

Warsaw University  
and  
National Museum in Warsaw

# **WARSAW EGYPTOLOGICAL STUDIES**

**I**

**Essays in honour of  
Prof. Dr. Jadwiga Lipińska**



NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW  
„PRO-EGIPT”  
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### *The scarab on the cat's forehead*

*Dear Jadwiga, I know you prefer English to German  
(I am sorry that Polish is beyond discussion on my side).\**

*But I don't know whether you prefer cats or dogs.*

*Anyway, I don't know any dog story,*

*but here is a little cat story:*

Numerous cat statuettes of the Late Period display a scarab on their forehead.<sup>1</sup> The beetle is shown head-down, that is looking in the same direction as the cat. It may be executed in various ways. It may be cast (in bronze or faience) with the whole statuette, it may be worked separately either of the same or another material and glued into a shallow groove on the cat's forehead.<sup>2</sup> In many other instances it is simply engraved.<sup>3</sup> The cat figures with this feature are depicted in the usual sitting position. Quite rarely the scarab can be found on the cats' heads of standing Bastet statuettes.<sup>4</sup>

A scarab is a much more distinctive feature than, e.g., golden ear-rings, a necklace, or an aegis. One should, therefore, look for the motive for applying it to cats. The cat is one of the very few animals that entered the theriomorphous section of the Egyptian pantheon only in the course of Pharaonic history. Another case is the ram of the Fezzân type which was introduced to Egypt from the south in the Middle Kingdom; his great chance was that he became associated with Amun of Thebes,<sup>5</sup> the King of the Gods, the Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands. The case of the cat is different: obviously, it took a considerable time to become domesticated and it was only then that it entered the realm of the gods. The male was

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\* As on several previous occasions, I am indebted to Agnes and Georg Stillfried for checking my English.

<sup>1</sup> G. ROEDER, *Ägyptische Bronzwerke*, 47 (§ 194 k); id., *Ägyptische Bronzefiguren*, 345 (§ 445 c); 346 (§ 447 c); 348 (§ 449 c).

<sup>2</sup> ROEDER, *Bronzwerke*, 47 (§ 194 k); id., *Bronzefiguren*, 345 (§ 445 c); 348 (§ 449 c).

<sup>3</sup> Id., *Bronzwerke*, 66 (§ 288 a).

<sup>4</sup> Id., *Bronzefiguren*, 266 (§ 329 b).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. P. BEHRENS, in: *LÄ* 6, 1243-1245 s. v. „Widder”; P. PAMMINGER, „Amun und Luxor - Der Widder und das Kultbild”, in: *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 5 (1992), 93-140; see also S. BICKEL, *BIFAO* 91 (1991), 56; A. MUZZOLINI, in: *Hommage à Jean Leclant*, BdÉ 106/4, 253-256.

first, becoming an aspect of the Sun-god. The tom-cat is the killer of snakes who defeats Apophis, the enemy of the Sun-god. The female, however, became associated with a number of goddesses.

The first to be mentioned is Bastet, the lioness of Bubastis, mother of the lion Mysis (*M3j-ḥs3*). She retained her leonine nature in so far as her aspects and qualities are savage, but took on the shape (or just the head-mask) of a cat as a more appropriate attire for her peaceful roles.<sup>6</sup> Bastet is at home not only in Bubastis but also in Heliopolis where she is the daughter of Atum (like Tefnut). In this way she touched the solar sphere with which she must anyway have been associated by virtue of her leonine shape.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, we have to mention the aspect of the Divine Daughter in the myths of the Eye of the Sun. In this role she may appear as Hathor-Tefnut or as Bastet, but also as the lioness Pakht. Nebet-hetepet of Heliopolis is not originally a lioness nor does she assume cat shape. But from the New Kingdom onwards, she is associated with the leonine goddesses Sakhmet and Bastet. One of her attributes is a naos-sistrum with two cats sitting at its sides.<sup>8</sup>

Summing up we may conclude: with a number of goddesses, the shape of a cat is substituted for that of a lioness, particularly where they appear in a mild and peaceful aspect. Each of these goddesses has some or other relation to the Sun-God.

