

Birds in Ancient Egyptian mythology and daily life (with some examples from the Egypt Centre)

by Dulcie Engel

Birds were an important feature of Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs, and daily life:

One hundred eighty-three bird species have so far been identified on the balance of probabilities from the mummies, bone remains, hieroglyphs, art, and artifacts of ancient Egypt. Just six of these appear to have been depicted only in Predynastic times (Wyatt, 2012)

This is a brief guide to some of main birds, both real & mythological, with links to artefacts in the EC.

Ba-bird

In Egyptian iconography, a person's *ba* (that is, part of the soul most like our concept of personality) was represented as a human-headed bird:

The human head denotes an individual, and the bird's body depicts the freedom of movement of the deceased, able to leave the netherworld and soak up the sun's creative energies (Jackson 2018b)

The bird's body is usually depicted as that of a falcon, thus associating the deceased person with the god Horus (see under 'falcon'). The ba-bird is free to leave the tomb, but returns each night, just as the sun god Ra returns to the underworld before rebirth at dawn. Examples of ba bird statues appear in the New Kingdom, but are much more common in the mid-late 1st millennium BCE. Many have holes with broken dowel fragments in the base suggesting that they were attached to shrines, stelae or coffins.

In the EC:

There is a whole flock of ba-birds in the museum (10), such as:
EC236, EC237, W429 (Offerings case HoD)

Duck, goose & waterfowl

In Egypt, ducks, geese and their eggs were an important food source, both farmed and wild.

Geb, the god of the earth/underworld, was often depicted as a white-fronted goose. Amun was also associated with the goose, and when the Pharaoh Akhenaten introduced his new religion, he ordered the destruction of many depictions of geese because of this association with the old creator god (see Jackson 2019). A famous wall painting, 'Meidum Geese' from the tomb of prince Nefermaat I and his wife Itet (now in Cairo's Museum of Egyptian Antiquities), is known for its realistic depictions of geese. Howard Carter also made watercolours of three varieties of geese depicted here: White-fronted, Greylag and Red-breasted (see Malek et al n.d.). Recently Anthony Romilio (2021) has suggested that another, now extinct breed, the speckled goose, is shown on the painting. One of the wall paintings from Nebamun's tomb (see below) shows farmed geese, stored in baskets, presumably ready for market (see McKie 2009). Nebamun is inspecting the birds and his scribes are recording the number of geese.

'Fowling in the Marshes' is a fragment of a wall painting from the tomb chapel of Nebamun in Thebes dating back to c. 1350 BCE, and now in the British Museum. Nebamun was a wealthy official, and the paintings from his chapel reflect an idealised version of daily life at the time. In this scene, the tomb owner is shown hunting birds in a boat with his wife Hatshepsut, their daughter and their cat (see British Museum 2016): *a hunt through reed beds that burst with creatures - shrike, wagtails and pintail ducks - easily identifiable still....That great hunt scene is more than a depiction of everyday life: the birds and cat are symbols of fertility and female sexuality, and Nebamun's expedition can also be seen as "taking possession of the cycle of creations and rebirth" (McKie 2009)*

Furthermore: *Waterfowl such as ducks and geese are linked to Egyptian origin stories, and so scenes like this, featuring abundance and fertility, help to guarantee the tomb owner's daily rebirth in the afterlife (Jackson 2019)*

Fellow Volunteer Bethany Saunders has written an article on this scene from Nebamun's tomb for this issue of the Newsletter (Saunders 2021).

In the EC:

EA64830 (Amulets case HoD) Cornelian scaraboid **duck** amulet from the 19th Dynasty.
W588 (Animals case HoD) A pale green wooden **goose**.

W1021 (Body adornment case HoL) An ointment bowl in white stone in the shape of a **trussed duck**.

W1022 (Animals case HoD) A dark stone ointment bowl is in the shape of a **double duck**.

