Fall 2013

The Lioness and the Kittycat: Egypt's Great Feline Goddesses, Sekhmet and Bastet

Kathryn Razavi-Shearer

University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Recommended Citation

Razavi-Shearer, Kathryn, "The Lioness and the Kittycat: Egypt's Great Feline Goddesses, Sekhmet and Bastet" (2013). Undergraduate Honors Theses. 556.

https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/556
The Lioness and the Kittycat: Egypt’s Great Feline Goddesses, Sekhmet and Bastet

Kathryn Razavi-Shearar

Department of Art and Art History

Primary Thesis Advisor
Elspeth Dusinberre, Department of Classics

Committee Members
Robert Nauman, Department of Art and Art History
Ben Teitelbaum, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures
Vicki Grove, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures

University of Colorado at Boulder
November 2013
Abstract

“The Lioness and the Kittycat: Egypt’s Great Feline Goddesses, Sekhmet and Bastet,” grows out of my abiding interest in Egypt and the powerful goddesses of antiquity. Originally fascinated by the connection between goddesses and lionesses in multiple cultures of the ancient Near East, I began investigating Sekhmet in detail. The duality of her nature — ferocious, protective — as described by many scholars intrigued me, particularly as it seemed to be less present in the more peaceable Bastet. This thesis draws on the visual and textual records of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period in Egypt, the times of the goddesses’ greatest popularity, to investigate the nature of Sekhmet and Bastet in detail. In contrast to previous scholarship, I demonstrate that Sekhmet was fundamentally powerful and bloodthirsty, that the so-called benevolent side of her nature should be understood as simply another ramification of her dangerous violence. Bastet, by contrast, emerges in this work as a joyful, protective, nurturing figure. Although some legends ascribe to her the killing of the evil serpent, Apophis, the vast majority of evidence points to a fully benign — even purring — being. These very different aspects of feline nature manifest in the two goddesses may well stem from the times of their respective significance: the New Kingdom, when Sekhmet reigned supreme, was a period of relative strength and stability in Egypt, while Bastet’s main period of importance came at a time when Egypt was in great turmoil. This is an entirely new recognition in Egyptology.
Introduction

The powerful goddesses of Egypt include two feline deities, whose cults flourished at different times. Sekhmet, the lioness goddess of power and destruction, was worshiped in particular during the height of the New Kingdom. Bastet, the cat goddess of protection and fertility, saw her worship reach its greatest popularity during the Third Intermediate Period. Each of these goddesses has been thought to share a dual nature, one both benign and violent — an interpretation that perhaps grows from observation of modern domestic cats. This thesis demonstrates that the nature of each goddess was much more singular than has previously been suggested, with a side to her actions and worship that so heavily outweighs the other as to render it almost nonexistent.

Originally fascinated by the connection between goddesses and lionesses in multiple cultures of the ancient Near East, I began investigating Sekhmet in detail. The duality of her nature — ferocious, protective — as described by many scholars intrigued me, particularly as it seemed to be less present in the more peaceable Bastet. This thesis draws on the visual and textual records of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period in Egypt, the times of the goddesses’ greatest popularity, to investigate the nature of Sekhmet and Bastet in detail. Thus the first section, a brief historical overview, emphasizes the reign of Amenhotep III, possibly Sekhmet’s most devout follower, and the Twenty-Second Dynasty, when Bastet’s cult began to attain international fame. The bulk of the thesis considers the goddesses, their renditions, their cults, their role in the Egyptian pantheon, and their natures overall. Thus the second section of the thesis concentrates solely on Sekhmet, while the third investigates Bastet.
In contrast to previous scholarship, I demonstrate that Sekhmet was fundamentally powerful and bloodthirsty, that the so-called benevolent side of her nature should be understood as simply another ramification of her dangerous violence. Bastet, by contrast, emerges in this work as a joyful, protective, nurturing figure. Although some legends ascribe to her the killing of the evil serpent, Apophis, the vast majority of evidence points to a fully benign — even purring — being. These very different aspects of feline nature manifest in the two goddesses may well stem from the times of their respective significance: the New Kingdom, when Sekhmet reigned supreme, was a period of relative strength and stability in Egypt, while Bastet’s main period of importance came at a time when Egypt was in great turmoil.
The goddesses associated with felines in ancient Egypt are vast in number and exist in every period of ancient Egyptian history. However, two of these goddess have been chosen most frequently by scholars as representatives of the feline goddesses of ancient Egypt: Sekhmet and Bastet. This is in part because we have large amounts of material evidence related to these two goddesses in the form of texts and visual representations. It is also due to their popularity in ancient Egypt. I have chosen to focus on these two goddesses for these reasons, but also and particularly because they embody

---

1 http://lw.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/research/Publications/fall2002/individual.html
characteristics that are repeatedly found in association with the feline goddesses of ancient Egypt. In this work, I will investigate the societal, cultural, and religious associations of Sekhmet and Bastet, while focusing intensively on their visual representations.

Although Ancient Egypt has a history ranging from prehistory to the Romans, I have chosen to concentrate specifically on two periods in Egypt: the New Kingdom under Amenhotep III and the Third Intermediate Period. The reason for focusing on these rather miniscule slices of Egyptian history is due to the importance of these periods for the study of Sekhmet and Bastet. Although I think further scholarly exploration of Sekhmet’s and Bastet’s appearance in other time periods would prove greatly beneficial, I believe that my focused investigation of their imagery in the time periods when they were at the height of their power as deities and when the most representations of them were created will prove to be an important contribution to the field.

The majority of our material representations of Sekhmet come from the reign of Amenhotep III, and the value of looking at the specific socio-historical conditions under which these images were made is unmatched. We cannot take these objects out of the

2 See Appendix for a layout of the history of Egypt
3 I could have chosen to explore other time periods in which Sekhmet and Bastet were present. However, I decided to look specifically at Amenhotep III’s reign and the Third Intermediate Period so that I could give thorough attention to the subject at hand. Exploring multiple periods where Sekhmet and Bastet were not as central of deities as they were under Amenhotep III and in the Third Intermediate Period, respectively, would distract from my intent of an in-depth exploration the visual imagery of Sekhmet and Bastet in the context in which they were created. Although I think further scholarly exploration of Sekhmet’s and Bastet’s appearance in other time periods would prove greatly beneficial, I believe that my focused investigation of their imagery in the time periods when they were at height of their power as deities and the most representations of them were created will prove to be an important contribution to the field.
context in which they were made, and although Sekhmet was existent before Amenhotep III, her power as a deity increased dramatically under his reign.

Bastet’s period of pre-eminence was much later than Sekhmet’s. During the Third Intermediate Period under the Twenty-second Dynasty, Bubastis (Bastet’s cult center) became the capital of the kingdom, and Bastet became a national deity. During the Third Intermediate Period Bastet went from being a small location-based goddess to being a dominant deity throughout the kingdom. As a result much of the visual imagery we have of Bastet dates to this time. It is essential to look at the socio-historical conditions of this period so that we can understand the context in which Bastet’s popularity emerged.

One previous model of investigating these goddesses takes a single image and considers it in tremendous detail. Thus, “A Seated Statue of Sekhmet and Two Related Sculptures in the Collection of the San Antonio Museum of Art” by Gerry D. Scott, III from the American Research Center in Egypt, considers a particular statue of the goddess and seeks to contextualize it visually. However, intense scholarly research of this form has been done multiple times. Also, this particular form of study would not prove pertinent to my exploration of the similarities and differences between Sekhmet and Bastet due to the fact that these similarities and differences come in the form of multiple media, including statues, reliefs, engravings, amulets, and ritual instruments. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the socio-historical context of Amenhotep III’s reign and the Third Intermediate Period as well as exploring multiple forms of visual representations of Sekhmet and Bastet due to its relevance to my thesis. This creates a liminal way of study. It is not so broad as to explore every period that Sekhmet and Bastet appear, but it is not

4 Guirand 1965: 104
so focused that it only explores one image or even one type of image. In doing this I hope to provide a contribution to scholarly study which both scholars and people unfamiliar with the field can find insightful and captivating.

