

Felines and Female Divinities: The Association of Cats with Goddesses, Ancient and Contemporary¹

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Abstract

From Neolithic sites in Anatolia, to Sumer, Crete, Egypt, Greece and India, cats, great and small, have been associated with female figures and divinities. Their power, intelligent self-awareness, and mysterious shape-shifting characteristics have exerted a profound influence on humankind. But, why divine females, in particular, should have become so closely associated with felines is a question that has not been given sufficient attention. It appears that the concept of virginity holds the key: only powerful, autonomous goddesses, free of male control, were linked with felines. The characteristics of these divine females echo those of cats: independence, strength, self-reliance, elegance, and a willingness to allow themselves to be tamed strictly on their own terms. This ancient respect for felines and their especial link with women, not only is a reminder that “spirit” pervades the entire natural world, that there is a seamless link between human and non-human, but that these ancient goddesses can inspire all women to re-claim that proud assertiveness and courage epitomized by these regal creatures.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
(William Blake)

Introduction

On the front pediment of a simple, south Indian-style temple dedicated to the

Dravidian Goddess Mariamman in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, the Goddess is shown in brightly painted “folksy” relief seated on a tiger, while inside the temple is a picture of the Goddess Durga riding on a lion, attacking the Buffalo Demon, Mahisasura.

A seal of the Sumerian Goddess Inanna has her foot resting on a lion, while the Roman Goddess Cybele rides in a chariot drawn by two enormously powerful lions. A Minoan goddess in the Herakleion Museum, Crete, is depicted on a seal standing on a mountain with two lions rearing up on either side of her, and the figure of the “little snake Goddess” has a cat seated on her head. The tall bronze statue of the Egyptian Goddess Bastet shows the elegant figure of a human woman with the head of a cat, sheltering four tiny kittens at her feet.

What do all these female divinities have in common, and why are so many goddesses from so many, far-apart, seemingly unrelated ancient cultures, associated with felines?

Cats are not the only animals associated with goddesses, since as far back as the Bronze Age, female deities have been associated with, or depicted as, birds, fish, butterflies, snakes, cows, dogs and other creatures (Gimbutas 1989).

But the cat, especially the great cats, appear to have been regarded as having a special affinity with female divinity, particularly those ancient, great Mother figures, creator and protector of the natural world, strong, autonomous goddesses whose characters were regarded as emulating those regal, powerful, beautiful and mysterious creatures, the great felines.

Baring and Cashford claim that,

One of the most archaic images of the creative and destructive force of the goddess was the lion . . . The lion’s relation with the goddess has persisted through the ages . . . the lion is inseparable from the image of the Goddess . . . (1991: 281, 391)

The lion has through the ages had a profound effect on the human psyche, revered for its ferocity, strength, and beauty. Because of its regal character, it has frequently been described as “king of the beasts” and associated with royalty. Numerous religious figures and leaders were regarded as symbolizing the characteristics of the lion, for example, Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) was often depicted wearing a lion’s head helmet; the Indian emperor Ashoka (d. c.232 BCE) whose pillar has a four-faced lion; and Christ, described as The Lion of Judah. The constellation Leo appears in the northern hemisphere in the hottest summer months of July/August, confirming the lion’s association with the strength and life-giving protective power of the sun.

However, there appears to be considerable evidence indicating that great cats were associated with female divinity and royalty long before being appropriated by

kingship and male gods. Again, Baring and Cashford point to this:

Lions are the guardians of temples all over the world, and everywhere the Goddess is conceived seated upon a throne of lions – from seventh-millennium-BC Anatolia to second-millennium-AD Europe in the figure of the Virgin Mary. (1991:30)

Earliest Links of Felines and Goddesses

It seems that the earliest associations of the lion with female figures might be traced to Paleolithic times in France where caves display paintings of lionesses in contexts which might suggest a ritual connection (Johnson 1994: 100). The cave of Pech Merle which displays breast-shaped stalactites with protrusions resembling nipples highlighted with black and red paint, contains a crowned, red figure which has been named the Lion Queen, while Les Trois Freres cave has a chamber apparently guarded by the engraving of a large-eyed lioness, as well as other engravings of a lioness and her cub, and other lions (Streep 1994: 41; Baring & Cashford 1991: 30). However, there is no incontrovertible evidence of the veneration of a Mother deity at this stage of pre-history, and some scholars would dispute connecting these sites with a goddess (Ruether 2005: 13-14).

The Neolithic town of Catalhoyuk in Anatolia (Turkey), inhabited from 7000-5700 BCE, revealed many images of female anatomy and sexuality, one in particular depicting a voluptuous female figure seated on a throne, possibly in the act of giving birth, her arms resting on the backs of two leopards supporting her. Although even the excavator James Mellaart believed this figure represented a Mother deity (Stone 1976: 15), more recently this has been disputed (Hodder 2004: 68f; Ruether 2005: 28f). Whether or not this figure was attributed divine status, if she is indeed giving birth, it would probably be the first recorded instance of the female cat (here, leopards) regarded as symbolic of the fierce yet tender and protective mother of her offspring, seen in her role as birth companion to all women.

The Neolithic Anatolian site of Hacilar, dated from c. 7000-5000 BCE, yielded approximately 45 female figurines of young and older women, many naked, some probably pregnant, others in the process of giving birth, some with hands cupped round large breasts (Roller 1999: 34-35). A number of these women are depicted on thrones supported by leopards or cradling leopards to their breasts. Lynn Roller believes that there is, here, an obvious emphasis on womanhood, especially motherhood, although nothing very clearly suggests that the figures were considered divine or used in an explicitly religious context. However, she does say, “evidence from both sites suggests that powerful female figures played a role in the religious consciousness of the community (ibid: 28). She further draws attention to the fact that both at Catalhoyuk and Hacilar women were associated with felines, particularly

leopards, which she believes indicates a close connection between predators and human fertility and the protection of mothers and children. She comments on “the desire for mastery over the natural environment symbolized by taming these fierce animals”, as well as “the wish to extend the power represented by animals such as wild felines to agricultural prosperity and fecundity” (1999: 36-37). She suggests that this early connection of female images of power, strength and awe with felines is an indication of “a belief system in the process of construction”, which later developed into the cult of the Phrygian Mother Goddess, Kybele/Magna Mater (1999: 38-39).²

Possibly originally from Babylon, tentatively dated c. 3000 BCE, is a unique female figure with the head of a lioness (Johnson 1994: 103). Baring and Cashford record a carved bowl, dated c.2700-2500 BCE from NE Iraq showing a female divinity surrounded by animals as well as a star, the crescent moon, water, serpents, and, very prominently, two leopards with upraised tails at her feet (1991: 188-9).

