

BULLETIN OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

VOLUME LI

BOSTON, DECEMBER, 1953

No. 286



Fig. 1. *Bronze Statuette of Cat on Column*
Late Period
Martha A. Willcomb Fund

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

SUBSCRIPTION ONE DOLLAR



Fig. 2. *Limestone Slab* Back Third Century B.C.
Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, Martha A. Willcomb Fund, Gift of Mrs. Charles Gaston Smith's Group

PTOLEMAIC RELIEFS IV A Votive Tablet

IT does not occur often, but it does happen every once in a while, that an object is brought to the Department the like of which no staff member has ever seen before. Such was the case when the relief with the cat's head first came to the Museum some years ago. A plain rectangular slab of fine-grained white limestone,¹ it bears on one side in bold relief the head of a ram deity (Fig. 2) and on the other a representation of *Felis libyca*, the Egyptian cat (Fig. 3). Although there is nothing unusual about limestone panels with decorations on both sides, this piece is unique

since it shows the cat's bust not in the traditional Egyptian relief style² but half in the round, as if it were part of a piece of sculpture sliced in two and set against a background. This form of relief in purely Egyptian style, in which a profile view is treated three-dimensionally, had hitherto been unknown, but after a thorough examination the slab was entered in the Egyptian collection as being undoubtedly ancient and of exquisite workmanship. Indeed, there is much to be said in praise of this panel since it enriches our exhibition by the unusual likeness of an Egyptian cat,

¹ Acc. No. 51.2474. Height 20.5 cm., width 22.2 cm., thickness of the slab at the edge 1.1 cm. Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, Martha A. Willcomb Fund, and Gift of Mrs. Charles Gaston Smith's Group.

² For a concise definition of Egyptian two-dimensional representation, see G. Steindorff, *Catalogue of the Egyptian Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore, Md., 1946), pp. 2-3.



Fig. 3. *Limestone Slab* Front Third Century B.C.
Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, Martha A. Willcomb Fund, Gift of Mrs. Charles Gaston Smith's Group

an animal which was held in high esteem in the Nile valley and still today has a large number of admirers. Its role in antiquity, its religious significance, and the many ways in which it was represented, have recently been discussed very ably by Mrs. Elizabeth Riefstahl in a detailed, well illustrated study published in *The Brooklyn Museum Bulletin*;³ it may suffice here to state that in the Late Period the cat was sacred to the goddess Bastet, the mistress of the town and temple of Bubastis in the Delta,⁴ and there lies probably the origin of this relief panel.

The reverse of our limestone slab shows the bust of a ram-headed deity with human body; the execution is fine, though not nearly as lively as that of the cat, and it is done in the traditional

relief style which represents the crowning horns, eye, and shoulders as seen from the front. The human body already indicates that this is a god, but it is difficult to state which one of the ram-headed deities he could be. The one which first comes to one's mind is Khnum, but he is an Upper Egyptian deity and never encountered in the Delta. A ram-headed deity was the protector of Mendes in Lower Egypt, not far north of Bubastis; he is unnamed and always referred to as *The Ram*, *The Lord of Mendes*, and even in latest times never combined with Khnum. It so happens, however, that there is a monument in this Museum which proves the association of a nameless ram-headed deity with Bubastis: a granite relief from its temple on which this god leads a procession of deities.⁵ Above him is pre-

³ Volume XIII, Number 2, Winter 1952, pp. 1-15, with 12 figures.

⁴ H. Kees, in Hans Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), pp. 80-82; see also *ibid.* pp. 371-373.

⁵ *Bulletin M.F.A.*, Vol. LI, No. 283, February, 1953, p. 4, fig. 3; cf. p. 2, note 5.