W1041 (Offerings case HoD) Wooden funerary stela from Ptolemaic Period. It calls upon various gods to ensure that the dead person received bread, beer, beef, **geese**, incense and 'all things sweet pure and good on which a god lives'.

W2060 (Woodwork case, HoL) Leg from a folding stool terminating in a **duck's head**.

Falcon

The falcon was the iconic bird of ancient Egypt. It was associated with power, dominance, sky and heavenly bodies, and hence connected with several gods. Thus, the so-called 'Horus falcon' belongs among the most frequently depicted birds in ancient Egypt, both in hieroglyphs and art (Malek et al, n.d.)

Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, was often depicted as a falcon-headed god. Furthermore, the winged sun disc, which is often found on coffins and over temple doorways, represents the union of Horus with the sun god (see Jackson 2018a). The falcon-headed Qebehsenuef was one of the Four Sons of Horus, who guard the viscera removed during mummification inside canopic jars. He was under the protection of Serket/Selket (the scorpion goddess), and guarded the mummy's intestines. We find him frequently depicted on canopic jar lids and as an amulet to place on the body, marking where the intestines had been.

In the EC:

The **winged sun disc** is normally found in the lunette (the rounded top section) of a stela. For example:

W1041 (Offerings case HoD), **W946** (Votive offerings case HoL). It is also to be found on coffin fragments such as **W354** (Drawers HoL).

EA54222 (Amulets case HoD) **Horus** the elder green faience amulet.

EC388 (Mummification case HoD) Travertine canopic jar lid showing **Qebehsenuef**.

EC890 (Amulets case HoD) Blue faience amulet of **Qebehsenuef**. Similar amulets: **PM8** (Amulets case HoD)

EC895 (Faience case HoL).

W84 (Animals case HoD) A copper alloy **falcon** statue.

W498 (Mummification case HoD) A travertine canopic jar with an inscription for **Qebehsenuef**, although the form of Imsety is depicted on the lid.

W535 (Animals case HoD) A hollow wooden **falcon-shaped coffin** wearing a double crown and containing a small mummified bird of prey.

W1982 (HoD) Coffin of the Chantress of Amun, Iwesemhesetmut: a **falcon-headed Horus** is depicted in the Weighing of Heart and other scenes.

Heron

The heron, known in Ancient Egypt as the *benu*, was the sacred bird of Heliopolis, and one of the forms that the sun-god Ra could take:

Just as Ra was self-creating (every morning at sunrise as well as at the instant of creation) so was the benu—a symbol of eternal renewal and rebirth (Jackson 2018b)

Hérons also feature on the wall painting 'Fowling in the marshes' from Nebamun's tomb (see under 'Duck etc'), where Nebamun is shown carrying 3 decoy herons.

In the EC:

EC644 (Animals case HoD) Stone mould for a benu bird.

Ibis

The *akh* is the form in which dead inhabited underworld, the result of the reunion of the *ba* (see above) with the *ka* (the creative life-force). The *akh* was represented by the **crested ibis** (or northern bald ibis).

A different bird, the **sacred ibis**, represented the god Thoth:

The Sacred Ibis is probably associated with the moon god Thoth, the god of writing and scribes, because its head and curved bill resemble either the new moon and/or a hand holding a scribe's pen. Depictions of this bird frequently occur both as hieroglyphs (often very elaborate and accurate) and in Egyptian art (for example in marshland scenes) (Malek et al, n.d.)

Large cemeteries for cult animals such as ibises can be found for example in Abydos, Tuna el-Gebel, and Saqqara. The birds were mummified and buried inside ceramic pots. Recent DNA analysis has suggested that these ibis offerings were not captive-bred, but wild birds, who at most were caught shortly before sacrifice (Wasef et al 2019).

In the EC:

EA63796 (Gods case HoD) Thoth statuette of green faience.

W91(Metalwork case HoL) Copper alloy ibis foot from a statue.

W1048 (Animals case HoD) A small wooden model of an ibis.