It is interesting, and intriguing, that at Catalhoyuk, Hacilar, and in many other sites in “Old Europe”, female images and sculptures appear to outnumber male figures (Baring & Cashford 1991: 84; Gimbutas 1989), and whether they are divine figures or not, they certainly indicate a very early association of females with felines.

Inanna

The Goddess Inanna, worshipped as Great Goddess of Sumer from early in the 3rd to the 1st millennium BCE, the Bronze Age, was also known as the Goddess Ishtar in Babylon during the last millennium BCE. Inanna’s most well-known title was “Queen of Heaven”, sometimes “Virgin Queen of Heaven and Earth”, controller of the orderly movement of the natural order, heavenly and earthly. Her all-encompassing, unchallenged power is also reflected in titles such as “Light of the World”, “Righteous Judge”, “Opener of the Womb”, “The Green One” and “Loud Thundering Storm” (Baring & Cashford 1991: 176). She was particularly venerated for her dominion over the fertility of crops and animals, the great giver and protector of life (Kinsley, 1989: 113f). Another of her names was “Labbatu”, meaning lioness (Husain 2003: 114).

Her lion-like nature is personified in a description by Ruether who says she “was typically pictured as impetuous, imperious, ambitious, ready to fight for her own prerogatives, and generally succeeding in her exploits (2005: 49). Her hymns celebrate her awesome, insatiable sexuality, demanding the attentions of the God Dumuzi to enable her to continue to bless the world with her life-giving powers. Although associated with the dying and rising Dumuzi as consort, their sexual union ensuring the continued fertility and abundance of crops, and animals, this in no way appears to challenge her supremacy. In this role she was believed to participate in the, probably annual, sacred marriage rite with Dumuzi, whose role was in all likelihood

performed by the king, while a priestess acted the part of the Goddess. Her role as wife and mother is not emphasized, but rather her autonomous, awesome sexuality (Ruether 2005: 50). Together with her Babylonian manifestation Ishtar, she was venerated as supreme deity, unrivaled, respected and revered by all other divinities (Kinsley 1989: 129).

However, despite her association with the orderly and harmonious cycles of nature, she was also said to behave at times in a dangerously disruptive and violent fashion, causing destruction through tempestuous storms, winds, floods, and searing heat. She was described as roaring in anger, charging at the earth and smiting it with her terrible countenance (Kinsley 1989: 130-131). So, her sexuality and creativity were not merely gentle and nurturing, but at times destructively violent and terrifying, displaying the “co-occurrence of opposites” characteristic of many female divinities (Gross 1978; King 1989: 152). Controller of life and death, she was ever changing and yet ever the same.

Although she was often portrayed in the role of lover, Kinsley points out that,

She is rarely described in the roles of helpmeet, wife, or mother. She is not a patient, responsible type of being . . . She is often described as acting violently, aggressively, or impetuously. She is, in short, identified with life in all its rambunctious, teeming, vigorous manifestations and bubblings. (Kingsley 1989: 137-8)

Her violent nature is also demonstrated in her love of battle, compared with a lion, roaring in heaven and earth: “Like an awesome lion you annihilated with your venom the hostile and the disobedient” (Kingsley 1989: 133).

It is not surprising, then, that a seal relief of Inanna depicts her with her staff or wand, her right foot raised and resting on the back of a lion (*ibid.*: 132), and numerous other such seals of both Inanna and Ishtar show them standing on or riding a lion (Baring & Cashford 1991: 192; 200; 202; 204; 217).

Ishtar’s association with the lion is dramatically illustrated in Babylon’s great Ishtar Gate, dedicated to this Goddess, protector of the palace, and the imposing processional way, with blue glazed bricks decorated with dozens of figures of lions.

Cybele

Yet another female divinity strongly associated with lions was Cybele who has associations with a Neo-Hittite Goddess, Kubaba, of Bronze Age origin (c. mid 2nd millennium BCE), and became the prominent female divinity in Phrygia (Asia Minor) at the beginning of the first millennium BCE (Roller 1999:45-8, 67). Cybele’s association with lions is evidence of her powerful untamed nature, lover of all wild things, Mistress of the Animals (Ruether 2005: 100; Esther Harding 1982: 49).

Her name Kybele (Greek) and Cybele (Latin) is connected with mountains, so that she was known as “the Mother of the Mountain” (Roller 1999: 68).

Substantial archeological evidence of the Phrygian Mother Goddess, consisting of sculptures, monuments, and places of worship, clearly demonstrate her dominant status as “Matar”, Mother of the state in that ancient civilization (Roller 1999: 64, 66, 71f, 111). Numerous monuments cut into the rock in the highland of Phrygia, display representations of the Goddess, the so-called Arslankaya or “lion rock” showing her surrounded by huge lions, as well as holding a lion cub (Roller 1999: 85-6, 109-110). Roller maintains that the lions indicated her sharing of their strength, acted as her guardians, allowed her to tame them, demonstrating her control of the animal world (1999: 109-110). Roller points out that as well as her close association with lions, the Phrygian Mother was also accompanied by raptors, emphasising her as a figure of power and protection, able to bestow on her devotees some ability to control the tumultuous forces of nature, thus providing defence against the unknown (1999: 110, 114).

From Anatolia the worship of Cybele spread to Greece where she was known as Meter Kybele, also addressed as Meter Theon (Mother of the gods), her veneration there being well established by the 6th century BCE (Roller 1999: 119). Here her connection with lions becomes even more clearly evident (ibid: 109). A 5th century temple dedicated to her in Athens contained a depiction of a seated Kybele flanked by lions, while a 4th century sculpture shows her seated on her throne with a lion lying on her lap, and at Delphi the frieze of the Treasury (550-525 BCE) depicts her in a chariot drawn by lions, in her protective role, defending Olympus from the Giants (Baring & Cashford 1991: 394). Her most characteristic image was of her seated on a throne with a lion, either standing at her side or seated on her lap (Roller 1999: 150), indicative of her pre-eminent status as mother of all gods and all humanity: Mother Earth (Roller 1999: 141, 145, 169-170). Of the Greek Kybele, Roller says, “she was a vivid and forceful character, at home in the mountains with predators and clashing castanets and tympana” (1999: 139). Her rites involved nocturnal gatherings of mainly women where the beating of the tympanum evoked ecstatic trances (Roller 1999: 156-7; 181-3; Ruether 2005: 100).

