The Exploration of an Aegis Amulet with the Head of a Feline Goddess

The Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute recently held an exhibit titled, "Shadow of the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt and its Influences." The exhibit displayed an astonishing number of Egyptian and Egyptian inspired artifacts, the most intriguing being a tiny bluish-green object mere centimeters high (see fig. 1). The label described the object as an Aegis Amulet with the Head of a Feline Goddess created in the Late Ptolemaic Period, between 664 and 30 B.C.[18] The museum identified the piece as either Bastet or Sekhmet, two goddesses associated with felines in ancient Egypt and with each other.[19] The amulet is 3.7 centimeters in height and 3 centimeters in width and was on loan to the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[20] It was purchased by the Metropolitan in 1910 with funds donated by Helen Miller Gould.[21] Previously, the amulet had been in the collection of Reverend Chauncey Murch, who obtained it between 1883 and 1906.[22] During this time Reverend Murch was the director of the Presbyterian Mission at Luxor.[23] His collection when acquired by the Metropolitan in 1910 consisted of 3,370 pieces, the majority consisting of delicate Egyptian scarabs and different forms of seals, but also including amulets.[24] This particular aegis amulet, while displaying some individual characteristics, is typical of its time period in terms of style, material, and subject.

The amulet is made out of faience, a material in the Egyptian tradition dating back to the Predynastic Era. Faience is a plastic composite material which has a glazed surface and a ground

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[18] "Shadow of the Sphinx," Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, accessed November 14, 2012, http://www.mwpai.org/museum-of-art/museum-of-art-calendar/shadow-of-the-sphinx/.
[19] Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Aegis Amulet with the Head of a Feline Goddess Late Ptolemaic Period, Utica, 4 November 2012.
[20] "Aegis of Sekhmet or Bastet," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 24, 2012, http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/100005057.
[21] "Aegis of Sekhmet or Bastet," The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[22] "Aegis of Sekhmet or Bastet," The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[23] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1916), 7-8.
[24] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 7.

quartz interior.[25] To make it, natron is added to the quartz body and then hand shaped or put into a mold.[26] In earlier cases faience was self-glazing, but eventually a glazing material was added either before or after firing, usually a copper salt.[27] When the additive was copper a brilliant turquoise blue-green color was created, but different colors could be created with the addition of different minerals.[28] Faience was appealing to the masses because it could be fired into a variety of beautiful colors, the most popular being the turquoise blue-green seen in this amulet. It was also relatively inexpensive to produce. The ground quartz interior basically consisted of sand which was in abundance in the desert environment of Northern Africa. In the later dynasties production of faience amulets and other tokens became nearly industrial.[29]

Faience was a material that slowly developed from the Predynastic period and continued to be used quite frequently into the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. In the predynastic years, faience development was purely experimental, and the process of making it was not standardized.[30] For instance, faience pieces found in some predynastic graves were different in composition even from other faience examples found in the exact same grave.[31] Into the Old Kingdom dynasties, the production of faience became more common, and a standard procedure for making it was developed. However, faience pieces were still relatively small and consisted of mostly beads, amulets, small vessels, and figurines.[32] The major exception to this was the mass production of faience tiles that were used in the making of the Step Pyramid of Djoser at

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[25] "Techniques," Introduction to the Art and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt packet, from Professor Lacovara.
[26] "Techniques," Introduction to the Art and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt packet.
[27] "Techniques," Introduction to the Art and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt packet.
[28] Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Faience Beads, Utica, 4 November 2012.
[29] Philippe Gemond, *The Symbolic World of Egyptian Amulets, from the Jacques-Edouard Berger Collection* (Milan: 5 Continents, 2005), 17-21.
[30] Edited by Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 178-184.
[31] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 179.
[32] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 179.

Sakkara.[33] Faience tiles were used in lining the interior walls of the burial chamber of this Third Dynasty monument.