Many of the works written for people outside of Egyptology, archaeology, anthropology, art history and other related fields are overviews, which often brush over or even fully omit relevant information. However, a focused look at one statue of Sekhmet can cause those who are not within the field immense boredom. To try to remedy this divide between layman overview and scholar needlepoint focus, I explore multiple forms of representation so that those unfamiliar with the field can get a taste of the delicious variety of visual representation and avoid utter boredom. However, I do so within a specific time period so that I do not sacrifice the complexity of the subject matter and can give this topic the in-depth examination it deserves. In so doing, I believe that this gap between the literature read by scholars in the field and those without a background in the subject matter can begin to be bridged so that we can better communicate with one another, creating a more informed society as a whole.

The New Kingdom

During the New Kingdom under King Amenhotep III of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Egypt was wealthy, peaceful, and held powerful influence over the rest of the ancient world; these socio-historical factors allowed for the completion and construction of a variety of royal monuments.\(^5\) Amenhotep III ruled both Upper and Lower Egypt from

---

\(^5\) Shaw 2000: 260
During this time Egypt was wealthy and harvests yielded plentiful grain. One thousand years later, he was remembered “as a fertility god, associated with agricultural bounty.”

Amenhotep III’s reign was a period of peace and affluence. Only Nubia was subjected to a campaign during his rule. All other international relations under Amenhotep III were handled through diplomatic missions. His reign was a high point of Egypt’s influence in the ancient world, and it was the culmination of activities by his predecessors of the 18th Dynasty. All of these factors allowed for Amenhotep III to construct royal monuments on an almost incomparable scale. He left behind shrines, statues, and tombs that rivaled those of former rulers. Amenhotep III’s reign was a period in history when a unified Egypt enjoyed wealth, a peaceful home front, and powerful influence providing Egypt with the milieu for creating a vast array of monuments.

The Third Intermediate Period

The Third Intermediate Period, comprising the 21st to the 25th Dynasties (1069-664 B.C.E.), marks a new phase in Egypt’s history when a decentralization of the government and re-emergence of local centers of power took place. In the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, Egypt witnessed major political upheaval and a weakening of the economy as military action failed to re-establish Egyptian authority in Nubia, and as control over the resources of the southlands, such as gold mines and trade in the products of sub-Saharan Africa, was lost. An influx of Libyans and Nubians permanently

---

6 Shaw 2000: 481
7 Shaw 2000: 260
8 The information in the following paragraph is drawn from Shaw 2000: 260-268.
9 The information in this paragraph is drawn from Shaw 2000: 330-345.
altered the profile of Egypt’s population, while Egypt’s influence and contact with the outside world was greatly reduced.

The political fragmentation during the Third Intermediate Period was a consequence of major changes in the Egyptian government, which distinguishes the Third Intermediate Period from the New Kingdom. The authority and prestige of the king was weakened while Libyan chiefs remained in powerful positions. The government had become a theocracy, where supreme political authority was being vested in the god Amun. Furthermore, the king’s policy of granting exceptional powers to provincial rulers and kinsmen created a movement toward regional independence and caused tension over access and control of economic resources. Another royal policy that weakened the king was one that permitted positions in the military, clergy, and bureaucracy to become hereditary benefices of provincial families. It only took a moment for these families to realize that intermarriage with other office-holding clans would make them powerful. This led to the provincial centers of Egypt falling under the control of powerful local elites. Now the actual officials of the centralized government only held local influence. These conditions resulted in independent regional centers and an increase in collateral dynasties.

This process of decentralization was most noticeable in the Delta. Here Libyan chiefs gained control of several provincial centers, some of which “eventually eclipsed the pre-eminence of the 22nd Dynasty.” The 22nd Dynasty itself ultimately lost influence except for “a small area focused around Tanis and Bubastis.”

---

10 The information in the following paragraph is drawn from Shaw 2000: 330-345
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Although the Delta contains the most marked example of this decentralization of the government through strengthening local rulers’ power base, it was occurring in both Upper and Lower Egypt.\textsuperscript{13} During the Third Intermediate Period a north-south divide existed. The north was almost completely controlled by Libyans, while the Egyptians ruled the south. “The semi-autonomous status of centers such as Bubastis was probably established during the early phase of Libyan settlement, and was retained throughout the succeeding centuries.” \textsuperscript{14} Overall, the Third Intermediate Period was stable, but many changes occurred whose effects were permanent and “played a crucial role in shaping the Egypt of the later first millennium B.C.E..”\textsuperscript{15}

This brief overview of the historical and political makeup of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period provides a backdrop for our understanding of the emergence of Sekhmet’s and Bastet’s cults. During the New Kingdom, the period when Sekhmet saw her greatest influence, the Egyptian political system was dominated by a single pharaoh with tremendous world powers. Sekhmet’s greatest devotee, Amenhotep III, reigned during a time of relative peace and great prosperity. Yet he seems to have been plagued by personal anxiety and internal tumult, as will become clear. It is due to his personal influence, it seems, that Sekhmet took on such great importance during this time. The Third Intermediate Period, by contrast, was one of division and unrest in Egypt. Bastet’s cult rose to significance during a period of great internal uncertainty and turmoil in Egypt, a period that decisively ended the great kingdoms of Egyptian supremacy and

\textsuperscript{13} Shaw 2000: 245-246
\textsuperscript{14} Shaw 2000: 345
\textsuperscript{15} Shaw 2000: 330
opened the way to ongoing external domination by the Assyrians, the Persians, and eventually the Romans.
Sekhmet

Sekhmet and the precinct of Mut at Karnak

Amenhotep III of the Eighteenth Dynasty (reigned 1391-1353 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{16}) dedicated what was originally 730 statues of the lioness-goddess Sekhmet near Luxor: 365 standing and 365 sitting (two for each day of the year)\textsuperscript{17} in the temple precinct of the goddess Mut at Karnak (figures 3-5, 7-10). Nearly 600 of these statues survive, and they average around two meters in height. The statues are believed to have been “the embodiment in stone of a litany invoking Sekhmet…not to unleash her dreadful powers against the king and Egypt.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Roaf 1990: 132
\textsuperscript{17} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid: This belief is in part due to the epithets inscribed on the statues. These inscriptions reference her multiple manifestations, which seem to try to appease Sekhmet in all of her names. It seems that Amenhotep III was trying to cover all of his bases so as not to bring the ill will of Sekhmet upon himself or on his kingdom. This belief is also due to the prevalence of Sekhmet appeasement rituals.
The location of these statues, the temple precinct of Mut at Karnak, had links to Sekhmet even before Amenhotep III came into power. An earlier statue of Hapuseneb, vizier of Hatshepsut was discovered at this site, and Sekhmet was one of the deities invoked on it. Furthermore, the precinct also contains a sacred lake associated with Sekhmet and other leonine goddesses, called Isheru. The lake Isheru was considered, at the time of Amenhotep III, as the place to which Sekhmet returned after going on a

---

19 http://www.touregypt.net/karnak.htm
20 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140 - Mut was a mother goddess with ties to kingship and to the Eye of Ra. Capel and Markoe 1996: 128-129
21 The word “Isheru” was an ancient term for a lake with leonine goddess associations.
bloodthirsty rampage, and “within which she is appeased.” This understanding of the historical background for the location of these statues reinforces the notion that the images served to appease Sekhmet and keep her from unleashing her wrath upon humans.

This idea is further supported by the relief found at the front entrance of the Mut temple precinct (figure 1), which depicts a king playing a sistrum (a ritual rattle) for Mut and Sekhmet. Sistra were used for ritual song and dance, but also for appeasing dangerous deities. When a king is depicted playing a sistrum in front of Sekhmet, it is indicative of an appeasement ritual. This interpretation is further supported by the inscription on the relief at the temple of Mut, which reads: (the king is the speaker here) “I am the perfect sistrum player for the Golden Lady, who pacifies the heart of my mistress every day.”

