

The Divine Feline of Ancient Egypt: Progression of Bastet's Iconography in Two and Three-Dimensional Works

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Abstract

For many, cats are loyal companions and pets, and have been for centuries. Often associated with Ancient Egypt, cats are revered for their hunting capabilities and their fertility. Ancient Egyptians worshipped many divine beings, often those having animal qualities to make them appear larger than life. Cats are no exception. Bastet is one of the Ancient Egyptian goddesses that were worshipped and seen as the patron for children, childbirth, women, the home, fertility, and domesticity. This paper explores her iconography and how she was portrayed throughout Ancient Egyptian history (roughly 3150 BCE - 30 BCE) through three-dimensional works such as sculptures, figurines, and relief carvings. In the earlier years, she was depicted as a lion headed goddess however as time progressed, her portrayal shifted to that of a domesticated house cat, often in a rigid seated position or as a mother with her kittens. This paper examines how Bastet had influenced those who worshipped her, the extent of the Egyptian culture it impacted, and the connection to the Greek goddess, Artemis, with whom she is commonly associated.

1. Introduction

Art in ancient Egypt was different from our contemporary understanding of it. To the ancient Egyptians, art was functional; that is, all art had a purpose. Artistry was a highly regarded profession that was only available to the societal elite. Art had its place inside temples, tombs, and homes, but there were no museums or galleries dedicated to art as it was never taken out of its context.¹ Artworks were used to document their history and preserve their livelihoods. Unlike today, where art objects travel around the world, the ancient Egyptians would never take a statue from its home because the works were typically site specific and moving them would go against their purpose. Most of what we know today about ancient Egypt is from their art, which came mostly from tombs and other burial sites or monuments. Although grave robbing has been a huge problem in preserving their history, scholars have been able to learn a great deal about Egyptian practices and culture. With major excavations beginning in the early 1800s and 1900s, hundreds of thousands of artifacts and important pieces of Egyptian history have been unveiled over the past two centuries and have created copious amounts of international public interest in Egypt. Particularly since the excavation of the intact tomb of Tutankhamun (1922-1923 CE), modern day scholars have been able to gain insight into the burial practices of pharaohs and royalty as well as their mummification practices.²

Ancient Egypt has been known as a polytheistic kingdom that was powerful, influential, and technologically advanced. As with many other civilizations, Egyptians developed their own system of beliefs. From the excavation of Egyptian tombs, we have learned most of what we know regarding ancient Egyptian religious practices, culture, and politics. Ancient Egyptians worshipped various gods and goddesses, often depicted on tomb walls, and three-dimensional art, as well as described in writing. Many of these deities possessed animal-like qualities, both physically and spiritually. This paper will explore one of these deities, the feline-headed Bastet. As the patron of the home,

domesticity, cats, fertility, and childbirth, she was important to all ancient Egyptians (Fig 1). Originally born as the daughter of the sun god, Ra, Bastet was the opposite of another manifestation of herself, Sekhmet. The latter was a lion-headed goddess and was associated with warfare and healing as opposed to Bastet's reputation as a fertility deity.³ In the following examination of depictions of Bastet, the focus will be in particular on artworks including small-scale sculptures, statues, reliefs, and painting. Through an analysis of various two- and three-dimensional works as well as scholarly and historical perspectives on the worship of Bastet, the main deity of Lower Egypt, this paper considers how and why her representations changed over time, while maintaining relevance. Following a brief description of ancient Egyptian religious practices and history, this paper traces the chronological evolution of Bastet's origins from depictions as a fierce protector through a lioness form to maternal representations as a mother cat with kittens through her visual imagery.



(fig 1) *Relief of Bastet*. C. 1000 BCE. Tufa. 23.7 in x 5.2 in. Washington University (Saint Louis, Mo.) Art & Architecture Library.

https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS34144_34144_15628507 .

2. Aspects of Egyptian Religion

As noted, the religion of ancient Egypt was polytheistic. Thousands of divine beings were worshipped and mentioned throughout its history, and many are still worshipped in the region today. According to Jaromir Malek, a scholar of ancient Egyptian religion,

Ancient Egyptian Religion was a vast and largely unsystematic collection of diverse ideological beliefs which developed in different parts of the country in prehistoric times, before 3000 BCE, and which continued to be modified and changed throughout Egyptian history by the interaction of various elements and the inclusion of new ones...The term "religion" covered a wider area in ancient Egypt than the more limited sense in which we understand it nowadays. It also included ideas which we describe differently, such as state ideology and the theory of kingship, concerned with the position of the king and his relationship to gods.⁴

Religion in ancient Egypt was integrated into all aspects of life. It dictated how the government functioned and how rulers were able to come into power. Egyptian religion was extremely flexible, even if artistic conventions were not. Through constant contact with nearby civilizations as well as absorbing new ideas from existing tribes within Egypt, such as Nubia, Egyptian religion came to include thousands of deities and other divine beings.

Gods and goddesses were represented by animals, though the animals were not themselves worshipped, except only as manifestations of gods. Animal attributes were given to the divine to develop their personalities and become a personification of the divine being itself.⁵ Bovines were known for their maternal aspects (specifically cows nursing their young) and in turn, the iconography of their horns was given to the goddess Hathor to suggest celestial motherhood. Falcons are predators who were recognized for their protective nature, and the god Horus manifested

himself in a falcon guise to solidify his role as protector of the kings. Felines were known for their ferocity, territorial, and protective natures, and Sekehmet and Bastet were given heads of felines (lion and domesticated cat respectively) to convey such attributes.⁶

