

Bast

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The cat is surely the best-loved animal among modern Pagans, and Bast is one of the most beloved of Egyptian goddesses. Reproductions of the cats of Bast are widely available. They range from regal seated cats, fifteen inches or more high, to small, more realistically proportioned figures. They are often placed in personal shrines and revered as representations of the goddess herself, though more properly they are her sacred animals. The larger statues usually have a golden collar about their necks, a golden scarab on their breasts, symbolic of the Sun God Ra, and some have real gold earrings and nose rings.

The lore of Bast is as complex, confusing and enigmatic as the nature of cats. Her worship was already ancient by the time of the Old Kingdom (around 2500 BCE). There are several variants of her name, reflecting her different centres and the 3000 years of her worship: Bast, Bastet, Ubasti, Pasht, are the most common. According to the Egyptologist Wallis Budge, she was first worshipped in the form of a cat and was probably the patron deity of a town or district. At some time during the Old Kingdom she came to be portrayed

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as a lioness-headed woman similar to Sekhmet. But whereas Sekhmet wore red, Bast was depicted in green. She was “The Lady of the East”, associated with the dawn aspect of the sun when its heat is mild. Sekhmet is the fierce destructive heat of the noonday sun; Bast is its gentle fructifying heat and light that encourages germination, growth and healing.

Sekhmet and Bast are both aspects of Ra, the Sun God; but their powers are complementary: Sekhmet protected the Pharaoh in battle and brought him victory; she thus features as an important goddess on the monuments that record the Pharaohs’ lives and exploits. Bast’s role, on the other hand, was more generally protective and nurturing, qualities of less significance in terms of rulership; she is thus mentioned less frequently than Sekhmet in the texts. Only one Pharaoh, Sheshonq I (10th century BCE), gives her prominence in the records: he came from Bubastis in the Nile delta, the main centre of Bast’s worship. His name is found inscribed on a colossal cat-headed statue of Bast. He reunited Upper and Lower Egypt after a period of schism and disorder, following which Bubastis became the capital of Egypt and the worship of Bast spread throughout the country, remaining immensely popular for the last thousand years BCE.

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A magnificent temple was built for Bast at Bubastis (originally “Per Bast”, the House of Bast). Here she resumed her cat form, becoming a slim and lissom woman with the head of a cat. Bast is usually depicted with a sistrum in her right hand, a musical rattle also sacred to Hathor with whom she shared a joy in music, dance and revelry. Many sistra have been found, often with a figure of a seated cat at the top. With her left hand Bast holds an aegis to her breast, a semicircular breastplate surmounted by a cat or lion head, symbolic of protection. Many figurines show her with cats or kittens at her feet.

Bast was a goddess of the people rather than of the priesthood, who did not regard her as one of the High Gods; her powers were seen as particularly relevant to the concerns of the home and everyday family life. Large statues of her are few, but there are many thousands of small statuettes and amulets of Bast and her cats in bronze and faience. It is evident that she became a favourite deity of the general population.

All cats, whether in the temple or the home, were revered as sacred. When they died, they were deeply mourned and were frequently mummified and buried in large cat cemeteries. Sometimes the mummified bodies were decked with jewels and supplied with mice for food in the afterlife. Cat mummies were also found in

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the tombs of their human families. Hundreds of thousands of mummified cats have been found by excavators, so many that a shipload was sent to England in 1890 to be sold as fertiliser.

Wanton killing of a cat was punishable by death, and history relates that a Roman soldier who killed a cat was lynched by a mob. However, many of the mummified cats had been killed by having their necks broken. It is probable that they were sacrificed to Bast since it was common practice to sacrifice sacred animals to their gods. Given the Egyptian view of the afterlife, they may have been sent to the other world with a petition to the goddess.

Bast was the daughter of Ra, the Sun God, and in both her leonine and her cat form represented part of his all-seeing fiery nature. Cats' eyes are highly adapted to see in a very dim light; Bast is thus the Eye of Ra during the night hours. Her eyes change with the light levels, reminiscent of the phases of the moon, which was also regarded as the Eye of Ra at night. In some writings, Bast is the mother of Khonsu, the moon god.

Myth has it that Ra sailed his celestial boat across the ocean of the sky during the day; at sunset, his boat entered the portals of the Underworld. Every night, Ra had to contend with the forces of chaos and darkness

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in the form of the mighty serpent, Apep. To fight the serpent, Ra changed himself into the tomcat, Mau.

Cats have the reputation of killing snakes and scorpions, which were prevalent and greatly feared in Ancient Egypt. But it was as killers of vermin that cats made themselves indispensable: they were kept in the temples, on the farms, in the granaries and in the home – wherever food was stored. The name, Bast, means “Tearer” and she protected the home, preserving it from thieves (whether human or animal) and from all hidden dangers.

