

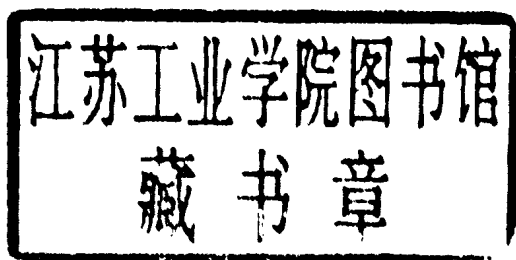


KATHARINE BRIGGS  
COLLECTED WORKS

VOLUME XIII

NINE LIVES

The Folklore of Cats



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The great day for the cat must be placed some two thousand years ago in Ancient Egypt, when cats enjoyed a position of special privilege, and had long held it. The cat goddess was Bast, who was generally shown as a female figure with a cat's head but sometimes assumed the form of a gigantic cat. Bubastis was the original home of Bast, but after a time the cat became a sacred character through the whole of Egypt, which indeed appears to have been a nation of fanatical animal-lovers.<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, there is a good deal of evidence to show that cats were regarded as supernatural creatures in many places that were far removed from Egypt, but the difference between the Egyptian view of cat character and that of general tradition is very striking. As a rule one would regard cats as nocturnal animals, and we do a certain violence to their nature when we try to make them keep us company during the day and settle down to sleep comfortably in the house at night. It is a little surprising to find that the goddess Bast was a sun deity when one would have expected her to be attached to the moon and to darkness. However, it was so.

The Egyptians have given us very little precise information about their numerous Pantheon, and, except for what we can glean from the *Book of the Dead*, we rely for a great deal of our

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knowledge upon the Greek historians and travellers, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch. Because of this we have very little information about the early worship of the sacred animals. It seems likely that they were originally totem animals, then perhaps local deities, and that the cult of some of them, and among these the cat, spread all over Egypt. Cats, though they were domestic pets, not exclusively temple animals, were universally sacred, and anyone who killed a cat, even accidentally, was put to death. According to the account given by Diodorus, cats, hawks, and ibises were the most ardently protected of the sacred animals. Diodorus Siculus, who was born about 100 BC, gives a vivid account of this. He writes:

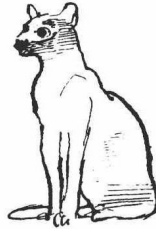
When one of these animals is concerned, he who kills one, be it accidentally or maliciously, is put to death. The populace flings itself on him, usually before he can be tried and judged. Superstition towards these sacred animals is deeply rooted in the Egyptian's soul, and devotion to their cult is passionate. In the days when Ptolemy Auletes was not yet allied to the Romans, and the people of Egypt still hastened to welcome all visitors from Italy, and, for fear of the consequences, carefully avoided any occasion for complaint or rupture, a Roman killed a cat. The populace crowded to the house of the Roman, who had committed the 'murder'; and neither the efforts of the magistrates sent by the King to protect him nor the universal fear inspired by the might of Rome, could avail to save the man's life, though what he had done was admitted to be accidental. This is not an incident which I report from hearsay, but something I saw myself during my sojourn in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

Diodorus also gives us some pleasant details of social history about these pet cats. They were fed on bread-and-milk, and slices of Nile fish, and they were summoned to their meals by certain set calls. For all we know it may have been an equivalent of 'Pussie, Pussie, Pussie'! After their death their bodies were carefully embalmed.<sup>3</sup> Lewis Spence quotes a passage from Herodotus, written some four centuries earlier, which gives much the same picture.



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When a conflagration takes place a supernatural impulse seizes upon the cats. For the Egyptians, standing at a distance, take care of the cats and neglect to put out the fire; but the cats, making their escape, and leaping over the men, throw themselves into the fire; and when this happens great lamentations are made among the Egyptians. In whatsoever house a family cat dies a natural death all the family shave their eyebrows only, but if a dog dies they shave their whole body and the head. All cats that die are carried to certain sacred houses, where, being first embalmed, they are buried in the city of Bubastis.<sup>4</sup>



The truth of this has been confirmed by later excavations. The return to the original home of the cult suggests that the connection with the goddess Bast was still close even at this late period. In a late Demotic papyrus cited by Lewis Spence, there is a lively discussion between the goddess Bast in the form of a gigantic cat and a small jackal who seems to represent a trickster figure. The cat takes the positive side of the argument. She maintains that the gods are in charge of the universe and that right will triumph in the end; a man who ill-treats even a little lamb will suffer for it, the clouds that overshadow ill-used creatures will roll away and innocence will be vindicated. The jackal, however, is a pessimist. He points out that the lizard devours the fly, the bat eats the lizard and is swallowed by the snake, which is pounced upon by the hawk. In fact the whole of nature is at war. The dispute becomes heated and is enlivened by anecdotes and proverbs. It seems as if the author's sympathy is with the jackal, but unfortunately the papyrus is mutilated and we never hear the end of the argument.<sup>5</sup>

