

# Of Cats, Mice and Men in Late Old Kingdom Dakhla

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*I know Ursula is a dog lover,  
and I hope she also likes cats.*

Dogs are pictured as companions and auxiliaries of men already in Predynastic hunting scenes. And in the late Old Kingdom, archaeology and iconography provide a number of attestations of the close link between elite members, mostly males, and dogs of different species, some of which were imported from neighbouring regions. But for the cat, which became so popular in the late periods of Egypt, the story of its relationship to man is far from being so clear and the date of its domestication is still under discussion. Archaeological remains from human settlements are extremely scarce before the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, as are cats' representations before the New Kingdom. In this context, it is particularly remarkable that two of its earliest epigraphic attestations have been found in Balat.<sup>1</sup> With this short note, I would like to present to our honoree further thoughts on this topic, combining paleography with other evidence.

The common name of the cat, *mjw* (Erman and Grapow 1926–1931, 2: 42.1–3) is well known from the Middle Kingdom onwards, but hardly attested so far in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium texts. The first occurrence of the cat sign in a hieroglyphic text known to me has been recently published and may date from the late 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty (fig. 1a). It features in the lacunary text of a royal seal impression found in Elephantine, probably as an ideogram, since these short texts mostly lack phonetic signs.<sup>2</sup> The reading of the sequence is unclear, but it confirms the presence of the sign and word in the formal repertoire of royal phraseology. Apart from this seal impression, the other Old Kingdom mentions of cats come from onomastics. The female form *mjwt*, including the cat sign, is attested in at least one anthroponym from Giza, which would also date back to the late 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty (fig. 1b).<sup>3</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> Pantalacci 2013, 250–251.

<sup>2</sup> Engel 2018, 128–139, n° 259. I thank warmly Philipp Seyr for this reference.

<sup>3</sup> Stela Cairo JE 56994, right jamb, lower register; see Gourdon, AGÉA 1420 [G1], with references. Unfortunately, the sign is blurred by accidental chisel marks. The other occurrence of the name,

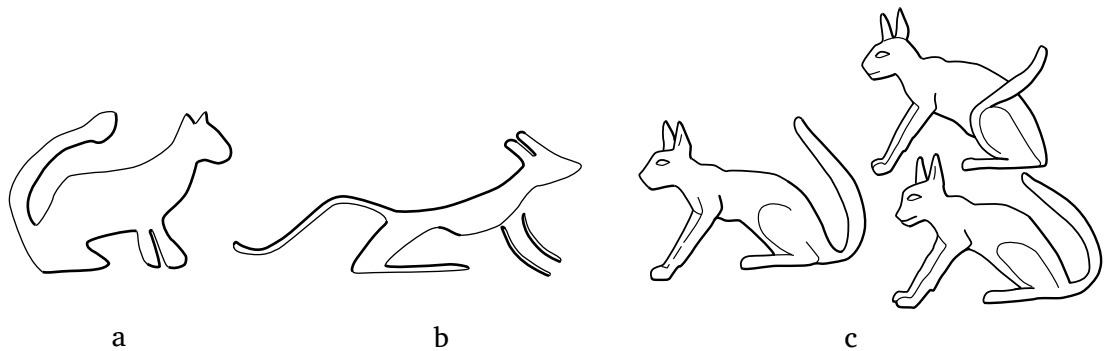


Fig. 1: a) Seal from Elephantine, after Engel 2018, 128, Nr. 259 b) Determinative of the name *Mjw*t on the stela of Itefnen and Peretim (Caire JE 56994); c) *Mjww* on the block MMA 15.3.1708, after Goedicke 1971, 52. Sketches, not to scale

confirms that the word *mjw* was already part of the common Egyptian speech.<sup>4</sup> Hence the reading *Mjw.w* of the toponym written with the triple cat sign (𐍑𐍑𐍑) on a block found near the pyramid of Amenemhat I in Lisht (fig. 1c), but ascribed to the late 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty, is nearly certain.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the figure of the local god called *nb Mjw.w* is damaged<sup>6</sup> and his name is lost; thus locating the *Mjw.w* city, mentioned only in this text, is not possible. In addition, if their phonetic value is beyond doubt, it is equally impossible to determine whether these cats must be taken as ideograms or phonetic signs. Would the toponym actually mean “Cats-city”, it would indicate that the presence of (numerous?) cats in or near a settlement was a feature rare enough to be recorded in its name as its main characteristics. Incidentally, these cats settled together with humans in an Egyptian village would show that, at least in this place, domestication was well on its way.<sup>7</sup> And this indirect clue would be interesting, as the word *mjw*, applying to wild or tamed cats alike,<sup>8</sup> gives no information about their degree of domestication.