---

22 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Many of the images of Sekhmet that survive today are from this temple precinct. The location and the associations that come with the site of these statues, as well as the statues function itself, point to a goddess who was both powerful and dangerous, one deserving of appeasement. However, the ancient Egyptian lioness-goddess Sekhmet possessed a dual nature. One side of her persona was her powerful, dangerous, destructive, vengeful, aggressive nature. The other, lesser, side of Sekhmet connected her to notions of healing and protection.

---

25 Capel and Markoe 1996: 135
The Nature of Sekhmet

Although I originally believed that Sekhmet had a purely benevolent side, after much research, I have come to agree with numerous scholars that she is a primarily violent goddess.  

Interestingly, most scholars do acknowledge Sekhmet’s few benevolent aspects and seem to consider them as purely kindly, albeit minor. The more I researched these minor benign characteristics of Sekhmet, however, the more I came to realize that they emerge out of the context of her as a powerful, violent, and dangerous goddess. I have come to recognize that these minor characteristics do not point to a benign side of Sekhmet, as suggested by most scholars, but rather reinforce her nature as a powerful, violent, and dangerous goddess. I have chosen to argue this point by examining both texts about and images of Sekhmet. This is due to the fact that the meanings of iconographical representations are often confirmed by textual evidence, which serve to reaffirm their relevance. Indeed Sekhmet’s name in hieroglyphs (figure 2) translates to the feminine form of “The Powerful,” an idea that is reinforced by the ways in which she was depicted.

---

26 Examples of scholars with this view include but are not limited to: Robert Armour, Serge Sauneron, Nigel and Helen Strudwick, John L. Foster, Félix Guirand, Barbara Watterson, and Anne K. Capel and Glenn Markoe

27 Robert Armour is an example of such a scholar.

28 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
Figure 2²⁹ Sekhmet in hieroglyphs

*Iconography of Sekhmet: Sculpture*

Sekhmet’s representation in ancient Egyptian art can be broken down into two categories: iconography related to her dangerous nature and that related to her benevolent nature (table 1). It is of the utmost importance to remember that these categories are fluid and arbitrary. However, for the purposes of this argument, this format provides an organized mode for analyzing these characteristics in an attempt to explain how they all illustrate and reinforce Sekhmet’s dominant persona. I have chosen to categorize in this manner rather than by time period because the majority of the visual evidence used in this paper comes from the reign of Amenhotep III, 1391-1353 B.C.E., during the New Kingdom in Egypt.³⁰ This allows me to not worry so much about changes over time, but rather focus on the iconography at hand. It is also noteworthy that “Sekhmet” can also be spelled “Sakhmet” and variation in the spelling of Egyptian names does occur in different translations.

²⁹ Hart 2005: 138
³⁰ Roaf 1990: 132
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Iconography related to Sekhmet’s dangerous nature (powerful, violent, and dangerous)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ia. Hieroglyphic name - powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ib. cobra (<em>uraeus</em>) and solar disk – destruction, violence, power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ic. Lioness head- violence, power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Id. Dress- violence, power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. Iconography related to Sekhmet’s benevolent nature (healing and protection)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IIa. Sign of life (<em>ankh</em>) – healing (because she is a bringer of illness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIb. Papyrus Scepter – protection through violent means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIc. Nursing a king or god – protection through violent means</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sekhmet was represented in two major forms: seated and standing. She was a composite theriomorphic-anthropomorphic goddess with a lioness head and a human woman’s body. As in much of Egyptian art, a striated lappet wig conceals the transition between her animal head and her human body. The wig was worn by gods, goddesses, both male and female noble dead, and by living mortal women prior to and after Amenhotep III’s reign. Sekhmet’s lioness face is surrounded by what is known as the leonine ruff, represented through patterned geometric incisions in the stone that create the stylized appearance of fur surrounding the face. Carved geometric details also appear on the ears and the lappet wig. The leonine ruff tends to stop once it creeps up under her rounded ears.

---

31 The information in this paragraph is drawn from Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140. They define theriomorphic-anthropomorphic as, “An image that associates or identifies its subject with other-than-human and may convey more specific messages. The most common type has a “human” body and an animal head.”
Centered between her ears is usually a cobra attached to a sun disk. The sun disk extends behind her ears and the diameter is larger than her head. Her muzzle tends to be rounded, and the division of the mouth and whiskers was incised. Her eyes are often clearly outlined through carving, and sometimes her tear ducts are visible. She may or may not be shown wearing an *usekh*, (a broad beaded collar) around her neck, which generally covers part of her chest as well. The collar is often incised so that it appears that there are “rows of dates, papyrus blossoms, leaves, and lotus blossoms.” Living Egyptian men and women also wore this type of collar.

Figure 3 Right: Statue of Sekhmet in seated position, in the Mut precinct at Karnak crowned with the headdress consisting of both the sun disc and *uraeus*. 18th Dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.).

Figure 4 Left: Head of a statue of the lioness goddess Sekhmet, with fragmented sun disk and *uraeus* headdress. Granite, Temple of Mut at Karnak, 18th Dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.). Vatican Museums.

---

32 Scott 2008: 227
33 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
34 Capel and Markoe 1996: 135
Sekhmet is usually clothed in a tight-fitting sheath dress with shoulder straps.\textsuperscript{36} The dress ends just above the ankles, and in some well-preserved images, anklets represented by incised bands are visible. The shoulder straps of the dress often extend over her breasts and were sometimes decorated with floral motifs or rosettes. One rosette was centered on each strap in such a way that they covered the nipples of the goddess.\textsuperscript{37} When statues with this sort of detailing are found, they are often assumed to be from one of “the best sculptural workshops of the reign.”\textsuperscript{38} This belief is in part founded in the observation that such details “have a partial prototype in the rosettes over the breasts on a sculpture of Thutmose IV’s mother.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Sekhmet’s Headdress: Sun Disk and Uraeus}

The majority of surviving images of Sekhmet show her wearing a headdress consisting of a solar disk and a cobra rearing back into a striking position (\textit{uraeus}) (figures 3-10). It is beneficial to examine the various elements of Sekhmet’s headdress individually, as well as their meaning when they are combined. Multiple layers of information are unearthed in this manner, and their implications are more fully understood.

\textsuperscript{36} Scott 2008: 223-224
\textsuperscript{37} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
The sun disk which crowns Sekhmet’s head in so many of her representations takes the form of a round, smooth disk (figures 3-10). The solar disk is generally larger than Sekhmet’s actual head, and because it extends beyond the rest of the statue it is sometimes fragmented, lost, or stolen (figures 2, 3-5, 11). However, even on statues where the solar disk is completely missing (figure 11), there is usually a deep slot where the solar disk would have been attached to the head.\textsuperscript{40}

The sun disk connects her to her father, the sun god Ra who also wears the solar disk as part of his headdress. However, the solar disk when placed on Sekhmet’s head is

\textsuperscript{40} Scott 2008: 223
not referring to the nourishing warmth of the sun, as it could on Ra’s. Instead it alludes to the sun’s devastating power with which Sekhmet was associated.\textsuperscript{41} In the Book of the Dead, Sekhmet’s power was attributed “to her use of the sun’s heat and also associated her with the hot winds of heaven.”\textsuperscript{42} Other sources linked the scorching winds of the desert with her breath.\textsuperscript{43} It was reported that she used as a weapon the blistering heat of her body, which was allegedly drawn from the sun, and Sekhmet supposedly said of herself: “I am the fierce heat of the fire.”\textsuperscript{44} The solar disk, due to its placement on Sekhmet’s head, suggests all of these destructive associations with heat, fire, and the sun, reminding the viewer of her destructive power.\textsuperscript{45}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Armour 2001: 181
\item Armour 2001: 103
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Guirand 1965: 86 -She has been described as “the goddess of fire and symbolizes the devouring fury of the sun, a force to be considered in a desert land.”\textsuperscript{45}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Figure 6 Relief of Seated Sekhmet crowned with the solar disk and uraeus and holding ankh and papyrus scepter, provenance unknown.

