



CAT I. IN MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

Cats are not mentioned in literary Persian sources until late Sasanian times. In Zoroastrian mythology the cat (*gurbag*) is said to have been created by the Evil Spirit, and in the Pahlavi texts it is classed in the much despised “wolf species” (*Bundahišn*, TD₂, p. 147.15, tr. Anklesaria, p. 189 par. 23.2; Jāḥeẓ, IV, pp. 208-09, V, pp. 319-20; *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 272). According to a Zoroastrian myth cited in the *Dadestān ī dēnīg* the cat was born from the copulation of Jam’s sister Jamak with a demon (West, *Pahlavi Texts* II, SBE 18, p. 419; *Persian Rivayats* I, pp. 255, 260).

The cat was known earlier, however, as by the end of the 3rd century c.e. the Parthians exported the longhaired Persian cat (Dembeck, pp. 360-63). Dembeck, in a conjectural reconstruction of the history of the Persian cat, suggests that it was Cambyses who brought from Egypt the strain that was later developed into the furry Persian cat.

Because of its association with evil the cat was taboo in Sasanian Persia. To the Zoroastrians the cat was treacherous and one of the “noxious creatures” (*xrafstra*), in contrast to the dog, which they praised for its loyalty (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 90-91). Jāḥeẓ reports that the Zoroastrians believed that if a cat were to urinate in the sea ten thousand fish would die (Jāḥeẓ, V, p. 321). Nevertheless, a story in the *Šāh-nāma* (Moscow ed., IX, p. 192 vv. 3082-87) suggests that cats were common both as pets and mousers at the time of



Ḳosrow II Parvēz (r. 590, 591-628). According to this story Ḳosrow sent a wicked and ruthless man to Ray, the home town of *Bahrām Čōbīn*, as governor with the order to destroy it. The governor ordered all the house cats in the city killed, but this led to such an explosion in the mouse population that the inhabitants of the city were forced to abandon their houses. The city was saved when the queen brought a kitten to entertain the king, persuading him to remove the wicked governor from his post (Moscow ed., IX, p. 193 vv. 3098-102).

The cat is not mentioned in the Bible, though it is casually alluded to once in the Apocrypha (Baruch 6:22). However, legendary narratives about it abound in other Jewish sources (Wood, pp. 36-38; Ginzberg, I, pp. 35-36, 43). The cat is also not mentioned explicitly in the Qur’ān, although *tafsīrs* and *ḥadīṭ* frequently refer to it. According to Muslim mythology the cat was created on Noah’s Ark: Alarmed at the increasing number of mice Noah asked God for help; God ordered him to touch the lion’s head or rub its nostrils, whereupon the lion sneezed out a pair of cats (Jāḥeẓ, V, pp. 347-48; Baḷ’amī, ed. Bahār, I, pp. 140-41; Ḥoqūqī, III, p.25; Danhardt, I, pp. 271f.; Massé, p. 189; this myth may be at the root of the Persian folk belief that the cat is vain because it fell out of a lion’s nose, *az damāḡ-e šīr oftāda*; Hedāyat, pp.140-41; cf. Thompson, Motif A1811.2 “Creation of cat: Sneezed from lion’s nostrils”). In Islam the cat therefore carried good associations, and even the Prophet is said to have assigned the *konya* Abū Horayra to one of his companions whose affection for his pet kitten was well known. The Prophet’s affection for cats is also reflected in a tradition according to which he says about a woman who starved a cat to death that she would be punished in hell (Boḳārī, pp. 469-70; Ḥammām b. Monabbēh, p.36, trad. no. 89 and cf. pp. 389-90 for evidence from other *ḥadīṭ* compendia; Tūḳadī, p. 103). Among the Sufis, Šeblī is said to have received divine forgiveness for his sins, not as a result of his piety but his kindness to a helpless kitten (Damīrī, II, p. 383). In Islam the cat, unlike the dog, is therefore also not considered to be “unclean.” According to a tradition traced to ‘Āyeša, the prophet’s wife, it is permissible to make ablutions with the water in a vessel from which a cat has already drunk (Ebn Māja, I, p. 131, trad. nos. 367-69). This is in stark contrast to the Zoroastrian belief that even if one were to wash a bowl from which a cat has eaten seven times it still would be unclean, that eating food touched by a cat’s whiskers will cause one to waste away, and that demons will enter a corpse seen by a cat (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 163 n. 51).