The scarab is mainly associated with Atum and the Sun. The reasons and motives have often been set out: on the one hand, the forming and rolling of the dung-ball, both as nutrition and as a protection and provision for the next generation; and on the other, the impression that the insects come into being from mud or dung, apparently from nothing, without sexual generation, just like Atum. For this very reason the word for „scarab“, *ḥpr* (> *ḥprj*), may be assumed to be derived from the verb *ḥpr* „to come into existence, to become“<sup>9</sup> (on the level of the script, however, the beetle-sign serves to write the verb, and in fact, all other words of the same consonantal skeleton *ḥpr*).<sup>10</sup> If this etymological assumption should prove wrong, it would not be so in the eyes of the Egyptians who did in fact establish this „etymology“

<sup>6</sup> See E. OTTO, in: *LÄ* 1, 628-630 s. v. „Bastet“.

<sup>7</sup> See *LÄ* 3, 1081 with n. 18, adding e.g., E. CASTEL RONDA, „Algunos aspectos de dioses felinos en el antiguo Egipto“, in: *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Egiptología* 2 (1990), 5-22; W. WESTENDORF, *HÄB* 30 (1990), 255-257.

<sup>8</sup> See J. VANDIER, *RdÉ* 18 (1966), 76-84.

<sup>9</sup> See J. OSING, *Die Nominalbildung des Ägyptischen*, vol. 1, 296.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. E. EDEL, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, vol. 1, §25.

between the two words on the level of the typically Egyptian theological pun.<sup>11</sup> So, if „coming into existence” daily is the main quality of the morning sun, it seems natural that its symbol is the beetle, and its name is *Hpr* > *Hprj*.

There is a further association with the scarab that has a high significance for Egyptian civilisation. In the Middle Kingdom, stamp-seals typically assume the shape of the beetle, and, in fact, for us „scarab” refers in the first place to the seal, and only in the second to the insect. There is hardly any „solar” explanation for this development (like comparing the mud balls that are to be sealed with the dung balls of the beetle or even with the sun). Rather, there is another „etymological” motive at work, though what is born here over and over again is not the seal itself but rather its impression, that is the image or writing or ornament that is engraved in it.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of a scarab on the forehead of cat figures may be explained by the common solar connotation of both animals.<sup>13</sup> This is however not fully convincing as the two do not otherwise go together in iconography. There is certainly no „etymological” relation between them. No word for „cat”<sup>14</sup> can be connected with the scarab and the assumed meaning of *hpr(r)* does not apply to cats: these animals may have seven lives, as we say, meaning that they can recover from the severest blow, they also use to procreate in numbers, but the cat is not born over and over again, as the morning sun is, or the seal impression, and it does not - like Atum and assumedly the dung-beetles - come into existence from nothing. It is, therefore, advisable to look for another motive for the idea to decorate cats' heads with scarabs. I believe that it can be found in the fur pattern of the cat.

The Egyptian cat is a descendent of the wildcat, and it was only in the course of a long period of acculturation that it emancipated itself from the wild form to such a degree that physical distinctions are observable.

... the domestic cat, *Felis catus catus*, a species indigenous to the Old World that includes such related forms as the European wildcat, *F. catus sylvestris*, the African wildcat, *F. catus libyca*, and perhaps some other distinct groups. The

<sup>11</sup> On this, cf. F. JUNGE, „Zur Sprachwissenschaft der Ägypter”, in: *Studien zu Sprache und Religion Ägyptens. Zu Ehren von Wolfhart Westendorf*, 1984, vol. 1, 257-272, esp. 267-268.