Such are the three hieroglyphic occurrences of the cat sign known to me in the Old Kingdom sources from the Nile valley. Although the epigraphic quality of the three documents is hardly comparable, several features are already fixed: the cat is craning forward, leaning on its forelegs, both of which are visible; its large ears are pricked up, slightly tilted forward. This attitude is very close to this of the wild cats, as pictured, for example, in the Middle Kingdom tomb of Khnumhotep III at Beni Hasan.<sup>9</sup> Far from the comfortable

Gourdon, AGÉA 1420 [G2] is written 𐍑𐍑𐍑 and lacks the cat sign; thus, the meaning “She-cat” is probable, but not absolutely certain.

<sup>4</sup> For the lexical field of animals in anthroponymy, see Vernus 2005, 91–92.

<sup>5</sup> Goedicke 1973, 52; Zibelius 1978, 89.

<sup>6</sup> He was probably animal-headed: Goedicke 1973, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Following the description of domestication phases by Baldwin (1975, 435–441). But more recent analyses introduce many nuances in the degree of domestication of cats: Ottoni et al. 2017 (I am grateful to Salima Ikram for providing this reference); Cechetti, Crawley and McDonald 2020, 2–3, 4.

<sup>8</sup> <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/68250>.

<sup>9</sup> In this tomb are pictured a cat in the marshes (Malek 1993, 37, fig. 20) and another in the desert (Malek 1993, 40, fig. 22), in a similar posture.



Fig. 2: Reconstructed seal Balat 0142 and sealings 8462b, 8462e (©Ifao/A. Hussein, I. Ibrahim)

seated position of the later hieroglyph E 13 (𐩔), their whole attitude expresses tension or watchfulness. Variation occurs only in the position of their tail (fig. 1): it may be curling between the flank and thigh and then turning upward, like in the later representations, or stiff, and held high or low. The different positions may convey the movements of the wagging tail while the cat was in this waiting posture.

The cat as iconographic motif is also practically absent from visual representations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. Surprisingly, it did not enter the glyptic repertoire of the stamp-seals so popular from the late Old Kingdom onwards.<sup>10</sup> So it is all the more remarkable that it appears on a stamp-seal in Balat, in the motif of two nearly “hieroglyphic” cats facing each other, combined in an elaborate composition with two lizards and two mating Seth-animals, all wild species linked to the desert (fig. 2). This seal (0142, sealings inv. 8462) belonged to a high official of the governors’ palace, in the phase immediately preceding the arson that destroyed this Residence (6–8<sup>th</sup> to early 9<sup>th</sup> dynasty).<sup>11</sup> The outline of the felids, although schematic, is quite close to the cat hieroglyph. Only the position of the tail, held high at the back with wagging tip, differs. Here again it could be an attempt to convey realistically the tail movements.

If we are poorly informed about domestic cats in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Egypt, the presence of wild cats among Egyptian fauna is archaeologically documented well before the Dynastic period in the Nile valley<sup>12</sup> and the Western desert. Nevertheless, in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Dakhla, felid bones have rarely been found,<sup>13</sup> and never, so far, in settlement contexts.<sup>14</sup> Although the

<sup>10</sup> According to Wiese 1996, but one might identify a cat on at least one stamp-seal (195, pl. 9), and maybe on some others. The Seth-animal is more common and better characterized (Wiese 1996, 116–117 and pl. 9, 12).


<sup>11</sup> See the online database on the Ifao website: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/scbalat/sc1/?q=8462> and Pantalacci 2022, 436–445 (seal ID 0142).

<sup>12</sup> Baldwin 1975, 431; Osborn and Osbornova 1998, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Riemer et al. 2005, 333–335.

<sup>14</sup> They are so far absent from faunal remains from Balat (Pantalacci and Lesur 2012, 296) or the contemporary site of Ayn al-Gazzareen (Mills 2002, 76), and not even appear much later in Roman towns like Kellis (1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century CE: Churcher 2002).

faunal remains did not allow a formal identification of the cat species living in Dakhla, the desert environment suits well the *Felis libyca*, a species particularly easy to domesticate.<sup>15</sup> It is thus possible that feral or tamed cats were more common in or around Balat than in the Nile valley. This would explain the appearance of this rare iconographic motif on our seal.

