

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH



A pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) among the papyrus marshes. Wall painting from the northern palace of Akhenaten, Amarna (Davies 1936, vol. 2, pl. 76)

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

BIRDS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

edited by

ROZENN BAILLEUL-LESUER

with new photography by

ANNA R. RESSMAN

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM PUBLICATIONS 35
THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012946464

ISBN-10: 1-885923-92-9

ISBN-13: 978-1-885923-92-9

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Published 2012. Printed in the United States of America.

The Oriental Institute, Chicago

This volume has been published in conjunction with the exhibition
Between Heaven and Earth: Birds in Ancient Egypt
October 15, 2012–July 28, 2013.

Oriental Institute Museum Publications 35

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Published by The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

1155 East 58th Street

Chicago, Illinois, 60637 USA

oi.uchicago.edu

Illustration Credits

Front cover: "Birds in an Acacia Tree." Tempera on paper by Nina de Garis Davies, 1932. Catalog No. 11.

Back cover: Head of an owl. Limestone and pigment. Late Period to early Ptolemaic period, 664–150 BC Catalog No. 22

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Printed by Four Colour Print Group, Loves Park, Illinois

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Service —
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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2. THE ROLE OF BIRDS WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF ANCIENT EGYPT

FOY SCALF

AVIAN ELEMENTS IN THE DIVINE ICONOGRAPHY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

The proliferative variety of animal imagery within ancient Egyptian religion continues to remain a source of astonishment and bewilderment to many viewers (Pearce 2007, pp. 242–64). Crowned beasts, human bodies with animal heads, and fantastic deities depicted with the commingled limbs of numerous creatures — what Virgil called “monstrous shapes of every species and Anubis the barker” — are commonly found in the Egyptian artistic repertoire (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, p. 1854). What, however, did such representations mean? For some Greco-Roman authors seeing and hearing of Egyptian practices, animal veneration was a source of ridicule, hypocritically invoked as Greeks and Romans had their own forms of animal worship, some of which were imported from Egypt.¹ Others, such as Plutarch, Diodorus, and Horapollo, while often not approving of the practice, had at least a partial understanding of the complex symbolic web woven by Egyptian philosophers. Despite the potential confusion a glance at an Egyptian religious work of art can

cause, the visual metaphors employed actually have an internal consistency and logic. If it were not the case, what power would the images have either to influence people or explain their ideologies.

A primary impediment to understanding a figure such as the bimorphic Horus, shown with a human body and a falcon’s head, is adopting a literal interpretation of the scene (fig. 2.1). The iconography of divine beings was a human invention, an intellectual construct developed to provide a means to express, discuss, manipulate, and understand the various physical forces within the cosmos inhabited by the people of ancient Egypt. It should be remembered that the ancient Egyptians still had intimate contact with and reliance upon the natural forces of their environment. Such forces had an assortment of traits that could be used metaphorically to embody abstract concepts or provide iconic vessels for the physical manifestation of cosmic and social characteristics. Features of flora and fauna derived from the natural world were chosen in order to communicate concepts such as ferocity, protection, or motherhood. In this view, literal readings must be abandoned. Like any artistic expression, “these are communicative devices, metaphors, in a system of formal art that aims not at realist reproduction but at the essence of being” (Quirke 2008, p. 74).

Diodorus Siculus, a historian from first-century BC Sicily, had already grasped the basic metaphorical concept. Concerning the symbolism of the falcon, he wrote:

Now the falcon signifies to them everything which happens swiftly, hence this animal is practically the swiftest of winged creatures. And the concept portrayed is then transferred, by the appropriate metaphorical transfer, to all swift things and to everything to which swiftness is appropriate, very much as if they had been named.²

It is this metaphorical transfer which underpins the “imagistic” system of ancient Egypt.³ Horus, a god whose name literally means “the one who is far



FIGURE 2.1. Bimorphic depiction of Thoth, with the head of an ibis, and Horus, with the head of a falcon, shown anointing the pharaoh Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (170–163 BC). From the temple of Kom Ombo (photo by Foy Scalf)

away,” is depicted as a falcon, which can soar high into the sky, but the falcon is not limited to Horus. Montu, a god associated with valor and combat, can also be depicted as a falcon due to the bird of prey’s ferocious killing abilities. Likewise, the falcon is a common form of the solar deity Re because the flight of the falcon alludes to the flight of the sun across the sky. The complexity of the natural world and the ambivalence of its flora and fauna led to a vast amount of overlap in the iconographic canon (table 2.1).