<sup>12</sup> See H. SATZINGER, „Zu den Men-cheper-rê-Skarabäen”, in: *Studia Aegyptiaca* 1 (Festschrift V. Wessetzky), 1974, 329-38.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. MALEK, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 102.

domestic cat is apparently not a separate species: there is evidence of hybridization and interfertility between it and the wild races.

The domestic form is most clearly related to the African wild race, which also ranges into areas of the Middle East. Domestic cats acquired wild-type genes wherever domestic populations were established near wild regions. ...

The domestic cat has evolved as an urban scavenger and may have originated about 8000 BC, when nomadic humans settled into village life. From archaeological and anatomical evidence, however, it is impossible to distinguish wild from domestic types until New Kingdom times (1570-c.1085 BC) in Egypt (Neil B. Todd, „cat”).<sup>15</sup>

Like almost all small cats, the wildcat in all its local varieties has a characteristic fur pattern of darker stripes and dots. Some stripes run along the spine to the neck where they are bundled between the ears and continue to the forehead. There, the outer stripes, which are quite marked, diverge slightly until they reach the upper eyelids. There is some variation in the particular types, in some cats these lines seem to run vertically, whereas in others they run at a slight angle (see Pl. LXIII.1-2<sup>16</sup>). There is a breed of the domestic cat, called the Abyssinian cat, that has a particularly scarab-like fur pattern at the forehead (see Pl. LXIII.3-4); it is believed to resemble the cats depicted in ancient Egyptian art. With any type, little imagination is needed to associate this pattern with the form of the dung-beetle, as it has been canonized in Hieroglyphic: . The stripes in the centre may be taken for the head, whereas the two outer stripes represent the foremost pair of legs. The other two pairs of legs can be identified with stripes that run backwards from the forehead.

So it may have been the cat's fur pattern that inspired people to see a beetle on the animal's forehead. This was probably the case with literate persons who were familiar with the scarab sign. It should be added that the resemblance is with the hieroglyphic beetle sign rather than the hieratic in which late variants abstract the front part to a circle. The inspiration

<sup>14</sup> Apart from the onomatopoetic *mjw*, *mjt* there seems to be a word *wšt* (probably fem.), attested in the Coffin Texts ; see MEEKS, *AL* 78.1109.

<sup>15</sup> For my convenience, I am quoting from *The Grolier Electronic Encyclopedia* 1995 which has been installed on my personal computer. - For a recent account of the domestication of cats see, e.g., MALEK, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 15-44; L. GINSBURG, „*Felis Libyca balatensis*: les chats du mastaba II de Balat”, in: *BIFAO* 95 (1995), 259-271.

<sup>16</sup> See also the cover photo and fig. 3 in MALEK, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*.

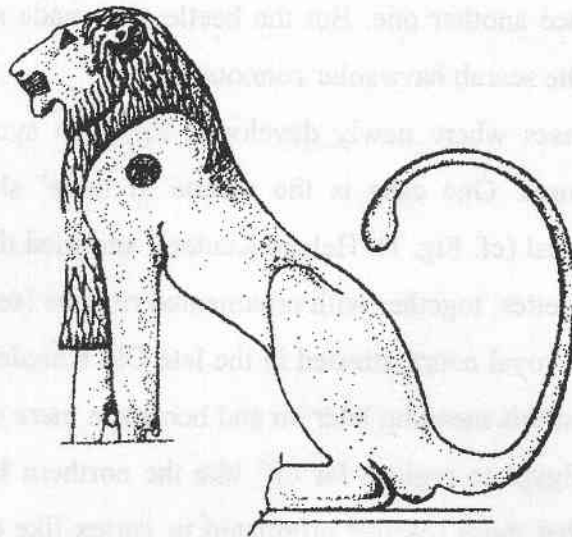


Fig. 1. Dêr el-Bahari, temple of Hatshepsut, causeway (*PM II*<sup>2</sup>, 341 [1]).