A few major deities are crucial to understanding both the culture of ancient Egypt as well as the nature of Bastet. Amun was ancient Egypt's main creator god and the prominent deity during the New Kingdom. He is often shown wearing a headdress with a double plume. During the New Kingdom, he merges with the sun god Ra, and becomes Amun-Ra who was then represented as a ram or a ram-headed man. Ra, the sun and creation god, ruler of the gods and father of pharaohs was often represented as a falcon-headed man with a sun disk inside a cobra on top of his head. Amun-Ra is seen as the father of Bastet, who was one of three daughters, including Sekhmet and Hathor. Each daughter is seen as the Eye of Ra (also known as a wedjat), who would seek out retaliation against Ra's enemies as well as be a symbol for divine protection (Fig. 2). Sekhmet was exceptionally violent but, when calm, would transform into Hathor. Hathor was kinder and more forgiving than her sister as the goddess of the sky, the sun, sexuality, motherhood, music, dance, and the afterlife. She also had the role as mother of the pharaohs, and was often depicted as a cow or as a woman with cattle horns and a sundisk on her head.⁷



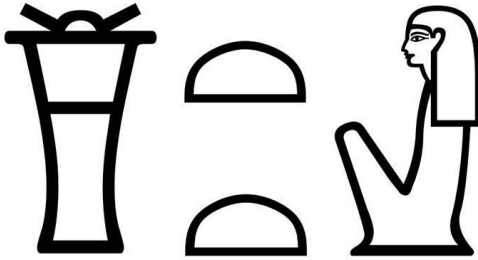
(fig 2.) Wedjat Eye Amulet. 1070-664 BCE. Faience and aragonite. 2 9/16 in. MET Museum.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/561047> .

3. Bastet and Bubastis

At Bastet's cult center, located in the Northern Delta city of Bubastis, outside of modern day Zagazig, were numerous temples and shrines dedicated to the feline goddess (Fig. 3). Due to the fact that the city is now in ruins, we have to rely on primary sources from later time periods to understand the extent of these temples and how the city was brought to life every day (Fig 4).⁸ A main source of information on Bubastis and the events that took place comes from the Greek historian, Herodotus, and his numerous trips to Egypt, around 450 BCE.⁹ Though we must use Herodotus with caution, since he provides an etic or external perspective on Egyptian culture, his account is useful in its general outlines.

The Egyptians hold solemn assemblies not once a year, but often. The principal one of these and the most enthusiastically celebrated is that in honor of Artemis at the town of Bubastis, and the next is that in honor of Isis at Busiris...When the people are on their way to Bubastis, they go by river, a great number in every boat, men and women together. Some of the women make a noise with rattles, others play flutes all the way, while the rest of the women, and the men, sing and clap their hands...But when they have reached Bubastis, they make a festival with great sacrifices, and more wine is drunk at this feast than in the whole year besides. It is customary for men and women (but not children) to assemble there to the number of seven hundred thousand, as the people of the place say...Thus the towns came to stand yet higher than before;...Of the towns in Egypt that were raised, in my opinion, Bubastis is especially prominent, where there is also a temple of Bubastis, a building most worthy of note. Other temples are greater and more costly, but none more pleasing to the eye than this. Bubastis is, in the Greek language, Artemis.¹⁰

In his account, Herodotus compares Bastet to Artemis, the Greek goddess of wilderness, chastity, and hunting. Bastet was seen as a protector of women, cats, and children, similar to how Artemis was a protector of those things as well. In her early forms, Bastet was a lioness, known for hunting their prey, and Artemis was the goddess of the hunt. Yet, there are a few deviations from this association between the two goddesses. Artemis was seen as a goddess of chastity



(fig. 5). Jennifer Houser Wegner, *Bastet's Name in Hieroglyphs*, 2015. Glencairn Museum.

<https://glencairnmuseum.org/newsletter/july-2015-cats-lions-and-the-fabulous-felines-of-ancient-egy.html>



(fig. 6). *The Goddess Bastet*. 600 BCE. Bronze. 6.5 in x 2 in. The British Museum.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA12590 .

4. Predynastic and Old Kingdom

Initially, in the early days of the Old Kingdom (2649 BCE-2131 BCE), Bastet was depicted as a fierce lioness who was known for providing protection.¹⁴ One common theme in ancient Egyptian culture is that everything came in pairs and had opposites as duality was vital to keeping the peace in the kingdom. For example, King Narmer (the first pharaoh documented in art) united the two halves of Egypt in order to keep the peace and prevent the world from falling into chaos. From this point forward, ancient Egyptians viewed the world through the lens of binaries: if there were men, there had to be women; if there was stability, there had to be chaos; if there was good, there must be evil; if there were higher beings (gods), there must be lower beings (mortals) and so on. Such duality allowed balance and helped prevent one side from becoming too overwhelming, which then could lead to chaos.

This duality helps understand the existence of Bastet's opposite, Sekhmet, a warrior goddess with a head of a lion and who was seen as Bastet's sister. Eventually, the two became known as manifestations of the same god with Sekhmet the more violent, powerful, and merciless side and Bastet the more mother-like, gentle and nurturing side. According to Roy Willis,

Sekhmet (“Powerful One”) was a terrifying lioness goddess. The sun god sent her to slaughter rebellious humanity, and criminals were sometimes sacrificed to her. Contiguous diseases were said to be her messengers, and her priests served as doctors. Other goddesses were less forbidding, although their influence was equally potent. They include another feline deity, Bastet, who was the goddess of love, sex, and fertility. Originally a lioness goddess, from the middle of the second millennium BCE she began to be shown as a cat.¹⁵

Sekhmet was known as a ruthless warrior goddess, while Bastet took the more subdued role. Both goddesses were seen as two different versions of the same goddess, as most of their roles as protectors overlapped.

As dynasties and rulers transferred power and changed, so did the gods and goddesses that were worshipped. While pharaohs tended to associate themselves with Horus, the god of kingship, protection, and healing, each dynasty

typically had a specific god with which it associated. For example, Akhenaten of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550-1307 BCE) attempted to convert Egypt to monotheism with the exclusive worship of Aten, the sun-disk god.¹⁶ And in the Twenty-Second Dynasty (945-712 BCE), when Bastet was the primary deity of the throne, the capital was moved to Bubastis, her cult center.¹⁷

In the Old Kingdom, Bastet did not have as much of an influence as other gods and goddesses. During this time, along with her counterpart, Sekhmet, Bastet was depicted as a lion-headed woman. As many other gods also embodied the head of a lion, it is difficult to identify specific ones without descriptions indicating the name of the deity.¹⁸ This is one of the reasons why there aren't many known depictions of Bastet hailing from the Old Kingdom or Predynastic periods. One of the few securely identified depictions of Bastet as a lion-headed goddess dates from around 2500 BCE, putting it in the fourth dynasty of the Old Kingdom (Fig. 7). This statue stands around seventeen inches tall and is carved out of alabaster, a translucent, white stone known for its malleability, which allows easier carving. Alabaster was an imported resource and was used mainly for important subjects due to its scarcity. This statue depicts Bastet with the head of a female lion, the headdress of a goddess, and the body of a woman. The face is distinctly a lioness, with a large, prominent nose which is at the forefront of the snout, a deep jaw line to the neck, and small, deep set eyes.