Egyptian divine images should be understood in their multiplicity and diversity, not as monolithic entities without nuance. We should not interpret figures such as a human body with a falcon head as representing some actual entity in the universe, whose particular likeness distinguished it exclusively from every other divine being. Rather, this is one way to express a particular quality about a force in the universe which the ancient Egyptians were attempting to explain and these “hybrid representations” should

be considered “a form of iconographic signs and can be compared to hieroglyphics.”⁴

AVIAN ELEMENTS AMONG THE “TRANSFORMATION” SPELLS OF EGYPTIAN FUNERARY TEXTS

Because of the close association between departed humans and the divine world, the metaphors evoked by avian imagery have further significance for understanding the Egyptians’ conception of the afterlife. In the Egyptian collection of mythological episodes scholars now call the Book of the Heavenly Cow, it is said that man comes into being from the tears of the sun god. The creator of this etiological myth employed a playful pun, connecting the Egyptian word for “man” (*rmt*) with the word for “tear” (*rmy.t*) because they contain similar consonantal roots. However, the further implication contained in this myth is that man is “consubstantial” with the gods; man is made from divine material (Ritner 2011). For the ancient Egyptian, the ultimate desire for the afterlife was to join in the company of the gods and partake in the role of the sun during the day and Osiris throughout the night. The deceased actually sought to become gods and to possess the powers of the gods, including the ability to manifest in representative animal forms and attain the qualities of the cosmic forces the images conveyed.

Just as substantial avian imagery appears within Egyptian religious art, funerary literature reserves a prominent place for birds within the so-called transformation spells. The designation “transformation” derives from the recurrence of the Egyptian verb “to become” (*hpr*) in the introduction to such spells (fig. 2.2). Within the traditional funerary compilations of the Pyramid Texts (PT), Coffin Texts (CT), and Book of the Dead (BD), the idea of “becoming” a particular being, including the gods themselves in addition to a variety of plant and animal forms, occupied the focus of many passages. In the Greco-Roman period, descendants of the transformation spells were used independently on papyri to form their own composition referred to as the Book of Transformations.⁵ It was believed that those who employed these texts could transform into animal forms of their choosing and Book of the Dead spells were dedicated to becoming a “falcon of gold” (BD 77), “divine falcon” (BD 78), “phoenix” (BD 83), “heron” (BD 84), “ba-bird” (BD

TABLE 2.1. Prominent deities associated with avian iconography

Name	Avian Features
Benu	Heron
Horakhty	Falcon, Winged Sun Disk
Horus	Falcon, Winged Sun Disk
Isis	Falcon, Kite, Kestrel, Swallow
Khonsu	Falcon
Montu	Falcon
Nekhbet	Vulture
Nephthys	Falcon, Kite, Kestrel, Swallow
Qebehsenuf	Falcon Head
Re	Falcon, Winged Sun Disk
Sokar	Falcon
Thoth	Ibis