Bubastis was at one time the capital of Egypt, and it was then that the local cat-cult spread over the whole country. Bast reached

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the height of her popularity in the fourth century BC. She was a goddess of pleasure and music and especially of the dance, and would beat time to music with the sistrum held in her hand. Herodotus gives us an enthusiastic account of the great annual festival held at Bubastis in honour of the goddess. Her temple was one of the most elegant in Egypt, and pilgrims came from all over the country to attend it, travelling in barges, alive with the sound of castanets, and flutes, with dance, song and merriment. The pilgrims exchanged quips with the women who ran to the banks of the Nile to watch them pass. Hundreds and thousands came to the great fair, and on the sacred day a glittering procession wound its way through the streets to the temple and more wine was drunk in the festivities that followed than in all the rest of the year. It is true of course that a large proportion of the population of the country was in the town on that day.<sup>6</sup>

Bast was not only a sportive goddess, but a benevolent one, and a healer of disease. There were many demons and sinister powers in the Egyptian mythology, but she was always beneficent. Some faint memory of these healing qualities may have clung to the cat's traditions even in the darker days that were to come, for, as we shall see later, some strange magical properties were ascribed to different parts of the cat's body and used to make grisly remedies.

When we leave Africa, and move North into the very different mythology of Scandinavia, we find that the cat has acquired another patron. Freyja, the Scandinavian goddess of fertility, of beauty, love and marriage, adopted the cat as one of her cult animals, and when she did not ride her horse into battle she travelled in a chariot drawn by cats.

Grimm, in his *Teutonic Mythology*, suggests that the sinister strain in the cat traditions may have been due to Freyja's ambivalence as at once the patroness of lovers and the chooser of the slain, and hostess to the dead in her high and spacious palace in Asgard. This may have had its effect, but the spread of Christianity is the more likely cause.<sup>7</sup>

The early Christian missionaries to Europe acted wisely and lovingly in presenting the positive aspect of Christianity to their converts and christianizing heathen holy days and sacred places. The Roman Saturnalia settled happily into Christmas, the Teutonic Eostre was reshaped to celebrate the Resurrection, many

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heathen temples blossomed afresh as Christian churches, Bride, the Celtic goddess of spring and mating, was adopted as St Bridget of Ireland. Even a mermaid was successfully canonized as St Libyan.<sup>8</sup> But when whole tribes and nations were carried over by their rulers and baptized willy-nilly they inevitably brought a great deal of undigested heathenism with them. The grimmer gods and goddesses, probably those to whom extensive sacrifices were made, took demonic forms, and some among them were cat goddesses. The Cailleach Bheur of the Scottish Highlands, the Blue Hag of Winter, who sometimes appeared in cat form, was one of them. She was a nature goddess, who herded the deer as her cattle. The touch of her staff drove the leaves off the trees, and brought snow and harsh weather. When spring came she threw her staff away under a holly tree and took the shape of a standing stone until the autumn.<sup>9</sup> A tale was told of her in her cat form that resembles Grant Stewart's 'Legend of the Witch of Laggan'.<sup>10</sup>

Another cat demon of Britain is Black Annis of the Dane Hills in Leicestershire, who was probably a descendent of the Celtic Danu, one of the goddesses of war. "In *The County Folk-Lore of Leicestershire* Charles James Billson goes into the traditions of Black Annis at some length, quoting from various sources.<sup>12</sup> Among them he gives an extract from Dudley's *Naology*.<sup>13</sup> He describes the cave, about a mile from Leicester, where there is a series of low hills called the Dane Hills. For many centuries this was a wild forest. He goes on:

On the side of one of the knolls in this formerly wild district was a round cave, of diameter of ten or twelve feet, and height about five, excavated from the sandstone strata then extant. This cave was known by the name of *Black Annis's Bower*. Black Annis was said in the county to have been a savage woman with great teeth and long nails, and that she devoured human victims . . . . The name of Annis, to whom this cave is said to belong, is known to the Celtic mythologist by the name of *Anu* or *Nannu*, names signifying the mother goddess, according to the authority of Vallancey, an author well learned in the Celtic language of the Irish.