It is presumed that the goddess had rounded ears at the top of her head to align with the lioness depiction, however, thousands of years have taken a toll on this piece, and they are now broken off. In typical fashion of deities, royalty, and their representations, Bastet is wearing a traditional Egyptian headdress, called a Nemes, which resembles braided hair.¹⁹ There is not much left of her body; however, by studying the breaks on her torso and face, scholars are led to believe that she was a part of a larger composition which included the king, who stood alongside the goddess for protection.²⁰ Kings and other officials often depict themselves next to popular deities, in part to connect themselves to divinity as well as dedicate themselves in order to receive protections. Although only the head and torso remain, we can understand the early stages of Bastet's iconography and how it has progressed forward.

The oldest Egyptian writings discovered date to the Old Kingdom. These texts, named the Pyramid Texts, are Egyptian funerary and religious texts. The texts were first found in the late 1800s carved into the walls and sarcophagi at a pyramid complex in Saqqara belonging to Pepi I of the Sixth Dynasty (2289-2255 BCE).²¹ However, as excavations continued, the same texts were found at other pyramid tombs in the area. The Pyramid Texts are ritualistic guides to the afterlife. In the third book of the Pyramid Texts of Pepi I (2300-2181 BCE), Bastet was described as a nursing figure who cared for the king in his infancy, "The sky speaks, the earth shakes, the gods of Heliopolis quiver, at the sound of the offering presented before me. My mother Bastet has taken me, she in the midst of Nekhep has nurtured me, and she in the midst of Dep gives her arms towards me."²² Though she was depicted as a lioness in this writing, it is her nurturing, maternal side emphasized which will heavily influence her later depictions.

In the Menat of Taharqo, 690-664 BCE, the king is being nursed by Bastet in her lion-headed human form (Fig. 8). A menat was a large amulet placed onto the living or deceased for divine protection.²³ The Menat of Taharqo is made of faience, and its delicate nature indicates the menat was intended to be a temple donation or to accommodate the burial of a king. Egyptian faience, not to be confused with earthenware originating from Italy, is made out of finely crushed organic materials such as quartz and alkaline salts then finished with a glaze. This ceramic was, "considered magical, filled with the undying shimmer of the sun, and imbued with the powers of rebirth," and had the "essence of eternity."²⁴ Faience was used throughout Egypt to mimic the properties of precious materials such as turquoise, which symbolized fertility and life.

The shape of this menat can be described as a long oval with a bulbous, circular base. While this shape is typical, menats can be any shape. The size of this menat is roughly four inches long by two inches wide, with a thickness of three-eighths of an inch. The images on the menat are in a low relief, and are bordered by rounded, upturned edges. On the large oval front, Bastet is depicted as a lion-headed goddess, wearing a divine headdress with a large circle and a snake peeking out underneath, which relates her to Hathor, and stylized hair ending mid-chest. Utilizing hierarchy of scale, where the more important figures are shown larger, Bastet stands taller than the king, Taharqo, who is depicted as a child in this relief. In her hand, Bastet is holding a saucer and is feeding Taharqo. In the circular bottom, a horus falcon, wearing the double crown of Egypt, sits flanked by symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt on each side, a vulture and a uraeus (cobra) respectively. On the back of the menat is a vertical line of hieroglyphs which dedicates the piece to Taharqo. By showing Bastet as a nurturing figure, it solidifies her role as a provider and a protector. For the king, it allows him to imply a divine status and at the same time gain the protection of the goddess.²⁵ Although this piece is from the Third Intermediate Period, it shows Bastet's roots as a lion-headed goddess as it continues.



(fig. 7) *The Goddess Bastet Bust*, 2500 BCE. Alabaster. 17in x 12 in.
Jaromir Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, (Philadelphia, USA: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993): 74



(fig. 8) *Menat of Taharqa*, 25th Dynasty (690-664 BCE). Faience. $3 \frac{3}{4}$ in x $1 \frac{11}{16}$ in x $\frac{3}{8}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544882>

5. The Middle and New Kingdom: Mummification of Domestic Cats

During the First Intermediate Period (2134-2040 BCE) and the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BCE), the inclusion of cats in tomb paintings and tombs became popular.²⁶ As tombs were meant to replicate everyday life and to provide for the deceased in the afterlife, it was only natural to include a beloved cat not only for company but also as a way to protect any food from pests. In many tomb scenes, cats are shown eating or hunting close to their presumed owners. However, there are not many examples of sculpture and other three-dimensional works from this era that have depictions of cats, let alone Bastet.

In order to secure the protection from Bastet, it was vital to include either a feline, preferably a domestic cat, or Bastet herself painted on the walls, or carved statues placed inside the tomb. As mentioned earlier by Herodotus, cats became revered and garnered a great deal of respect due to their successful hunting that kept mice and other rodents out of the home (which in turn, prevented diseases), and out of the fields, which protected the foundation of ancient Egyptian commerce and livelihood.²⁷ A great example of cats playing this role is in the Tomb of Nebamun, dating to

around 1350 BCE (Fig 9).²⁸ Nebamun was an official in the New Kingdom who worked as a scribe and a grain accountant. As a highly valued individual from his career, he had the ability to commission such a lavish tomb that has stayed well-preserved.²⁹

In this scene from his tomb, Nebamun is hunting alongside his wife and their daughter in a marsh. In the center of the painting stands Nebamun, who is the largest figure in the picture, signifying his importance through hierarchy of scale. Nebamun is shown standing on top of a small raft, presumably made of papyrus, with both arms outstretched and bent. He is holding three white decoy birds by their legs in his left hand, and a black throwing stick in his right hand. Although rigid, his body shows movement through his back right foot with his heel elevated, as if he were to take a step. On top of Nebamun's head is a stylized cap, meant to represent braided hair. He is adorned with beads at the ends of the cap, a light turquoise neck piece, three lotus flowers hanging off of his shoulders and two blue and red cuffs on each arm as well as a white wrapped skirt on his lower half. His chest is bare, except for the necklace, as are most of his legs and feet.