W1982 (HoD) Coffin of the Chantress of Amun, Iwesemhesetmut : Thoth with ibis head is depicted in the Weighing of the Heart scene.

Lapwing

The lapwing (*rekhyt*) is often used as a symbol for subject peoples, but the usage is ambiguous and the birds could be interpreted either as captive enemies or loyal subjects (Shaw & Nicholson 1995). Their images appear in temples and palaces throughout the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman periods:

For over 3000 years the rekhyt-people were abundantly depicted in Egyptian art, usually as a lapwing with human hands raised in adoration (Griffin 2006)

Ken Griffin has made an in-depth study of the symbolism and meaning of the rekhyt people in Egyptian religion (Griffin 2018).

In the EC:

EC398c, EC 397b (in storage) Faience tile fragments possibly showing part of lapwing.

W1161(Stone case, HoL) Limestone statue of boy holding a bird, possibly a lapwing.

Ostrich

Ostrich feathers are those used most frequently in ancient Egypt's iconography. Ostrich feathers adorn the crowns of gods such as Amun and Shu, and were used in ceremonial fans (Jackson2018b)

Ostrich feathers are associated with the concept of *maat* (truth, justice, universal harmony), and the goddess of the same name, who wore an ostrich feather (see Jackson 2018b).

This feather is depicted on the scales in weighing of the heart scenes, balancing against the deceased's heart. Ostrich eggshell fragments were made into beads for bracelets and necklaces. They have also been found in burials, as EC volunteer Sam Powell has investigated:

the fragments may have been included in the burial as unworked material. It is also possible that the eggs may represent food provisions for the deceased... The shells may have functioned as cups or bowls... particularly interesting is the idea that ostrich shell may have had some symbolic and/or ritual function, connecting to rebirth and regeneration (S. Powell 2019)

In the EC:

AR50/3444 (Predynastic case HoL) **Ostrich eggshell fragments** from a Predynastic burial at Armant.

W1376 (Body adornment case HoL) Limestone temple relief of Nefurere depicting part of an **ostrich fan**.

W1982 (HoD) Coffin of the Chantress of Amun, Iwesemhesetmut : the **feather of Maat** is depicted on the scales in the Weighing of the Heart scene.

Owl

*Representations of an Owl, most probably the Barn Owl, as a hieroglyph, where it represents the **m** sign (G 17 of Gardiner's sign-list), are very common but depictions in art are very rare... The ancient Egyptians depicted the Barn Owl in an unusual way, en face, most probably to show its characteristic facial features of the bird.* (Malek et al n.d.)

Owls were associated with mourning and death. The ancient name for owl was *jmw* 'one who laments'. On the back of the Protodynastic 'Libyan palette' found at Abydos an owl within a fortified wall is depicted, representing a city. Later, owls were frequently shown on fishing and fowling wall paintings, such as those in the tomb of Sennefer (see Krgovic 2017).

In the EC: We have no objects depicting owls, but you will easily find the owl hieroglyph on one of the many inscriptions on display.

Quail

Like ducks and geese, quails were also bred on farms, and considered a good source of protein:

*Depictions of the Common Quail are frequently attested in ancient Egyptian sources, both as the hieroglyphic signs **w** (G 43 of Gardiner's sign-list) and in Egyptian art where they appear in their natural environment (e.g. in grain fields during the harvest season) or among food-offerings* (Malek et al n.d.)

In the EC: We have no objects depicting quails, but you will easily find the quail hieroglyph on one of the many inscriptions on display.

Sokar hawk

Wooden Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figures combine the powers of the creator god Ptah, (represented as mummiform), Osiris, god of death, resurrection and fertility (represented by the two feathers of his crown), and Sokar, the hawk-headed god of the cemeteries (the bird), particularly associated with Saqqara. Larger Ptah-Osiris figures would usually be hollow with a removable back-piece, so that prayers for the dead could be placed inside the figure. Most figures are incomplete as the different sections making up the statue often became separated over time. In particular, Sokar hawks and Osiris crowns are often found detached from the statue base and the Ptah figure.