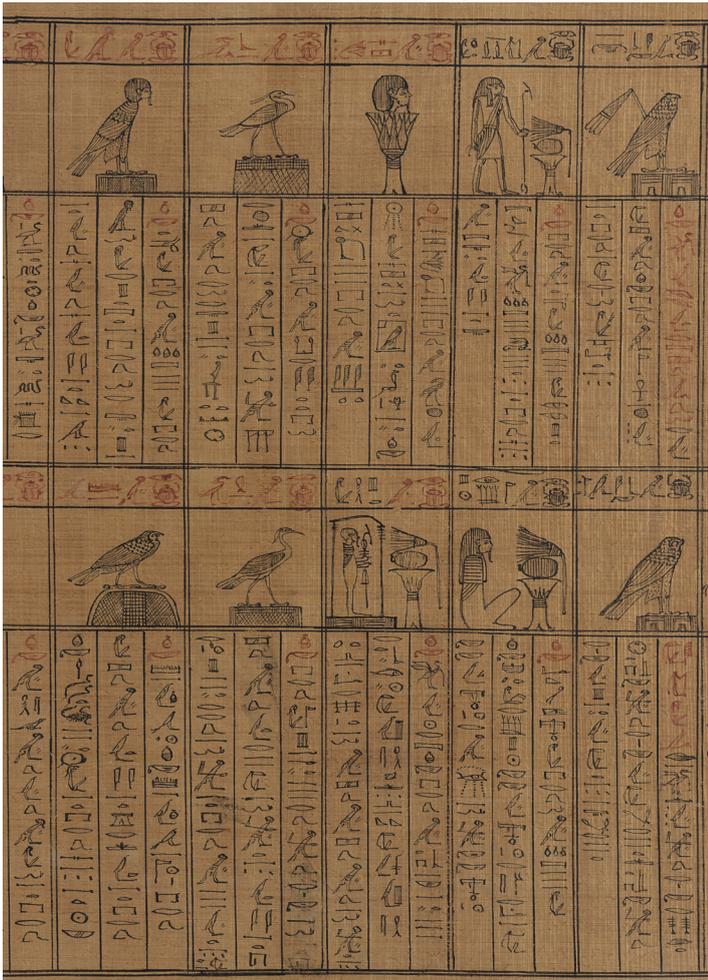


FIGURE 2.2. Spells 77–86 from Papyrus Milbank (OIM E10486), a Ptolemaic Book of the Dead papyrus belonging to Irtyuru. The vignettes show the various forms in which the deceased wished to transform himself by means of the accompanying spells (D. 17930; photo by Anna Ressman)

85), and a “swallow” (BD 86). These animal appearances represented the gods and the powers associated therewith (fig. 2.3).

In the “spell for becoming a divine falcon” (CT 312/BD 78), Horus announces to Osiris that he will send the deceased as a messenger in his own falcon form: “I made my form as his form when he comes and goes to Busiris, for my appearance is his appearance.” Later in the text, the messenger replies: “I have performed what was ordered because Horus endowed me with his *ba*.” The *ba*, although often translated as “soul,” represents the physical manifestation and power of the god. Thus, the *bas* of the sun god were the many forms he could take, one of which was the phoenix, which is called the “*ba* of Re” and into which the deceased wished to transform by means of BD spell 83 (see Catalog No. 2 and fig. 2.3). The phoenix, called the *benu*-bird in Egyptian (table 2.1), was the

manifestation of the sun god as creator, who was born of an egg laid upon the primeval mound that first rose from the cosmic waters.

For the deceased individual, the *ba* often manifested in iconography as a human-headed bird (see Catalog No. 34). The bird body represented the freedom of movement of the deceased and specifically the ability to fly into the sky so that he might “share in the cosmic existence of the sun god.”⁶ However, as the transformation spells suggest, individuals could take innumerable forms in the afterlife. In addition to the human-headed bird, the deceased could be depicted as a falcon-headed human, attested by anthropoid coffins with falcon heads, mummies fitted with cartonnage falcon heads, and scenes on stelae showing the deceased’s falcon-headed corpse lying upon a funerary bier (compare the writing of Qebhsenuef in table 2.1).⁷