On Nebamun's right stands his wife, Hatshepsut, who is wearing an elaborate headdress, a gold hoop earring, and long, black braided hair. She is wearing a white, see-through full-length dress, with a wavy golden shoulder wrap. In her left arm, close to her chest, she holds a bundle of white lotus flowers. Her size is about three-fourths of that of Nebamun, with their daughter even smaller.³⁰

Nebamun's daughter is seated in between his legs on the raft. One of her hands is wrapped around his leg, showing a familial relationship, and her other hand is holding a bundle of lotus flowers. She is mostly nude, except for a golden necklace covering her shoulders, a long gold necklace with a large pendant, presumably a pocket to hold things in, at the end, and she has numerous gold bracelets on her arms.³¹ Ancient Egyptians distinguished women from men through their skin color. Men were typically painted lighter than women, and that is true in this scene. Both women are an ashy, dark brown color, while the man, Nebamun, is a lighter, orange-brown color.³²

Next to Nebamun on his left is a large cat, who has caught some type of bird in its mouth, as well as holding two other birds in its paws. This cat is about the size of the daughter, showing that this cat is playing a vital role to Nebamun. The tawny brown of the cat stands out against the blue and red colors of the papyrus plants it's standing against. Its fur is made to look realistic through quick brushstrokes extending past the body. The stripes on the body indicate that this cat is potentially descended from the African Wildcat, which is also known as a tabby markings that we can see today in our own pet cats (Fig. 10). Its eyes are carved out, as if they originally had a gemstone originally inlaid but has been removed since. The background of this scene is filled with various species of birds and waterfowl along with a thicket of papyrus, and beneath the raft is a waterline filled with fish. Behind Nebamun and his wife are eight vertical registers of hieroglyphs, explaining the tomb owner is enjoying himself in the pleasures of the afterlife. Marshes are seen as fertile places that symbolize rebirth and cats were seen as the perfect, efficient hunting partners. By including this depiction in the tomb, Nebamun is not only being provided for and looked after by the cat through its hunting skills, he also gains the protection of Bastet for himself and the women in the afterlife.³³ This scene is bursting with life and movement, compared to the stoic nature of most Egyptian art. The birds are seen with their wings flapping and contorted in every direction. The cat looks as if it just pounced to catch its prey, and the fish in the water appear to be moving.³⁴

Tombs were meant to be elaborate and lavish, with no detail spared. They were portals to the afterlife and ways for your family and friends to still be in contact with you after death. A majority of tombs had separate rooms, with the body being held in one room and sealed off from the outside world.³⁵ In these tombs would be votive offerings to gods and goddess that were important to the deceased, small statues of everyday objects to create permanence, and often filled with items used in everyday life such as pots and pans, vases, clothing, and jewelry.

A way to incorporate and preserve the living world into a tomb is through the art of mummification. People would be mummified, and so would animals that were either beloved pets or seen as a manifestation of a deity. The afterlife was the extension of the realm of the living and in order to continue the lifestyle they're used to for eternity, preservation is key. The mummification of any living being is seen as a hallmark of ancient Egyptian culture. People were mummified themselves, as were important rulers, officials, and even mummified animals, both wild and domesticated. Mummification was a lengthy and expensive process, reserved for the ultra-wealthy and important figures. Thus, it is interesting to see that mummifying domestic cats became extremely popular in the latter part of the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BCE), Third Intermediate Period (1070-712 BCE), and the Late Period (712-332 BCE).³⁶ This was partly due to the twenty-second dynasty's preference to worship Bastet. It was a common practice to mummify your cat (or a cat bred specifically to be sacrificed) to place it within your tomb or have your cat mummified when they died and placed in a communal grave near a temple. In November 2018, archeologists in Cairo excavating a tomb had discovered over a dozen mummified cats, hundreds of wooden statues, and a bronze statue in a domesticated cat form dedicated to Bastet.³⁷

The mummification of the cats is an art in itself. The cats were wrapped in linen, often in patterns and in different dyed cloth with faces drawn onto the surface. Hundreds of mummies have been discovered, particularly in areas where Bastet's worship was prominent. An example of a delicate cat mummy is from the British Museum, dating to around 60-30 BCE (Fig 11). This mummy stands a little under twenty-one inches tall, and is a slim cylindrical shape, tapering towards the top, and with a distinct feline face. Its body is intricately wrapped in a diamond shape, with its layers being distinctive and prominent. The color is mostly a tan beige however there is a darker dyed linen, almost black, which is seen inside the diamond pattern. This pattern and coloration continues throughout and around the mummy, and at the top of the tapered body is a modeled feline head. It is shaped as if there is a skull underneath the wrappings, and its facial features are drawn onto the surface, with large open eyes looking forward. There are also ears added onto the top of the skull. The face is meant to look naturalistic in the way its eyes are drawn onto the wrapping where the cat's eyes are underneath, and the ears are in the correct placement as if it was alive. Over the years, hundreds of cat mummies have been unearthed and studied. A few of these mummies are held at the British Museum; they are similar in structure and have distinct patterns on their wrappings (Fig 12). By having dozens of examples of mummified cats in elaborate wrappings, as well as being well preserved, it shows us that the cats were treated with care and mummified with good intentions.