Let's now turn to the hieratic attestations. The cursive version of E 13 () was previously known only by two hieratic texts, roughly contemporary with the corpus from Balat.<sup>16</sup> The Elephantine cat (fig. 3a) is crouching, ears up, craning forward; its rear part is not preserved.<sup>17</sup> The sign is out of context. The ductus of the head is peculiar: the ears are very large, and two strokes under the muzzle may represent the whiskers. But a few strokes are blurred and may also belong to a pentimento. A second, slightly more recent occurrence in P. Gardiner II (BM EA 10676), is recorded by Goedicke (1988, 9b; fig. 3b). But it has a very different outline, more compact; it is also crouching, with small ears and a curling tail held up, but very short legs.<sup>18</sup>

Even more static, as compared to the hieroglyphic sign, is its hieratic version which I tentatively identified on a label from Balat (inv. 2062 vso, fig. 4).<sup>19</sup> Obviously, the text is cursorily written; here the crouching cat, craning forward, has upright ears and a very short tail, held downward. When comparing these three cursive occurrences, we clearly see that, due to the rarity of the sign, the ductus was not standardized, but was partly left to the personal interpretation of each scribe. Soon afterwards, from the very beginning of the Middle Kingdom, the standard form of the seated cat with curling tail comes in constant use both in cursive and formal hieroglyphs.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the identification of the cat sign on the Balat label was deduced from the meaning of the word it classifies. I suggested the name *Gꜣgw*, meaning “The-gazing-one”,<sup>21</sup> refers to the intense gaze of a cat observing a virtual prey.<sup>22</sup> Another Old Kingdom occurrence of this verb, in an apparently recent spell of the *Pyramid Texts*, applies to a snake, as

<sup>15</sup> Ginsburg 1991, 17–18; Ottoni et al. 2017, 1–2. When studying remains of cats from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the last millennium BCE found in Balat, Ginsburg (1995, 266) even postulated that, by then, their domestication was still in progress, and proposed to distinguish a new sub-species, *Felis libyca balatensis*.

<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, its appearance in three cursive documents at the same time, around the end of the Old Kingdom, may say something about the increasing presence of the cat in human environment.

<sup>17</sup> Goedicke 1988, 9; the fragment is still unpublished. My sketch is from a personal photograph.

<sup>18</sup> I was unable to trace the sign from the online photos of P. Gardiner II on the British Museum website, and without a context, this identification has to be confirmed. If this sign is really intended to depict a cat, it suggests that the animal itself was unfamiliar to the scribe.

<sup>19</sup> In a preliminary presentation, P. Posener-Kriéger had identified this sign as a mouse, but the shape and attitude are totally different from the mouse sign (Möller 131; E 263), which is also rare in the Old and Middle Kingdom: the single attestation comes from Hatnub (Anthes 1928, Gr. 33, pl. 25; Goedicke 1988, 10b).

<sup>20</sup> See for example Buck 1956, 6: 236h and 303l (coffin of Djehoutynakht, Boston MFA 20.1822–18–27, late 11<sup>th</sup>–early 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty) and the feminine name *Mjjet* as written twice on Montuhotep's stela, Saqqara, 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Malek 1993, 48, fig. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Pantalacci 2013, 250; on the root *gꜣw*, reduplicated variation. *gꜣgꜣw*, *ggw*, Edel 1956, 14–17. Another anthroponym derived from the same root and dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> dynasty is *Mggj* (Gourdon, AGÉA n° 1697).

<sup>22</sup> Cp. the marsh cat in the tomb of Khumhotep III at Beni Hasan as recorded by Howard Carter: Malek 1993, 37, fig. 19.

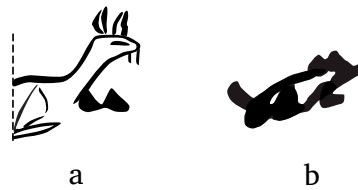


Fig. 3: a) P. Berlin 10523, Elephantine; b) P. BM EA 10676 (P. Gardiner II). Sketches after personal photo and Goedicke 1988, 9b, not to scale



Fig. 4: Label 2062 from Balat, verso (©Ifao/M. Shauqi, J.-F. Gout)

a wild and dangerous animal.<sup>23</sup> Although the graph used in Balat, the textile bundle V 33 (♂), differs from the writing  $\overline{\text{W}} 11$  of the *Pyramid Texts* with the stands W 11, we can hardly doubt that it is the same word. Generally, the sign V 33 is uncommon to write [g] in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium; its use here, instead of W 11 ( $\overline{\text{W}} 11$ ), also suggests that this verb was not part of the formal, traditional level of written language<sup>24</sup> and, like the paleography of the cat classifier, is partly due to the scribe's idiosyncrasy. This word, maybe more colloquial and vivid than *mjw*, and the tense posture seen in all the cat graphemes, picture a felid on the lookout. Whether wild or tamed, we do not know.