Cats are extremely fertile and noisy in their lovemaking; they are also efficient and devoted mothers. Bast was thus also a goddess of sexuality, fertility and childbirth. She became one of the goddesses of the birth house and many amulets bear prayers or spells concerned with safe delivery of a child or the healing of women or children. One statue is inscribed, “May she grant all life and power, all health and joy of heart”.

Cats are playful, charmingly interactive with humans, always lithe and graceful, sensuous, responsive and alert. They have the ability to relax totally and yet to become fully alert in an instant. They are small enough to sit on one’s lap, to be stroked, to play with children; yet they are always independent in

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attitude and manner. They can inexplicably vanish from sight and as suddenly reappear, nonchalantly licking their coat as though they had never left. They are intrepid defenders of themselves and their place: they can fluff themselves out and arch their backs to make themselves look twice their size, and they can yowl and hiss alarmingly.

Small children sometimes exhibit the same charm, spontaneity and interactive playfulness as a cat and little girls were often called “Mai-Sheri” (Pussy).

Bast is a model for any woman who wishes to develop her sexuality, sensuality, social charm, flexibility, capacity for motherhood, yet retain her independence of spirit. The Greeks identified her with Artemis, “Woman Whole unto Herself”. But Bast is less of a rebel against the conventional roles of women as wives and mothers, and decidedly more sexual, nurturing and pleasure loving. In many ways she has more in common with Aphrodite.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, visited Bubastis in the fifth century BCE and wrote a vivid description of the magnificence of the temple complex of Bast and of her festival, held in April/May. He recounts that people came by boat in their thousands, playing musical instruments, singing and exchanging ribald jokes and gestures with the people on the banks. It is said that

more wine was drunk during the days of her festival than in the whole of the rest of the year.

Bast is not a goddess of the intellect but of the emotional and sensual nature. She puts us in touch with the wisdom of the body, celebrating its physicality. She teaches us to dance the dance of life on swift light paws. Evoking the cat within can enrich men and women of any age. Cats are by nature fastidious and clean, always well groomed, naturally graceful and elegant. Bast can lead us, not just to take more care over appearance, but to discover an inner gracefulness, subtly changing our posture and gestures.

Cats are full of apparent contradictions: capricious yet constant; aggressive yet soft and playful; active and energetic yet able to relax and sleep for hours; tough yet delicate; sociable yet independent; their paws can be gentle or armed with sharp claws, and can strike with the speed of lightning; they are ruthless and efficient hunters, taking live mice back to their kittens to teach them how to hunt; (playing with their prey is a left-over kitten-trait); their voices can be an ear-splitting yowl, a menacing hiss, an attention seeking miaow, an enquiring “prrrp?” or a peaceful and soothing purr. Cats look us straight in the eye; they search our faces and our body language, being quickly perceptive and responsive. The human who can call on this

variety of qualities with the flexibility of a cat is indeed blessed by Bast.

Bast can enable us to enjoy being alone, to be emotionally and physically self-sufficient and relaxed. But, above all, evoking the inner cat can help us in virtually every type of inter-personal situation. Bast enables us to become alertly perceptive and responsive, assertive yet sensitive and delicate. She teaches us to be firm with children yet loving, tolerant and responsive to their moods and hurts. In the birthing chamber she helps us be relaxed and accepting, rejoicing in the wonder of new life. Bast can help us to find the most appropriate voice and stance to use in any situation. She is the essence of personal charm yet can in an instant transform into a formidable adversary – and equally quickly restore charm and good humour.

Evoke the cat within yourself and imagine your cat-self dealing with the main situations and people in your life. Be prepared to surprise yourself.

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Incense: Red sandalwood, Benzoin, Musk

Hail Bast, Lady of grace and beauty, Mistress of the Light and the Dark, who art the Eye of Ra in the places of night. Thou art throned in the splendour of thy great temple and in the heart of every home. Thy right hand shakes aloft the sistrum, calling us to dance and joyous laughter. Thy left holds the aegis of protection to thy breast and around thy feet kittens play. Thy voice is the yowl of defiance, the croon of pleasure, the deep purr of delight and intimacy.

Come then on silent feet, Oh Huntress of the Night, stalking the small and timorous fears that nibble away our soul's nourishment. Let all evil and venomous creatures beware thy sharp claws. Yet art thou also our companion by the hearth, the bringer of solace, the healer and comforter.

Wherever the body is alive to sensation and
pleasure, and every moment of life is lived to
the full with zest and courage,
Wherever women give birth in joy and hope, and
children laugh and play,
Wherever the softness of fur and the rhythmic
sound of a purr bring cessation of grief and
effort,
Thy voice is heard and thy presence felt.

By soft fur and sharp claws,
By pricked ears and tail held high,
By grace and charm and delicacy,
By the mystery of night and the glory of the new
day,

I call upon Thee to Be with Us
in Body and in Spirit.

Jean M. Williams