In order to study mummified remains without disrupting the intricate wrappings, radiology was commonly used by archeologists and historians. Although today, we have additional options to study these mummies like CT scans, MRIs, and X-rays. A group of archeologists from the National Archeology Museum in Parma, Italy, studied a mummy of a cat dating to around 300 BCE, which was in the height of domestic cat mummification.

From about 332 BC to 30 BC, animals began to be raised near the temples for the specific purpose of being mummified. People bought the mummies and left them at the temple as offerings. For this reason, many cats that had died prematurely and by unnatural deaths have been found. Kittens, aged 2–4 months old, were sacrificed in huge numbers, because they were more suitable for mummification... Indeed, the abnormal findings in the caudal portion of the calvarium may suggest an unnatural death. Cat mummies were so numerous that in the late 19th century, mummified cats were shipped from the town of Beni Hasan, in middle Egypt, to the English port of Liverpool to be pulverized and sold as fertilizer in England.³⁸

The main reason for this study was to evaluate how cats were wrapped and buried, as well as decorated and preserved. This particular cat was only four to five months old, and its bones were broken and compressed in order to occupy the smallest amount of space possible (Fig 13). In addition, this cat was forced in a seated position, which commonly represents divinity in hieroglyphics and in other forms of art. A frontal seated position allows an individual to partake in the ritual before itself for eternity, and therefore connects it to divine worship.³⁹ In this study, they had found numerous cats were also only a few months old, signifying that some cats were bred specifically for mummification and killed at a young age due to their small size and the ease in mummification.⁴⁰ A majority of those cats were female as well, showing a connection to Bastet through their fertility. As cats were bred in large numbers near temples, it was a common practice for worshippers of Bastet to pay for a ceremonial burial in order to show dedication, either for their own cat or a cat provided by the temple.⁴¹ This study is one of many regarding animal and feline mummies, and it gives us a greater understanding of how ancient Egyptians decided to mummify their feline counterparts.⁴²

A vast majority of these mummies found were female kittens. There are a few reasons for this. First, a lot of cat mummies were dedicated to Bastet, a female goddess, so it would make sense for a female cat to be offered rather than a male since females are able to give birth and have maternal instincts. Second, female cats are typically smaller than male cats, making the mummification and wrapping processes easier. Third, the age at which these cats were sacrificed was between four and six months of age, the average age at which cats go through their first heat cycle and therefore is connected to fertility. Finally, male cats were seen as connected to lions, rather than domesticated cats.⁴³



(fig. 9) *Fowling in the Marsh Scene from the Tomb of Nebamun*, 1350 BCE. Plaster. 38.5 in x 45.3 in x 8.7in. The British Museum. British Museum, 2019. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/egyptian-life-and-death#nebamuns-story>.



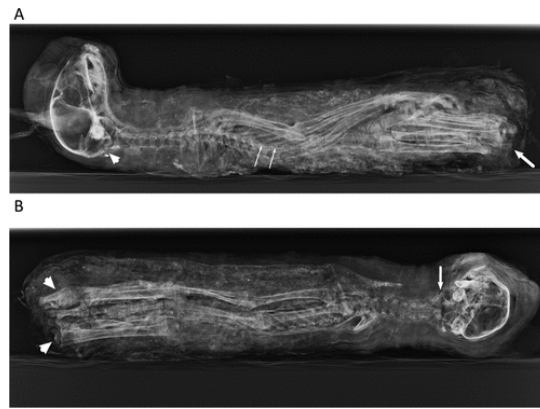
(fig. 10) David Grimm, *African Wildcat*, photograph, 2014. <https://www.science.org/content/article/genes-turned-wildcats-kitty-cats>



(fig. 11) *Animal Mummy*. 30 BCE. Plaster, linen, feline remains. 20.9 in. The British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA6753



(fig. 12) *Animal Mummies*. 30 BCE. Plaster, linen, feline remains. Various sizes. The British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA6752



(fig. 13) *X-Ray of Mummified Cat*, 2012, Photograph. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22412167>.

6. From Wild Lion to Domestic Cat

Few scholars are divided on why Bastet became associated with the domestic cat and why she was needed. In particular, Allen and Allen discuss that her prominence may be in reference to location and where other deities were worshipped.⁴⁴

The domestic cat initially had no religious significance, and Bastet was well established as a Lioness Goddess. Was associating her with the cat a way of differentiating her from the other lioness goddess, in particular Sekhmet who had a very dominant personality? Bastet may have been seen as a less aggressive form of Sekhmet from the early periods, but until the cat was domesticated, there wasn't another creature who could represent her feline but friendly character. Certainly the cat provided a good illustration of the gentler pacified Goddess compared to the angry Goddess depicted in the form of a lioness. However, Hathor was regarded as the gentler form of Sekhmet so why was Bastet needed? This was partially geographical. In areas where Hathor was preeminent, she took the form of the pacified.⁴⁵

As Bastet started to become known as the gentler aspect of Sekhmet, her iconography changed. From the lion-headed goddess of the Old Kingdom, she transformed into the figure of a domesticated cat, closely resembling the Near Eastern (also known as African) wildcat (Fig 10).⁴⁶ This transformation came with the gradual domestication of the cat, which was a good icon for Bastet since cats are still hunters and can be threatening, yet they are not as much of a danger to humans nor as violent as lions can be.⁴⁷ Cats were favored by humans due to their hunting ability. They were natural pest control, while also being friendly companions. They were utilized in the home as well as in

agriculture to keep pests such as mice, snakes, and other small animals that could pose a threat to crops or human health. Snakes were often used as pest control as well, however they were poisonous and dangerous to humans, while cats on the other hand posed very little threat.

There are two main forms in which Bastet manifested. One is a stoic, imposing cat, seated while looking forward, and the other is a cat reclining, surrounded by kittens who are typically feeding from the mother cat. In three-dimensional art, statues that represented Bastet as well as small votive figurines, were placed into tombs and temples as offerings. Mummified cats often were held inside these containers that closely resembled life-sized domesticated cats. Statues and figurines were dedicated to Bastet in order to communicate with her. Two famous examples of these vessels are the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)'s *Cat Statuette* (Fig. 14 & 15). Both of these works are hollow, bronze statues created with the intention of holding a mummified cat inside, however they are extremely different.