Little children who went to run on the Dane Hills, were assured

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that she (Black Annis) lay in wait there, to snatch them away to her 'bower'; and that many like themselves she had 'scratched to death with her claws, sucked their blood, and hung up their skins to dry'.

Billson supplements this with several quotations from the *Leicester Chronicle* of 1874.

Black Anna was said to be in the habit of crouching among the branches of the old pollard oak (the last remnant of the forest) which grew in the cleft of the rock over the mouth of her cave, or 'bower', ever ready to spring like a wild beast on any stray children passing below. The cave she was traditionally said to have dug out of the solid rock with her finger nails.<sup>14</sup>



To these is added a note by Miss Henrietta Ellie.

A relic of this still remains in the minds of people in Leicester in the form of 'Cat Anna'. Some warehouse girls told me a short time ago that she was a witch who lived in the cellars under the castle, and that there was an underground passage from the cellars to the Dane Hills, along which she ran.<sup>15</sup>

Long before these accounts were written Black Annis's memory had been celebrated by the Easter Monday Drag Hunt. The bait

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was a dead cat soaked in aniseed and it was drawn from Black Annis's Bower by devious ways through the city till it ended at the mayor's house. This was attended in the Dane Hills on Easter Monday morning by great numbers of people, who climbed the various knolls to watch the hunt. The Mayor entertained a large company when the hunt was over. The hunt itself gradually dwindled away from about 1767, though an Easter Monday Fair was kept up in the Dane Hills for some time after that. The first mention of it in the town records is in 1668, but it is described there as very ancient.<sup>16</sup>

The hag, Black Annis, however, was still remembered at the time of the Second World War. Ruth Tongue has recorded a vivid story told her by a little evacuee from Leicester in which Black Annis was providentially destroyed.

### *Black Annis*

Black Annis lived in the Danehills.

She was ever so tall and had a blue face and had long white teeth and she ate people. She only went out when it was dark.

My mum says, when she ground her teeth people could hear her in time to bolt their doors and keep well away from the one window. That's why we don't have a lot of big windows in Leicestershire cottages, so she can't only get an arm inside.

My mum says that's why we have the fire and chimney in a corner.

The fire used to be on the earth floor once and people slept all round it until Black Annis grabbed the babies out the window. There wasn't any glass in that time.

When Black Annis howled you could hear her five miles away and then even the poor folk in the huts fastened skins across the window and put witch-herbs above it to keep her away safe.

My mum told us there was a wicked stepmother who sent her three little children out near Christmastide to gather wood when it got dark earlier than this is (a dark lunchtime, Christmas Eve 1941). They were ever so cold and frightened and little Dicky he cried.

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'Don't cry, Dicky lad,' says Jim. 'Don't be frightened. 'Tis Christmas Eve. You can't be hurted noways.'

'Why?' says Dicky.

'There's no bad 'uns about,' says Jen.

'Why?' says Dicky.

''Tis Our Lord's birthday and the bells ring,' they said. 'If the bad 'uns hear them they die.'

So off they went to the wood and picked a big load each. It was getting dark and they had a long way back and they were so tired and little Dicky cried and so did Jen. 'It's getting dark and she may not have gone under the earth yet. I'm going to run.'

But she couldn't with all her load of firewood.

Then Jim said, 'I've got a holed stone and if you like I'll look through it and see. But she'll be right underground with the covers over her ears till after Christmas.'

But she wasn't, she'd forgotten the day and Jim saw her five miles off.

It wasn't quite dark yet and they tried to make haste. Then Jim looked again. 'She's only a mile away,' he whispered, but they couldn't go any faster until they heard a yell.

Then they did run till they dropped.

'She won't come now,' says Jim. 'She'll stop to eat that ragged, drunken old woman I saw – I think it was Step-mother come to look for us.'

'I hope it were,' says Jen and little Dicky. 'We're nearly home now.'

So they rested just a bit longer and then little Dicky says, 'It's coming on near dark' and Jen says, 'There's something grinding teeth. Look through the stone, Jim.'

So Jim looked and it was Black Annis only half a mile behind them. She hadn't liked the taste of that beery old Stepmother, so she only snapped off her head and come on again.

'Drop your faggot across the path, little Dicky, and run for home!' says Jim.

So Black Annis bruised her legs and ran back to her cave to get an ointment to stop the bleeding. My mum says if a witch bleeds she loses all her power and dies.

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And didn't Jim and Jen run too! But she wasn't scratched bad and back she come. She was only a quarter mile away when Jim looked, so they both dropped their faggots to trip her and ran for it.