The first evidence of a faience workshop was recently found at Abydos by a combined expedition of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Yale University, and NYU's Institute of Fine Arts.[34] The expedition unearthed a settlement dating back to the Old to Middle Kingdom that includes a series of brick pits thought to be early kilns.[35] It is not known yet how exactly the Egyptians would have used these pits to create faience, but their presence indicates the importance of fired handmade wares during the time period. By the third intermediate period, the production of faience became so widespread that it becomes hard to differentiate between Egyptian faience and imported goods from around the Mediterranean.[36] In fact, faience was so important in these later periods that the production of glass decreases to make room for all of the faience production.[37] It is not surprising that this aegis amulet is fashioned from faience due to its tremendous popularity and importance in Egyptian society, especially in the later dynasties.

Amulets were truly important to the Ancient Egyptians; they had a magical purpose and provided protection from evil. Egyptians had many names for amulets, but each name was related to this idea of magical protection. Some of these names include Wedja, Meket, Nehet, and Sa.[38] Wedja meant to be intact or well preserved. Meket was derived from the verb "meki" to protect. Nehet was synonymous with protection and shelter. Lastly, Sa meant to be free from all trouble.[39] "Amulet" is a modern term, (the Dictionary defines an amulet as "anything worn

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[33] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 179.
[34] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 180.
[35] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 180.
[36] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 183.
[37] Nicholson and Sha, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 184.
[38] Philippe Gemond, *The Symbolic World of Egyptian Amulets*, 20.
[39] Philippe Gemond, *The Symbolic World of Egyptian Amulets*, 20.

about the person as a charm or preventative against evil, mischief disease, witchcraft, etc."[40]) but the Egyptians interpreted its characteristics broadly and it could be argued that a variety of objects are associated with amuletic qualities. "Indeed so deeply were the Egyptians imbued with the idea…of averting danger and disaster by means of magical figures and formulas, that it would be almost true to say that *all* their tomb furnishings and decorations were amuletic in origin."[41] Amulets were one of the original ways Egyptians protected themselves with what they believed were magical properties. For example, in tombs each canopic jar that contained a different body part had a deity associated with it for protection.[42] Magic became intertwined into Egyptians everyday lives, and afterlives, with amulets as the primary source.

In a review of the objects acquired by Reverend Murch, the author Arthur C. Mace creates a distinction between two groups of amulets in the collection, amulets from an early period around the sixth dynasty, and amulets from a late period around and after the eighteenth dynasty.[43] The "early" period amulets are particularly small, carved out of precious stones, and portray human or animal heads, or sometimes human hands, faces, or legs.[44] In the "late" period, amulets were not solely made out of precious stones, are not as small as the early amulets, and portray animals or humans that represent gods and goddesses.[45] For example, Sekhmet, the violent lion goddess who could annihilate her enemies was known to be able to bring plague as well as dissipate it and for this reason many amulets were made in her feline form. In the Reverend Murch's Collection, there are twenty-four types of amulets belonging to the "early" group and seventy-four belonging to the "late" group.[46] Because the feline headed amulet was

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[40] Philippe Gemond, *The Symbolic World of Egyptian Amulets*, 17.
[41] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 21.
[42] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 21.
[43] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 22.
[44] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 22.
[45] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 22.
[46] Arthur C. Mace, *The Murch Collection of Egyptian Antiquities*, 22.

created between the twenty- first and thirtieth dynasties, it would be categorized in the later group. This amulet is typical of the later group because this amulet is made of faience, not a type of precious metal, and it is in the form of an animal head that represents a goddess.