The *Gayer-Anderson Cat* dates to the Late Period, approximately 664-332 BCE, and was excavated from Saqqara (Memphis), Lower Egypt.⁴⁸ As a gift to the British Museum in 1939, the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* was donated by Major Robert Grenville Gayer-Anderson, who was an avid Egyptian small statue collector. A copy of this cat is located at the Gayer-Anderson Museum, which was Gayer-Anderson's home in Cairo, Egypt. Standing at sixteen and a half inches tall with an eight-inch width, this seated cat statue weighs almost twenty-four pounds. On the cat's head, there are incised lines inside both of the ears, with a hole towards the bottom of each ear that holds a singular gold hoop earring. On the forehead is a raised relief scarab (beetle) facing downwards towards the face, as well as a winged scarab on the chest to symbolize rebirth. There are two stylized bands starting at the top of both ears and extending down the forehead into the eyes. The eyes are deep set and empty, suggesting at one point there were precious stones or metals inlaid in the sockets. There are inner corner relief details on the outside of the eye to represent traditional eyeliner. The nose is adorned with a gold hoop going through the septum. There are faint lines underneath the nose to indicate whiskers. The body is very slim and muscular, and its neck has incised lines mimicking the pattern of an elaborate collar. In the center of the pectoral lays a silver plate with a low relief of a wadjet eye, signifying protection and healing. Underneath the plate is an incised scarab with wings, facing upwards towards the plate and holding a sun, a symbol of Ra.⁴⁹

The cat is seated upright, giving off energy of power, stoicism, and pride. Its thin front legs are extending fully downwards, meeting at the base. The hind legs are hidden; however, faint changes in width and texture indicate thighs, showing the legs are tucked in with the back paws being exposed, extending towards the front paws. Wrapping around its right side is the tail hugging the body closely and ending at the front paws. At the end of the tail are bands, connecting the feline to wealth and divine status. Many high ranking officials, kings, and deities wore golden bands around their body to show wealth and separate them from other people.⁵⁰

From the side, the statue looks unmistakably feline. The curvature of the head and back mimic how a domesticated cat would sit with its intense gaze looking forward, and the head held upright, alluding to power and patience. Through x-rays and radiation, scholars have determined that the cat was created using the lost-wax casting method, where liquified hot metal is poured into a hollow mold, often ceramic, that was made by wax.⁵¹ After the mold is created, the wax is melted and removed (Fig. 16).⁵² Pins from the wax mold can be seen through x-rays.

Gayer-Anderson noted when he originally purchased this feline that the surface of the cat was covered in verdigris, a green pigment obtained from copper, and red pigment from oxidation, which Gayer-Anderson had removed. Although this piece appears to be in almost pristine condition, x-rays have shown a large crack extending from the head to a large portion of the back, and wrapping around the center of the body. Gayer-Anderson had placed additional supports inside the cat to prevent the head from dislocating.⁵³

It is believed that this cat was a part of a temple, either left as an offering or as a placeholder for Bastet. The interior is hollow, however, it is not widely believed that the intention was to hold a mummified cat, as there is no apparent opening designed to later be sealed shut. We can make the assumption that it was intended to be a part of a temple or an offering based on its overall shape and size of the cat, common practices of ancient Egyptian worshippers towards deities, as well as its hollow interior that has the potential for a mummified cat to be placed inside. Due to its precious metals and extreme attention to detail, it was most likely commissioned by a wealthy individual.⁵⁴

An example of a cat statuette that was intended to hold a mummified cat is the *Cat Statuette* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 14). Dating from 332-30 BCE during the Ptolemaic Dynasty, this leaded bronze statue stands just over one-foot tall, is roughly five-inches wide, and nine-inches long. The piece resembles a lean seated cat looking forwards. It has a deep brown, almost black color on the entirety of its body from the bronze material, with a vast amount of green oxidation all around the statue. All four of its paws are planted firmly on the ground, with its tail lying flat next to its front and back paws, enclosing the figure. The erect and alert posture is reflective of the feline personality and the goddess' power of protection. Its smooth and slender face has large, bulging eyes with creases which act as an indicator for facial bones. Its nose is clearly defined with two nostrils, and incisions

underneath to indicate whiskers and a mouth. The ears are large, and each has vertical lines engraved on the inner half of the ear. The right ear has a small hole that is supposed to hold a gold hoop earring, however it is now lost. On its neck and extending onto its chest are engravings. The neck engravings resemble a collar and/or a necklace with a pendant of the wedjat eye extending onto its chest for protection.⁵⁵ Through these engravings as well as a place to hold a gold earring, we can determine that this statue served the purpose for a divine power. Form is an essential element to determine the function and significance. By having a feline shape that resembles the average house cat, it indicates that this specific statue has a function and is associated with a feline god/goddess.

There are various similarities between the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* and the *MET Cat Statuette*. First, the two cats are seated in the same position, looking forwards with a stoic, calm expression. Their ears have horizontal lines for texture and to mimic nemes. They both have holes in their ears to hold jewelry, however, the *MET Cat Statuette* is missing the gold hoops and the *GA Cat* is missing its eyes of stone or metal. They share a strikingly similar facial structure through eye shape and placement, slender cheeks, and a broad nose, indicating the continuity of ancient Egyptian stylized practices throughout different dynasties. Whiskers are inlaid underneath the nose, with the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* being more naturalistic, while the *Met Cat* has more uniform whiskers. On their necks are collars engraved as well as a wadjet eye pendant on their chest. Both of their tails are banded and wrapped around their bodies, although the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* is more pronounced.

These two cats are important for understanding Bastet's iconography. They are both in the shape of a common house cat, and are dedicated to Bastet, aiding her representation as a cat. However, the *MET Cat Statuette* and the *Gayer-Anderson Cat* are not the only examples of house cat shaped vessels dedicated to the goddess. There are other small statues in this stoic, seated position that are intended to be offerings to Bastet, such as a collection of Cats from the MET Museum (Figs. 17, 18, 19). Although not as popular as the *MET Cat Statuette* and the *Gayer-Anderson Cat*, they all show the significance of Bastet in sculpture and the accessibility in worshipping her. These three cats are all similar in appearance, with a straight forward gaze, alert seated posture, and similar features such as a hollow cheeks, large open eyes, and its tail wrapped around their front paws.