In the Middle Persian *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (8.7) the practice of consuming cat's meal is attributed to Arabs and Berbers, suggesting that cats, together with mice, snakes, and foxes, were part of their diet (ed. Messina, pp. 51-52). This statement accords with traditions according to which it is forbidden to sell cats or eat their flesh (Ebn Māja, II, p. 1082; Termedī, IV, pp. 279-80), implying that these practices were not uncommon. In both Persian and Arabic sources it is said that by eating the flesh of a black cat one is protected against magic (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 207; IV, p. 42; V, p. 341; Damīrī, II, p. 37; Qazvīnī, p. 417). It was also believed that, because cats at times attack enemies much larger than themselves, a diet of cat's flesh would (by sympathetic magic) endow the eater with the cat's fearlessness and bravery. This is said to be the reason why Isma'īli assassins were fed cat's meat (Fozūnī, p. 446).

Trade in cats is attested from the 3rd/6th century (Jāḥeẓ, V, p. 339). Thus, grocers in the time of Jāḥeẓ kept a variety of cats well-known for their mousing skills called *baqqālī* (from *baqqāl* "grocer" or *monammer* "leopard cat," Jāḥeẓ, V, p. 318); the variety of cats now called *gorba-ye gol-bāqālī* or *gorba-ye palangī* and known to be excellent mousers may well be their descendants.

Jāḥeẓ further reports that kittens were more expensive than adult cats and that women adorned their kittens with earrings and necklaces, dyed their furs, and would kiss them and let them sleep in their beds (Jāḥeẓ, V, pp. 315, 337-38). The Deylamite prince Rokn-al-Dawla (335-66/947-77) had a pet cat he was exceedingly fond of. Sometimes petitioners would attach their written requests to the neck of the prince's favorite pet to make sure that the prince would see them (Damīrī, II, p. 35).

According to 'Aṭṭār one of the Sufi shaikhs had a pet cat who wore shoes to keep its paws clean, as it was allowed onto the shaikh's prayer rug. Once when the cat was beaten by one of the shaikh's servants, the shaikh demanded that the servant apologize to it ('Aṭṭār, p. 49). The famous jurist 'Emād Faqīh Kermānī was said to be fond of a cat whom he had trained to imitate his prostrations during prayer. The shaikh and his cat are allegedly the subjects of a famous satirical verse by Ḥāfeẓ (Amīnī, 1333, p. 207).

The pet cat of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah Qājār, Babrī Khan, was quite famous (E'temād-al-Saltāna, p. 21), and some Qajar aristocrats kept cats (Hedāyat, *Kāṭerāt o kaṭarāt*, pp. 76-77; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, pp. 307-12).



In folklore. In popular beliefs cats are variously regarded both as blessed (*baraka*, cf. Westermarck, pp. 20, 107) and as manifestations of the *jenn* or even the devil himself, especially black cats; thus, the devil is said to have appeared in the form of a black cat to the Prophet while he was praying (Westermarck, p. 6; Damīrī, II, p. 382; Massé, p. 205; Kōsravī, pp. 85, 91, 95; Rice, p. 249; Şafīnežād, pp. 392, 396; Mīhandūst, pp. 48, 49; Hedāyat, pp. 140-41; cf. Hehn, pp. 352-53). White cats can also be *jenns*, however (Donaldson, p. 36). Seeing such cats, especially the first thing in the morning, is a bad omen and one must say *besmellāh* in order to avoid harm (Šakūrzāda, p. 323; cf. Thompson, Motif B147.1.2.2. “Cat as beast of ill omen”). In Khorasan, however, it is sometimes believed that black cats may be Muslim *jenns* and be helpful rather than harmful (Mīhandūst, p. 49). A folk legend states that a cat always lands on its feet because the first imam, ‘Alī, blessed its back by caressing it (Hedāyat, p. 141; Massé, p. 188; Harou, p. 667). This belief has given rise to the expression *gorba-ye Mortazā-‘Alī* “‘Alī’s cat,” referring to those who, when in difficulties, always “land on their feet.”