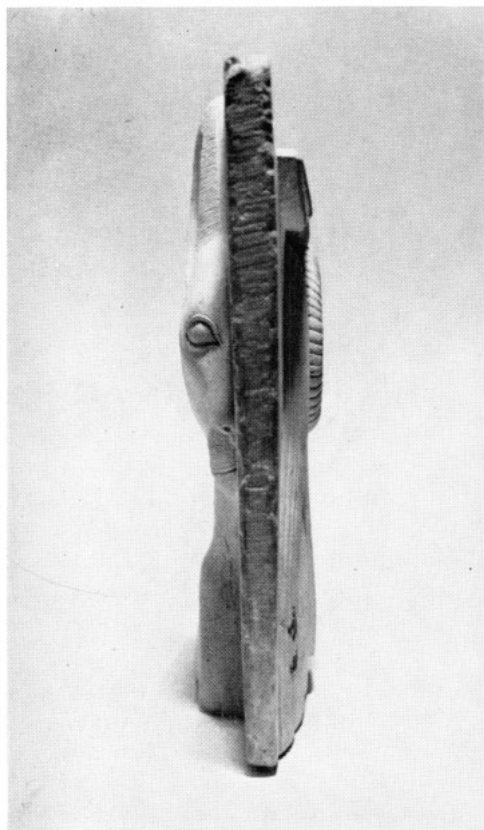


Fig. 4. *Limestone Slab*
Side View

served only the end of his title which reads “. . . of Bubastis.” Therefore, in addition to the cat-headed Bastet, a ram god must have been worshipped at the site.

On the limestone panel, the animal's head is rendered with a great deal of precision; and, leaving aside for the moment the stylized wig as well as the surmounting horizontal horns, one can recognize in it the prototype of *Ovis platyra aegyptiaca*,⁶ a breed of wool-producing sheep with curved horns which appears in Egypt at the time of the Middle Kingdom. The second set of horns, forming a crowning addition to the head rather than part of it, characterizes a different genus, *Ovis longipes palaeoaegyptiacus*, which was not fleecy and died out just about when the new race with curved horns became domesticated in Egypt, long before this relief was modeled. This breed, with its horizontal corkscrew horns, was the only species known to the Egyptians in the

⁶ L. Keimer, “Remarques sur quelques représentations de divinités-béliers . . .” in *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*, 38 (1938), pp. 297-331, 690, 693-697. This article has been of invaluable help for the study of the ram relief.

early times when the standard representations of Egyptian gods were first developed, and naturally the ram-headed deities wore the horns of the then prevailing breed of sheep⁷ and retained them traditionally, throughout Egyptian history, even after *Ovis longipes palaeoaegyptiacus* had died out. These horns, as a divine attribute, were also employed as a component part of certain crowns of kings and deities,⁸ and it is only in the representation of ram-headed gods that they appear without forming the base of an elaborate headgear. They are not worked out as fully as the other parts of the head, and the right horn is even unfinished and does not yet show the typical corkscrew shape which on the left horn has been already indicated.

A small trapezoid beard in a different material, which is now lost, must have been worn formerly by this nameless god, and the groove where it was imbedded is carefully carved out. It continues horizontally at right angles under the chin and permits one to estimate that the beard must have stood out at least five millimeters from the background of the slab. This beard is another divine attribute and can be found frequently on similar representations.⁹

Since the ram-headed figure on the reverse of the panel is definitely a deity we may safely assume that the bust of the cat on the front does not represent a sacred animal but the cat-headed goddess Bastet herself, and this is borne out by the impression which the aspect of this head conveys. There is nothing of a purring kitten in this representation; the feline deity appears to be alert, stately, and (what is not so obvious in the picture of Fig. 3) rather stern-looking. One is reminded of the grim lion head with which the goddess Bastet was adorned exclusively in earlier

⁷ For instance Khnum of Assuan, the Ram of Mendes, and Hershef of Heracleopolis. The latter was also worshipped in the Eastern Delta; see H. Bonnet, *loc. cit.*, p. 289, and Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, Text, Vol. II, p. 176*.

L. Keimer, *loc. cit.*, pp. 322-323, figs. 43-49. Abd el Monem Joussef Abubakar, *Untersuchungen über die ägyptischen Kronen* (Glückstadt, Hamburg, New York, 1937) figs. 2, 4-11, 13, 17-23, 25, 27, 41-45, and pl. 10.

⁹ L. Keimer, *loc. cit.*, p. 323.

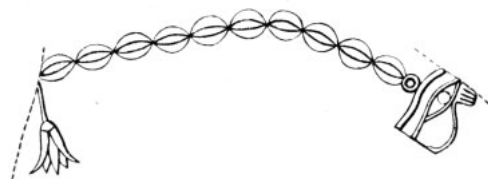


Fig. 5. *Limestone Slab* Necklace of Cat Goddess

times. The bone structure of the skull is marked with great fidelity, but otherwise details have been treated ornamentally rather than naturalistically, and this is especially noticeable in the ear. Where the human ear has its lobe, the cat's ear in this case runs out in a highly ornamental curved ridge. The fore part of the helix is shaped like the feather of *Truth* and *Right*, carefully incised with parallel lines just as the corresponding Egyptian hieroglyph, a feature which is found on most Egyptian bronze figures of cats.¹⁰ The eye is almost entirely directed toward the front (Fig. 4); the tear duct is clearly shown and the upper lid drawn over the lower lid. The whiskers appear as thin incised lines, coming closer together where they meet the background formed by the slab, and a tiny drop-shaped spot in relief (barely visible in Fig. 4) marks the ever so shiny philtrum of the live specimen.