Roller quotes the fourteenth Homeric hymn of praise which expresses common beliefs, particularly her association with lions:

Mother of all gods and human beings; she takes pleasure in the resounding of castanets and tympana and the roar of flutes, the cry of wolves and bright-eyed lions, the echoing mountains and the wooded glens . . . (1991: 122)

When her cult spread to Rome, she was named “Magna Mater”, honoured with a temple on the Capitoline Hill (ibid: 272-4) which survived until the 5th century CE,

numerous emperors, such as Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE) and Claudius (10 BCE-54 CE), venerating her as the supreme divinity of the empire (Roller 1999: 309, 315), and protector of the city (Roller 1999: 285).

The Roman Cybele was also depicted as having the power to tame the wildness of lions, so that they acted as her willing companions, displaying her power and dominance over nature (Roller 1999: 310). As her veneration grew, so the accompanying rituals became more elaborate. Her popular and lively Spring festival was celebrated by an image of her on a chariot drawn by two huge lions being carried aloft by her priests through the streets of Rome, accompanied by devotees in rapturous trances, sometimes flagellating and castrating themselves, reminiscent of the self-castration of Attis, her lover (Roller 1999: 290, 297; Baring & Cashford 1991: 400, 405). A 2nd century BCE bronze sculpture of this chariot, housed in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, preserves a powerful image of her regal, sovereign dignity with her accompanying felines (Roller 1999: 295).

She was yet another goddess who stood independent of men, although in the Hellenistic period she became associated with her young lover Attis, largely a Greek creation (Roller 1999: 113-4, 177-8; Ruether 2005: 101), but he appears to have remained subordinate, in no way challenging her supreme status. His self-castration, imitated by Cybele's priests, suggests her ability to tame and control those males devoted to her, emphasizing their subservient status. The castration of priests and acolytes of powerful goddesses was relatively common, possibly to demonstrate their chastity and complete devotion, whereas the emasculation could represent the male attempt to become women in order to achieve something of the enormous spiritual power and fertility of these divine females (Walker 1983: 142ff).

Minoan Crete

Considerable evidence suggests that the religion of Minoan Crete was goddess-centred, venerating the Great Mother of Life, manifest in the beauty, vitality and power of the natural world, celebrated in vibrant frescoes, statues, pottery, seals and jewellery. From their depiction in the many frescoes discovered, it would appear that women enjoyed high esteem in Minoan society.

The island of Crete was settled from c.6000 BCE by explorers from Anatolia who possibly brought knowledge of female divinities from Catalhoyuk. The Minoan Goddesses were also associated with a number of sacred animals, for example the bull, doves, snakes and felines. No male divinities have been identified in early Minoan sites, and although the later Goddess appears to have been associated with a young male consort at certain times of the year, he was regarded as her inferior, as evidenced by his small size in relation to the Goddess (Gadon 1989: 102). These male figures are also often depicted in reverential postures, suggestive of devotees paying homage to the Goddess (Baring & Cashford 1991: 131-3). As in Old

Europe, female divine figures outnumber male figures (Gimbutas 1999: 149; Pomeroy 1976: 15).

Interestingly, the small, bare-breasted Minoan faience figure, from the palace of Knossos, commonly referred to as the small Snake Goddess (c. 1600-1580 BCE), has a cat or leopard seated on her head. Two other figures in the Heraklion Museum, a small circular shrine or sanctuary for the Goddess has a striped reclining cat, among other figures, on the roof, apparently in a guardian capacity, and a seal from Knossos depicting the Goddess on a mountain peak, standing between what appear to be two guardian lions rearing up protectively and perhaps adoringly, on either side of her, suggests her power over all untamed nature (Roller 1999: 134). Numerous other seals show the Goddess flanked by lions. The two "Snake Goddesses" apparently have some sexual connotation, their bare breasts pushed into prominence by their tight bodices, suggestive of great confidence in their powers of fertility, as well as of nurturance. Like the snakes the small Goddess holds high, cats, because of their strength and ferocity, would also be regarded as guardians and fierce protectors of her shrines. Kinsley suggests that the Minoan Goddess was probably a tutelary figure, guardian of the house, city or palace (1989: 141).

The mythological lion-like griffins, associated with the palace of Knossos, were possibly fierce guardians of the sacred places associated with the Goddess.

As great Earth Mother, Lady of mountains and cave sanctuaries, symbolic of her life-giving womb, she was the sacred virgin, supreme giver and protector of life. She was yet another Goddess regarded as custodian of the birthing process (Gadon 1989: 91), guarded and accompanied by lions, who epitomized the powerful and good, nurturing mother.

Egypt

It is in ancient Egypt that felines really come into their own as venerated sacred animals, as well as being valued and admired in the domestic setting. From very early times cats played a prominent and significant role in Egyptian society and religion. Their association with a number of female deities over many centuries is, therefore, not surprising, nor the fact that the earliest domestic cats were found in Egypt.

Egyptians frequently depicted deities in animal form, such as the bull, ibis, ram, falcon, jackal, the distinction between humans and animals, the natural and supernatural spheres, not clearly recognised, with no separate category identified for non-human animals. But the cat's popularity exceeded that of all other animals, and eventually extended beyond the borders of Egypt (Malek 2006: 73).

The earliest remains of a cat in Egypt was found at Mostagedda in Middle Egypt, dated sometime before 4000 BCE (ibid: 45). Wall paintings, relief work and sculpture, reveal the unique and closely observed relationship between cats and humans in ancient Egyptian society. A cat-shaped alabaster vessel, possibly

used to hold cosmetic oil, c. 1890-1801 BCE, is the earliest larger three-dimensional representation of a cat (Malek 2006: 52). Of slightly later date is a blue faience statuette of a cat with a spotted coat from c.1850-1650 BCE (Malek 2006: 53).

Gradually, from about 2000 BCE, frequently occurring depictions of cats in domestic contexts show increasing contact with humans, becoming more at ease in Egyptian homes. The first depiction of a cat in a domestic context appears in a tomb at Beni Hasan dating to approximately 1950 BCE, and by 1450 BCE cats were comfortably ensconced as valued domestic pets. The cat in the tomb painting is shown confronting a rat, indicating their valued ability to protect the home and crops from pests (Malek 2006: 49).

What probably happened is that, between 4000 and 2000 BCE, as increasing quantities of grain were stored in settled communities and towns, and were targeted by rodents, so wild cats strayed into these settlements, attracted by easy pickings (ibid: 53-4). As people observed the cats' ability to protect their valuable granaries, and keep poisonous snakes at bay, so they were encouraged, by the leaving out of scraps of food, until some mutually dependent relationship was established. With their ability to offer protection against famine, one of the greatest threats to ancient Egyptian survival, cats soon demonstrated their ability to offer more valuable services than other pets such as dogs, baboons and monkeys. Ever opportunistic, they recognised the benefits of additional sources of food and comfort within houses, allowing humans to exert some influence over their lives. Sedentary farming communities created conditions which led to the domestication of the cat, although it has always maintained considerable independence, agreeing, as it were, to live with humans on its own terms, a trait unknown in other domesticated animals.