Cats are perceived as thieving and sly animals (in Sanskrit *naktačārin* is used of the cat and the thief; Gubernatis, II, p. 42), and the thieving cat is referred to by a variety of expressions and proverbs in both Persian and Arabic. In dream interpretation, the cat is the sign of the thief (cf., *gorba dozda* in Persian; Fozūnī, p. 435; Mostawfī, III, pp. 307-08; Maydānī, I, p. 279 no. 813).

A very old belief is that the mother cat is so enamored of her young that she eats them (Aelian, 6.27; Ebn Qotayba, II, p. 72; Damīrī, II, p. 385; cf. Jāḥeẓ, V, p. 318). In Arabic poems satirizing ‘Āyeša (also called *omm al-mo’menīn* “mother of the faithful”), the wife of the Prophet, for her intrigues against Imam ‘Alī, which led to much bloodshed among Muslims in the battle of Jamal, is compared to a female cat who wants to eat her offspring (Jāḥeẓ, I, p. 197, VI, p. 58; Damīrī, II, p. 36; Qazvīnī, p. 147).

Cats’ eyes are closed after birth, and it is believed that, unless the cat moves her litter seven times in the house in which she has given birth, the kittens will not open them (Dehḳodā, 2537, III, s.v. *gorba*; Mostawfī, III/2, p. 53). Cats are said to be ungrateful animals because they close their eyes when eating in order not to see who feeds them (Massé, p. 206), and unlike the dog, which becomes attached to its master, the cat is believed to be attached to the house in which it lives (Hedāyat, p. 141; Mostawfī, III, p. 312).

In folk medicine a number of illnesses and cures are connected with cats.



Thus, accidental eating of a cat hair will cause *merāq*, a variety of madness (Hedāyat, p. 115), or constant nausea (Šakūrzāda, p. 636); in children ingesting cat hairs causes weakness and sickness (Pāyanda, p. 272). Splashing water on a cat one may cause warts (Pāyanda, p. 273; Karīmī, p. 44; Šakūrzāda, p. 322; Massé, p. 205), killing it produces fainting spells or death, and beating it, especially in the dark, is certain to cause vagrancy (*āvāragī*; Massé, pp. 197, 206; A'zamī, II, p. 53; Ṭāhbāz, p. 72; for other cultures cf. Thorndike, I, p. 68, II, p. 789; Sigerist, p. 342). Pliny (28.46) reported that cat dung was useful for the treatment of sores and for extracting sharp objects stuck in the flesh or throat (cf. Pliny, 28.51, 76; VIII, pp. 115, 129, 165). A concoction of cat's dung and oil is said to be useful against fever, as in the Persian proverb *be gorba goftand fažla't darmān-e, qāyem kard* "the cat was told: your dung is medicine; it hid it," which also alludes to the cat's unfriendly nature. Cat blood is useful against leprosy, and a snuff made from cat gall is thought to help treat facial paralysis (Qazvīnī, pp. 417-18). If a cat eats the placenta of a woman after childbirth, she will become barren as a result of an illness called *čella gorbaī* (Šakūrzāda, p. 139). To cure her barrenness the placenta of a cat should be held over her head while water is poured on it. The water, trickling down on her head, will cure the woman (Šafīnezād, p. 428). Another cure for female infertility involves taking some cat hair, some game meat, and a string of seven colors to the bathhouse and casting them in the oven (*tūn-e hammām*; Ṭāhbāz, p. 72).

