



THE CATS OF ANCIENT EGYPT.

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It has been said with truth that one of the greatest triumphs of human perseverance is the domestication of the cat. No tame animal has lost less of its native dignity or maintained more of its ancient reserve. The domestic cat might rebel to-morrow. We could not reach it for capture, nor beat it into submission. We could only kill it if it did not consent to be harmless and to make itself at home. Nothing but the experience of countless generations of cats that they would not be harmed by man, can have produced the result we now universally observe. Where and when did this taming of the least tamable of animals take place? The monuments of ancient Egypt enable us to answer the question.

In pre-historic times the religion of the Egyptians was pure and simple totemism. Probably in those days the inhabitants of Egypt were not united under any common government, but consisted of a number of small tribes or clans, each of one kindred. Every such clan or kindred had its totem. Totems are defined by Mr. Frazer, in his learned work on the subject, as "a class of material objects, which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation." The members of a totem clan commonly regard themselves as actually descended from the totem. If the totem (as is most frequently the case) is an animal, the savage will not, as a rule, kill nor eat it. On the contrary he venerates, and to the eyes of civilized men, appears to worship it, though of course the whole conception of worship only arises at a more advanced stage of human development than that to which totemism belongs.

The cat was the totem of some ancient Egyptian clan. Other clans venerated the bull, the crocodile, the hawk, the jackal, the cobra, the lizard, and so forth. Observation of existing totem tribes in Africa, Australia, and elsewhere, shows us that one or more representatives of the totem are often fed or even kept alive in captivity by the tribe. Thus Mr. Frazer tells us that "amongst the Narrinyeri in South Australia men of the snake clan sometimes catch snakes, pull out their teeth or sew up their mouths, and keep them as pets. In a pigeon clan of Samoa a pigeon was carefully kept and fed. Amongst the Kalang in Java, whose totem is the red dog, each family as a rule keeps one of these animals, which they will on no account allow to be struck or ill-used by any one." The ancient Egyptian cat clan doubtless treated cats as the Kalang treat red dogs.

But ancient Egypt did not remain for ever a disorganized assemblage of tribes. Thanks to warfare between clan and clan a nation was gradually welded together out of these savage units. In the main each clan settled down as a village. Some villages grew in importance, and became towns, dominating the surrounding districts. Now one town and now another (as the fortunes of war dictated) won the position of capital of the country. A victorious town tended to enforce universal respect for its particular totem. We conclude that at some time the cat tribe became the head of Egypt. At all events very early indeed the cat became a totem venerated all along the Nile. So also did the ibis, the hawk, the beetle, the asp, and other animals.

Cicero says that no one ever heard of an Egyptian killing a cat; the remark might be made at the present day with almost equal truth. Herodotus relates that, when a fire occurred in Egypt, the people's first idea was to save the cats and to prevent them from leaping into the flames. But though cats were thus universally venerated, an especial reverence was paid to them in certain places, and of these Bubastis (in the Delta) was chief. Likely enough that city may have been founded in the night of the past by the pre-historic cat clan.

Not only were cats preserved from injury, respected, and petted during life, but they were buried with honour and mourned when dead. Many a parallel may be found to this custom of the ancient Egyptians. For instance, in Samoa, to quote once more from Mr. Frazer, "if a man of the owl totem found a dead owl by the roadside, he would sit down and weep over it and beat his forehead with stones till the blood flowed. The bird would then be wrapped up and buried with as much ceremony as if it had been a human being." The Egyptians' idea of respectable burial implied preliminary mummification. According to their notion, a living man consisted of a body, a *ka*, or ghost, a *ba*, or soul, a shadow, and a "luminous." At death these component parts were broken up and set adrift. It was believed that some day all of them would come together again and there would be a resurrection; this however could only happen if all the parts were preserved. Some of them might be destroyed by command of the infernal powers; that of course could not be prevented by surviving relatives. They could only help to keep the *ka* going. This *ka*, or ghost, seems to have been the element in which the life was specially believed to reside. It was an impalpable double of the man's body; it was in fact the mediæval, or for that matter the modern, ghost. To keep it alive it had to be fed with the ghost of food, clothed in the ghost of clothing, and housed in the ghost of a house; it might be pleased and amused by the ghosts of luxuries and games, and served by the ghosts of slaves. The ingenuity of the ancient Egyptians may be measured by the fact that they found out how to supply the double with all these things.

But the ghost or double of a body (in ancient Egypt) had to have a material something to be the double of. The actual body was of course best; second best was an image of it made in some lasting substance. Hence arose mummification to preserve the body, and portrait sculpture to replace it if destroyed. In later times a wealthy Egyptian was often buried with no less than some hundreds of little images in the shape of a mummy, ticketed with his name, besides one or more really fine portrait statues of him. Such statues are called *ka* statues. If the mummy were destroyed the *ka* could still be kept in existence by means of them. A rich man was mummied in costly style, had many *ka* statues, and was buried in an elaborate tomb; a poor man was merely dipped in bitumen, rolled in a few yards of common stuff and hidden in the desert sand.

