



## Feline goddesses

Lion-headed goddesses can have a wide variety of names, such as Sakhmet, Mut, Tefnut, Bastet or Wadjet. In fact, many local goddesses can assume the aspect of either a fierce lioness or a gentle cat. One of the oldest deities with this dual aspect is the goddess Bastet. She is attested since the Old Kingdom and Bubastis, in the Eastern Delta, was her town of origin. The two capital cities of Egypt each had a goddess of this type as well: in Memphis, she was called Sakhmet and in Thebes the goddess Mut assumed this aspect during the New King-

dom. During the reign of Amenhotep III, hundreds of statues of Sakhmet were erected in the temple precinct of Mut at Karnak and in other Theban temples, including the King's mortuary complex in western Thebes. Feline goddesses are often called the Eye of Re and were considered to be the sun god's daughter. One of the myths associated with this goddess relates that Re and his daughter quarrel and that the angry goddess abandons her father and withdraws to Nubia. Re then sends an emissary, usually Thoth or Onuris, to calm her



down, and this god eventually succeeds in making her come back to Egypt and make peace with her father. In a related myth, known as the *Myth of the Destruction of Mankind*, the sun god has created mankind from his tears but becomes disenchanted with them when they rebel against him. Re sends his daughter Sakhmet to wipe out mankind, but after a while regrets his decision. In order to stop the carnage and to satisfy the blood lust of Sakhmet, he orders that beer mixed with red ochre be poured out over the fields. The goddess mistakes this



red beer for blood, gets drunk and is no longer able to recognize the people, who are thus able to escape. The angry, destructive aspect of this type of goddess is symbolized by the lioness, whereas the more gentle aspect of the appeased goddess is expressed by the form of the cat. The fearsome lioness is associated with plague and destruction and with warfare, while the cat is linked with female fertility, sexuality and protection during pregnancy and childhood. Despite this seemingly clear distinction, however, lioness goddesses could also be

invoked for protection against evil: “behind Mut there is no fear”, as texts on amulets sometimes express it. The aggressive nature of the lioness could also be beneficial to those who worshipped her, not least the king, whom she protects against his enemies.

Although the dual aspect symbolized by lioness and cat applies to all goddesses of this type, in the Late Period in particular the lioness was primarily associated with Sakhmet, while the cat was linked to Bastet. It has therefore become customary to consider Late Period bronze lioness statuettes, even when there is no inscription on them, as representations of Sakhmet and the famous Late Period bronze cats as depictions of Bastet.

*JvD*

Parallels: G. Steindorff, *Catalogue of the Egyptian Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore 1946), no. 502; G. Roeder, *Ägyptische Bronzefiguren* (Berlin 1956), Pl. 40 h. and 81 a; E. Gubel et al., *Van Nijl tot Schelde. Egyptische Kunst in Belgisch bezit sinds vijf eeuwen* (Brussels 1991), no. 216.