Numerous omens are taken from the behavior of cats. A cat licking its paws while in the company of the members of a household or facing the door is a sign the guests are about to arrive (Šafīnezād, pp. 395-96; Massé, p. 192; A'zamī, I, p. 51, II, p. 53; Hedāyat, p. 140). A cat sitting with its back close to the fireplace, sleeping under the *korsī*, jumping up and down for no apparent reason, or chasing its tail forebodes cold weather (Šakūrzāda, pp. 323, 339-41) and a cat licking its paws while facing the *qebła*, rainy weather (Pāyanda, p. 272). Cats mating during the *čella-ye kūček* (the last twenty days of Bahman) are believed to forebode rain and prosperity for the next year, and in K̄voy, when people hear the cats mating, they prepare a special pastry (*qāvūt*) dedicated to K̄dīr-e Nabī (Enjavī, *Jašnā* I, p. 27, II, pp. 127-28). In Qamšār near Kāšān it is believed that leopards, in order to rejuvenate themselves, come to town at midnight at the end of the *čella-ye kūček*, catch a cat, and take it to the roof of the public bath and eat it there (*ibid.*, II, p. 92).

In Khorasan a magical object made from cat and dog hair, pages from the Qur'ān, bread, and human excrement is thrown into water to stop the rain



(Hedāyat, p. 196). Girls, who seek to find a suitable mate, may burn cat and dog hair under their skirts, exposing their genitals to the smoke (Šakūrzāda, p. 88).

Cats play an important role in Persian literature. Of cat tales that can be traced to the Aesopic fables the most famous is perhaps ‘Obayd-e Zākānī’s satirical poem *Mūš o gorba*, in which a version of tale type 113B “The Cat as the Sham Holyman” has been adapted (Zākānī, pp. 330-33; cf. Perry, pp.537-38, 586, fable no. 692; *Kalīla wa Demna*, pp. 205-08; Mīnovī, pp. 385-7; Wakīlīān, pp. 164-66; and see Thompson, Motifs K1961 , and K2010). In Sanskrit literature this tale type may be traced to the *Mahābhārata* (5.5421-48), but there is an allusion to it even earlier, in the *Laws of Manu* (4.192; Gubernatis, II, p. 52). Another modified fable, adopted by ‘Obayd-e Zākānī is that of “the fox with many tricks and the cat with only one trick” (Zākānī, p. 243, no. 34 of the Arabic anecdotes, where the cat of the original is changed to a fox; cf. Perry, pp. 542-43 no. 605, and Thompson, Motif J1662).

The central message of some of the fables has often been turned into a proverb; for instance, the Persian proverb *gorbe dast-eš be gūšt nemīrese, mīge “pīf pīf bū mīde”* “The cat can’t reach the meat, so it says: “it smells”,” is clearly based on Aesop no. 15, “sour grapes” (Daley, p. 100; Perry, p. 31, no. 19, and cf. pp. 303-04, no. 3; for other Persian versions see Enjavī, I, p. 254; and Thompson, Motif J871). Some Aesopic cat fables have also been changed almost beyond recognition, for example, the Persian tale about the cats trained to hold lit candles (sometimes lanterns) on their heads at the king’s table (Thompson, Motifs 1908.1, K264.2, J1908.2, and tale type 217). To prove to the king that nature is more powerful than training a wise man lets loose several mice in the presence of the cats, and the cats, reverting to their feline nature, drop the candles and begin chasing the mice (Amīnī, 1338, pp. 140-43). This tale, which is widely found in Arabic literature, (e.g., ‘Abd Rabbeh, I, pp. 311-12), is based on Aesop no. 50, according to which Aphrodite changed a cat who was amorous of a youth into a beautiful maiden. Once, however, the goddess decided to test her nature and released a mouse in the bedchamber. The cat maiden immediately jumped up and began chasing the mouse (Daley, p.114; Schwarzbaum, 1979, pp. 169, 175, nn. 8 and 10, 439).

Persian versions of other popular tales found worldwide include tale type 901, which was used by Shakespeare in his “Taming of the Shrew.” According to this tale, a crafty man who married a shrewish woman tamed his wife by shooting his animals in her presence to punish them for their disobedience. In Persian this tale is attached to a famous proverb: *gorba-rā bāyed dam-e hejla*



košt “one should kill the cat at the nuptial chamber” (Wakīlīān, pp. 162-63; Amīnī, 1338, p. 270).

For other Persian tales about cats see Marzolph, s.v. “Katze.”

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