Increasingly, they are illustrated in charming indoor scenes, enjoying the comforts, as well as outdoors, enthusiastically accompanying their human families on hunting trips. Cats are commonly shown seated under the chairs of women, whereas dogs were more often placed under the husband's chair, demonstrating the general association of cats with women (ibid: 57-61). Many paintings show remarkable attention to detail, striped and spotted coats being beautifully executed, and sometimes with considerable humour. As Malek comments: "The artist sometimes succeeded superbly in conveying the rather haughtily graceful dignity and aloofness of the animal . . ." (2006: 101).

It was not simply the cat's charm and usefulness in the domestic context which so infatuated the Egyptians, but its more mystical, "spiritual" grace, strength, dexterity, nocturnal prowess with shining all-seeing eyes, and its "shape-shifting" abilities, apparently capable of disappearing and re-appearing at will. Its cunning, stealth, and speed as a hunter would have been much admired, with attempts to emulate its skills. This type of supernatural aura possibly contributed to its becoming associated with divinity, worthy of reverence and veneration (Malek 2006: 75).

The cat also became a symbol of eternity because of its habit of curling up to

sleep with its head tucked round to meet its tail, in a perfect circle, reminiscent of the sacred ouroboros, World Serpent, swallowing its tail, no beginning and no end (Moore 1999: 14).

The Egyptian name for the cat was the onomatopoeic “mau/miu”, (s)he who mews, also meaning “to see”, a reference to the all-seeing eyes of the God Re, and to the remarkable eyesight of cats, especially their night vision, and glowing eyes (Malek 2006: 25; Saunders 1991: 21).

In Egypt a transformation occurs: whereas in other ancient cultures the goddess is depicted as associated with, and in the presence of, cats, here the goddess actually becomes a cat.

Possibly the oldest of Egyptian cat goddesses is Sekhmet (“Powerful”) of Memphis, from the old Kingdom, c.2600 BCE, depicted as a lioness-headed woman, often regally seated on a throne, the sun disc on her head. Because of their obvious love of the sun, cats became associated with the sun, sometimes regarded as the daughter of the sun god, Re, where they symbolized the fierce and devouring heat, strength and rage of the sun. Their mothering, life-preserving qualities further emphasized an affinity with the life-giving sun.

Neumann points to the association of the sun with fire and the hearth, and so with food preparation (1963: 284-5). The hearth as sacred heart of the home is the prime symbol of transformation, of raw food to cooked, provider of sustenance and warmth, further emphasizing the protective, nurturing qualities of the cat goddesses. The Goddess as Lady of Transformation, further reveals her identification with the mysterious, ever metamorphosing cat, guardian of the grain stores, protector and lover of the hearth.

The eye of the sun was also depicted as burning and judging, so this goddess was regarded as a deity of fate, holding human destiny in her hands (Johnson, 1994: 106). In this role she was closely connected to the king, who was believed, at times, to manifest himself in the form of a cat. So enamored was the Pharaoh Amenhotep III with Sekhmet, that he set up hundreds of statues of her in the temple precincts of her sister cat goddess, Mut (Hart 1999: 128-9, 187).

The lion had long been associated with royalty, probably from c. 2647 BCE. Panthers and leopards, admired for their beauty, strength and speed, as well as their protective ferocity, were often kept as royal pets, and regarded as guardians, evidenced by the sphinxes placed at gateways and entrances to holy sites (cf. the great sphinx, “guardian” of the pyramid of King Khafra 2518-2493 BCE).

Sekhmet’s royal associations resulted in the emphasis of her warlike, warrior status, believed to assist the king’s unvanquishable heroism in battle, also embodied by her ferocious lioness character. Like the Hindu Durga, one myth relates her slaughtering and drinking the blood of thousands of adversaries. One of her titles was “Lady of bright red linen”, reminder of the blood of her conquered enemies (Hart 1999: 188). Her ferocious and potentially destructive power was believed to

require appeasement and propitiation.

In addition to Sekhmet's ferocity, appealed to for protection by her faithful devotees, she was strongly linked to life and its preservation, often holding the *ankh* in her hand, and called "Lady of Life" acknowledgement that her ability to control the rodent population meant she not only kept pestilence at bay, but also possessed healing qualities (Hart 1999: 189). Like many of the Hindu indigenous deities, she was associated with both causing and curing disease.

A cat-like goddess called Mafdet, associated with the female panther whose claws were reputedly lethal to snakes and scorpions, thus her power to protect from them, is another of the early cat-headed goddess dated from c. 2340 BCE (Malek 2006; Hart 1999: 117).

Pakhet, "she who snatches" or "the tearer", was another lioness Goddess feared and revered for her ferocious strength. Renowned for her sharp claws, and her skill as a night huntress, it is not surprising that later Greek settlers linked her to Artemis (Hart 1999: 168).

Mut, paramount goddess of Thebes, her name with the same root as "mother", was frequently depicted as lioness-headed, also worshiped in her milder cat form. Commonly venerated as one of the pharaoh's mothers, she supplanted the Goddess Amaunet to become the chief wife of the God Amun (Hart 1999: 128). This is the first example I have encountered of a feline goddess being attributed a consort role, but there is no evidence that she was subservient to the male deity, apparently being worshiped alongside him as an equally powerful divinity (*ibid*: 56). She probably preceded the male god, as she was sometimes referred as the mother of all deities.

Perhaps the best-known cat goddess is Bastet, possibly a later development of Sekhmet, associated with her as early as c.1850 BCE. Like her older sister, her roots reach back to mythology linking her to Re the Sun God whose cult center was at Heliopolis ("sun city"). She also had close links to the king, originally depicted as a lioness, associated with Re's rage and vengeance. Despite her ferocity, she was also described as "mother and nurse of the king" (Capel & Markoe 1996: 140).

An early representation of Bastet dated to c.2800 BCE shows her as a woman with a lioness's head, a sceptre in one hand and an *ankh* symbol of life in the other. Another early appearance from c.2600 BCE is on the temple of King Khafre at Giza (Hart 1999: 54). But by approximately 1000 BCE she becomes a cat goddess, a gentler, nurturing, "quintessential Mother" (Johnson 1994: 106).

Bastet shared Sekhmet's fierce lion character, as well as showing her domesticated female-cat nature, her more protective, gentle side. Malek points out that the Egyptians commonly perceived reality in terms of opposites, the Goddesses Sekhmet and Bastet frequently regarded as complementary opposites, expressed in such claims as, "She rages like Sekhmet and she is friendly like Bastet", but eventually they came to be seen as two aspects of the same Goddess, dangerous and threatening, as well as peaceful and protective (Malek 2006: 95).

