

The Feline Tradition: From Goddess to Hellcat and Back

By Michael Orlando Yaccarino



I give thee every land in obeisance,
I give thee all power like Ra.

—Inscription upon the ancient
Egyptian feline sanctuary of
King Osorkon II, Bubastis

There are no ordinary cats.

—Collete

During the past few years, there has been a veritable media explosion of interest in the domestic cat. It is impossible to enter a local bookstore without being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of feline-related books—everything from cat massage manuals to instructions on kitten-juggling are readily available. Of course, all of this increased cat consciousness is effective in helping to maintain the continued respect and care deserved by the species and necessary for its survival. But hasn't all of this familiarity bred a de-mystification of the feline? It must be remembered that unlike any other creature of the animal kingdom, the history of the cat is intricately linked historically with the religious, mythologies and literature of the world. Most importantly, the figure of the cat has always been a living symbol of the unknown, of the mysterious and of the occult powers of the gods.

In ancient Egypt, it is known that the cat was domesticated, deified and later declined in favor during the approximate period 3500 BC - 100 BC. The gradual ascension to such an exalted seat in society was not achieved by appreciation of their outward pleasing aesthetic qualities alone. It first occurred through respect for their unequalled skills at protecting farmers' valuable crops from the ravages of snakes, vermin and rats. Initially brought into the Nile area by the Ethiopians, the cat flourished in this region until its exportation throughout Europe by the Phoenicians as a model of efficient pest-control which precipitated its fall from the heavens and, much later, into a hell of its own.

It is difficult to imagine just how significant a role the feline played in Egyptian society. One clue for modern civilization came about upon the discovery of a vast burial ground in Tel Beni-Hassan, Egypt during the mid-nineteenth century. Before the witless authorities destroyed the fascinating remains, literally thousands of embalmed cats were uncovered. Since that time, it has been learned that the wealthy and poor alike conducted elaborate death ceremonies for their most revered household guardians in this ancient civilization. These included public lamentation by the family, the administrations of a professional mortician, as well as the interment of mummified mice to feed the lost animal on its journey to the other side. It is understanda-

ble then that amongst such a feline loving people, the actual punishment for the slaying of a cat was death.

Still, in our time, cat-lover or not, one cannot escape the fascination and intensity seen in a cat's eyes. For the Egyptians, the changeable feline eye reflected the varying phases of the moon. For this reason, the cat has always been associated with all things lunar, occult and otherwise, which lead to its alliance with the gods. The resultant deity within Egyptian mythology was the goddess Bastet (also known as Bast or Pasht, the latter name possibly being later bastardized into the commonly used nickname "Puss"). The daughter of Isis (goddess of fecundity) and the sun-god Osiris, Bastet became a composite of their best features. Symbolic of procreation, she also represented sexuality, protection of the dead and productive farming.

In annual festivals, Bastet was appeased through orgiastic celebrations the purpose of which were to secure the future fertility of the people and their land. With time, though, the ban on the exportation of cats was eased and the feline was integrated into European communities. It may have been at this point that the feline became known as the "cat" for when the domesticated animal replaced the weasel as official vermin-hunter in Rome, it was referred to as "catta" from the Nubian term "kadis" as the weasel was before it.

Centuries later, the true dark age for the cat began when Pope Innocent VIII declared the animal anathema in 1484. The following feline apocalypse saw the fiendish extermination of thousands of cats which were slaughtered in the cruelest ways—including crucifixion. All, of course, executed in the name of protecting the one, true God's faithful from the demonic powers of a four-legged beast.

An unfortunate stratagem of Christian leaders in the medieval period (and one which is still utilized today) was the achievement of power through the debasement and intolerance of others' faiths. Even so, ironically, many of the venerated attributes of the pagan gods of the past were incorporated into those of the Church. Most relevant here are the filtering down of associations from the Egyptian goddesses to the figure of the Virgin Mary. It is curious to note the persistence of the legend that a kitten was born at the same moment Christ was within the manger—a scene depicted many times in religious paintings of the period.

By the time of the witch-craze, which gripped Western Europe in the 17th-century, the cat was perceived as a minion of Satan aiding the sorceress in wrecking havoc. It was during these black years that many of the harmful "old wives' tales" surrounding the cat were defined and used against the creature. For example, many feline's are quite fond of sleeping near the warmth of

since these are the very reasons why cat-lovers nurture a special bond with and greatly respect their animals.

To know a cat is to be in contact with a little piece of the heavens and the unknown. To love a cat is to share one's life with one of the most sacred creatures of the gods.

Michael Orlando Yaccarino is a freelance writer, interviewer, and photographer who has a life long fascination with the unusual. His work in genre film, music and the arts has appeared in numerous publications. This article has been inspired by and is dedicated to his favorite feline, Sharkey. Almost 8 years ago, she came into his life, an orphan found one fateful night near her mother and sibling on a snowy road.

This once near death creature has grown into a singular cat of considerable personality and warmth. Long may she live, the keeper of the mysteries.