In the EC: As with ba birds, we have quite a flock of Sokar hawks (14), such as:

EC229, EC230 (Coffins case, HoD), **WK21** (Woodwork case HoL).

W2001 (Gods case HoD) is a complete Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figure.

Vulture

Representations of the Egyptian Vulture occur frequently in Egyptian script, since the depiction of this bird was used to denote the 'aleph' hieroglyph (G1 of Gardiner's sign-list). Its attestations in Egyptian art are, however, extremely rare (Malek et al n.d.)

The depiction of a vulture standing with its wings outstretched emphasised its protective function. A vulture was usually shown hovering over the head of the pharaoh, clutching a *shen* symbol in its claws. Vultures became important symbols for queens who sought protection from the vulture goddess Nekhbet by wearing the vulture crown. A standing vulture was used on amulets to be placed upon the mummy of the deceased (see Jackson 2017).

In the EC:

EA15597 (Amulets case HoD) Standing gold vulture amulet.

EC641 (Fakes/copies case HoL) plaster copy of predynastic Battlefield palette: one side shows vulture & lion (front shows giraffe & bird, probably northern ground hornbill).

W944 (Drawers HoL) Cartonnage coffin fragment showing goddess Nekhbet with the head of a vulture.

HAPPY BIRD-SPOTTING!

References

British Museum (2016) "Paintings from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun," in Smart history, August 29, 2016

<https://smarthistory.org/paintings-from-the-tomb-chapel-of-nebamun/>

Egypt Centre (n.d.) 'Birds in Ancient Egypt' <https://www.egypt.swan.ac.uk/birds-in-ancient-egypt/>

Goodridge, W. & Williams, S. (2005) Offerings from the British Museum (Egypt Centre)

Griffin, K. (2006) 'Images of the Rekhyt from Ancient Egypt' Ancient Egypt Oct-Nov. 2006, p.45-51

(2018) All the Rxyt-people Adore: The Role of the Rekhyt-people in Egyptian Religion (GHP Egyptology)

Jackson, L. (2017) The Noble Vulture Nile Magazine 10, Oct-Nov 2017 p.34-41

(2018a) The Divine Falcon Nile Magazine 13, Apr-May 2018 p.39-47

(2018b) Spirit Birds Nile Magazine 16 Oct-Nov 2018 p.29- 39

(2019) Marsh Birds of the Gods Nile Magazine 19 Apr-May 2019 p. 6-12

Krgovic, O. (2017) 'Owls in Ancient Egypt' <https://www.atthemummiesball.com/owls-ancient-egypt/>

Malek et al (n.d.) 'An album of Howard Carter's watercolours of birds and animals' Carter MSS. vii.1

(Concept & direction: J.Malek; texts of individual entries: J.Janák & J. Wyatt)

http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter_birds.html

- McKie, R. (2009) 'Raiders of the lost art' The Guardian 04/01/09
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/04/british-museum-egyptian-nebamun-tomb>
- Powell, S. (2019) 'What is so egg-citing about ostrich egg fragments?'
<https://egyptcentrecollecionblog.blogspot.com/2019/05/what-is-so-egg-citing-about-ostrich-egg.html>
- Romilio, A. (2021) 'Assessing 'Meidum Geese' species identification with the 'Tobias criteria' Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports 36, April 2121
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352409X21000468>
- Saunders, B. (2021) 'Tomb Scene: EA37977 Fowling in the Marshes' Egypt Centre Volunteer Newsletter
- Shaw, I. & Nicholson, P. (1995) British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt (British Museum Press)
- Wasef S., Subramanian S., O'Rourke R., Huynen L., El-Marghani S., Curtis C., et al. (2019) 'Mitogenomic diversity in Sacred Ibis Mummies sheds light on early Egyptian practices' PLoS ONE 14(11)
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223964>
- Wyatt, J. (2012) Birds, Pharaonic Egypt
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah15065>