The uraeus or cobra that makes up part of Sekhmet’s headdress (figures 3-11) was placed in a similar position on the head of her father; this creates a visual link between the goddess and Ra. Interestingly, Sekhmet was also believed to be the cobra crowning Ra’s head: “She was placed as the uraeus serpent on Ra’s brow, where she guarded the sun-god’s head and spat forth flames at his enemies.” This suggests Sekhmet’s role as the “Eye of Ra,” an identification that is further reinforced in the examination of her headdress as a whole. The Eye of Ra “was supposed to have

---

46 Guirand 1965: 103
47 Armour 2001: 104
48 Ions 1983: 104
49 Armour 2001: 104 - “In early Egyptian writing” Sekhmet “was often called the Eye of Ra,” and see also Watterson 1996: 172-173 – “Sekhmet was believed to be a manifestation of the enraged Eye of Re who devoured the enemies of the Sun God.”
represented the god when he was forced to take action against his enemies and was vindictive and fierce - the traditional evil eye.”\(^50\)

Due to the hieroglyph for the Eye of Ra, “we can assume that its power was derived from the combativeness of the *uraeus* and the heat of the sun,”\(^51\) two elements which are represented on Sekhmet’s headdress. Furthermore, the headdress combination of cobra and solar disk links her image to the famous episode when Sekhmet, on the orders of Ra, “wearing the solar disk and *uraeus* of her father…nearly destroyed mankind.”\(^52\) However, the solar disk and cobra not only remind the viewer of her connection to the vindictive quality of Ra, but also to Sekhmet’s uncontrollable power. For in this same episode, “Sekhmet attacked them (humans) with such fury that the sun-god, fearing the extermination of the human race, begged her to arrest the carnage. ‘By thy life’, she answered him, ‘when I slay men my heart rejoices’, and she refused to spare her victims.”\(^53\) Sekhmet’s own father could not convince her to stop the carnage he had ordered. Sekhmet becomes her own agent while wearing the *uraeus* and sun disk, and she becomes an uncontrollable force. The only way Ra could halt Sekhmet’s devastation was to “spread across the bloody battlefield seven thousand jugs containing a magic potion composed of beer and pomegranate juice. Sekhmet…mistook this red liquid for human blood and drank it so avidly that she became too drunk to continue the slaughter.”\(^54\)

\(^{50}\) Armour 2001: 104  
\(^{51}\) Ibid.  
\(^{52}\) Ions 1983: 104  
\(^{53}\) Guirand 1965: 101-102  
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
Serpent and Sun Disk: Celebrating Sekhmet

The serpent and sun disk remind the viewer of this episode when she nearly obliterated mankind; they recall her role as the Eye of Ra as well as her bloodthirsty nature and her ability to act on her own will. The fact that the Egyptian people would recognize the meaning behind Sekhmet’s image is illustrated by celebration of the annual “orgiastic drinking festivals” held in Sekhmet’s honor. The purpose of this yearly festival was not only to commemorate the near escape of the destruction of mankind, but more importantly to appease Sekhmet. It was believed that Ra had decreed “on that day there should be brewed in her honour as many jugs of the philtre as there were priestesses of the sun.” In addition, “the calendar of lucky and unlucky days carefully notes: ‘Hostile, hostile, hostile is the 12th Tybi. Avoid seeing a mouse on this day; for it is the day when Ra gave the order to Sekhmet.’” She has even been described as “the avenging goddess who had to be appeased to prevent the end of the world.” This episode of Sekhmet’s uncontrollable rage was deeply embedded in the calendar of the ancient Egyptians. Sekhmet’s uraeus and sun disk serve as visual reminders of her immense power and her role as the vindictive Eye of Ra.

---

55 Ions 1983: 104; Guirand 1965: 101-103
56 Ions 1983: 104; Guirand 1965: 101-103
57 Guirand 1965: 101-103
58 Ibid.
59 Strudwick 1999: 84
Figure 7 Statue of the lioness goddess Sekhmet in standing position, crowned with the solar disk and uraeus and holding the papyrus scepter. Granite, Karnak Temple of Mut, 18 Dynasty Reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.). Vatican Museums.

*Lioness and Goddess*

Underscoring the notion that Sekhmet’s image conveys danger and destruction, her head is always one of a lioness (figures 1, 3-12). It is known that “dangerous and destructive” are the “attributes…expressed by leonine forms and heads.”60 The association derived from tales like the “Destruction of Man” described above, but also from the observation of lionesses themselves.

60 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
Lionesses were known to migrate down from the desert to drink at water holes on the border of civilization; they were also known to prey on both cattle and people.\textsuperscript{61} The Isheru at the Mut Temple precinct would have served as an excellent watering hole for lionesses, creating yet another connection to this site and leonine goddesses like Sekhmet. An area attractive to lions would have been somewhere that the practice of appeasing lioness goddesses would have been pertinent.

Figure 8 Statue of the lioness goddess Sekhmet crowned with both the \textit{ureaus} and the sun disk and holding the papyrus scepter and ankh. Granite, Karnak Temple of Mut, 18 Dynasty Reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.). Vatican Museums.

\textsuperscript{61} Watterson 1996: 172-173
There were even sacred books in ancient Egypt that taught how to dispel lions, such as “(The book of) driving away lions.” The desire of the ancient Egyptians to get rid of lions was due to their dangerous nature and ability to kill humans. However, they were also admired (and feared) for their power. This is especially true for lionesses, due to the fact that they are the ones who hunt and kill with such grace and undisputable power. This raw power in lionesses observed by the ancient Egyptians was part of the reason that leonine goddesses like Sekhmet were associated with war.

Figure 9

Standing statue of Sekhmet crowned with the solar disk and uraeus headdress and holding papyrus scepter and ankh. Granite, Karnak Temple of Ptah, 18 Dynasty Reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.).

---

62 Sauneron 2000: 132-135
63 Capel and Markoe 1996: 70
64 Watterson 1996: 173 - “Black granite statue in its shrine in the Temple of Ptah, Karnak. The statue is lit from above through an opening in the roof but is otherwise in darkness. Among local people, the statue has a reputation of evil. One story tells of how, at some unspecified time in the past, seven boys (seven is a magical number to the Egyptians) who were employed on an archaeological excavation as basket boys to remove rubble
Numerous Egyptian leonine goddesses express the fury and power to obliterate for “image and name combine in every instance to form a differently nuanced expression of one central theme, the protective power of dangerous force.”\textsuperscript{65} This protective power should not be taken for granted, for “Sekhmet could also attack what she should protect and, according to myth, once abandoned Egypt, refusing to return until pacified by the gods.”\textsuperscript{66} Sekhmet’s wrath was something that ancient Egyptians - pharaoh, priest, and common people alike - feared greatly. Sekhmet’s lioness head visually links her to ancient Egyptian lion and leonine goddess associations with danger, destruction, and war; these links are further supported by textual evidence.

\textsuperscript{64} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
Figure 10 Viewer left and second on viewer right: statues of the lioness goddess Sekhmet in standing position, crowned with the sun disk and uraeus combination headdress and also holding both the ankh and the papyrus scepter. Granite, Karnak Temple of Mut, 18 Dynasty Reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.). Vatican Museums.