A fine necklace in low relief adorns the goddess (Fig. 5; drawing by Suzanne E. Chapman), tied at the back where it ends in a blossom of *Nymphaea caerulea* SAV., the blue lotus.¹¹ The string of beads consists probably of stylized cowrie shells, examples of which have often been found in Egyptian burials, and supports on the chest a sacred-eye amulet with suspension ring. This amulet, the Egyptian name of which was *Wd̄.t* (Udjat), played as the "Eye of Horus" an important role in Egyptian religion and magic. As a sacred emblem it occurs in numerous representations, and its amuletic power was held in high regard.¹²

There is something extraordinarily effective about the sophistication and simplicity of this necklace which is so different from the incised decoration (Fig. 6; drawing by Suzanne E. Chapman) found on another recent accession, the bronze figure of a cat seated on a papyrus column (Figs. 1, 7).¹³ Here a broad composite collar surrounds the neck of the animal, and from it is suspended an aegis with lion's head, sun disc and uraeus, pointing again to the close association of lion- and cat-headed deities.¹⁴ The chain of sus-

¹⁰ For instance: G. Steindorff, *loc. cit.*, pl. XCVII, no. 647; E. Riefstahl, *loc. cit.*, p. 6, fig. 5; Frances Follen Jones, in *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, Vol. XI, 1952, no. 1, pp. 1 and 3; G. Roeder, *Ägyptische Bronzezeit* (Glückstadt, Hamburg, New York, 1937), pl. 33, i; also a fine bronze cat (unpublished) in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, D. C., and numerous other examples (see Fig. 1 on cover).

¹¹ L. Keimer, in *Revue de l'Égypte ancienne*, 2 (1929), p. 237, fig. 41.

¹² It is often worn by bronze cat figures; see for instance G. Steindorff, *loc. cit.*, pl. XCVII, no. 645. The drawing of a cat appears in the *Skrine Papyrus* No. 2 (*Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 5 [1918], pl. VI) where the animal sits on a base decorated with the Udjat eye.

¹³ Acc. No. 52.1026; height 48.3 cm., height of the cat 20.3 cm.; Martha A. Willcomb Fund. Christie, Manson & Woods, Ltd., *Catalogue of English and Oriental Porcelain, Objects of Art*, etc., June 26, 1952, p. 12, no. 68 (illus.); *The Connoisseur* (London), Vol. CXXX, no. 528, November, 1952, p. 139 (illus.); *Bulletin M.F.A.*, Vol. L, No. 282, December, 1952, p. 84.

¹⁴ See above, p. 82, and E. Riefstahl, *loc. cit.*, pp. 7-8.



On Crown of Head



Fig. 6. *Incised Decoration on Bronze Statuette of Cat*
Drawing by Suzanne E. Chapman

pension is, as on the limestone relief, formed by beads in the shape of stylized cowrie shells but their specific amuletic meaning in this connection remains thus far obscure.¹⁵

Small limestone slabs, with relief decoration, either on one or on both sides of the panel, are found in nearly every Egyptian collection, and they are usually classified under the headings "Trial Piece," "Sculptor's Model," or "Sculptor's Study," implying that their only function had been to permit apprentices to try their craft.¹⁶ This is certainly true for some of these reliefs, but by no means for all of them, and in each case the problem has to be considered carefully. The fact that some pieces of perfect workmanship show signs of sculptor's guide lines or are essentially unfinished, is in itself no proof that the piece in question has been used merely to train a student or to serve as model. Many of the best reliefs of tomb chapels show markings of that kind, are even partly unfinished, and yet cannot by any stretch of the imagination, be considered to be merely experimental. Quite a number of these small relief panels were found at temple sites or in the cemeteries of sacred animals,¹⁷ and in the few instances where the exact provenance

¹⁵ This bead string occurs also in relief on bronze figures of cats; see G. Steindorff, *loc. cit.*, pl. XCVIII, no. 652, and the statuette in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (note 10).

