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From gods to garbage dwellers

The steady demise of Cairo's cats and what one group is doing to save them.

[Theodore May](#) July 21, 2009 06:41

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A stray cat carries a pigeon through a Cairo street, June 2, 2009. (Amr Abdallah Dalsh/Reuters)

CAIRO, Egypt — Drivers swerve to hit them. Frustrated landlords poison them. Their distinctive bodies — gray and spotted, slender and wiry — litter the streets of the capital.

It is an inglorious end for these once revered animals. They are members of the world's oldest breed of domesticated cat, the mau, once worshipped as a god and the pet of choice for Egyptian pharaohs.

Now, a small band of animal welfare activists is fighting back, dedicated to saving the individual animals as well as the proud status of a species that dates back 4,000 years.

Nestled in the hills overlooking Egypt's capital is the headquarters of the Egyptian Mau Rescue Organization (EMRO).

EMRO's director, Abdel Rahman Fahmy, said the organization focuses on the mau cats "because they have a history."

In ancient Egypt, cats earned a revered status because of their pest control prowess. By the beginning of the second millennium B.C., cats had been domesticated and various cults surrounding them had emerged.

“The cat in ancient times was represented by the important goddess Bastet,” said Mohamed Ali Maher, a longtime guide at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. “They were very important to the ancient Egyptian people.”

Bastet was the goddess of motherhood for many dynasties, while another cat god, Sekhmet, represented warfare. A number of other gods, represented by cats and lions, stalked through Egypt's pantheons over the centuries.

On an earthly plane, cats became close companions for many ancient Egyptians, who often used them for hunting.

Killing cats became a crime punishable by death.

Images of cats adorn the walls of temples throughout Egypt. Archaeologists have unearthed scores of cat statues. Mummified cats litter archaeological museums throughout Egypt.

“We have a lot of tombs for cats because the ancient Egyptian people offered them to the gods,” Maher said.

Archaeologists have discovered a tomb in the Nile delta region holding hundreds of thousands of mummified cats.

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