_Egyptian Dress of Fire and Blood_

Sekhmet’s dress would have originally been painted.⁶⁷ It is unfortunate that time has worn away the paint; however, when traces of the paint on Sekhmet’s garment are preserved, we can see that it was painted red. This is supported by one of her titles: “lady of bright red linen.”⁶⁸ The choice of color has multiple meanings. It is the color of her homeland: Lower Egypt.⁶⁹ However, a secondary meaning also exists. It is believed that

---

⁶⁷ Scott 2008: 224; Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
⁶⁸ Hart 2005: 138-139  
⁶⁹ Ibid.
the color of her dress is a reference to “the blood-soaked garments of her enemies.”\footnote{Ibid.} This reinforces her origins, and more importantly, her war-oriented and bloodthirsty nature. Also, when the straps of her dress were detailed with rosettes, they connected her to lions because the rosette pattern placed over the nipples was “an ancient leonine motif that can be traced to observation of the shoulder-knot hairs on lions”\footnote{Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140; Hart 2005: 138} (figure 11).

Figure 11\footnote{Capel and Markoe 1996: 134} Fragment of a statue of Sekhmet, which exhibits rosettes over the nipples of the goddess. Unfortunately her headdress has been lost or stolen. Granite, Karnak Temple of Mut, 18 Dynasty Reign of Amenhotep III (1391-1353 B.C.E.).
Power and Violence

Robert Armour, the author of *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, could not have summed up Sekhmet’s ferocious aspect better: “depicted with the body of a woman and the head of a lioness…her headpiece consisted of a solar disk, which associated her with the sun god, and a uraeus (or cobra), and she was often dressed in red. Her physical description and her name, which meant, ‘to be strong, mighty, violent,’ reflected her character: she was renowned for her violence and power.”

A Lighter Side? Sekhmet’s Dubious Benevolence

Sekhmet’s benevolent nature appears in the form of the papyrus scepter she sometimes holds (the “heraldic plant” of her homeland, Lower Egypt), the ancient Egyptian symbol of life called the *ankh*, and in images of her breastfeeding the king or a god. The papyrus scepter (figures 6-10, 12) was “long associated with goddesses and with ideas of protection and renewal.” When Sekhmet is holding this scepter, it connects her to these notions. However, those statues that depict her holding a papyrus scepter have inscriptions that “emphasize her warlike aspect, e.g. ‘smiter of the Nubians’.” ‘Smiter of the Nubians’ might have been a positive title since the Amenhotep III had a military campaign in Nubia. However, her violent nature is reinforced by the text as well as her portrayal as a lion-headed goddess with burning solar disk and striking cobra.

---

73 Armour 2001: 181
74 Hart 2005: 138-139
75 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
76 Hart 2005: 138-139
Figure 12 Bronze inlaid with gold, silver and copper depicting a seated Sekhmet crowned with the solar disk and uraeus headdress and holding both the ankh and the papyrus scepter and a priest offering her gifts in an attempt to appease her. Provenance unknown.

Sekhmet as Bringer of, or Protector against, Disease

Sekhmet was linked to healing as is visible when she was depicted holding the sign of life (ankh) (figures 6–10, 12). This initially positive and kindly aspect to her nature is more complicated than it first seems, however. Sekhmet was known to “shoot seven arrows that wounded humanity” by causing disease. Sekhmet was the patroness for the formidable cohorts of demons who spread misfortune throughout the world. These demons were known as the “Emissaries of Sakhmet;” under her control they “wandered the earth, striking blindly and causing seasonal illnesses.” Sekhmet had the power to unleash her demons of pestilence and disease - but also, when it suited her, to recall them.

---

77 Guirand 1965:102
78 Armour 2001: 104
79 Traunecker 2001: 68-69
80 Ibid.
81 Scott 2008: 223
Due to her ability to summon the bringers of illness, Sekhmet became “linked to medicine and the healing arts.”

Texts like the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus attest to a methodical body of knowledge and rational practice of medicine within ancient Egypt.

However, a general belief that is still prevalent within rural areas of Upper Egypt today holds that diseases were sent by the ferocious goddess Sekhmet. For the common people of ancient Egypt and the countryside of modern Upper Egypt, it was more important to purge the evil demon from those suffering from diseases than to try to cure the physical cause of the illness. Sekhmet’s priest was famous for his knowledge of medicine in regards to both humans and animals.

In order to protect oneself from the attacks of these demons, it was necessary to name each of them and to win over the good will of their divine protectress: Sekhmet.

To appease Sekhmet, the Litanies of Sekhmet were recited within the walls of great temples to ensure the protection of the land. Laypeople had to make do with an amulet (figures 13-14) in the form of Sekhmet to keep her from bringing illness to them.
Figure 13\textsuperscript{85} Group of amulets from a woman’s burial. Number 3 is an example of a Sekhmet amulet. Faience, New Kingdom. Dimensions range: H. 1.9-2.5 cm; W. 1.3-1.9 cm.

Figure 14\textsuperscript{86} Assorted amulets favored by women. K, m, and l are examples of Sekhmet amulets. Faience, Provenance unknown. New Kingdom; dimensions range: H. 2.2-4.8 cm; W. 1.3-2.7 cm. Cincinnati Art Museum.

\textsuperscript{85} Capel and Markoe 1996: 74
\textsuperscript{86} Capel and Markoe 1996: 73
**Sekhmet as Protectress**

Sekhmet has also been linked to maternal concepts such as “powerful protection, as in a lioness protecting her young,”\(^\text{87}\) and this idea is conjured when she takes the form of a mother nursing a child king or god (figure 15). These images of Sekhmet are often found in the form of amulets and engravings. Sekhmet was associated with kings and gods, so it makes sense that she would be depicted with them. She “devoured the enemies of the Sun God,”\(^\text{88}\) Ra. She also violently protected Osiris, god of the underworld. Sekhmet proclaims, “I am the fierce heat of the fire for a distance of millions of cubits between Osiris and his enemy, and I keep away from him the evil ones and remove his foes from his habitation.”\(^\text{89}\) Sekhmet was also believed to accompany the king into battle and to help him slaughter his enemies.\(^\text{90}\) At times the king was even said to ‘rage like Sekhmet’ against his foes.\(^\text{91}\) Even if Sekhmet was protecting kings and gods, she did it in a way that followed her nature: by violent means.

\(^{87}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
\(^{88}\) Watterson 1996: 172-173  
\(^{89}\) Armour 2001: 103  
\(^{90}\) Armour 2001: 103; Watterson 1996: 172-173  
\(^{91}\) Watterson 1996: 172-173
Figure 15\textsuperscript{92} Sekhmet nursing king. Aegis (cultural ornament – “consisting of an usekh, a broad beaded collar, surmounted by the head of a deity…probably served as votive offerings or attachments to large-scale divine statuary”\textsuperscript{93}) and menat or counterpoise (“Like the aegis, the menat served a protective…function”\textsuperscript{94}). The Sekhmet image is engraved on the menat. Gold. Provenance unknown. Late New Kingdom early-Third Intermediate Period.

\textit{Sekhmet’s Contradictory Nature Reconciled: Violence Overall}

Sekhmet is still dangerous, even to those she helps. According to the Book of the Dead, Sekhmet’s “power was great enough not only to assist Osiris but at times to dominate even him.”\textsuperscript{95} As discussed earlier, she also chose to defy Ra and continue massacring the human race after being ordered not to.\textsuperscript{96} This caused Ra to decree appeasement for Sekhmet, to try to keep her from unleashing her powers again. Kings also feared Sekhmet, and they practiced appeasement rituals in her honor – in some cases

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{92} Capel and Markoe 1996: 136
\textsuperscript{93} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{95} Armour 2001: 104
\textsuperscript{96} Guirand 1965: 101-103
\end{flushleft}
honoring her in extravagant ways, like Amenhotep III’s 730 statues and also relief sculpture found in the Mut temple precinct at Karnak. Sekhmet’s seemingly benevolent characteristics only serve to underscore her fundamental nature as a dangerous, violent, and powerful being.