Bastet reflected the sexual energy and fecundity of the female cat, and its procreative functions, which increased her popularity, frequently appealed to for help with human problems. Like other goddesses linked with cats, she was particularly associated with conception and birth, and appealed to by women for protection at these times in their lives (Capel & Markoe 1996: 139).

All acts of birthing tended to be seen as having sacred significance, imitating the original act of creation (Gimbutus 1999: 11). All life appeared to emanate from the great womb of a female divinity. During the act of birth human women came closest to the divine Mother, sharing her primordial life-giving power.

During the first millennium BCE, at the city of Bubastis in the Nile Delta, the veneration of the Goddess Bastet reached its zenith. Her temple was considerably extended during the reign of King Osorkon I between 924 and 889 BCE, resulting in an enormous growth of her cult. Although her name means “She of the city of Bast”, she was soon linked with other localities such as Memphis (Malek 2006: 94-95).

Dozens of statues of Bastet, sometimes simply called Bast, show her as a seated lion or as a slim, elegant lady with the head of a cat, often wearing earrings, sometimes clothed in a narrow-skirted, patterned dress (Capel & Markoe 1996: 140; Malek 2006: 105). Sometimes she is depicted as a graceful and regal-looking cat, sitting upright, adorned with nose-ring and earrings. Other statues show her with four tiny kittens being sheltered at the feet of this fertile and fiercely protective Mother.

Bubastis was the site of her elaborate festival, one of the largest and most popular in the country, involving a lively and noisy procession where the image of the deity was brought out of her temple and transported on a barge along the Nile, paraded in public for all to see (Malek 2006: 98).

In the 5th century BCE the Greek traveller Herodotus described one such festival, claiming the temple as the most beautiful in all Egypt, with crowds of pilgrims, which he estimated to number about 700 000 devotees, on river boats wending their way to the city, making music, joyfully singing and clapping their hands (Malek 2006: 98). Much feasting and the consumption of large quantities of wine, created a distinctly licentious and bawdy element.

The discovery of large numbers of bronze statuettes of cats, suggests they were offered at the shrines of Bastet as memorials of pilgrimages, as tokens of gratitude for favours granted, or in expectation of benefits requested from the Goddess, such as healing and success. The most common form was the seated cat, tail neatly curved round the front paws, often with ears pierced with silver and gold rings, sometimes an image of the scarab beetle indicating the cat’s association with the sun-god, carved between the ears.

Small cat amulets were worn close to the body as protection from a variety of hazards, like snake bites and scorpion stings (Malek 2006: 79). Cat statuettes may have been kept in homes as protection against pestilence and poverty.

Extensive cat cemeteries containing the mummified remains of tens of thousands of cats have been excavated near the Bastet temple, probably dating from c.900 BCE. Most of these cats apparently came from catteries attached to the temple, cared for by the attendants there, although some were undoubtedly much-valued domestic pets (Malek 2006: 126). The beautifully wrapped mummies with linen bandages forming geometric patterns, often have painted faces depicting quizzical, almost humorous, expressions, seemingly reflecting the respect and affection afforded these sacred felines. During the Ptolemaic (332-30 BCE) period the popularity of the cat reached its height with thousands of mummified cats buried in cemeteries throughout Egypt (Malek 2006: 128).

The Greeks identified Bastet with Artemis/Diana, sometimes referred to as the Mother of Cats (Walker 1983: 93). So popular was the worship of Bastet that it survived until the late 4th century CE when the emperor Theodosius banned all religions other than Christianity.

Canaanite Goddesses

Lilith was a dark form of the goddess from Sumer, Belit-ili, known to the Canaanites as Baalat, the “Divine Lady”, and later familiar to the Hebrews in Israel. Connected with death and the underworld, she is sometimes accompanied by owls, creatures of the night and regeneration. A Sumerian terra-cotta relief of c.2300 BCE shows her with two owls, standing on two lions, or a two-headed lion (Gadon 1989: 123-4).

Patriarchal Hebrew folklore knew her as the first wife of Adam who refused to be submissive to him, particularly expressing her unwillingness to submit to the male superior position in their love making (Ruether 1985: 71, 73; Stone 1976: 158-9). So she was banished, and replaced by the more subservient Eve. Later she was demonized by the Hebrews, reputedly attacking women in childbirth and stealing their children, a reversal of the usual function of the protective goddess (Ruether 1985: 64). Her daughters, the lilim, were believed to copulate with men at night, causing sexual dreams. Various charms and amulets were devised to protect young males from their attentions. The lions associated with Lilith are probably symbolic of her autonomous status, and refusal to defer to male authority.

The Greeks adopted the lilim, calling them Daughters of Hecate, and Christians later regarded them as succubi, Night Hags who tormented men in their sleep, especially celibate monks (Walker 1983: 541-2).

The Canaanite Goddess, Asherah, was one of the oldest goddesses of the Middle East regarded as primal Mother of the gods (Ruether 2005: 57) and commonly referred to as “Lion Lady” (Gadon 1989: 173). A cult stand, possibly to hold incense, dated to the 10th century BCE and found at Taanach, depicts her standing and holding the ears of two ferocious-looking lions (ibid: 173-4).

Astarte (Ashtoreth in Hebrew) was another early Canaanite deity whose ancient

shrine at Byblos predated the arrival of the Hebrews (Baring & Cashford 1991: 427). The meaning of her name was connected to “womb”, reflecting her association with fertility (ibid. 1991: 460). She became Goddess of Sidon, in Phoenicia, often called “Queen of Heaven” and “Virgin of the Sea”, regarded as the guardian of the prosperity of this rich sea port (Stone 1976: 160-162). A 6th century BCE sarcophagus from Cyprus shows four figures of Astarte offering their nourishing breasts to the departed soul, as well as having two griffins or sphinx-like creatures on the lid (Getty 1990: 70-1). In approximately the 10th century BCE the Old Testament condemns numerous kings, including Solomon, for their veneration of her (I Kings 11:5; Gadon 1989: 182).

The Goddess Anath, daughter of Asherah, known as “the Maiden”, and “Virgin Daughter of Palestine” was a goddess of the hunt and of war (Ruether 2005: 59), shown in an Egyptian relief with a head of a lion, echoing that of the Goddess Sekhmet (Baring & Cashford 1991: 457). Although frequently depicted as the partner of Baal, she was not his wife, and at times acted independently, thus retaining considerable autonomy (Ruether 2005: 61).

These Semitic goddesses were all associated with the male deities El and Baal, but the female divinities retained their independence, acting as assertive protectors (like their feline familiars) of the males (Husain 2003: 82-3). Often the goddesses were venerated as controlling procreation and maintaining the continuation of all life, rather than the male divinities.