What is particular about the faience amulet in the Shadow of the Sphinx Exhibit is that it is an aegis amulet. An aegis is a symbol that combines the head of a deity with a broad collar.[47] Aegis ornaments are also associated with protection and safety. For example, "One was set at the prow and stern of every temple god's sacred barque, the head being that of the god or goddess in question."[48] Aegis amulets are only connected with a few deities, one being the cat-goddess Bastet. Other figures associated with aegis amulets include Tefnut, Mut, Hathor, Amen-Re, and Bes, all portrayed as their accompanying animals with a broad collar and the long tripartite wig.[49] More specifically, Bastet and Tefnut were shown with a sun-disc and uraeus atop their heads.[50] A typical aegis amulet consists of the head of the deity facing forward, there is a ring behind the collar for suspension in some form, and the color is usually blue-green or bronze.[51] The deities that were associated with aegis amulets all were powerful and could bring protection to their wearers, they all also had connections with fertility so in this instance women who wanted to bear children would also have worn them. The aegis amulet first appears in the New Kingdom, but is more associated with the Third Intermediate Period and after.[52]

The aegis was also associated with the menyet collar, a type of heavy beaded collar that was worn for adornment.[53] Because the collar was so heavy, a counterbalance located between

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[47] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[48] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[49] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[50] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[51] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[52] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[53] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.

the shoulder blades was required for it to stay in place and this was called a counterpoise.[54] This counterpoise was pendulum shaped but sometimes contained within this was an aegis, and one of the most popular forms "depicts at the top a lion goddess's head, either frontal or in profile, wearing a sun-disc or a human goddess's head set atop a large broad collar."[55] Because the counterpoise hung between the shoulder blades of the wearer, it makes sense that it would contain a protective aegis amulet since this is a vulnerable region of the body.[56] Counterpoises like these have been found depicting Bastet, Tefnut, Mut and Hathor, all of whom have associations to protection.[57]

The cat goddess Bastet and her counterpart Sekhmet were not interchangeable for the Egyptians, but they were undeniably linked. The museum label identifies the cat head depicted as either Bastet or Sekhmet, and there is no way to define if it was one or the other because they are deeply connected in every way. Bastet was the gentler of the two, a feline Protectress representing mothers and fertility.[58] Sekhmet was the violent goddess of war who devoured enemies of the Sun God.[59] Egyptians saw these two sides as inseparable, and this becomes a motif in Ancient Egyptian society. Bad is always connected to good, light to dark, and violent to peaceful.

Bastet was associated with many different things, one being fertility. She was sometimes depicted with kittens to show her association with motherhood.[60] Even so, and even though she was mother to the lion God Mihos, she was still considered a "virgin goddess."[61] Originally she

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[54] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[55] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 42.
[56] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[57] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[58] Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Aegis Amulet, 4 November 2012.
[59] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 34.
[60] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 32.
[61] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Sutton Publishing, 1984), 192.

was shown in the form of a lion, but in her later images she was shown as a cat.[62] This was probably due to the introduction of domestication. Domesticated cats were introduced from the West and South around 2100 BC.[63] As she transformed from a lion into a cat and became friendlier, her violence was transferred to her counterpart, Sekhmet.[64]

Though there were references to Bastet early in Egyptian history, it wasn't until the creation of Bubastis that she reached her full height in popularity. Bubastis was the Greek name for what the Egyptians referred to as Bast or the "House of Bastet." This was a city that had developed out of a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of Bastet.[65] According to the Greeks, the Egyptians were so fond of their domesticated cats that when one died they took the body to be embalmed and buried at Bubastis.[66] Cat mummies were also found in personal graves but were probably sacrifices to the gods rather than personal pets.[67]

The destructive and violent counterpart of Bastet was Sekhmet, depicted usually in leonine form. Sekhmet was the "fierce goddess of the Memphite Area, who symbolized the burning heat of the sun, and, as the sun-god's vengeful eye, destroyed his enemies, and brought plague and pestilence."[68] Because Sekhmet was related to the sun god and compared to the burning of the hot sun in the desert, she was usually depicted with a sun-disc atop her head, like the aegis amulet.[69] She was related to the Memphis area, and was part of what was referred to as the Memphite Triad.[70] This consisted of Sekhmet as the mother, Ptah (god of craftsmen and