The site of the Mut Temple precinct had long been linked to Sekhmet and the appeasement of lioness goddesses, and Amenhotep III’s choice to place his statues of her at this location reinforces the notion that the images served to appease Sekhmet and keep her from unleashing her wrath upon humans. That power was considerable, as shown by Sekhmet’s name in hieroglyphs, as well as the uraeus and sun disk that crowned her head. Her headdress also served as a visual reminder of her uncontrollable power and her role as the vindictive and violent Eye of Ra. Sekhmet’s lioness head also links her to violence, destruction, danger and war, and these links are further supported by textual evidence. Even the blood red color of her dress also served to illustrate her violent, warring nature.

When a seemingly benevolent attribute accompanies Sekhmet, nonetheless her role as a dangerous deity is never forgotten. Even when Sekhmet is represented holding the papyrus scepter of protection, the engravings on the images emphasize her violent nature. Sekmet’s connection to healing, as illustrated through her occasional portrayal holding the ankh, emerges only from her role as commander of the demons of illness. When Sekhmet serves as a protector of kings or gods, as illustrated in images where she is shown breastfeeding them, she does so through brutal violence. She also has a history of overpowering and defying those she protects. All of this together demonstrates Sekhmet’s nature as a powerful, violent, dangerous, destructive, and warring goddess.
who was deserving of appeasement. Her ferocious nature was never forgotten even when she appeared to offer protection or healing.
Bastet, Goddess of the Delta

The ancient Egyptian feline goddess Bastet was originally a local deity of the Nile Delta. Her sacred site was located at Bast in Lower Egypt and became tremendously popular after the collapse of the New Kingdom (ca. 1085 B.C.E.). The name Bastet translates to ‘She-of-Bast,’ reinforcing a sense of the goddess’ initial role as a local deity. The main temple at Bast was known as Per-Bastet (House of Bastet). The Greek pronunciation of Per-Bastet and Bastet was Bubastis, and this became the name used for the site and the deity from the sixth century B.C.E. on. Today, Bubastis or Bast is known as Tell Basta. Bast was a strategically and economically important location throughout much of Egyptian history because it “controlled…routes from Memphis to Sinai, which in turn led to Western Asia.”

---

97 The information in this paragraph is drawn from Ions 1983: 100-101 and Watterson 1996: 201-203. Bast “lies some 60 km to the north-east of Cairo.”
98 Watterson 1996: 201-203 The fact that both the name of the place and the deity were the same in Greek caused some confusion for scholars, which has since been sorted out. Malek 1993: 73-111
99 Watterson 1996: 201-203
100 Ibid.
The names of the kings of the Twenty-second Dynasty suggest that they were ethnically Libyan, and peoples of Libyan ethnicity formed a large component of the Delta’s population. This seems to indicate that they lived in Bast or areas nearby. It was at this time, the period of Libyan domination of Egypt, that the female cat became viewed as a manifestation of the goddess Bastet.

---

101 http://www.landofpyramids.org/bastet.htm
102 http://ees.ac.uk/research/Tell%20Basta.html
103 http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/tellbasta.htm
104 Malek 1993: 94-95
Bastet soon was a particular favorite of the kings; she “became the great national divinity . . . with Sheshonk I and the . . . pharaohs of the Twenty-second Dynasty” (950-730 B.C.E). It was at this time when her cult center of Bast or Bubastis became the capital of the kingdom. The pharaohs of the Twenty-second Dynasty enriched the temples at Bast and even built a shrine to Bastet in Thebes. The goddess’ early image was “the wild variety of domesticated” cat, “which was admired for its virility, strength and agility.” She was soon connected with the sun-god Ra, who was sometimes known as the ‘Great Tomcat’ – indeed, she was said to be both his daughter and wife. Interestingly, one of the kings from the Twenty-second Dynasty was named Pamiu, ‘The Tomcat.’ His name links him to Ra, the ‘Great Tomcat.’ Elevating his local deity, the daughter of Ra, Bastet, surely also served to link this king to the divine.

Many of the extant material representations of Bastet come from the Third Intermediate Period, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on it despite the fact that Bastet remained popular from the time she became the local deity of the Libyans of the Twenty-second Dynasty to the Graeco-Roman period. The Third Intermediate Period is also sometimes called “Late Dynastic” and “Late Period,” and these terms may be used within this paper. A vast quantity of Bastet images date to the

---

105 Guirand 1965: 102-104  
106 Smith 1998: ix-x  
107 Guirand 1965: 102-104  
108 Ions 1983: 100-101  
109 Ibid.  
110 Ibid.  
111 Ions 1983: 100-101; Malek 1993: 82  
112 Malek 1993: 95  
113 Watterson 1996: 201-203
Third Intermediate Period due to the rise of the XXII Dynasty of Egyptian Kings who were local to her main center of worship.

*Bastet the Kindly, Playful, Fertile, and Protective*

Ancient Egyptian iconographical representations of the goddess Bastet from the Third Intermediate Period link her to notions of protection, fertility and motherhood, pleasure, music, and dance. These connections are further strengthened by textual evidence.

Bastet’s representation in ancient Egyptian art consistently relates to and emphasizes her benign nature (table 1).

*Table 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Iconography related to Bastet’s benevolent nature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>la. Hieroglyphic name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lb. Seated cat form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lc. Cat-headed woman form:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lca. Cat-headed woman holding a basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lcb. Cat-headed woman holding a sistrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lcc. Cat-headed woman holding an aegis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Id. Bastet with Kittens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le. Bastet sistrum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bastet’s name in hieroglyphs is written phonetically (Figure 1). Some scholars have surmised that this does not reveal much about her nature, although the employment of the hieroglyph of a sealed perfume or ointment jar may have been chosen to suggest the ritual purity associated with her cult. However, images of cats were found on jars such as these as well as other objects of daily use, and it seems they were believed to serve a protective quality.

---

113 Hart 2005: 45
114 The information on Bastet’s name and its connection to jars is drawn from Hart 2005: 45 and Malek 1993: 79.
Cat and Bastet

Ancient Egyptian representations of Bastet from the Third Intermediate Period depict her in multiple forms. She is sometimes represented as a seated domestic cat, either plain or bejeweled. Other times she is represented as a cat-headed woman. In these cases she is either holding “a sistrum or an aegis, consisting of a semi-circular breastplate surmounted with the head of a lioness.”\textsuperscript{115} In her other hand she would hold a basket.\textsuperscript{116} These images may or may not include kittens at her feet. Another representation of Bastet is found on sistra. Here, Bastet is depicted in the form of a domestic cat lounging on the arch of the sistrum, sometimes accompanied by kittens. Since all of her representations take the form of a domestic cat, it is pertinent to look at the domestic cat and its role in ancient Egypt.

The domesticated cat was introduced into Egypt from the west and the south around 2100 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{117} The ancient Egyptians perceived domestic cats as beneficial creatures. Cats eliminated vermin, such as mice, which otherwise would contaminate food and stored grain. Domestic cats also hunted and killed snakes, which the ancient Egyptians feared. This aspect of cats is highlighted in the myth of Bastet killing Ra’s enemy the snake of the underworld, Apophis. In earlier records, other domestic cat deities or demi-gods served this function. However, with the rise of the Libyan pharaohs resulting in Bastet as cat-deity \textit{par excellence}, she took on this role. Bastet became a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{115} Guirand 1965: 102-104  \\
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{117} The information in this paragraph is drawn from Watterson 1996: 201-203 and Malek 1993: 73-111. Medical texts that discuss cats include one that advises “to prevent mice from coming near things, put cat-grease on everything,” and others addressing snakebites and ways to prevent them.}
protector of the sun-god, but through her form as a domesticated cat in the Third Intermediate Period, her role as protector was further expanded.

