

# A LIONESS AT PEACE: TWO ASPECTS OF THE GODDESS BASTET

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## RESUMEN:

La inscripción en una pequeña estatua en bronce del Museo Ashmolean de Oxford, identifica una diosa con cabeza de leona con Bastet. La datación de estatuillas de bronce resulta todavía vaga, situándose simplemente en época tardía o ptolemaica. El estudio de las pocas piezas inscritas permite mejorar esta situación tratando de establecer relaciones con otros monumentos fechados con mayor precisión.

El texto inciso es, «Que Bastet de vida a Paiuenhor, hijo Pashenbastet, nacido de Tahetro». Estos nombres son característicos de los periodos tardíos y ptolemaico sin más pistas sobre fechas o procedencia. La paleografía de la inscripción apunta más hacia época tardía.

The inscription on the front of the small bronze (or, more accurately, copper alloy) group<sup>1</sup> in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1971.1004, identifies the standing lioness-headed<sup>2</sup> goddess, accompanied by a pair of felines seated in front

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<sup>1</sup> Listed in PM viii as 802-120-710, but without an indication of its present location. Before its acquisition by the Ashmolean, the statuette was in the H. J. P. Bomford collection, MOOREY, P. R. S. and CATLING, H. W. (eds.): *Exhibition of Ancient Persian Bronzes Presented to the Department of Antiquities by James Bomford, Esquire, and Other Selected Items of Ancient Art from the Collection of Mrs. Brenda Bomford. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Department of Antiquities, Oct. 10-30, 1966*, No. 192 pl. xii, and then in London at Spink & Son Ltd. A photograph of it was reproduced by Ph. Derchain in DELVAUX, L. and WARMENBOL, E. (eds.): *Les divins chats d'Égypte: un air subtil, un dangereux parfum*. Leuven, 1991, fig. 46. I am grateful to Dr Helen Whitehouse for permission to study and publish the object and for the photographs which accompany this article. The line drawing of the inscription was made by Mrs M. E. Cox.

<sup>2</sup> The head alone is not enough to establish whether it is that of lioness or a lion.

of her, as Bastet (figs. 1-5). The statuette is an excellent example of the richness of ideas often present in even the humblest of Egyptian monuments. Such ideas sometimes far surpass the level of technical execution. An initially sophisticated design was occasionally adopted for a more ordinary and less skilfully produced object. In the Ashmolean piece, however, the technical quality and accomplishment do not lag far behind the design. The object has already been the subject of an enlightening comment by Philippe Derchain<sup>3</sup>, but it deserves further attention and full publication.

The partially zoomorphic form is perhaps best known from large seated and standing sculptures of the goddess Sakhmet made by Amenophis III for the temple of Mut at Karnak<sup>4</sup>. The face suggests that the feline is a lion or lioness, and this identification is strengthened by the mane which encircles the face. When compared with the Karnak statues, the face of the Ashmolean lioness is much more pointed. The goddess wears a sun-disc with a rearing uraeus on her head; her ears and two striated lappets show from beneath the mane at the front, and the tail of the uraeus can be seen on top of the wig at the back. With her left hand the goddess holds a lotus umbel staff vertically in front of her body; her right hand grasps an *ankh* sign. She wears a long dress which ends just above the ankles of her bare feet, with the toes indicated by incised lines. The goddess is conspicuously slender ('flat') in profile.

The goddess and the two animals are placed on a base which forms an integral part of the sculpture, and is 8.8 cm long, 3.3 cm wide, and 1.4 cm high. The height of the whole sculpture (the base and Bastet) is 13.2 cm; the height of the base and the animals is 4.9 cm. The base, the figure of Bastet and both animals were individually solid-cast and joined. The base is hollow, with two tangs next to the narrow sides. Some features, such as the ruff of the mane, the marks on the body of the uraeus, the inside line of the ears, the striation of the tripartite wig and details of the faces of the goddess and the animals, were incised.

The statuette is remarkably well preserved. Only the *ankh* sign held by the goddess and the face and ears of the animal on her true left have been slightly damaged.

The dating of bronze statuettes is still rather vague and the majority of them are simply placed in the Late or Ptolemaic periods. One way of improving the situation is by concentrating on inscribed pieces and trying to establish links with other, more accurately dated, monuments. It is, therefore, important that each inscribed statuette be studied and published in detail. But inscribed pieces are relatively rare<sup>5</sup>. Other possible dating methods can be envisaged, for example exploiting the differences in the composition of the copper alloy of which they are made. This is likely

<sup>3</sup> See the preceding note.