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[62] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 192.
[63] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 192.
[64] Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1980), 43.
[65] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 192.
[66] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 193.
[67] Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Mummified Cat, Utica, 4 November 2012.
[68] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 34.
[69] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 34.
[70] John Baines, Leonard H. Lesko, and David P. Silverman, *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1991), 41.

architects) as the father and Nefertum (associated with the sunrise and rebirth) as the son.[71]

Although Sekhmet was violent, associated with war and rage, she could also drive away sickness. Moreover, doctors were often called Priests of Sekhmet.[72] Because she was so fierce in battle, the Egyptians thought she was the perfect goddess to rid their bodies of the demons that caused illness.[73] Because of Sekhmet's healing powers she was often depicted on amulets and used in prayers. A fragment of writing by a priest of Sekhmet states, "[he will not] depart (life) on his bed, he will not die on […] this incantation is spoken over an image of Sekhemet […] in a year of plague, it is an amulet […]".[74] So in addition to being the Goddess of war, Sekhmet was also the goddess of healing. People today would be confused by the notion of the destroyer who doubles as a healer, but for ancient Egyptians this was an important premise.[75]

Although Bastet and Sekhmet seem like two complete opposites, they are completely related, and most of the time indistinguishable from each other unless specifically marked. Both Bastet and Sekhmet are associated with the Sun, accounting for the sun disc atop the amulets head. They were both depicted on amulets to protect against disease or ensure fertility. Both goddesses were depicted with a feline head. Although there are some differences between the two, such as the primary location where they were worshipped, and most notably their different natures, this amulet could actually be either one of the two because they are so inextricably linked.

This particular feline headed amulet, whether it be a representation of Bastet or Sekhmet, was displayed in one of the first rooms of the museum exhibit. It was displayed with other tiny amulet pieces and it stood out from the rest because of its bold green-blue color and remarkable

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[71] Baines, Lesko, and Silverman, *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, 41.
[72] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 171.
[73] Barbara Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*, 171.
[74] Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1992), 120.
[75] Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 31.

detail. All of the pieces were approximately the same size so it was not overshadowed by the surrounding artifacts. Next to the glass display case there was a box of magnifying glasses. These were labeled and encouraged the viewer to take a closer look at the smaller artifacts. Even though you couldn't get extremely close to the pieces, the museum still encouraged the viewer to look at the beautiful detail work and absorb as much about the visual characteristics as possible from every angle.

The museum also included educational pamphlets to expand on various topics and make the exhibit more interactive for children. One such pamphlet focused on cats and was titled "See how many images of cats you can find in the exhibition." It also gave a brief historical background of cats in ancient Egypt. Although all the factual information was correct on this sheet, it could have been presented in a more visually stimulating way with less text and more images. The text also encouraged the viewer to think that Bastet was the most important cat goddess, and Sekhmet was only mentioned in passing. Sekhmet was equally important to Bastet in Egyptian culture and even though she was a "destructive force of the feline and was worshipped as the goddess of war and pestilence,"[76] she also played other important roles such as she also had the power to dispel pestilence, which this pamphlet doesn't mention.

There are many other examples of aegis amulets and amulets of Sekhmet or Bastet in general. The first example was a faience fragment of an amulet of Sekhmet from the Jacques-Edouard Berger Collection (see fig. 2). Though it is not an aegis amulet, there are some similarities between this and the original amulet in the Utica exhibit. The faces of the feline look very similar, with the same rounded ears and the same defined nose and long face. In addition both wear the tripartite wig and are made out of the same faience material. They both would've

[76] Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Shadow of the Sphinx Exhibit, "Cats Everywhere!" Informational publication, Utica, 4 November 2012.

been worn in the same way because their suspension rings are located behind the heads of the felines. However several things are missing from this amulet. There is no sun disc or uraeus, and there is no broad collar. Since it is a fragment it also looks like it has been broken below the chest, and below this might have once been a female body.