Cats were believed to have “apotropaic (protective) qualities, which first brought them widespread respect and a prominent place in the personal religion of ordinary people.”\footnote{118} This notion continued and is found in representations of the goddess Bastet.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{Figure 2\textsuperscript{119} Left: “Pet cat: painting in the Theban tomb of May, harbor master in the Southern City, possibly in the reign of Thutmose III.”\textsuperscript{120}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Figure 3\textsuperscript{121} Right: “Hunting cat: painting in the Theban tomb of Menna, Scribe of the Royal Fields, possibly in the reign of Thutmose IV.”\textsuperscript{122}}
\end{figure}

\textit{Bastet as Protectress}

Many amulets show Bastet as a seated domestic cat. These serve as a reference to the cat’s apotropaic qualities and “would have provided round-the-clock protection

\begin{flushright}
\footnote{118} Malek 1993: 73
\footnote{119} Watterson 1996: 202
\footnote{120} \textit{Ibid.}
\footnote{121} Watterson 1996: 203
\footnote{122} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{flushright}
against the hazards of everyday life.”\(^{123}\) Bastet’s protective function is further shown in representations where she is holding a basket and/or an aegis. The basket imagery has its origins early in the New Kingdom: on an ivory knife dating to 1850 B.C.E., a group of protective creatures are incised.\(^{124}\) One of these creatures is a domestic cat, sitting on a basket. This connection between the basket and the cat provides an enhanced protective function, one that finds manifestation years later in images of Bastet holding a basket. Bastet is also represented holding an aegis, a cultic ornament “constituting of an usekh, a broad beaded collar, surmounted by the head of a deity.”\(^{125}\) Interestingly, the aegis when held by Bastet is usually topped by the head of Sekhmet.\(^{126}\) The aegis served as a protective ornament – and the combined powers of the two feline goddesses must have rendered its protection formidable.\(^{127}\)

Statuettes of Bastet in the form of a seated cat or a cat-headed woman - with or without kittens at her feet – might be used as gifts to Bastet herself.\(^{128}\) It was a common custom in late Egypt to present an image of Bastet “to commemorate a pilgrimage made on the occasion of a religious festival or as an expression of gratitude to the god for past favors or in expectation of such favors in the future.”\(^{129}\) This process was originally reserved for royalty; however, by the Third Intermediate Period, it had been modified so that this custom was available to ordinary people.\(^{130}\)

\(^{123}\) Malek 1993: 79  
\(^{124}\) Malek 1993: 78  
\(^{125}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
\(^{126}\) Malek 1993: 105  
\(^{127}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
\(^{128}\) Malek 1993: 100  
\(^{129}\) Ibid.  
\(^{130}\) Ibid.
When the statues of Bastet had pedestals, they tended to be in the shape of the *menat* or “counterpoise, with one end rounded and the other rectangular.”\(^{131}\) The *menat*, like the aegis, served a protective function.\(^{132}\) Representations of Bastet in the form of a domestic cat along with her attributes and textual documents thus comprehensively illustrate her function as protective deity.

---

**Figure 4**\(^{133}\) Left: Bronze seated Bastet statue. Provenance unknown.
**Figure 5**\(^{134}\) Right: Bronze statue of seated Bastet. Provenance unknown.

---

\(^{131}\) Malek 1993: 100-101
\(^{132}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\(^{133}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 139
\(^{134}\) Guirand 1965: 13
Cats, Kittens, and the Joy of Sex

In addition to possessing apotropaic and benevolently protective powers, Bastet was also linked to fertility and motherhood. She “was known and revered for her procreative powers.” Amulets in the form of Bastet tend to date to the Late Dynastic period in Egypt. In their representations, she is often accompanied by kittens. These amulets were “almost certainly worn by women for their fertility-enhancing powers.” Bastet’s associations with motherhood even extend to the king, for in the Pyramid Texts

---

135 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
136 Capel and Markoe 1996: 70 - Egyptian men and women wore amulets for different magical purposes.
137 Ibid.
Bastet was invoked as the mother and nurse of the king.\textsuperscript{138} The image of a seated female domestic cat had long been associated in Egypt with the notion of fertility and sexuality in women.\textsuperscript{139} The proliferation of these fertility-related images as manifestations of Bastet in the uncertain and war-torn years of the Third Intermediate Period is probably linked to her association with fertility and sexuality.

Many votive offerings and amulets in the form of Bastet depict her accompanied by kittens, serving as an additional allusion to the goddess’s fecundity.\textsuperscript{140} Votive offerings as well as amulets work both to propitiate and to get something from the deity. The image of the female cat was a manifestation of the goddess Bastet and “the cat’s fertility, <and> apparently boundless nocturnal love-life” linked her to sexuality.\textsuperscript{141} Such frequent and noisy sex along with her protective, child-bearing, and nurturing nature all combined to create a goddess who was popularly beseeched for help with human problems relating to fertility and childbirth.\textsuperscript{142} The ways in which Bastet was depicted and the ways in which her images were used illustrate her function as a benign deity of fertility and motherhood.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Malek 1993: 97
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
Figure 8 Left: Assorted amulets favored by women. O and P are examples of Bastet amulets. Faience, Provenance unknown. New Kingdom; dimensions range: H. 2.2-4.8 cm; W. 1.3-2.7 cm. Cincinnati Art Museum.

Figure 9 Right: Bronze statue of Bastet holding sistrum in one hand, aegis in other, with kittens at her feet, provenance unknown.

Bastet is also connected to the pleasurable aspects of sexuality, as demonstrated by her annual festival. This festival took place northeast of modern Cairo at her sacred center Bast. When Herodotus visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C.E., he thought “there was no temple in Egypt that was a greater pleasure to look at than that of

---

143 Capel and Markoe 1996: 73
144 Guirand 1965: 104
145 Watterson 1996: 201-203
Bastet.” ¹⁴⁶ Bastet’s annual festival at Bubastis included song, dance, and uninhibited drinking. ¹⁴⁷ It was said to be a grand and jubilant festival full of buffoonery and pleasantry where everything was an excuse for jokes and masquerade. And it was wildly popular: Bastet’s festival was described by Herodotus as “the most important and best-attended festival” where the “devout came in hundreds of thousands from all over the country.” ¹⁴⁸

Ruins from the Temple of Bastet ¹⁴⁹

Moreover, Bastet’s worship was said to be orgiastic, a description that derives from Herodotus’ observation of female celebrants exposing themselves during the festival. ¹⁵⁰ Scholars cannot be sure what this act meant to the ancient Egyptians within the festival context; it may have been a reference to the sexual nature of the goddess or perhaps an expression of celebratory merriment. ¹⁵¹ Furthermore, since during her festival,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.
¹⁴⁸ Watterson 1996: 201-203 and Guirand 1965: 102-104
¹⁴⁹ http://www.panoramio.com/photo/20159291
¹⁵⁰ Watterson 1996: 201-203; Malek 1993: 98
¹⁵¹ Malek 1993: 98 – Mardi Gras and Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales serve as (more) modern examples of this type of celebratory merriment.
“more wine was drunk than during all the rest of the year,”\textsuperscript{152} it is perhaps unsurprising that sexuality would be in abundance. Records of Bastet’s annual festival coupled with her representation as a domestic cat illustrate her function as a goddess associated with sexual pleasure.

\textit{Living the Good Life}

Indeed, Bastet has been described altogether as “a goddess of pleasure.”\textsuperscript{153} As discussed above, her image as the seated domestic cat “was long associated with… sexuality in women.”\textsuperscript{154} Furthermore, the sexual aspect of Bastet’s festival fits into her association with motherhood and fertility, since sexuality and fertility lead to motherhood.

Bastet’s link to pleasure is also demonstrated by her connections to Hathor. “Like Hathor she was a goddess of pleasure and loved music and dance. She would beat time with the sistrum, often decorated with the figure of a cat, which she grasped in her hand.”\textsuperscript{155} Hathor is also referred to as “gracious or peaceful as Bastet.”\textsuperscript{156} These textual references link Hathor and Bastet in script, emphasizing their benign nature, but also their shared associations with pleasure, music, and dance.