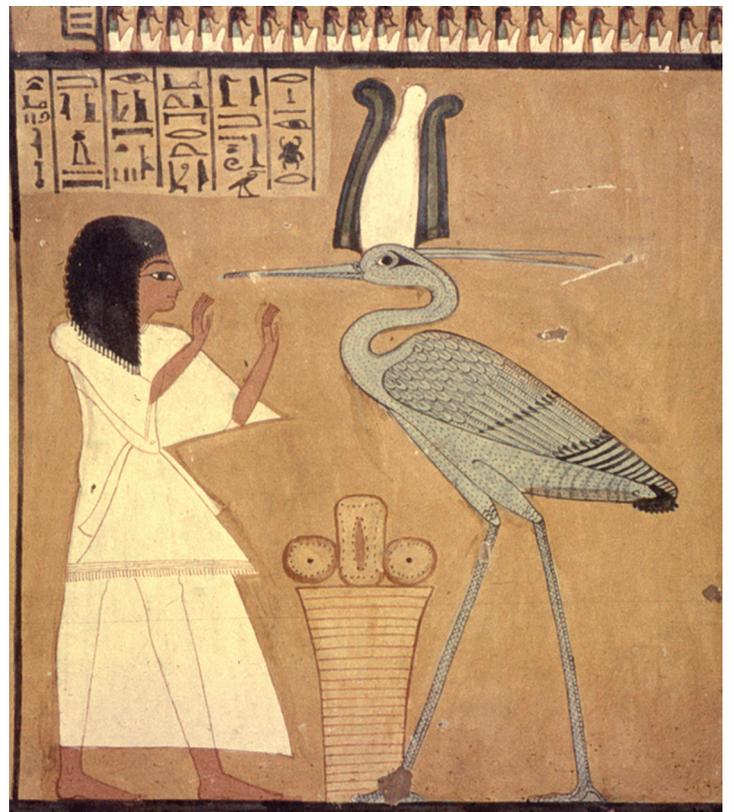


FIGURE 2.3. Inherkhau shown standing before the phoenix in his tomb (TT 359). The image is a supersized version of the vignette from Book of the Dead spell 83, whose introductory passage is above Inherkhau’s head: “Spell for becoming the phoenix, entering and going forth by Osiris, overseer of the crew in the place of truth, Inherkhau, justified” (photo by Charles Nims)

“ONE BIRD, ONE POT”: THE SACRED ANIMAL CULTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Avian elements were prominent in divine iconography and funerary literature, but most infamous has been the direct worship of animals within the sacred animal cults of ancient Egypt (see fig. 3.4). The veneration of selected sacred animals has a long history in Egypt extending back at least to the predynastic period as revealed by the recent excavations of the elaborate burials of fauna at Hierakonpolis.⁸ The exact nature of these earliest animal cults remain an enigma because of extremely fragmentary evidence and a lack of written documents from the period to provide the indigenous perspective on these practices. Based on evidence from later historical epochs, animal cults primarily took one of two forms. In one form, an animal was considered the physical living incarnation of a particular deity on earth (Dodson 2009). There were many sacred animals associated with different gods and various cities, such as the Apis bull, a living manifestation of the god Ptah worshipped in the city of Memphis; the living crocodile, an earthly form

of the god Sobek venerated throughout the Fayum; and the living falcon of Edfu, an incarnation of the god Horus. These animals, and others like them, were selected to be the representative of gods on earth, a breathing receptacle for the god's *ba* or manifest physical power, and they were well cared for, paraded during public festivals, and ornately buried. Cults of this type continued to be practiced into the Roman period and elements borrowed from Egyptian customs continued in use into the Byzantine era across the Mediterranean world (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, p. 1999).

The other form of animal veneration consisted of the capturing and rearing of animal species sacred to a particular deity and the mummification and burial of these species in special purpose-built necropoleis (fig. 2.4). Rather than a single chosen member, all members of these species were considered sacred to their tutelary divinity and were buried by the millions (fig. 2.5). An astonishing menagerie of fauna were treated in this manner including fish, beetles, lizards, snakes, shrews, moles, mice, ibises, hawks, falcons, dogs, and jackals. These categories of worship