These mummified cats would be placed in an open communal grave near a temple dedicated to Bastet, in hollow statues, or in small sarcophagi. *The Animal Mummy Case*, dating from the Late Period (525-332 BCE), is a long rectangular case with a small cat statue on top and is an example of a box designed to hold a feline mummy (Fig. 20). Measuring three inches tall, three inches wide, and seventeen and a half inches long, this case has a light blue color from oxidation of the bronze material from which it is made. There is a small one and a half inch seated feline on the top of the box looking forward and in an alert posture. The cat has a similar structure to the *MET Cat Statuette* and the *Gayer-Anderson Cat*, however, this cat is slimmer, indicating that it may be a juvenile. Its ears are slightly larger than the skull, which is a common indication that it's a kitten rather than an adult cat. On the front end of the case, the direction the cat on top is facing, there is an engraved prayer to Bastet from an individual named Horemakhbit. Inside the box are feline remains, showing that this case was used for its intended purpose of holding mummified cats.⁵⁶

Mummification and statues were not the only ways that Egyptians were able to show their dedication to the goddess. Detailed amulets and small figurines were commonly used. In the *Aegis of Bastet*, dating from 664-30 BCE, it shows the head of the goddess in a lioness form with a large, broad collar below (Fig. 21). This is a small object, just a little over two and a quarter inches tall. It's made out of cuperious metal, which is a copper alloy, and gives the piece its dark, rusted brown color. Aegises were a common way to represent a deity in Egyptian culture as well as other cultures like the Greeks.⁵⁷ They are characterized by use of small busts of deities with a large collar underneath the head that is typically included with a menat. There is not much detail left on the collar itself, however, the bust of Bastet is distinct. She has a broad-shaped nose and snout, deep-set eyes, and a headdress. Adorned on her head is the uraeus sundisk combination, which signifies divinity and power. This dual depiction of a uraeus cobra and a large sundisk relates the goddess back to Hathor. On the backside of the aegis is a loop, suggesting its potential use as an amulet. Aegises played a vital role in cults and religious practices. It was seen as a protective symbol, and had the ability for the goddess to inhabit the aegis to partake in the rituals.⁵⁸ There are numerous aegises dedicated to Bastet, with similar composition and subject. For example, another version is an *Aegis of Bastet*, made of faience, giving it a light turquoise color that is meant to mimic lapis lazuli (Fig. 22). Similar to the aegis mentioned in Fig. 21, this aegis is composed of the bust of a lioness Bastet wearing a headdress, a large collar, and a sundisk and uraeus on top of her head. However, the collar on this aegis has more detail to it as it has four registers of line designs, mimicking beading.

Aegises can be more elaborate than a simple bust with a collar. In an *Amuletic Aegis of Bastet*, dating from 1710-664 BCE, it is evident that this one was made for someone who was of higher status and wealthy due to its material (Fig. 23). The work is small, only an inch long, but is packed full of detail. It's made out of gold and blue faience, which creates contrast from the two vivid colors. The golden bust is a bit damaged, with the snout being broken off. However, the rest of the face is distinctly that of a lioness. She is wearing a headdress that has incised vertical lines within it to mimic hair. On top of her head is a golden uraeus, and a circular sundisk, which is larger than the deity's

face. The collar is separated into three golden registers, with the closest one to the head holding blue faience teardrop shaped fragments. The middle register has blue faience semicircles, and the last register alternates between blue faience and gold triangles.

The extravagance of the *Amuletic Aegis of Bastet* shows the importance of small amulets as amulets were believed to give magical protection to the wearer.⁵⁹ These types of works were portable due to their size, allowing easy transportation. Faience and copper were more commonly used as a material for the amulets rather than gold, which made them inexpensive to make and available to a wider range of people. The magical protections that were given by the amulet were a result of a combination of various elements, such as shape, size, color, and decoration.⁶⁰ The shape relates it back to the deity being honored, and amulets came in a wide variety of colors. A good majority of amulets were made of faience, which commonly had a light blue color in order to mimic lapis lazuli, a prestigious imported material that was believed to hold magical properties. Most amulets have loops on the back of them to accommodate a string for it to be worn as a necklace, but it was also commonly wrapped into clothing, for both the living and deceased.⁶¹

Amulets dedicated to Bastet had many forms. As mentioned above, an aegis was a common way to show devotion to the goddess, and another frequent amulet design was in the shape of a seated domesticated cat. In this particular *Amulet of Bastet*, a black feline in a seated, alert, and upright position (Fig. 24). The piece is made of polished hematite (material derived from iron ore), which gives it its beautiful rich, shiny black color. The amulet has similarities with the *Gayer Anderson Cat* and the *Cat Statuette* in the overall position of the cat, with its front paws planted firmly on the ground below, its back legs bent, a tail that comes to wrap around the front paws, and a deep curvature of the back. However, this amulet is smaller at only an inch and three-quarters tall, and therefore is missing some details that would be on a larger sculpture, such as gold embellishments or chest incisions. It is believed that the lack of detail does not derive from the effectiveness of the amulet in protecting the wearer. Like other amulets, there is a loop attached in the middle of the cat's back, right above the curvature of the spine.⁶²

As Bastet's iconography progressed forward, her previous depictions were maintained and the scope of her influence became broader. More amulets, mummies, and small statues were accessible to a wider population, therefore allowing new worshippers to look towards Bastet for protection and guidance.



(fig. 14) *Gayer-Anderson Cat*, 600 BCE, Bronze, 16.5 x 8 in. The British Museum.
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/animals/gayer-anderson-cat> .



(fig. 15) *Cat Statuette Intended to Contain a Mummified Cat*, 332 BCE, 12 in x 5 in x 9 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544118>.



