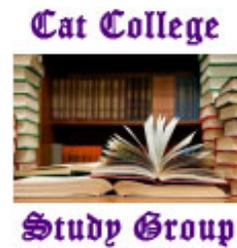




Cat College - Session 400 History 403: The Cat in Ancient Egypt



History 403: The Cat in Ancient Egypt

"Thou art the Great Cat, the avenger of the Gods, and the judge of words, and the president of the sovereign chiefs and the governor of the holy circle; thou art indeed... the Great Cat." --inscription on the Royal Tombs at Thebes



Egyptian Cat

Beautiful, mysterious and fascinating, the cat has lived alongside humans for 12,000 years and earned an important place in history, culture and religious viewpoints. Rich in 5,000 years of history, ancient Egyptian art chronicles the cat's transformation from wild predator to domestic companion and heightened status of divinity. These pieces

give us a glimpse into the cat's profoundly intricate role in the daily lives of ancient Egyptians and their complex and diverse belief system.

In 2007 a discovery pinpointed the cat's earliest domestication in the Fertile Crescent 12,000 years ago when humans settled into an agrarian lifestyle. The **African wild cat** (*Felis sylvestris lybica*), the genetic direct ancestor of all domestic cats and grand opportunist, thrived on rodents in and around granaries, which led to a symbiotic relationship with humans. History repeated itself in Egypt around 4,000 B.C. when people permanently settled in farming societies along the Nile River. *Felis sylvestris lybica* shared the habitat, ready to adapt to new surroundings and again offer pest control services. This sandy-colored, striped tabby with untufted ears, long black tipped tail and sharp claws is viewable in the ancient works, usually hunting.

Cats Honored Beyond the Farm

In addition to tamping down rodents, the cat also provided vital protection against scorpions and poisonous snakes. Usefulness gave way to popularity as people recognized their beneficial relationship with cats. Ancient



Ancient Egyptian Bronze Statue
Reclining Cat and Kitten

Egyptians had other pets in their homes — dogs, baboons and monkeys — but, according to Donald Engels, author of “Classical Cats: The Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat,” households with pet cats were healthier and had more food and fewer deaths.

The cat also played an important role in Egyptian medicine and common household customs using their fur, placenta and excrement of male and female cats with each having its own function, writes Jaromir Malek, renown Egyptologist, Keeper of the Archive at the Griffith Institute in Oxford and author of “The Cat in Ancient Egypt.” Need to keep mice at bay? Cover the area in tomcat fat. Have an achy-stiffness in your body? Apply bandages with a mixture of animal fats including pig, snake and cat fats. A lotion made with cat placenta was used to prevent gray hair — the exact directions have been lost. A mixture of a female cat's fur, resin and human milk was

applied to burns while reciting the appropriate spell.

The domestic cat was depicted in art around 1900 B.C. and by 1450 B.C. was common in domestic scenes, however, hundreds of years earlier individuals were named after the cat. The Egyptians called the domestic cat onomatopoeic (naming a thing by the sound it makes) “miu” or the feminine “miit.” Parents affectionately named their children after animals due to a behavior or characteristic that reminded them of an animal. Names included “Mouse,” “Monkey” or “Wolf” and “Crocodile,” “Frog” or “Hippopotamus.” Men and women were called “Cat” by adding the appropriate article and spelling; — “Pa-miu,” the Tomcat, would apply to men and “Ta-miit,” the Cat, would apply to women.



Ancient Egyptian Mummified Cat

Ancient Egyptian religion is complicated and has in part given rise to the misconception that the cat and other animals were worshiped. Malek and Engels emphasize that animals themselves were not worshiped, but rather were infused with the same spirit as their creator. The creator-god is in all living beings — animals, humans and gods — and each worships him in their own way and they are all under his protection, a concept as old as the first humans. Some animals, such as the cat, were thought to be visible epiphanies of divinities and if a cat had the proper markings could be the incarnation of Bastet, goddess of home, hearth and motherhood; belief in this doctrine made it possible for a god to be present in each household. Since the ancient Egyptian religion was formally practiced by priests and not the lower classes, the common people remained in close contact with animals and their religion remained strong even after the introduction of higher gods.

The cat's role in ancient Egypt is deeply complex and multi-layered, covering 5,000 years of history. After giving up a bit of independence and becoming an invaluable member of the household for 2,000 years the cat was poised for exaltation. New discoveries further illuminate the depth of the human-feline bond.