Bastet and Hathor’s link to music and dance is further supported through visual evidence. Images of Bastet in her manifestation as a domestic cat were often placed on the arch of sistra the handles of which were commonly crowned with an image of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{152} Guirand 1965: 102-104
\bibitem{153} Armour 2001: 162
\bibitem{154} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\bibitem{155} Guirand 1965: 102-104
\bibitem{156} Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\end{thebibliography}
Hathor’s head (Figures 10-13). The iconography on the sistra served as a visual link between Bastet and Hathor, but it also connected Bastet to music and dance. Bastet’s association with music and dance is repeated in images of the goddess as a cat-headed woman holding a sistrum in her hand (Figure 9). Sistra were used to make music, and they provided the beat for dances during both rituals and celebrations.157 Bastet’s appearance on sistra connects her to Hathor, but more importantly illustrates her associations with music and dance.

157 Guirand 1965: 102-104
Figure 10 Left: Sistrum with Hathor head topped with Bastet reclining with her litter of kittens. Bronze; provenance unknown, possibly from Bubastis.
Figure 11 Right: Viewer left: Bronze statuette of Bastet, provenance unknown. Vatican Museums.
Center: Bronze sistrum topped with a reclining Bastet accompanied by kittens, provenance unknown. Vatican Museums.
Viewer right: Bronze sistrum topped with a reclining Bastet, provenance unknown. Vatican Museums.

---

158 Capel and Markoe 1996: 99
A Pussycat at Heart

A large number of images of Bastet date to the Third Intermediate Period due to the rise of the Pharaohs of the Twenty-second Dynasty who were native to her main cult center and who elevated her status during their reign. Bastet’s function as a protective deity is shown by her name in hieroglyphs, her manifestation as a domestic cat, her attributes, and textual evidence. Furthermore, the ways in which Bastet was represented
and the ways in which her images were used illustrate her function as a deity of fertility, motherhood, and sexuality; one who was often called upon for assistance by humans. Bastet’s links to sexuality also emphasize her capacity to rejoice in sexual pleasure as shown by records of her festival celebrations and by her representations as a domestic cat. This connection to pleasure extends into Bastet’s textual and visual links with the goddess Hathor, as well as her connections to music and dance. These latter are perhaps demonstrated most strongly in images where she is shown holding a sistrum. All of this together demonstrates Bastet’s multifaceted nature as a protective and apotropaic goddess, one who rejoiced in sexuality and pleasure, in the fertility that might result from it, and in music and dance. Hers was an entirely benevolent nature, one that rejoiced in and brought joy to her followers.
Conclusions

Lioness vs. Kitty: The Differing Natures and Functions of Egypt’s Feline Goddesses

The site of the Mut Temple precinct had long been linked to Sekhmet and the appeasement of lioness goddesses, and Amenhotep III’s choice to place his statues of her at this location in the Eighteenth Dynasty reinforces the notion that the images served to appease Sekhmet and keep her from unleashing her wrath upon humans. Years after Amenhotep III, during the Third Intermediate Period, the Pharaohs of the Twenty-second Dynasty elevated their local goddess Bastet to a deity of national importance, and it is from this period that many of her surviving images originate. The two goddesses shared a feline form but differed vastly in nature. While Bastet’s function as a protective deity is underscored by her name in hieroglyphs, Sekhmet’s hieroglyphic name emphasizes her immense power. Sekhmet’s manifestation as a lioness-headed goddess linked her to violence, destruction, danger and war; Bastet’s domestic cat form linked her to protection, fertility, motherhood, and sexuality.

Bastet was called upon for help from humans. By contrast, Sekhmet was worshipped through rituals whose purpose was to appease her so that she would not massacre humanity. While Bastet had apotropaic qualities, Sekhmet sent disease. Bastet’s festival was a jubilant celebration full of wine, music, and dancing. Sekhmet’s festival was also full of wine, but wine served to appease and intoxicate her so she could not kill off humanity as she had attempted before.

As has become clear, Sekhmet and Bastet express two sides of the same coin. The coin is a feline. On one side is the wild, dangerous, untamable lioness, who rejoiced in the blood of man. On the other is the tame, beneficent, sexual, domestic cat who rejoiced
in the pleasures of humanity. The great feline goddesses of Egypt share virtually none of the same characteristics, but together they express the contradictory, unpredictable, dangerous, loving, wonderful nature of the cat.
### Appendix

**Chronological Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dynasties</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PREHISTORIC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 4000 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predynastic: 4000-3200 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EARLY DYNASTIC</strong></td>
<td>Dynasty I: 3200-2980 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty II: 2980-2780 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Mention of a “Priest of Bastet” occurs on the fragment of an inscribed bowl dating to the Second Dynasty.”</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OLD KINGDOM</strong></td>
<td>Dynasty III: 2780-2680 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty IV: 2680-2565 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Pyramid Texts invoke Bastet as the “mother and nurse of the king.” She is, in fact, one of only two goddesses mentioned on Khafra’s valley temple at Giza.”</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty V: 2565-2420 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty VI: 2420-2258 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD</strong></td>
<td>Dynasty VII: Interregnum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty VIII: 2258-2232 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty IX: 2232-2140 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty X: 2140-2052 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MIDDLE KINGDOM</strong></td>
<td>Dynasty XI: 2134-1991 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty XII: 1991-1786 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD</strong></td>
<td>Dynasties XIII-XIV: 1786-1680 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasties XV-XVI: 1720-1570 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynasty XVII: 1600-1570 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEW KINGDOM</strong></td>
<td>Dynasty XVIII: 1570-1314 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

159 Smith 1998: ix-x  
160 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
161 Smith 1998: ix-x  
162 Ibid.  
163 Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140  
164 Smith 1998: ix-x  
165 Bold added
King Amenhotep III of the 18th Dynasty commissioned some 730 life size statues of Sekhmet, both sitting and standing “for his mortuary temple on the West Bank at Thebes.”\(^{167}\)

Dynasty XIX: 1314-1197 B.C.E.\(^{168}\)
Dynasty XX: 1197-1085 B.C.E.

**THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD**\(^{169}\)

Dynasty XXI: 1085-950 B.C.E.
Dynasty XXII (Bubastite): 950-730 B.C.E.

“It was… in this general period of time that Bastet is first known to have been represented as a cat.”\(^{170}\)

Bastet “became the great national divinity when, about 950 B.C.E., with Sheshonk and the Libyan pharaohs of the Twenty-second Dynasty, Bubastis became the capital of the kingdom.”\(^{171}\)

“The popularity of Bastet, which never abated from the time when she rose to importance as the local deity of the kings of Dynasty XXII to the Graeco-Roman period.”\(^{172}\)

Dynasty XXIII: 817(?) - 730 B.C.E.\(^{173}\)
Dynasty XXIV: 730 - 715 B.C.E.
Dynasty XXV: 730 - 656 B.C.E.

Assyrian invasion:
Esarhaddon captures Memphis: 671 B.C.E.
Ashurbanipal sacks Thebes: 663 B.C.E.

**SAITE PERIOD**

Dynasty XXVI: 664-525 B.C.E.
Persian invasion under Cambyses: 525 B.C.E.

**LATE PERIOD**

Dynasty XXVII: First Persian Domination: 525-404 B.C.E.
Dynasties XXVIII-XXIX: 404-378 B.C.E.
6 kings maintain independence against Persia
Dynasty XXX: 378-341 B.C.E.
Dynasty XXXI: Second Persian Domination: 341-332 B.C.E.
Conquest of Alexander: 332 B.C.E.

**PTOLEMAIC PERIOD**: 332-30 B.C.E.
Roman occupation of Egypt: 30 B.C.E.\(^{174}\)

\(^{166}\) Smith 1998: ix-x
\(^{167}\) Scott 2008: 223
\(^{168}\) Smith 1998: ix-x
\(^{169}\) Bold added
\(^{170}\) Capel and Markoe 1996: 134-140
\(^{171}\) Guirand 1965: 102-104
\(^{172}\) Watterson 1996: 201-203
\(^{173}\) Smith 1998: ix-x
\(^{174}\)
Bibliography


\[^{174}\text{Smith 1998: ix-x}\]


