paws.

This image can also be interpreted as the cat helping its owner by flushing out the birds from the ground-level bushes for him, but this theory is experimental. It's uncertain whether cats were ever trained to retrieve birds. The male- cat was associated with Ra, the sun god, during the New Kingdom. The cat was thought to be a solar animal since, Ra has been known to manifest in the form of a large tom-cat.

A picture in the " Book of the Dead" shows a large, boisterous tom-cat brandishing a sword and beheading the Apophis serpent, which rebels daily against Ra. The cat was sometimes inscribed on magic knives and rods as a good luck charm. The female cat was associated with several goddesses, all of whom were daughters of Ra, but mainly with the Goddess Bastet. Bastet

was a protector of pregnant women and thus the female cat was linked to feminism and fertility.

The mother-cat was well known for her maternal instinct to save her kittens from whatever peril faced them; whether that be a fire she would leap through to rescue them or a battle with another predator that she would fight till death to protect her kittens. Bastet is often referred to with the phrase “ Housewife Bastet” adding to the symbol of feminism. Several statuettes from 664 - 630 BC show Bastet carrying a sistrum and accompanied with kittens. In the late dynastic period, thousands of bronze statuettes and figurines of cats of all shapes and size were fashioned for use as offerings to Bastet in her role as patroness of joy and music. At temples where Bastet was worshipped, it would be a common sight to see cats being maintained.

The cat was also associated with Mut, the goddess of fertility, reinforcing the cat as a symbol of feminism. On a stele of the foreman Pashed, a hieroglyphic describes a she-cat as “ mistress of heaven” and the following text explains that the goddess Mut was associated with the she-cat. Another goddess associated with the cat was Hathor. On a stele dedicated to Hathor at Deir al-Medina, two cats are shown flanking her emblem. Hathor’s reputation as the goddess of love added to the cat’s image of feminism. In the late dynastic period, cats were considered so sacred, that killing them even unintentionally, was a crime punishable by death.

Though, killing cats was considered a sacrilege, sacrificing them was not. Millions of domestic cats were specially cultivated in temples associated with

feline deities, only to be sacrificed, mummified and sold to devotees as temple offerings. Some cats were mummified elaborately, while others more simply. The cats were wrapped in lengths of linen and placed in elaborate coffins. Most cat mummies have been indentified as tabbies but a few are considered jungle cats. Cat tombs and cemeteries have been located across Egypt including Abydos, Dendra, Saqqara, Koptos, Tell Basta and Thebes.

180, 000 cat mummies or 19 tons of them were found at a vast cemetery linked to the cult of the lioness goddess Pakhet near Beni Hasan. In the late 19th century, the mummies were imported to England and ground up to use as fertilizer. Professor W. M.

Conway noticed the affair and published an eyewitness account. " So men went systematically to work, peeled cat after cat of its wrapping, stripped off the brittle fur and piled the bones in black heaps like a kind of rotting haycocks scattered on sandy plain. " (Houlihan, 89). In summary, the cats of Ancient Egypt were descendents of the jungle cats, domesticated in the Old Kingdom as family pets.

In the Middle Kingdom, their full potential was discovered as hunters of vermin and they gained economic value. Towards the end of the Middle Kingdom and into the New Kingdom, the cats were linked with deities associated with the Sun and worshipped in temples as sacred animals. The beliefs held with the cat were lost as the cat cults lost the battle against the head of the white monastery at Sohag in the 5th century AD. Shenute, the head, abolished many of the religious practices of the Ancient Egyptians and the cat, stripped of its divinity, went back to playing the role of a family pet.