Qetesh/Qadesh was another of the Middle-Eastern goddesses, her name possibly meaning “holy” (Hart 1999: 178). Like her sister deities, Astarte and Anath, she was associated with the fertility of both Earth and humans, and so connected with the sacred marriage ritual. Commonly known as “Lady of Heaven”, she was usually depicted standing naked on the back of a lion, offering erotic symbols of fertility to her devotees (Baring & Cashford 1991: 458-9). The Egyptians of the New Kingdom (c.1567-1085) adopted her as a symbol of procreation, later pairing her with Min, an ancient agricultural deity noted for his powers of fecundity and regeneration (Hart 1999: 178).

The Hebrew Bible condemned all rival deities, these strong independent goddesses being viewed with particular loathing as the greatest threat to the patriarchal Hebrew attempt to impose the worship of a single male deity on the nation, including the claim that their male god was the sole source of creation, thus appropriating belief in the female divinity’s original act of birthing/creation (Ruether 1985: 38, 41), and excluding women from participation in public ritual (Stone 1876: 160). Their prophets condemned the nation of Israel, envisioned as female, for reneging on their covenant with Yahweh and emulating the characteristics of these forceful, autonomous, voraciously sexual goddesses (Ruether 2005: 82).

Greek Goddesses

Artemis

A more recent epiphany of earlier nature goddesses is the Greek Goddess Artemis, Mistress of the Beasts, Lady of all Wild Things, Lady of the Mountains, owner and protector of the wild, “virgin” unexploited places of nature, mountains and forests. She was regarded as a lion among women, the lion and bear her special animals, as the great divine huntress personified the prowess of these greatest of nature’s hunters (Stapleton 1982: 53). Artemis was also known as “the goddess who moves by night”, reminiscent of the habits of the cat (Baring & Cashford 1991: 328).

Her name “Artemis” is not Greek, but is first encountered in the Minoan Linear B tablets, linking her to the Cretan Goddess in her forms as Diktynna, Britomatis, and Eileithya (Baring & Cashford 1991: 323). Like the Hindu Goddess Durga, she was renowned as an unconquerable, fierce warrior, who became associated with the mythical Amazons, courageous, independent, horse-riding women warriors, possibly an ancient women-dominated tribe, who apparently challenged men at their most uniquely masculine skill (Pomeroy 1976: 5). The Amazons were reputedly devout worshippers of Artemis, one myth claiming they were responsible for building her temple at Ephesus (Stapleton 1982: 26; Kramarae & Treichler 1985: 43-4; Walker 1983: 24-7).

Although known as a goddess of fertility, she was also regarded as the goddess of chastity, a virgin goddess, Artemis Parthenos, admired for her celibacy. Inviolable, autonomous of all male control, with no consort, her main contact with a male being that with her twin brother, Apollo, she consistently spurned all sexual advances. Downing points out that when the youth Actaeon surprised her bathing, and his objectifying gaze “turns her the huntress into the hunted, she naturally makes him experience the same transformation from hunter into victim” (1996: 177). Her beauty was her own, and it was dangerous to violate her privacy. She urged young maids and youths to emulate her purity. Despite, or perhaps because, of her character as austere virgin, she was particularly revered as the protectress of women and all female creatures, particularly coming to their aid in childbirth: Eileithya (Stapleton 1982: 53). She rejoiced in the birth of all new young life. This is a continuation of the theme of associating motherhood and childbirth with felines, venerated as ideal mothers. Because of this aspect of her nature, Artemis was thoroughly women-identified, a great favourite of women, particularly those in their childbearing years (Pomeroy 1976: 84).

She was known as the Goddess Diana in Roman times, also a hunter goddess associated with wild things, whose worship centred on the seaport of Ephesus, where her magnificent temple, one of the wonders of the world, enriched the city. It is surely significant that this temple was associated with the wild, independent Amazons, devotees of Artemis (Pomeroy 1976: 5). Diana, too, was greatly beloved by women,

appealed to for protection during pregnancy and to assist with, and ease, childbirth. One of the best-known images of Artemis/Diana from her temple at Ephesus was of the multiple-breasted, all-nurturing mother, although she remained inviolate virgin.

Hecate

As huntress of the night, Artemis was also believed to transform herself into a cat. Later, Artemis and Diana became identified with Hecate, Goddess of the night and the Underworld (Gimbutas 1999: 155).

Hecate appears to have originated in the Egyptian Heket, Goddess of birth and protector of pregnant women (Hart 1986: 84). Like Artemis and other goddesses, Hecate was associated with childbirth, known as the Goddess of Midwives. Her animal was a black cat, she and her cat also linked to death, and like the Hindu Goddess Kali known for their habitation of graveyards, reminders of the ever-present dark side of life. Cats were also believed to offer protection from evil nocturnal spirits. The reputation of cats for possessing magical powers, able to mediate between the mundane and supernatural worlds, was echoed by the enormous magical powers attributed to Hecate, “wise woman”, who became associated with witches, a connection destined to last into Medieval times, some evidence suggesting that European midwives did, at times, acknowledge the power of Hecate (Walker 2000: 257). Sometimes known as the Hag, literally “Holy Woman”, or the Night Hag, her virgin status was acknowledged as connected to her awesome power.

Hera

Despite in Classical times being depicted as the patriarchal epitome of the bitter, nagging wife of Zeus (of patriarchal Indo-European origin – Stapleton 1982: 287), a number of scholars believe that Hera (related to the Cretan Rhea) had known an earlier, possibly pre-historic, more independent and powerful epiphany as a majestic and beautiful queen, free of any consort, Goddess of the Earth, ruling the fields and oceans (Stapleton 1982: 125). In this guise, she was often shown flanked by lions, reminiscent of the Minoan Goddess of the Mountain (Baring & Cashford 1991: 312; Gimbutas 1999: 159). Gimbutas reports many pictorial representations of Hera showing her occupying a throne, with Zeus standing by her side, and points out that the Iliad refers to her as “Hera of the Golden Throne” (1999: 159-160).

Her temple at Olympia, the Heraion, long pre-dates that of Zeus. At her festival, one of the most ancient of Greek religious celebrations, held every four years at Olympia, only women were permitted to participate, with a special athletic event for virgins (Stapleton 1982: 125-6; Gimbutas 1999: 159-160). E.O. James claims she was a goddess concerned with every aspect of women, fecundity and childbirth (1950: 144).