As with men, so with cats; they too had their *ka* and all the rest of it, and their *ka* had likewise to be kept from annihilation against the great day of resurrection of cats, crocodiles, and men. A rich man's cat was elaborately mummied, wound round and round with stuff and cunningly plaited over with linen ribbons dyed two different colours. His head was encased in a rough kind of *papier maché*, and that was covered with linen and painted, even gilt sometimes, the ears always carefully pricked up. The mummy might be inclosed in a bronze box with a bronze *ka* statue of the cat seated on the top. Even finer burial might await a particularly grand cat, as we shall presently see. A poor man's cat was rolled up in a simple lump, but the rolling was carefully and respectfully done, which is more than one can say about many a poor ancient Egyptian's body brought to light in these excavating days.

In very early times, that is to say anywhere from four to ten thousand years before Christ, the Egyptian cat was the straightforward totem we have described. It is only fair to say that in the historical period he occupied a more ambiguous position. The Egyptians were not the stationary people they are vulgarly believed to have been. They developed now and again, when circumstances were favourable; altogether they developed a good deal. Their religion occupied much of their time and a remarkable share of the attention of their most educated class. It was far from being an unchanging, stereotyped religion. It began as pure and simple totemism coupled with ancestor worship. Out of the totems gods developed, and as there were tribal and afterwards local totems so there came to be local gods. Each of these home-made gods (and some foreign importations too) had a sacred animal attached to him. This

animal was the totem he had supplanted. Out of the cats arose the goddess Pasht, the local goddess of the city which the Greeks called Bubastis, and whose modern successor we call Zagazig. Like the cats, the goddess Pasht came to be venerated all over Egypt. When the most important local gods (that is to say the gods of the most powerful cities) were united into a national Egyptian pantheon, Pasht was amongst the number.

A local god or goddess might be without any particular character, but what would be the use of a pantheon of gods all one like another? Of course differences were marked amongst them. One became god of agriculture, another of death, and so on. Pasht for her part was lady of love, and corresponded in a crude sort of way to that much nobler conception, the Aphrodite of the Greeks. She was represented as a woman with a cat's head. Another goddess, who can scarcely be differentiated from her, is the lion-headed Sekhet.

Egypt possessed many temples to one or other of these goddesses. First amongst them was the great temple of Bubastis, the ruins of which have so recently been laid bare. It was called by Herodotus the most pleasing of all the temples of Egypt. A festival of an exceedingly merry and immoral character was celebrated there to the yearly delight of thousands of Egyptians. Cat mummies and cat *ka* statues have been found in many parts of Egypt, but, till recently, ninety-nine out of a hundred of them came from Bubastis. In the summer of 1888 however an enormous find of cats was made near Beni-Hasan—a place some hundred miles or so south of Cairo and well-known for its wonderful rock-cut tombs. That an important cats' burying place would exist somewhere thereabouts might have been predicted from the fact that a rock-cut temple, the famous *Speos Artemidos*, exists in the immediate neighbourhood, and this temple was dedicated to Pasht. Cats must therefore have been specially venerated in the ancient city.

The plain on the east bank of the Nile at Beni-Hasan is about a mile wide. It is bounded by a range of precipitous hills. A flat-bottomed side valley opens eastward through the hills at this point. The traveller mounting his donkey at the modern village rides for about half a mile across cultivated land and for another half mile across desert, passing on the way first the modern human burying place and shortly afterwards the ancient cemetery of the cats. He then enters the side valley (whose steep walls and floor are barren as the moon) and after advancing up it about a quarter of a mile he finds the *façade* of the artificial cave temple, the *Speos Artemidos*, conspicuous at the base of the mountain on his right hand. It is the simplest conceivable piece of rock-cut architecture. The slope of the hill is squared up vertically for a front. An open portico consisting originally of two rows of four piers each is, with the roof which they support, cut out of the solid limestone rock. A short narrow passage leads thence straight into the hill to an oblong chamber. A raised niche cut in the far wall opposite the entrance was the actual shrine of the goddess. A figure of Pasht was sculptured on one side of this niche and another was painted on the other side. The temple was not improbably cut out of the hill in very ancient times, for it closely resembles the neighbouring Twelfth Dynasty tombs. Queen Hatasu (of the Eighteenth Dynasty) inscribed her name upon it, but her successor, Thothmes III., had it erased and his own substituted. Seti I., the father of Rameses II., added some decorative sculpture. Such was the home of the great cat of the district, for in all these temples a representative of the totem class was kept in honour. Doubtless the head cat of Pasht's temple was a very grand cat indeed. She would live a life of dignified luxury, and dying she would be buried with royal magnificence.