<sup>4</sup> PM ii<sup>2</sup>, 262-8, and many of those in PM viii, 1150-9. For bronze statuettes of cats and cat-headed goddesses, see ROEDER, G. *Ägyptische Bronzewecke*, Glückstadt, etc., 1937, pp. 34-6, 46-53; id. *Ägyptische Bronzefiguren*, Berlin, 1956, pp. 266-72 and 344-57.

<sup>5</sup> See PM viii, 1124-7 for unprovenanced examples.

to vary according to the place and date of manufacture<sup>6</sup>, but very little research has so far been done on this.

The text (fig. 6) is incised within two framing lines some 0.9-1.0 cm apart. It reads *di B3stt* ‘nh <n> P3-*iw-n-hrw* s3 P3-*šri-n-b3stt* ms.n T3-*htr(t)*, ‘May Bastet give life to Paiuenhor, son of Pashenbaste, born of (woman) Tahetro’. Only the front and the true right side of the base are inscribed, thus reflecting the standard right-facing orientation and the way in which the piece was intended to be displayed and viewed.

The names P3-*iw-n-hrw*, ‘The dog of Horus’ (PN i, 100.9), P3-*šri-n-b3stt*, ‘The son of Bastet’ (PN i, 118.15), and T3-*htr(t)*, ‘The twin sister’ (PN i, 366.8) are characteristic of the Late and Ptolemaic periods, but do not provide further clues to the provenance and dating of the object<sup>7</sup>. The writing of T3-*htr(t)* is unusual and not recorded by H. Ranke in *PN*. It is tempting to regard the last sign as a ‘house’ (Gardiner O.1) due to the similarity with *htr*, ‘doorpost’<sup>8</sup>, but a detailed examination leaves no doubt that on the Ashmolean statuette it is Gardiner N. 36, ‘channel filled with water’. The short horizontal line above *t* seems to be accidental.

The short horizontal lines above the two bird signs present an interesting aspect of the inscription. These do not appear to have been intended as hieroglyphic signs but as mere space fillers.

On the whole, the palaeography of the inscription points to the Late rather than the Ptolemaic period.

The original form of the goddess Bastet<sup>9</sup>, like that of Sakhmet<sup>10</sup>, was leonine, and this probably accounts for their association as early as the Old Kingdom. A play on the peace-loving character of Bastet and the belligerence of Sakhmet can be detected in a 12th-Dynasty hymn extolling the virtues of King Amenemhet III. This is on a stela of Sehetepibre in Cairo (CG 20538)<sup>11</sup>. The king is described as ‘Bastet guarding the Two Lands’ and ‘Sakhmet for him who defies his command’. We cannot be sure that the association of the lioness with the cat already existed at that time (the full domestication of the cat was accomplished around 2000 BC). It is possible that the roles of the goddesses in the pairing was determined by the etymology of Sakhmet’s name, ‘The Powerful One’. But nearly two millennia la-

<sup>6</sup> OGDEN, J. in NICHOLSON, P. T. and SHAW, I. (eds.): *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 148-9.

<sup>7</sup> BAINES, J. R. In *LdÄ* vi, 1436-7 suggests that the word *htr* with the meaning ‘twin’ is attested from about 800 BC. But the related words for a ‘yoke’ of cattle and later a ‘span’ of horses are much older. All these, as well as *htr* for ‘tax’, ‘levy’, display connotations of what must be the original meaning of the root, ‘to link’, ‘to attach’, ‘to bind’.

<sup>8</sup> Although not listed in *Wb.* iii, p. 200, the writing of ‘doorpost’, with sign Gardiner O.1, is known, MASPERO, G.: *Les Momies royales de Dér el-Bahari*, MMAF i, 3, Paris, 1889, p. 669.

<sup>9</sup> OTTO, E.: in *LdÄ* i, 628-30.

<sup>10</sup> HOENES, S.-E.: *Untersuchungen zu Wesen und Kult der Göttin Sachmet*, Bonn, 1976; STERNBERG, H.: in *LdÄ* v, 323-33.

<sup>11</sup> Text in SETHE, K.: *Ägyptische Lesestücke*, Hildesheim, 1959, pp. 68-9 [13, a]. Translation in LICHTHEIM, M.: *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings i, The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, Berkeley, etc., 1973, pp. 125-9.

ter, the goddess Hathor 'rages like Sakhmet' and 'is friendly like Bastet' in the Ptolemaic version of the 'Myth of the Eye of the Sun' at Philae<sup>12</sup>, and there can be little doubt that the character of the cat was in the mind of the author of the text.