The second artifact that was strikingly similar to the Utica piece was from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (see fig. 3). It is an aegis amulet, but it is not in very good condition and has very little detail. However, the shape and material are exact matches to the original amulet. You can still make out the broad collar, tripartite wig, long face, and sun disc with uraeus atop the head. It is not clear which god or goddess the amulet is depicting because it is so worn, but the museum identifies it as either Bastet or Tefnut. Tefnut was a leonine goddess as well and was also portrayed on aegis amulets with a sun disc and uraeus. Because Egyptians had over one thousand deities, there weren't enough animal species for each deity to have his own unique animal counterpart.[77] For this reason, some animals were used for multiple gods and goddesses. Cats and lions were particularly popular because of the Egyptian's fondness for felines. This makes it very hard to distinguish a specific god or goddess when looking at a feline headed amulet.

Bastet and Sekhmet were both also sometimes portrayed as a figure with a woman's body and the head of a feline, as seen in a Bastet amulet from the Metropolitan Museum (see fig. 4). This is very different from the aegis amulet because it shows the figure of Bastet seated in a chair and holding a sistrum. Because Bastet was additionally associated with drinking and festivities, she was often seen holding a sistrum, which was a type of musical instrument.[78] Though the two amulets look very different, there are several similarities. They both were created in the

[77] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 14.
[78] Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 32.

Ptolemaic period so we know that the religious philosophy was basically the same at the time they were created. They are also both made from faience and made to be suspended somewhere on the person, you can see in the Metropolitan example the ring in which some sort of cord would have fit through is located behind Bastet's head. In addition, we can see the similarity of the long feline faces and the tripartite wig themes repeated.

A fourth object, similar in that it represents Sekhmet, is also an amulet made out of faience (see fig. 5). The relative abundance of faience amulets in a few select museums shows the popularity of the material in amulet making. This amulet again does not represent an aegis but shows the body of a woman with only the head of a lioness. The figure is in a standing position but if broken off above the waist the head and upper torso look similar to the fragment of the Sekhmet amulet (see fig.2). This head and face definitely look more leonine in terms of characteristics, and roughly carved. The eyes are large gouged out holes similar to the large nostrils. The ears are definitely more rounded like a lioness rather than a domesticated house cat. However, the slender body of the figure is sleek and delicate in comparison to the face. This artifact is unique to the other four examples but there are still some distinct similarities between this figure and the original amulet.

The feline headed aegis amulet in the Shadow of the Sphinx Exhibit is an excellent example of how important protective amulets were in the lives of Egyptian inhabitants. Even in the Ptolemaic period, traditions of magic and different gods and goddesses continued to be at the forefront of society. The amulet's faience material, aegis structure, and portrayal of a feline headed goddess (either Bastet or Sekhmet) are exemplary as to what would have been popular at the time. In turn, through understanding the different aspects of the amulet we can learn the importance of technologies (like faience production), the significance of magical protection, (in a

time where disease and rampant and death was imminent), and the continued tradition of polytheism (where different gods and goddesses held specific reputations).

Fig. 1. Aegis Amulet with the Head of a Feline Goddess Late Ptolemaic Period; "Shadow of the Sphinx Exhibit"; *Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute*; http://www.mwpai.org/museum-of-art/museum-of-art-calendar/shadow-of-the-sphinx/, 20 November 2012; Web.

Fig. 2. Fragment of an Amulet of Sekhmet; "World Art Treasures"; *Foundation Jacques-Edouard Berger*; http://www.bergerfoundation.ch/picasa/jeb_eg.html, 20 November 2012; Web.

Fig. 3. Aegis Amulet; “Collections”; *Museum of Fine Arts Boston*; http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/aegis-amulet-336207, 20 November 2012; Web.

Fig. 4. Amulet, Bastet, Sistrum; “Collections”; *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*; http://metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/100010215, 20 November 2012; Web.

Fig. 5. Sekhmet Amulet; “Educators Online”; *Museum of Fine ArtsBoston*

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