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“Myeo: the First Library Cat”

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“*Myeo: the First Library Cat*” *Ikoner* 5:16-18, 2004
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“The time was when the librarian was a mouser in musty books...”
Melvil Dewey

Introduction

In my earlier article “Cats and Dogs in the American Public Library; a Hidden Aspect of the Feminization of the Profession” (*Wilson Library Bulletin* 63:42-5, 140, April 1989), I made a passing reference to the fact that cats were a prominent feature in libraries as far back as ancient Egypt. Since that time The Molesworth Institute staff has continue research into a wide variety of matters dealing specifically with the relationships between animals and libraries. In the course of conducting the research described in our more recent article, “Companion Animal Privacy in an Electronic World” (*Journal of Information Ethics* 11:79-85, Fall 2002) we extended our inquiry into the history of cats in libraries. During the course of that inquiry we managed to uncover some hitherto unrecognized references and documents that have shed new light on the subject. Through careful examination we have, in fact, identified the first cat known to have lived and worked in a library and a great deal of other useful information about the significant role that library cats played in the introduction of important library techniques.

It can now (exclusively for *Ikoner*) be that the first library cat Myeo, as might be expected, dwelt in the Royal Library of Alexandria during the time it was managed by Demetrius of Phalerum prior to 282 BC. It can also be confirmed that cats played an important role throughout the existence of the Royal Library of Alexandria and that, in fact, there was a succession of cats one of which was always designated as the primary library cat who was extended special rights and privileges. Indeed several of the primary cats were recognized for their heroic deeds in helping to preserve and secure the library’s collections. This paper is intended to place the role of cats in Egypt and the development of the library in Alexandria in juxtaposition.

Cats in Ancient Egypt

Fully domesticated cats as human companions in ancient Egypt date to about 2000 B. C. They may be indigenous to Egypt as their original home was undoubtedly somewhere in the Near East, but they may have been imported from Persia or Nubia. The recent find of a cat with a human body in Cyprus dates to about 7500 B. C. suggests that domestication may have begun much earlier than originally thought. As might be expected the evidence is that cats were domesticated because of their skill in catching rodents, snakes, and other harmful creatures without consuming grain and other human food products. Initially they were likely to have been captured from the wild as kittens and domesticated but well before the founding of the library at Alexandria cats had a well-established place in Egyptian society and by 1000 B. C. had become identified as deities and worshipped. There were numerous Egyptian cat goddesses – felines were invariably female – but Bast, who had the head of a cat with a body of a human, or Batest, when represented in full cat form, was the only one represented as a domestic cat.

All cats we retreated with great respect and protected by law to the extent that the punishment for harming or killing a cat was quite severe and could include a death penalty. Nor could they be exported; and, indeed, the rescuing of cats from fires was a

high priority for the fire fighters. Give their status it is also not surprising that decorated statuettes of cats have been found in many excavated tombs. Cats were also mummified after death and have been found in tombs of Egyptians as well as many cat cemeteries. In the city of Bubastis, or Tell Basta, alone around 300,000 cat mummies have been found (Mark Rose “Caring for the Dead” *Archaeology* March/April 2004 p. 30-5). It was, in fact, research into the records pertaining to these cat cemeteries that led directly to the identification of Myeo as the first known library cat.

The Library at Alexandria

The Library at Alexandria is, of course, the most celebrated and renowned of ancient libraries. It was founded in the 3rd century B. C. within the Temple of the Muses (Mouseion!) and a smaller daughter library was founded within the temple of Serapis in the 2nd century B. C. Since it is so well known, there is no need to dwell here on the general aspects of its history but the librarians there made some unique contributions to librarianship that have not generally be recognized. It was at that library, for example, that the alphabet was first used as a means of arranging lists, materials, records, etc. (Lloyd W. Daly *Contributions to a History of Alphabetization in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* Bruxelles, Latomus, 1967). He wrote, “... Alexandria [was] the point of origin in the history of alphabetization and the period of the first two Ptolemies... the significant... time.... The organization, classification, and cataloguing of the library at Alexandria, in which it is clear that the alphabetical principle was applied... is an event and undertaking which seems to me the most likely to have provided the need and the occasion for the effective conception and application of the principle.” (p. 93-4).

