13-181 The Lioness Goddess Sekhmet, the "Powerful Woman"

On the left, the Burrell Sekhmet, on the right an example of a full body Sekhmet from the British Museum.

Taking pride of place in the displays in the Egyptian Gallery at the Burrell Collection is a fine sculpted granite head of the lioness goddess, Sekhmet (13-181). It was bought by Sir William Burrell on 12 October 1950 from K J Hewett. Although unprovenanced, it probably is part of one of the many seated or standing statues of the goddess, found at Thebes. These were set up by Amenhotep III (1390 - 1352 BCE) in the precincts of the temple of Karnak, and across the Nile at his mortuary temple at Kom el-Hatan, where his colossal statues, the "Colossi of Memnon", still stand flanking the long-vanished entrance pylon.

Sekhmet was a dangerous lady. Her name is the ancient Egyptian for "powerful woman". As the daughter of the sun-god Ra she wore a sun-disc as her headdress. The mortice slot for this can still be seen on the top of the Burrell head. She was the destructive power of the sun's rays and the hot desert wind was known as the "breath of Sekhmet". As well as the elaborate wig that can still be seen, the complete statue would have worn jewelled bracelets and anklets and a tight linen sheath dress. Sekhmet was "mistress of red linen", red being the colour of violence and disorder. True to form, Sekhmet was the goddess of disease. Plagues were known as the "messengers of Sekhmet", and the "seven arrows of Sekhmet" brought misfortune. But she could also be appeased to bring healing. Her priests were expert in the magical arts of medicine.

Perhaps this gives us a clue why Amenhotep III dedicated so many statues to her. Mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, Sekhmet was in origin the wife of the god Ptah of Memphis. By the New Kingdom she was equated with the goddess Mut, wife of Amun-Ra, with a cult-centre at Asheru, south of the main Karnak temple. Mut was the divine mother of the king. Amenhotep Ill's own mother was called Mut-em-wiya. It is possible therefore that these statues pay tribute to his divine and natural mother. But there is a more sinister explanation. During the reign of Amenhotep III Egypt stood unchallenged as the superpower of her day. It was a time of unparalled wealth and luxury. Egypt's influence extended throughout Nubia and the Near East. Diplomatic missions were even sent to the Bronze Age civilisations of the Aegean. People and goods flooded into Egypt. But with them may also have come disease. It is known that plague devastated Egypt during the reign of Amenhotep III's son and successor, Akhenaten. Is it possible that the luxury and extravagance of Amenhotep III's reign was threatened by an epidemic? Did he erect so many statues to this fearful goddess to entreat her protection? We can never for sure.

There is a tale, known to us as "The Destruction of Mankind" and preserved in tombs of the New Kingdom pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings, that tells of Sekhmet's aggressive and destructive nature. Ra, feeling threatened by humankind, after consulting with the gods, invokes Sekhmet to teach them a lesson. She goes on a killing spree and so much enjoys herself that Ra begins to fear she will exterminate people altogether. The only way he can stop her is to brew 7,000 jars of barley beer and to stain them the colour of blood with red ochre. When Sekhmet awakes to continue her orgy of slaughter, she sees the beer with which Ra has flooded the fields to a depth of three palms. She becomes so drunk with drinking what she thinks is blood that she forgets what she was going to do. So humankind is saved from destruction.

It was traditional to appease Sekhmet and to send wishes of good health by exchanging gifts of amulets of the goddess on the Egyptian New Year's Day. Since this fell on 19 July, perhaps we should begin celebrating Glasgow Fair in this way!