The full syncretization of these two initially separate deities which was achieved in the 1st millennium BC, if not earlier, was helped by two things. Firstly, the iconography of goddesses represented as lion-headed women (Bastet and Sakhmet, but also Pakhet, Mut, Mehyt, Smithis and others) did not differ (the presence or absence of a lion's mane is not necessarily decisive for determining the species). Secondly, it is often difficult to distinguish between the heads of different felines (a lion and a cat) when their relative sizes are not clear.

By the beginning of the 1st millennium, the goddess Bastet and her typical manifestation, the cat, overtook the lioness goddess Sakhmet in popularity, especially in the religion of the poor. Bastet began to display the characteristics of both and so combined peace-loving with ferocity.

While the two opposing aspects of the goddess Bastet were easily expressed in texts, this was somewhat more difficult in Egyptian two- and three-dimensional representations. The least ambiguous way was to show the goddess Bastet as a lioness-headed woman accompanied by one or more cats. I do not know of any example of the other possible solution, a cat-headed woman accompanied by lions, probably because the artist would have been aware of a certain 'hierarchy' in the animal world and the seniority of the two goddesses which demanded that, when shown together, the lion was represented more prominently than the cat<sup>13</sup>. There are, however, bronze statuettes of the cat-headed Bastet holding an aegis which incorporates the head of a lion or lioness. I am not aware of any example which would bring together lioness-headed and cat-headed goddesses, or a lioness and a cat. The combination of a lioness-headed woman and one or more cats provided a secondary level of allusion, between partly anthropomorphic (an animal-headed woman) and zoomorphic representations of the goddess, and this was something which would have appealed to the Egyptian artist. The level of 'ambiguity', to use Derchain's term, may have been further enhanced by showing two, rather than just one, cats.

It therefore seems more likely that the two animals sitting in front of the Ashmolean goddess are cats rather than lions (or lion cubs)<sup>14</sup>. Their tails are shown curled along the right side of their bodies, a norm which owes its origin to the prevailing right-facing orientation of sculptures (thus making the tail visible). The composition of the piece is similar to that known from statuettes of 'housewife Bastet'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> JUNKER, H.: *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien*, Berlin, 1911, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> It is significant that while lioness-headed Sakhmet almost always wears a sun disc, the cat-headed Bastet never does.

<sup>14</sup> A possibility suggested by Philippe Derchain, p. 87 and the caption to fig. 46. According to him, the presence of lion cubs might be explained by the wish to emphasize the maternal instincts of a lioness.

<sup>15</sup> Such as London, British Museum, EA 12590, MALEK, J. *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, London, 1993, fig. 71.

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The provenance of this small sculpture is not known, but Bubastis (Tell Basta) in the eastern Delta, the original home town of the goddess Bastet, is the first site which comes to mind. Paiuenhor, the man who dedicated the bronze statuette, does not seem to be known from other monuments and so at least for the time being we have to be content with a broad Late Period date.



Fig. 1 y 4.- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.1004. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 2.- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.1004. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 3.- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.1004. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 5.- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.1004. © Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

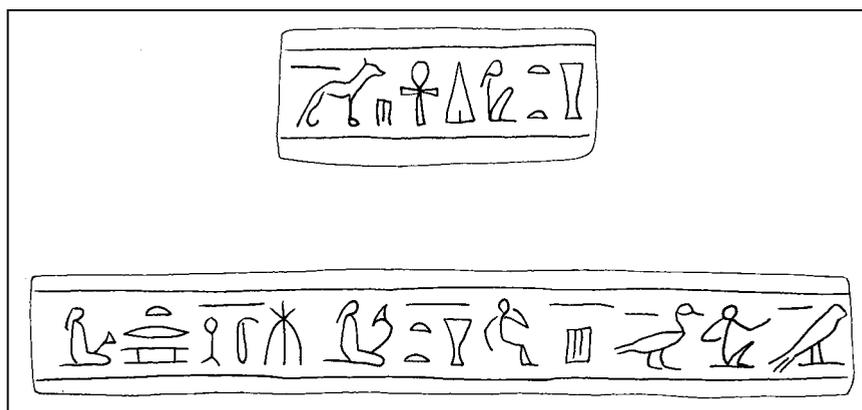


Fig. 6.- The inscription on Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.1004.