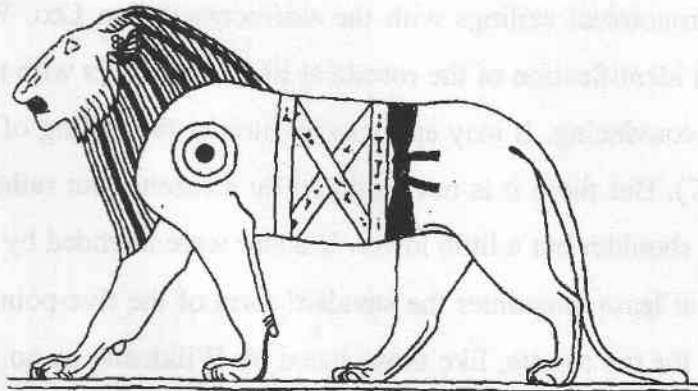


Fig. 2. Lion with rosette and ribbons (*JNES* 6 [1947], 289, after N.A. DAVIES, H.A. GARDINER, *Anc. Eg. Painting I*, pl. XIII).

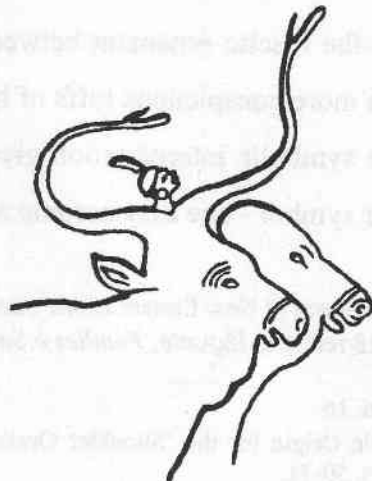


Fig. 3. A decorated bull. Bêt el-Wali temple (*MDAIK* 14 [1956], 135).

is one thing, its acceptance another one. But the beetle also made sense on the theological level as both the cat and the scarab have solar connotations.

There are some other cases where newly developed Egyptian symbolical iconography is inspired by natural features. One case is the rosette at lions' shoulders, seen in many representations of the animal (cf. Fig. 1). Helene Kantor<sup>17</sup> analysed this feature and arrived at the conclusion that the rosettes, together with ornamented ribbons (see Fig. 2), were a kind of badge of tame lions at the royal court, attested in the late Old Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> She thinks that this iconographical feature lost this meaning later on and became a mere ornamental device which eventually spread from Egypt to regions far off, like the northern Black Sea coast. Several theories have surmised that these rosettes originated in vortex-like curls at the shoulders of lions in many depictions though Kantor thinks that this does not apply to the earlier attestations which are of a more circular shape.<sup>19</sup> Richard H. Wilkinson<sup>20</sup> identifies recumbent lions depicted in astronomical ceilings with the star constellation Leo. Whereas this seems plausible, his general identification of the rosette at lions' shoulders with the star Regulus (or alpha Leonis) is not convincing. It may apply to the lion at the ceiling of the tomb of Sety I (see his figs. 5 and 7). But there it is not rendered by a rosette, but rather by a dot, and its position is not at the shoulder but a little lower. If a star were intended by the rosette it might be expected to have at least sometimes the standard form of the five-pointed star (★). Some of the variant forms for the rosette, like those listed by Wilkinson as no. 2 and 6, are never used for stars. Furthermore, the shape of the star constellation Leo resembles a recumbent lion, but this is hardly ever the position of the lions that are depicted with the rosette motive at the shoulder.

A parallel can be found in the rosette ornament between the horns of sacrificial bulls which may derive from the much more conspicuous tufts of hair that grow between the horns of bulls.<sup>21</sup> Taking account of the symbolic interpretation given above - regarding the scarab on the foreheads of cats as a solar symbol - one may assume a comparable significance for the

<sup>17</sup> H. KANTOR, „The Shoulder Ornament of Near Eastern Lions”, in: *JNES* 6 (1947), 250-274.