Before the Greeks married her to Zeus, apparently against her will, she was

known as virgin (Parthenos), her own person, not subject to any male, renewing her virginity annually by bathing in a spring at Naphlia (James 1950: 145). It is possible that certain ancient European parthenogenetic goddesses were demoted by the patriarchal Indo-Europeans into subservient consort divinities, unable to give birth to animal and plant life without sexual intercourse with male deities (Gimbutas 1989: 318; 1999: 164; Stone 1976: 62f). Perhaps Hera's constant quarrels with Zeus reflect the conflicts and tension between earlier forms of religion and later patriarchal deities (Stone 1976: 53, 67; Pomeroy 1975: 13; Paris 1986: 5-6).

A Nordic Goddess

Freya, the Earth Goddess of Norse mythology, giver and taker of life, celebrated for her beauty, fertility and sexual love, was the most important Nordic deity, with ancient origins. She was drawn in her chariot by two large cats, possibly lynxes (Moore 1999: 42-30). One of her many names was Mistress of Cats, and she was also celebrated as a virgin goddess. Despite being paired with her brother, she appears to have been largely independent of him, and like some other virgin goddesses venerated as the birth companion of women, and protector of the young. Like Artemis, her associations with the cat and death imbued her with the power to deal in witchcraft and magic (Gimbutas 1999: 193-6). Friday was named as the Day of Freya, a day assuring luck in any enterprise. She retained her power until Medieval times, apparently still respected today as possibly possessing magical powers (Walker 1983: 325).

Hindu Goddesses

Durga

One of the Goddesses most recognized as associated with a large cat, lion or tiger, is the Hindu warrior deity, Durga, the Invincible. A particularly formidable Goddess, she is also one of the most popular Hindu deities, worshipped widely throughout India, as well as in many diaspora contexts. She gained popularity around the 4th century CE, her worship increasing over the next centuries, but her roots almost certainly extend back to tribal non-Aryan cultures (Kinsey 1989: 4).

Her mythology particularly in the *Devi Mahatmya*, relates how she was called upon to fight and overcome a series of male demons who threatened the order and stability of the cosmos, rendering even the great male deities powerless (Kinsley 1986: 97). Her major victory was defeating the demon of chaos, Mahisasura, the Buffalo Demon, and her most popular iconic depiction is of her riding her fierce tiger/lion mount while she overcomes and beheads him (Erndl 1993: 4). Both she and her lion roar as they go into battle, and like a lion Durga feeds on the blood of her enemies; is, in fact, invigorated by it. Only a woman, her myths claim, possessed

the special power required to overcome the uncontrolled, disruptive male demons. She is able to accomplish what the male deities were incapable of achieving, and in her victory restores peace and stability to society (Kinsley 1986: 97).

As a warrior goddess, Durga challenges the stereotypic conception of women in Hinduism. Not subordinate to any male, she maintains her independent status, not relying on any male for protection or guidance, but is strong, courageous and determined, never losing her beauty and composure, even in the thick of battle (Erndl 1993: 4, 155; Gross 1978: 280-1; Kinsley 1986: 97). All these characteristics are reminiscent of the tiger, popularly depicted as her mount: a hugely powerful, lithe hunter, whose very presence is believed to strike terror into evil spirits (Saunders 1990: 26). Her more fearful sister goddess, Kali, is frequently shown wearing a leopard skin, indicating her terrible power and autonomy, combined with motherly protection for her devotees.

One of Durga's most common epithets is Mahisamardini, the slayer of Mahisa, but another popular name is Seranvali (Sinha-vahani), "lion rider" (Erndl 1993: 3; Wilkins 1989: 308), reflecting her close association with her ferocious, blood-thirsty, but protective mount whose characteristics she shares. Her lion symbolizes her wildness and ferociousness, inhabiting the fringes of civilization, independent of the usually accepted (patriarchal) social customs, and not submissive or acquiescent to their demands and requirements.

That she is quite frequently called Durgamma shows her identification with the ancient, non-Aryan village goddesses, fierce, independent protectors of the indigenous communities, known in south India as *Amman*/Mother goddesses. Almost without exception, they are free of male partners, revered as the Great Earth Mother, creator and destroyer of all life.

Durga's power stems from her independence from male dominance, her "virgin" status, presenting an image of womanhood freed from the patriarchal demands and constraints of wife and mother, inviting other women to explore roles not defined and controlled by men (Kinsley 1986: 99).

A Bengali image of Siva with the Goddess Annapurna, abundant giver of food, sustainer and renewer of all life (Kinsley 1986: 143), also regarded as a form of Durga, shows her with a lion at her feet (Rawson 1982: 60), while in Assam, next to the idol of one of the best-known sacred sites of the great Earth Mothers, often called "yoni-pithas", where the goddess is worshipped as Mahamaya, an erotic manifestation of female divinity, are a bull and a lion, her special animals (Sinha 1993: 48). The Himalayan foothills is home to the Tiger Goddess, Bageshwari (ibid.: 53), yet further confirmation that numerous Hindu goddesses, almost all not consort goddesses, are associated with fierce felines.

The Amman Goddesses of South India

Many of the Dravidian indigenous goddesses of south India, for example,

Mariamman, Pecciyamman, Makaliyamman, Bhadrakaliyamman, still venerated today, particularly by Tamil Hindus, are frequently depicted on the pediments of their temples, as well as in popular prints, seated on lions or tigers (Foulston 2002: 110-111).

These *Amman* Goddesses are part of an extremely ancient and vital form of religion, with roots tapping as far back as the non-Aryan Indus Valley Civilization of approximately 3000-1700 BCE (Erndl 1993: 19). These female deities are often referred to as “folk” or “village” goddesses as they are occupied with rural interests, regarded as the progenitors (Mothers) and guardians of the villages, presiding over the destinies of all inhabitants (ibid: 8). Although they are often feared as being easily angered and the cause of diseases and natural disasters, they are also revered as the great nurturing Earth Mother, both creator and destroyer; light and dark, creation and destruction all being part of the great cycle of life.

The virgin status of these divinities is their most essential and important characteristic, as it is their autonomy and independence from male control which is their major source of power (Erndl 1993: 156; Kinsley 1986: 202). However, as their name *Amman* indicates, their virgin status does not necessarily preclude motherhood. The appellation “Ma” or “Mother” is more usually an acknowledgement of their general creativity and nurturance, than biological birthing and motherhood (Gross 1978: 284-286). Control over their sexuality, as expressed in virginity or asceticism (or even purity/faithfulness in married women), is enormously powerful, generating an awe-inspiring virtue or *tapas* which is able to challenge the demands of patriarchal subservience.