In the Egyptian imagery of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium the cat begins to appear more frequently. It is often associated with rodents and serpents, all its favorite prey.<sup>25</sup> While the satirical

<sup>23</sup> Hannig 2003, 1364 = *PT* Utt. 731, § 2259 (Pepy II, Neith). Note that both the cat and the snake have vertical pupils, which might explain their common designation.

<sup>24</sup> In Balat we have a few traces of words hardly attested in the formal written language, like the word *mrht* meaning “stela” in the stela of Khentika (middle Pepy II): Hannig 2003, 548.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin 1975, 433–434. For cats and mice, see numerous ostraca of the New Kingdom, e.g. in Osborn and Osbornova 1998, 46, fig. 6–1; cats fighting serpents feature on “magic” objects, starting with the Middle Kingdom wands: Quirke 2016, 389–390.

images of the New Kingdom on ostraca or papyrus show cats and rats or mice of equal size, with the cat often playing the role of a servant,<sup>26</sup> a more realistic image from the Middle Kingdom pictures a female cat (*mj(w)t*) and a rat (*pnw*) face-to-face, nearly equal in size, cautiously observing each other.<sup>27</sup> Rather than rats, probably cats in Balat hunted mainly small rodents, like mice or small desert species (gerboas, gerbils). It is usually admitted that the cats' domestication was caused by the presence in human settlements of numerous rodents attracted there by food reserves, especially grain.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, archaeology confirmed that in the Pre- or Early Dynastic oasis, even temporary camps in the desert attracted a number of pests very quickly.<sup>29</sup> We lack comparative evidence to assess properly the fact that Elephantine and Balat, two settlements specialized in organizing desert expeditions, both yielded hieratic documents using the cat sign. Be that as it may, a New Kingdom (or later?) graffito from Dakhla shows that even deep in the desert, expedition members had in mind—or maybe even saw before their eyes—the presence of mice and cats (fig. 5).<sup>30</sup> At all times, it was certainly even more so in permanent, prosperous settlements. In the governors' palace of the late Old Kingdom, the silos containing the grain stored for the memorial cult of the governors were made of special bricks including a high proportion of ashes, which the mice hate.<sup>31</sup> Obviously, the people feared and anticipated infestation of their food stocks by rodents, and wild or feral cats would have been an easily available and effective response to the problem.

Thus it is no wonder that early occurrences of the word “cat” are “she-cats” in feminine anthroponyms, as possibly humans domesticated, or at least became familiar with, female before male cats. Female cats, having to care about their kittens, on the one hand have to secure sufficient quantities of food—a good reason to stay close to human settlements—and on the other are responsible for teaching the kittens how to hunt.<sup>32</sup> Thus they are reputed to be, and actually often are, better hunters than males. The Egyptians, keen observers of wildlife, had probably noticed this gendered feature from early times.

Although both written and archaeological evidence about cats and their relationship to humans are very scanty for the oldest periods of Egypt, the paleographical evolution, both monumental and cursive, notes a change—maybe a closer relation—in the interaction between men and cats. In the writing system, the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium image of a wild or feral animal on the lookout was all at once replaced, around the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium,

<sup>26</sup> See for example Vernus 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Kanawati and Evans 2018, 37 and pl. 45a and 80. Modern experiments have observed that modern feral cats practically never attack rats, too big a prey for them: Parsons et al. 2018, 1–2. But remains of a large cat (Roman date) in Myos Hormos proved that, in this Red Sea port, they could feed on black rats: Hamilton-Dyer 2013, 369.

<sup>28</sup> Baldwin 1975, 428; Ginsburg 1991, 17–19.

<sup>29</sup> Riemer et al. 2005, 333; Pöllath 2011, 339; Linseele and Lesur 2021, 129. See also for the late FIP–early Middle Kingdom in the quarries of Hatnub Anthes 1928, Gr. 33, 69–70 and pl. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Riemer et al. 2005, 322–323. The cat wears a collar, so it is fully domesticated. Since the motif of the cat and mouse/rat appears several times in rock graffiti, it has been suggested that cats actually accompanied desert expeditions (*ibid.*).

<sup>31</sup> Soukiassian, Wuttmann and Pantalacci 2002, 289.

<sup>32</sup> Cechetti, Crawley and McDonald 2020, 5.



Fig. 5: Cat and mouse/rat, after Riemer et al. 2005, 323 & pl. 46 a. Approximate length 12 cm

by the quiet, seated, familiar pet E 13 (𓆎). Nevertheless, at least in the Western desert, faunal remains of only partly tamed cats (*Felis libyca balatensis*) show that domestication was a slow and discontinuous process, as throughout the centuries, intermixture continued to occur regularly between tamed or domestic cats and wild animals.

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