For three or four thousand years the cat mummies of Beni-Hasan lay undisturbed, awaiting the resurrection; now a resurrection has come to them, but other than they looked forward to. The archangel that heralded it was an Egyptian *fellah* from the neighbouring village. By some chance one day this genius dug a hole, somewhere in the level floor of the desert, and struck—cats! Not one or two here and there, but dozens, hundreds, hundreds of thousands, a layer of them, a stratum thicker than most coal seams, ten to twenty cats deep, mummy squeezed against mummy tight as herrings in a barrel. The discovery meant wealth for somebody, probably not the finder, but the head-man of the village. A systematic exploration of the seam was undertaken. The surface sand was stripped off and the cats were laid bare. All sorts and conditions of them then appeared—the commoner sort caked together in black lumps, out of which here a grinning face, there a furry paw, there a backbone or row

of ribs of some ancient puss, stood prominently forth. The better cats and kittens emerged in astonishing numbers, and with all their wrappings as fresh as if they had been put into the ground a week, and not thirty centuries before. Now and again an elaborately plaited mummy turned up; still more rarely one with a gilded face (of such I myself found three). As far as I can learn only three cat *ka* statues have as yet been found. Two of these are small bronze figures. The third is a life-size bronze, a hollow casting, inside which the actual cat was buried. One or more bronze statuettes of Osiris, god of the dead, were likewise (I believe) found among the cats.

The plundering of the cemetery was a sight to see, but one had to stand well to windward. All the village children came from day to day and provided themselves with the most attractive mummies they could find. These they took down to the river bank to sell for the smallest coin to passing travellers. Often they took to playing or fighting together with them on the way, and then the ancient fur began to fly as for three thousand years it had never been called upon to do. The path became strewn with mummy cloth and bits of cats' skulls and bones and fur in horrid profusion, and the wind blew the fragments about and carried the stink afar. This was only the illicit part of the business. The bulk of the old totems went another way. Some contractor came along and offered so much a pound for their bones to make into something—soap or tooth-powder, I dare say, or even black paint. So men went systematically to work, peeled cat after cat of its wrappings, stripped off the brittle fur, and piled the bones in black heaps a yard or more high, looking from the distance like a kind of rotting haycocks scattered on the sandy plain. The rags and other refuse, it appears, make excellent manure, and donkey loads of them were carried off to the fields to serve that useful, if unromantic, purpose.

It cannot be too much regretted that no responsible Egyptologist watched the excavation of this extraordinary burying place. The *fellaheen* were left to do it after their own fashion. Fortunately they know that every "antica" has a money value, and these therefore they hoard for sale. But no record as to how they were buried is forthcoming. The life-size bronze cat, for instance, is a most remarkable creature. It must have been buried in a box, on which doubtless some inscription was painted, but no box was preserved, nor could I get any exact information as to how, when, where, or by whom the cat was taken out of the ground. The same was also the case with the two small bronze cats and a seated figure of Osiris in bronze of the usual Twenty-sixth Dynasty type. One can only therefore judge these remains from internal evidence. None of the cats have collars engraved on their necks, nor are their ears pierced for earrings. They are all more or less life-like images of the animal, without any accessories whatever. They sit more upright than the cats of Bubastis.

The big cat is the only one that need be described in any detail. He sits bolt upright (some eighteen and a half inches high), with his forelegs very straight and rigid, and his paws set close together. His neck is long and perfectly cylindrical. His head is practically a sphere with a face patched on to the front. He is in fact almost the mathematical abstraction of a cat reduced to its simplest forms. The inside of his body is hollow, and in it the cat's mummy was buried. Only the unmistakable smell and a few scraps of mummy cloth remained behind when I first saw the creature. The whole thing, legs and all, was cast in one piece, the cores of clay, about which the forelegs are cast, being still inside them. The right leg has cracked; moisture has at some time found its way to the clay within, which has swollen and burst the whole limb wide open. The interesting, and I believe unique, feature about this cat is that the whole body of it was thinly plastered over with a fine coating of *gesso*, and that this was gilded. Alabaster eyes were also introduced. Most of the gilded *gesso* and one of the eyes remain. The maker of the cat did not intend it to be gilt. This is evident not only because the modelling of the face is entirely altered by the plaster, which is thereabouts quite thick, but because the whiskers were indicated by tooling about the mouth, and this tooling the *gesso*, before bits of it flaked off, entirely hid.

A cat buried with such exceptional magnificence can have been no ordinary beast. It seems hardly too much to assume that it was the temple cat of its day, the sacred animal of that *Speos Artemidos* which all travellers in Egypt go to see. As such, at all events, it is pleasant to regard it.