Even with the use of alphabetization perhaps not everything ran smoothly as Matthew Battle suggests in his *Library: An Unquiet History* (New York, Norton, 2003). “No physical evidence remains of Alexandria’s libraries, and archaeological evidence from other, later libraries is of doubtful value in reconstructing the shelving and access of scrolls in their stacks. Contemporary descriptions, however, allow a few conclusions. Scrolls in libraries had tags marked with authors and titles of the work hanging from [their] umbilici [rods around which scrolls were wrapped]. This was especially necessary because scrolls, unlike codices, don’t stand up on shelves; instead scrolls had to be heaped together in precarious piles. [Thus providing good cover for mice.] To remove one scroll a reader or library assistant would have to shift all of the others on the shelf; as a result, only a general kind of order would have been possible to maintain” (p. 28).

New Evidence

In pursuing our research into the appearance of cats in the libraries at Alexandria, the staff of The Molesworth Institute has discovered new evidence that not only clarifies their origin and role but reveals evidence on the true origins of the use of alphabetization and at least one other major library tool that was used, and is still being used although to a lesser degree since the introduction of computers, in libraries throughout the world. The true history is fascinating.

Our research began with an examination of the hieroglyphic for librarian that begins with a person fishing and a fish symbol. Why, we wondered, the emphasis on fish. We had earlier discovered an inscription that revealed that Petsis, one of the sub-librarians, had been instrumental in introducing cats into libraries both as sacred symbols of wisdom and as “musty mousers.” It was, however, only with the discovery of the mummy of

Myeo, and some writing on the outer layer of that mummy, that we were able to piece together her history and related library developments.

Petsis and Myeo

Petsis, it appears, was becoming increasingly frustrated with his duties as the sub-librarian in charge of maintaining the stacks of scrolls, many of which were unmarked and all of which were then arranged in random order, in the library at Alexandria, and the increasing damage that was being done to the collections by mice and rats that were making their way into the library. To relieve some of his frustration he took to fishing along the Nile in the evening after work. Shortly after he began fishing a small cat appeared with him each evening. Soon, of course, Petsis was sharing his fish with this cat that he named Myeo. After a few weeks Myeo followed him home and then began accompanying him to work. Petsis enjoyed her company and his spirits brightened substantially when Myeo began catching mice and rats in the library and bring their bodies to his desk. Realizing that this might be a way of eliminating some of the damage to the collections, Petsis enlisted Myeo's aid in rounding up and introducing into the library an assortment of cats. As the number of cats, and dead mice and rats, increased, Petsis – a typical librarian – decided to keep appropriate statistics for his annual report. He assigned each cat a name and, using scraps of papyrus from damaged rolls, started keeping a daily record of the number of mice and rats captured by each cat. Each cat and his or her own scrap but, as the number of cats, Petsis found that keeping the scraps in random order, as he had been doing, meant that each evening he had to sort through all of the scraps to get the right listing for each cat. One evening, while fishing, Petsis realized that if he put the scraps in alphabetical order by each cat's name he would be able to find, and update, each record more rapidly. Shortly thereafter, he realized that he could apply the same principle to the organization of the scrolls and that he could use those scraps to create labels to attach to the end of the umbilici to facilitate shelving as well as to keep a record of the scrolls in the collection to facilitate locating and retrieving scrolls. New items could be recorded and interfiled with the existing scraps in interfiled with the existing scraps that were being housed, in alphabetical order, in long narrow boxes just as he was doing for the cats' records. We believe that the long rectangular symbol in the center in the center of the hieroglyphic for librarian represents one of those boxes.

Thus, it appears, that Petsis, with a major assist from Myeo, was responsible for the introduction of alphabetization for “organization, classification, and cataloguing.” His use of papyrus scraps for cataloging records is the first known use of catalog “cards” – far preceding the use of the blank backs of playing cards mandated by the French cataloging code of 1791 (see Judith Hopkins “The 1791 French Cataloging Code and the Origins of the Card Catalog” (*Library and Culture* 27:378-404, Fall 1992) – and his use of wooden storage boxes the first known use of catalog “card trays.”

Honors to Petsis and Myeo

The Molesworth Institute is now recommending to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO that Petsis and Myeo be recognized as the first World Heritage Library Figures, that a statue of them be placed in front of the Biblioteca Alexandrina, and that other appropriate steps be taken to celebrate their true role as the first significant figures in library history. Long live Petsis and Myeo.