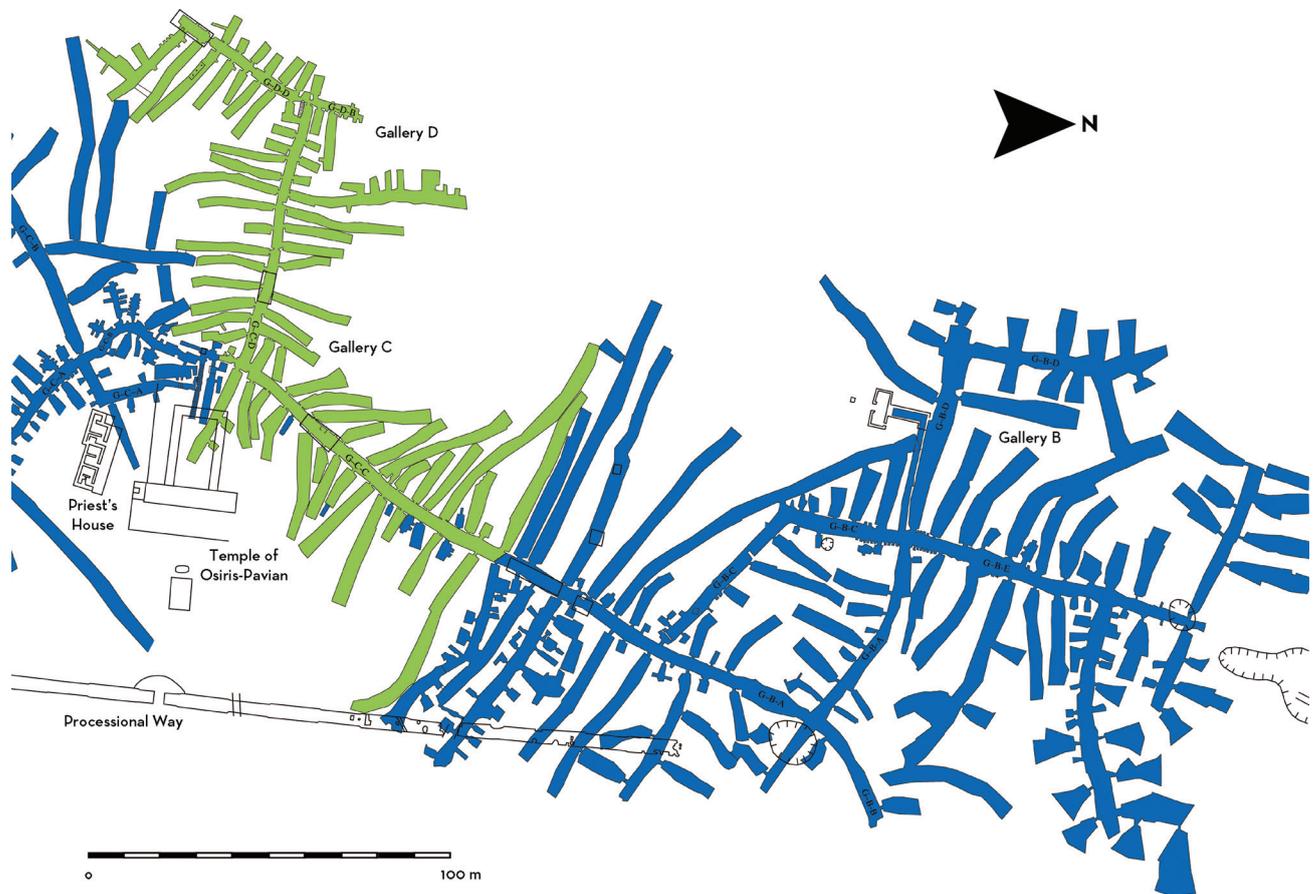


FIGURE 2.4. The subterranean animal necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel. Pre-Ptolemaic parts of the galleries shown in green (courtesy of Dieter Kessler)



FIGURE 2.5. A vulture lays before the innumerable ceramic vessels containing bird bundles stacked at the entrance to Gallery 6/5 in the Falcon Catacomb excavated at Saqqara (Davies and Smith 2005, pl. 23d)

were not mutually exclusive; the Egyptians could prepare for burial millions of falcons while still separately rearing a particular falcon which functioned as the living incarnation of the god on earth, public displays of which are known to have taken place at the temples of Edfu, Dendera, and Philae (Dijkstra 2002).