Black Annis fell flat on her face over the firing but she caught up with them at their cottage door where their dad stood with an axe. And he threw it right in her face and her nose bled like a pig and she yelled and ran for her cave crying, 'Blood! Blood!' but the Christmas bells started pealing and she fell down far away and died.

Then the children kissed their dad and he'd brought a great load of firewood himself, and the stepmother was dead, and it was Christmas Eve so they made a big fire and had kippers and butter for tea. ('Butter?' said a rationed boy listener, 'Coo! what a feast!')

'It was Christmas Eve,' said the tale-teller firmly, 'and the old stepmother had been hiding all their rations to sell to the grocer's man so she could buy beer.'

('Did they find Black Annis? I asked.)

'The crows picked her bones – but one of my uncles he found a long tooth – ever so sharp it is – that's how I know it's quite true.'<sup>17</sup>

In Cromarty Firth Black Annis is called 'Gentle Annie' because of the treacherous wind that suddenly blows there on calm-seeming days.<sup>18</sup>

As time went on the heathen gods were increasingly regarded as demons, and the persecution of an animal is often a sign that it had once held the status of a god. The hunting of the wren can only be explained by postulating a time when it was sacred. In the North of Scotland a yellowhammer was persecuted as the Devil's bird who was said to drink a drop of the Devil's blood on May Day. The dark red scratches on the little greeny-blue egg were supposed to be a letter written to the Devil in the mother's blood, just as witches signed their compact with the Devil in their own blood. It seemed that the Devil had taken over the creatures that belonged to the sun god, for yellow came to be regarded as the Devil's special colour. Yellow irises are called 'the devil's flowers' in Newfoundland, and we have 'the primrose path to the everlasting

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bonfire'. Animals who were used much in magical cures and charms were probably once sacred, and cats have been unenviably distinguished in that way and have also been particularly associated with Satan. The cat, however, has a special distinction. Tradition has allotted to the cat tribe a king of its own. Both in the Celtic countries and in England there are tales of the King of the Cats. In the English version, which is particularly pleasing, it seems that the cat community, since the magnificent funerals of Ancient Egypt are no longer provided by humans, has managed to arrange that its king at least shall be buried with appropriate dignity.



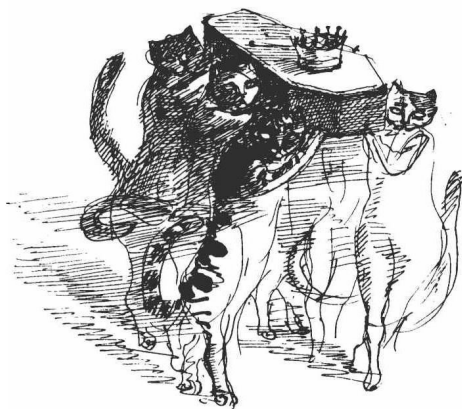
### *The King of the Cats*

A great many years ago there were two young men who were spending the Autumn on a shooting holiday up in the Highlands of Scotland. They were staying in a shooting lodge with an old woman to look after them; and her fine old black cat and their dogs were the only other company in the house. One day the elder of the two decided to stop at home, but the younger went out, to follow up some birds which he feared they had wounded the day before. So he set out in good time to follow the trail they had taken and to get back to supper before the early autumnal sunset. He did not come home until well after supper time, and his friend was beginning to get quite anxious about him when he came in, cold, wet and hungry. He muttered something about mist and sat down to supper, which he ate in silence. When it was finished and they were sitting by the fire smoking, with the cat sitting comfortably on the hearth-rug and the dogs lying down in the corner, he at length broke silence.



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'I know you must be wondering what happened to me,' he said. 'I hardly know how to tell you, it was so strange. I followed on the track I meant to take and picked up a few birds, and it was well before sunset when I turned for home, but one of those mountain mists came down, and I got right off the track, and wandered round I don't know where until it was nearly dark. The dogs seemed as much puzzled as I was, and kept following trails here and there, until I saw a light in the distance and made for it. Just as I got up to it, it seemed to disappear, but I was just near a great old hollow oak, so I scrambled up it, thinking I might get a glimpse of the light from higher up. And as I climbed up I saw that the light was streaming up from the tree itself. So I scrambled up to look down into the hollow, and there I saw the most curious sight -'. He broke off: 'Just look at that cat! He's listening to me! I swear he understands every word I'm saying!' And sure enough, old Blackie was sitting straight up on the rug, looking with bright, excited eyes at the young man.



'Never mind the cat!' said his friend, knocking out his pipe. 'Tell me what you saw.'

'I seemed to be looking down into a church,' said the other. 'It was like a tiny cathedral, with lights and an altar,