(fig. 16) Jose Manuel Benito, *Lost Wax Metal Casting*, Photograph. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/lost-wax-process>.



(fig. 17) *Cat*, 664-30 BCE, Cuperous Metal, 6 1/8 in. x 2 1/2 in. x 4 5/16 in. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552042>.



(fig. 18) *Cat*, 664-30 BCE, Cuperous Metal, 3 3/4 in. x 1 5/16 in. x 2 7/16 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552028>.



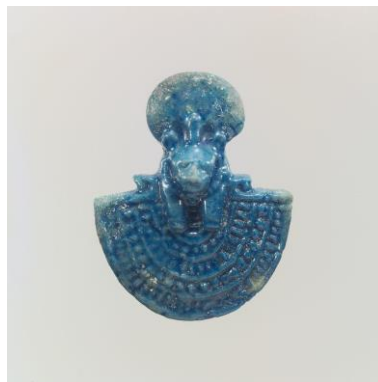
(fig. 19) *Cat*, 664-30 BCE, Cuprous Metal, 6 in. x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. x 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/570720>.



(fig. 20) *Animal Mummy Case*, 535-323 BCE. Bronze. 3 in. x 3 in. x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. The British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA65795



(fig. 21) *Aegis of Bastet*, 664-30 BCE, Cuprous Metal, 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. x 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. x 9/16 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552440>



(fig. 22) *Aegis of Bastet*, 664-30 BCE, Faience, 1 $\frac{9}{16}$ in. x 1 $\frac{9}{16}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548215>



(fig. 23) Amuletic Aegis of Bastet, 1710-664 BCE, Gold and Faience, 1in. × 13/16 in. × 3/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/549191>



(fig. 24) Amulet of Bastet, 1069-715 BCE, Hematite, 1 ¼ in. x 7/16 in. x 1 ⅛ in. Cleveland Museum of Art.

<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1973.29>

7. Connection to Fertility and Artemis

In order to connect Bastet to maternity and fertility directly, she was often depicted as a mother cat with kittens as well. The kittens portrayed a wide variety of activities, such as sleeping, suckling, or playing next to the mother cat. In the piece, *Cat with Kittens*, a female adult cat is reclining while her kittens are nursing from her stomach (Fig. 25). This is a small bronze statue, from 664-30 BCE, and is less than four inches wide, allowing it to be transported easily and to be placed into a home in order to honor Bastet.⁶³ The female cat is reclining on her side, with her front paws outstretched in front of her, and her back legs stretched with her tail lying on her back thigh. Next to her are four kittens, with one playfully climbing on her neck between her two front paws, and the other three are nursing from her stomach. Two of the nursing kittens are between her front and back legs, with the other kitten between her two back legs. On the mother cat's neck is an incised collar with a wedjat eye for divine protection. The five cats are laying upon a bronze base, with an inscription, "Bastet, given life."⁶⁴

Through the depiction of a mother cat nursing her kittens, it solidifies the role Bastet played in fertility. She was not only looked towards and worshipped for fertility in childbirth, but also the fertility of the land, agriculture, and animals.⁶⁵ Another example of Bastet in a mother with kittens form is, *Cat with Kittens Amulet*, made of faience from 1070-664 BCE (Fig. 26). This piece combines common elements associated with Bastet as mentioned earlier, including an alert, seated posture of a domesticated cat, an uraeus on top of the head, and a loop on the back of the mother cat for the piece to act as an amulet. It is a small piece, not even two inches tall, and it shows an adult female

cat, seated upright and alert, protecting four small, seated kittens underneath her two front legs. By having Bastet depicted with kittens, it shows her nurturing side, protection over offspring, fertility, as well as ensuring her status as a divine mother to the kings. From contemporary scholar Alleyn Diesel, he commented on why Bastet was a common goddess as well as a reasoning for the iconography of a domesticated cat.

Bastet reflected the sexual energy and fecundity of the female cat, and its procreative functions, which increased her popularity, frequently appealed to for help with human problems. Like other goddesses linked with cats, she was particularly associated with conception and birth, and appealed to women for protection at these times in their lives.⁶⁶

When Alexander the Great officially took over Egypt in 332 BCE, a gradual transfer of beliefs and ideas flowed from Egypt to the Greco-Roman world, and vice versa.⁶⁷ One of these beliefs was the worship of Bastet. There were many similarities between Bastet and the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana in Roman mythology), therefore the two were commonly associated with one another and often their names were used interchangeably. In the quote mentioned previously from Herodotus, he states that Bastet's temple in Bubastis belongs to Artemis, "Bubastis is especially prominent, where there is also a temple of Bubastis, a building most worthy of note. Other temples are greater and more costly, but none more pleasing to the eye than this. Bubastis is, in the Greek language, Artemis."⁶⁸ Artemis is the goddess of hunting, wilderness, animals, as well as women and children, which helped equate her to Bastet.⁶⁹ As these two goddesses shared similar characteristics and patron subjects, it allowed Bastet to continue to be present when a new culture came to replace the old one.



(fig. 25) Cat with Kittens, 664-30 BCE, Bronze and Wood, 2 3/8 x 3 7/16 x 1 15/16 in. The Brooklyn Museum of Art. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4036>.



(fig. 26) Cat with Kittens Amulet, 1070-664 BCE, Faience, 1 7/8 in. x 1.3 in. x 3.4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546247>

8. Conclusion

Bastet was looked towards for many things, including protection over women, children, and motherhood. Throughout her influence in ancient Egypt, her depictions softened from a wild lioness-headed woman, to that of a domesticated, seated cat. Bastet was crucial to every aspect of life of the average ancient Egyptian, as her worship encompassed various topics that were vital to everyday life. Through mummification, small statues and amulets, and incorporating her image into tombs, worshippers were able to gain the protection of the goddess as well as maintain equilibrium in their lives. As ancient Egyptian history came to an end, Bastet's iconography persisted through the depictions of Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunting and animals. Although the formal worshipping of cats in their connection to Bastet has come to a conclusion, cats are still highly valued today as beloved companions and hunters.

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