Among these cults, reverence of the ibis, sacred to the god Thoth, and the falcon, sacred to the god Horus, held special places of honor and the cults of these two birds were often administered together, as we know from the records of the personnel left behind at Saqqara, Tuna el-Gebel, Dra Abu el-Naga (Thebes), and Kom Ombo. The reverence for these birds was surely old, but our earliest indication for their mummification and burial derives from patchy evidence dated to the New Kingdom, such as a ceramic vessel with a hieratic inscription mentioning the discovery and subsequent burial of an ibis found in “the canal of Ramses I.”⁹ Sites dedicated to the purposes of the cult flourished throughout the land of Egypt, exploding in popularity soon after 700 BC. The exponential increase in the popularity of these animal cults followed first the Assyrian and later Persian conquests of Egypt and some scholars have interpreted the renewed vigorous participation as a

nationalist response to foreign domination (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, pp. 1863–64). However, expansion of the sacred animal necropolis of Tuna el-Gebel continued under the Persian rulers, historical memory of whom suffered, as indicated by the tale recounted by Herodotus about how Cambyses stabbed and killed the Apis bull.

The last native kings of the Thirtieth Dynasty from Sebennytos in the Delta, who supported Egyptian religious practices through substantial building campaigns and royal sponsorship during their brief dynasty, seem to have placed particular emphasis on the animal cults. Pharaoh Nectanebo II had a royal cult dedicated to “Nectanebo-the-falcon” including priests who served statues showing the king standing beneath the breast of the Horus falcon.¹⁰ The Macedonian rulers of the Ptolemaic dynasty (305–30 BC) sought continued employment of such traditional Egyptian symbols, including maintaining the cult of Nectanebo-the-falcon, fitting with the portrayal of Nectanebo as an ancestor of Alexander the Great in the *Alexander Romance*.¹¹ Maintenance of the sacred animal cults was important enough that the Ptolemaic sacerdotal decrees make prominent mention of royal patronage for their support. The decree preserved on the Rosetta Stone for Ptolemy V Epiphanes states that “He did many great deeds for Apis, Mnevis, and the other sacred animals of Egypt in excess of what those who came before him did. His thought concerned their condition at all times and he gave great and splendid (offerings) for their burials.”¹² The language of the decrees shows how the Ptolemaic kings negotiated with the powerful priestly class in addition to presenting themselves as traditional pharaohs maintaining the cosmic order of *maat* through their religious piety.

Birds for the cult were both raised in captivity as well as captured wild. A recently published Demotic inscription on a coffin from the hawk galleries at Saqqara refers to the discovery of a dead hawk which was collected for burial (Ray 2011, pp. 271–73). Royal subsidies in the form of fields controlled by the cultic administration as part of their priestly stipend allowed them to provide feed for the birds as well as raise liquid capital by leasing the land for cultivation or selling the produce at harvest. Several members of these cultic administrations are known from objects in the Oriental Institute Museum collection. Provisioning for the living falcons in the town of



FIGURE 2.6. Base of the magical healing statue of Djedhor from Athribis, in which he references his job caring for the “living falcons who are in this land” (column 5 from the left). OIM E10589 (photo by Jean Grant)

Athribis during the Ptolemaic period was the responsibility of a man named Djedhor, whose statue-base inscription details how he “prepared the food of the living falcons who are in this land” (fig. 2.6). Near the town of Esna, a man named Nesshutefnut, whose Book of the Dead papyrus is now in the Oriental Institute Museum (OIM E9787), carried the title “priest of the living falcons in his tree” (fig. 2.7). Such priests had direct control over the subsidized fields and they often treated it as private property which could be

bought and sold. A series of Greek receipts included not only the transfer of ownership concerning the fields, but also management of the *ibiotapheion*, the catacomb where ibis mummies were interred.