Their fascinating mythology, invariably depicting women suffering because of the violence caused by the requirements and demands of patriarchal culture, details stories of hosts of women, usually virtuous and faithful, who were abandoned, deceived, betrayed, insulted, raped and killed by men. These tales of suffering and terror recount how these violated and righteously angry women drew strength from their virtue, gained victory over male intimidation and violence, and after their deaths, (often at the hands of abusive males), were transformed into goddesses, so demonstrating the ultimate victory of women’s strength (*Shakti*). The myths relate how this vindication is frequently capable of effecting some sort of victory and healing, both to the individual women and their communities (Diesel 2002).

The association of these independent, wrathful female deities with fierce felines, is a clear reflection of their courageous, undominated natures and self-reliance, as well as their role as fiercely protective mothers (*Amma*).

Sasthi

Another Hindu Goddess associated with the cat is *Sasthi* (Wilkins, 1989: 477). The Giver of Children, believed to assist at childbirth, she is depicted as a golden-complexioned woman, a child in her arms, standing or riding on a cat. Again, the

cat, widely viewed as a good, gentle, but fiercely protective, mother, is connected with this deity, worshiped by women wishing to fall pregnant, as well as those with young children, to ensure the safe nurturance of their young. Gadon reports that young women in Bengal still keep images of her for protection, showing her pregnant or holding an infant (1989: 178).

Conclusion

Only powerful goddesses, independent of male domination, seem to have been linked with felines, suggesting that the concept of virginity is central to understanding the relationship between felines and female divinities.

Numerous recent attempts have been made to define and expound on the concept of virginity, often used in a somewhat derogatory sense as meaning sexually inexperienced, inactive, naïve or incomplete, waiting for the fulfillment of male ownership. Elinor Gadon has explained that being called “virgin” is not an indication “that chastity was considered a virtue in the pagan world.” It often “symbolized autonomy and independence, freedom to take lovers or reject them. Virgin meant one-in-herself, to be true to her own nature and instinct, not maiden inviolate”, not dominated or exploited by men (1989: 191; Harding 1982: 102-104). Such assertiveness gave women freedom, proudly owning their sexuality, allowing them to make their own choices, to choose and change sexual partners independently of any male expectations or requirements, not trapped in the biological role of constant birthing and mothering. This kind of autonomy, asceticism and purity brings tremendous power and spiritual energy to women, known as “*tapas*” in the Hindu tradition (Kinsley 1986: 202).

Sometimes a virgin is referred to as a mother without a spouse, and Hinduism reveres numerous goddesses who are both virgin and mothers (Erndl 1993: 6, 144), a concept not as paradoxical as it at first seems, and not unfamiliar to Christianity (cf. Kali, who is regarded as Mother to her devotees, and if partnered with Siva always dominates him; Durga; the Tamil Goddess Kannagi; the *Amman* goddesses of south India, almost always unmarried and referred to as “Ma/Mother”; and the newly popular goddess Santosi Ma (Kinsley 1986: 201-203; Preston 1982: 181, 184, 334-6; Erndl 1993: 144). The concept of motherhood is understood metaphorically, relating to the nurturing, creative potential of women (Erndl 1993: 6; Gross 1978: 284-7).

And Naomi Ozanec says,

The Virgin Goddess belongs to herself, not her father or lover. Virginity denotes completeness, and self-worth and independence. Virginity is a state of self-containment which is dependent on no man for completion. (1993: 211)

Mary Daly's "Wickedary" has an illustration entitled, "Virgin: Wild, Lusty, Never-captured, Unsubdued Old Maid, Marriage Resister", depicting a robust youngish woman, striped pants, double-axe medallion round her neck, boots, running with a large, lithe, spotted cat (Daly 1987).

The nature and characteristics of the cat are reflected in this concept of virginity: independence, self-reliance, confident elegance and grace, prodigious sexuality, fiercely protective motherhood, and a willingness to be tamed only on its own terms, never so dependent on its domestic life that it is unable to revert to wildness. All this is summed up by Rudyard Kipling's "the cat that walked by itself". Like the virgin goddesses, the cat's character also displays the complex ambivalence of light and dark: capable of great strength and terrifying ferocity, as well as gentle nurturing tenderness.

Much of the ancient world revered the graceful and regal feline figure, appropriately identifying it with all-powerful, regal and autonomous female deities. However, as Christianity established its hegemony in the Western world, respect for these female divinities steadily waned.

The symbol of the sacred cat, however, is a reminder that life, spirit, call it divinity, pervades the whole natural world, demanding reverence and respect. A seamless, symbiotic relationship exists between human, non-human, and every other aspect of this planet. Many feminists, especially Ecofeminists (contemporary wise women), emphasise the interconnectedness of all life, that humans have no right to dominate and destroy other living beings without good reason. They celebrate the relationship between women and nature, recognizing the need to acknowledge the integrity of the entire world, and reconcile the destructive, patriarchally-created alienation of human and non-human nature (Diamond & Orenstein, 1990; Plant 1989).

The challenge, finally, of the association of felines and female divinities, is for women to re-claim that proud assertive independence epitomized by those "virgin" deities and their feline familiars, recognizing that the image of these powerful goddesses can act as the inspiration to re-establish the sense of a sacred link between femaleness (humanity) and all nature.

Christine Downing reminds us that divinities do not die or become extinct, they merely go underground, become invisible, until humanity is again in need of their potency and wisdom (1996: 17).

As women explore the meaning of the Goddess, past and present, they are invariably brought back to a deeper awareness of themselves: the significance of their own lives, passions, motivations, and yearnings to discover and realize their own true humanity. What does the transformative image and strength of the Goddess reveal about the nature of women's sacred energy, and how best it should be used to create a more egalitarian, greener world?

Notes

- ¹ My interest in female divinities and their relationship with felines grew out of my research into Hindu women worshipping the goddess in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Repeatedly, I noticed the proximity of lions and tigers with the fierce, independent Tamil Amman goddesses, as well as with Durga, and occasionally, Kali. It then dawned on me that numerous other ancient goddesses such as the Cretan “snake goddesses”, and many Egyptian female divinities were also closely linked with felines, and so I was motivated to embark on this study which is also connected to my religious studies interest in feminist attitudes to religion and concepts of deity.
- ² There is a striking similarity between the Catalhoyuk figure on the lion throne and a statue of the Roman Cybele seated on a lion throne, illustrated on p. 402 of Baring & Cashford (1991).
- ³ With regard to Mariamman on the pediment of the Pietermaritzburg temple, and Durga as illustrated in popular devotional pictures, it would appear that the popular imagination frequently visualizes the figure of the lion as possessing a mane, without perhaps being aware that it is not the male creature but the female that is particularly associated with these goddesses. I also wonder whether this might not be the case in other, more ancient, depictions of female goddesses. After all, a lion with a mane is the rather more impressive figure, and many children appear automatically to draw lions like this.

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