<sup>18</sup> KANTOR, op. cit., 253 and n. 18 refers to JÉQUIER, *Fouilles à Saqqarah: Les pyramides des reines Neit et Apouit*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. KANTOR, op. cit., 253 and n. 16.

<sup>20</sup> R. H. WILKINSON, „A Possible Origin for the 'Shoulder Ornaments' in Egyptian Representations of Lions”, in: *Varia Aegyptiaca* 5, 1 (1989), 59-71.

<sup>21</sup> KANTOR, op. cit., 254-255.



rosette which is an universal solar symbol.<sup>22</sup> Both the lion and the bull are animals with solar connotations in Egyptian symbolism and this may have invited the Egyptian artist (or may we say art theoreticians ?) to apply the rosette ornament to them.

The next case which should be mentioned has nothing to do with solar symbolism but rather with the topos of the miserable foreign countries that are happy to be superated by Pharaoh who fulfils his task of restraining Chaos in the world. It is the depiction of longhorn cattle in Nubian tributes in which the horns are graphically interpreted as arms and hands of the indigenous people who beg for mercy or celebrate the Egyptian ruler (see Fig. 3). The oldest attestation of this motive, scrupulously studied by Jean Leclant,<sup>23</sup> is in Theban Tomb 40, of Amenhotpě called Huy, contemporary of Amenophis IV to Tut'ankhamun. A natural feature, the sweeping, curved horns of that type of cattle, inspired the masquerade (if it was one, as Leclant assumes), or simply the graphical rendition of the animals in that particular context.

I want to adduce another point of evidence of what I think is a comparable case although it does not deal with animals. It is the very old stereotyped ritual tomb scene of a person sitting in front of an offering table that is richly set with loafs of bread. This interpretation goes back to Griffith.<sup>24</sup> Before him, Borchardt<sup>25</sup> proposed that these shapes should be viewed as palm leaves. Recently, it has convincingly been shown that the type of loaves depicted changes during the early Old Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it has been recognized that the motive changes from loaves of bread to reeds between the Old and the Middle Kingdoms. These reeds are rightly interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Field of Reeds, the source of nutrition for the inhabitants of the Underworld.<sup>27</sup> I think that this is a crucial discovery. It is one of the few hints which point to the fact that the ancient Egyptians were at a very early stage fully aware of the fact that the dead did in fact not rely on real bread and beer and all the delicacies that were placed on their offering tables and, in addition, shown in great masses in the tomb decorations. What they needed in their afterlife

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., 264-265, quotes authors who interpret Near Eastern depictions of lions with rosette ornaments at the shoulder in this way.

<sup>23</sup> J. LECLANT, „La «mascarade» des bœufs gras et le triomphe de l'Égypte”, in: *MDAIK* 14 (1956), 128-145, pl. VI-VIII.


<sup>24</sup> F.L.I. GRIFFITH, *A Collection of Hieroglyphs*, London 1898, 54; see Ch.E. WORSHAM, „A Reinterpretation of the So-called Bread Loaves in Egyptian Offering Scenes”, in: *JARCE* 16 (1979), 7-10, esp. 7.

<sup>25</sup> L. BORCHARDT, *ZÄS* 31 (1893), 1; see WORSHAM, op. cit., 8.

<sup>26</sup> M. BÁRTA, „Archaeology and Iconography: *bd3* and *'prt* bread moulds and 'Speisetischszene' development in the Old Kingdom”, in: *SAK* 22 (1995), 21-35.



was nourishment of another kind - the one that was produced in the *šht i3rw*. They said „bread and beer, meat and fowl, linen and alabaster vessels, incense and oil,” and so forth, but this was nothing but a parable for the kind of spiritual nourishment and equipment that is adequate for an *3h*. This may be compared with bread and wine in the Holy Communion, whether interpreted according to Catholic or Protestant doctrine.