¹⁶ See the literature listed in G. Steindorff, *loc. cit.*, p. 8, note 12.

¹⁷ E.g. Cairo 33421 (lion-headed deity, from Tanis) and Cairo 33437 (walking bull, from the Bulls Cemetery at Saqqara); C. C. Edgar, *Sculptors' Studies and Unfinished Works* (Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire; Nos. 33301-33506. Cairo, 1906), pp. 60 and 66, pls. XXVIII and XXXII.

had been noted the circumstances clearly indicate that these slabs had been deposited as votive offerings.¹⁸ Too little is known of popular religious beliefs of the Egyptians during the Late Period, and therefore it is difficult to explain the function of a relief slab such as the Boston tablet. Like innumerable bronze statuettes and the mummified fauna buried in the cemeteries dedicated to sacred animals it must have reflected a particular relationship between man and his gods, and though we now may admire the slab as a work of art it was primarily created for a religious purpose and as such it should be respected also in our days.

It is regrettable that a good many of these limestone tablets, whether they be votive slabs or sculptor's trial pieces, are often indiscriminately attributed to Saite times (Dynasty XXVI, 663-525 B.C.), mostly for no other reason than that they are obviously of Late workmanship. There are pieces of Dynasty XXVI, dated by inscription,¹⁹ but their style is truly Saite and should not be mistaken for that of the group to which the Boston relief belongs. This group is of much later date as has been pointed out time and again by various scholars,²⁰ yet the earlier attribution seems to persist, even in the most recent publications. It is therefore necessary to stress once more that a purely Egyptian style of workmanship continued well after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great (332 B.C.) and, to judge by inscribed statues and statuettes of private persons, actually flourished under the Ptolemies. As a matter of fact it seems that certain classes of Egyptian objects were made only in Ptolemaic times, and this applies specifically to these votive tablets. The numerous slabs bearing the profile of a ruler or goddess²¹ are clearly Ptolemaic in style, and most of the small limestone busts of a king,²² so widely represented in Egyptian collections all over the world, are merely repetitions of the official portraits of Ptolemy II and III. At least two votive slabs are known bearing ink inscriptions which can be dated to Ptolemaic times; one in Demotic, the

other in Greek, the latter being a dedicatory text.²³

The best proof for a Ptolemaic date of the Boston tablet lies, however, in the workmanship of the cat-headed goddess. The transition from bold relief to "high" relief in the Greek sense, to half-round representation, became possible only under Greek domination as has been shown in a previous article.²⁴ It is therefore proposed to attribute this limestone slab to the third century B.C., a period from which date many works of art in pure Egyptian style, reflecting both the national tradition of religious devotion and a keen sense for the dignity of everlasting beauty in the nature of man and beast alike.

BERNARD V. BOTHMER

²³ W. Spiegelberg, *Die demotischen Denkmäler*, Vol. III, *Demotische Inschriften und Papyri* [Fortsetzung]; 50023-50165 (Catalogue Général des Antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire, Berlin, 1932), pl. XV, no. 50053, pp. 30-31 (Demotic); G. Legrain, *Collection H. Hoffmann: Catalogue des antiquités égyptiennes* (Paris, 1894), pl. II, no. 5, p. 2 (Greek); cf. Bissing, *loc. cit.*, col. 10, note 42.

²⁴ *Bulletin M.F.A.*, Vol. L, No. 281, October, 1952, p. 56.



Fig. 7. *Bronze Statuette of Cat on Column*
Late Period
Martha A. Willcomb Fund

¹⁸ See for instance W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Tanis*, Part I (London, 1885), pl. XV, fig. 3; p. 31.

¹⁹ *Fouilles de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire*, 9, 2 (1933), pl. XXIII, p. 26; also Brooklyn Museum no. 53.80.

²⁰ For instance Auguste Mariette, *Notice des Principaux Monuments*, etc. (1868), p. 219; C. C. Edgar, *loc. cit.*, p. 1; Arthur Weigall, *Ancient Egyptian Works of Art* (London, 1924), p. 329; F. W. von Bissing, *Denkmäler ägyptischer Sculptur* (Munich, 1911), *Text* to pls. 124-125, col. 9-10.

²¹ Edgar, *loc. cit.*, pl. XXIV (no. 33414) and pl. XXVII (no. 33416).

²² *Id. ibid.*, pls. VIII-XV.