It seems that there is still a lexicographic problem. *i3rw* is rendered in English as „reeds”, and in French by a word with the same meaning. German Egyptology, however, uses *Binse* which is „rush” (but notice that the Berlin *Wörterbuch* furnishes this translation with quotation marks, indicating doubts about that rendering). We know that parts of the stem of the papyrus plant is edible and was actually eaten, but I don't think that reeds or rushes yield very wholesome or delicious nourishment. Knowing the importance *i3rw* had in the beliefs of the Egyptians concerning their after-life, one would rather expect it to mean some kind of cereals. In this context one should remember that a wide spread designation of the omnipresent hieroglyph  as „reed leaf” is misleading, as this depicts rather the top part of a flowering reed stalk the blossoms of which are combed to one side by the wind. The „flag” is not a leaf but rather a much airier feature. What we see on the offering tables of the late Old Kingdom looks slightly different, as we do not see any stalk at all, or at best a very short one, below the „flag” or leaf. As hinted at above, I should prefer to identify it as a cereal plant but I don't think it possible to interpret the iconographic evidence accordingly. Probably the *i3rw* merely indicates an area that is supplied with water and therefore apt to produce nourishment. It may be added that *šht* is not a „field” to be tilled but rather any kind of area that is irrigated in some way or other and therefore apt to be used for farming, whether growing crops or herding cattle.

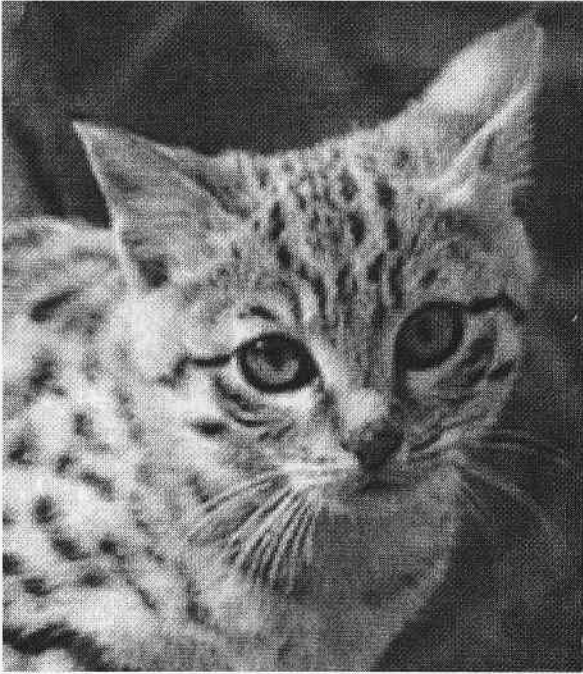
Egyptian art interprets features of the fur pattern of cats as a scarab, sees solar rosettes in the fur of lions shoulders and in the hair tufts between bulls' horns. By adding these elements in a way that appears playful to us, the theological information was intensified. This attitude should not appear strange to anyone familiar with ancient Egypt and its religious literature. This procedure in the field of art is a perfect counterpart to a very characteristic feature of religious language. What we usually call puns or plays on words are a means of communicating theological matters in religious texts. It is based on the principle that

<sup>27</sup> Ch. E. WORSHAM, op. cit.; also cf. M. HEERMA VAN VOSS, „Die beiden Opfergefelde als Opfertisch”, in: *Studien zu Sprache und Religion Ägyptens. Zu Ehren von Wolfharf Westendorf*, 1984, vol. 2, 805-807.

similarity or identity of sound attests - or causes - similarity in essence.<sup>28</sup> In language, the theologian happens to attest a similarity of sound among words for theological concepts that are interrelated or similar. In art, similarity of shape may be found appropriate for concepts that stand in a theological relation to each other. In both cases, the Egyptians regarded the formal correspondence as a confirmation and an intensification of these concepts.

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<sup>28</sup> See W. GUGLIELMI, „Wortspiel”, in: *LÄ* 6, 1287-1291, for a concise assessment and further literature.



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