After death, either natural or induced, the birds were taken to the *w^cb.t* “purification (room),” where they were embalmed, mummified, wrapped in linen, and many placed within ceramic jars prior to deposition in the *‘.wy htp* “house of rest.” The Egyptians held the entire animal as sacred and elaborate wrappings suggestive of an entire bird can sometimes hold only a few feathers or bones (Catalog No. 32). From the archive of Hor, a member of the administration for the cult of the ibis and falcon at Saqqara in the Ptolemaic period, we know that reforms in the treatment of ibis mummies stipulated one bird for each vessel, but often multiple birds were deposited in a single container (Ray 1976). Short votive prayers, such as those preserved on jar fragments in the Oriental Institute Museum collection (fig. 2.8), were sometimes written on the exterior of these vessels on behalf of a patron (Scalf, forthcoming). Most inscriptions do not identify the patron by title, but in several cases we know that these donors were personnel working within the association tasked with caring for the sacred animals. The technicalities of sponsoring a burial are unknown, but a Demotic letter now in the British Museum preserves a son’s promise to pay for the “burial of the ibis” if his father is relieved from illness (Migahid 1986, pp. 122–129). Unfortunately, some ambiguity persists about how participants outside of the priestly personnel contributed to the sacred animal festivities. It is unclear if royal patronage was sufficient to account for the exceptionally large cultic expenses associated with the administrative apparatus necessary for the annual processing of 10,000 birds at some sites.

The reasons why the Egyptians made such inordinate investments in their animal mummies have recently come under debate. For many years, it was common for scholars to explain that the mummies



FIGURE 2.7. The title of Nesshutefnut, *hm ntr n n3 bik.w ‘nh.w m ht=f* “priest of the living falcons in his tree,” from his Book of the Dead papyrus in the Oriental Institute Museum (OIM E9787)

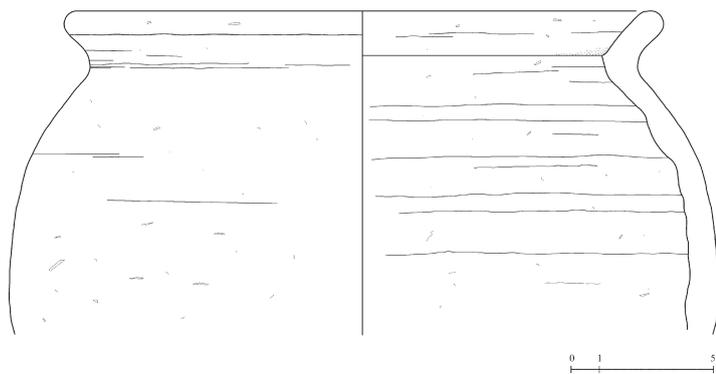


FIGURE 2.8. A fragmentary ceramic vessel that had probably been used as a container for an ibis mummy, with a Demotic votive inscription that mentions “the gods of the house of rest.” OIM E19051 (D. 17991; photo by Anna Ressler; profile drawing by Natasha Ayers)

were produced for a vibrant pilgrimage industry. According to this view, travelers visiting sacred sites on festival days throughout Egypt would buy a votive offering such as a mummy and/or bronze figure and dedicate it to the sanctuary of the god. There is some evidence for outside participation but it is somewhat vague about the exact nature of the interaction. What is known primarily concerns the actions of the religious associations, groups of personnel including priests, craftsmen, and other workers who supported the cult via their trade. At sites such as Saqqara and Tuna el-Gebel, where millions of hawk and ibis mummies have been found, administering the cult was a monumental investment that involved caring for the birds, an enormous pottery industry to produce the ceramic jars, stone-cutting crews to excavate the labyrinth of burial galleries, scribes for accounting, and priests to perform the appropriate religious rites. Massive crown subsidies suggest that the royal house took a particular interest in the sacred animals. Dieter Kessler, who has worked closely with the

Tuna el-Gebel material, has argued that the practices were actually part of the royal cult itself, important in the yearly ritual renewal of the king. Likewise, he believes that only those with the appropriate authority would have had permission to handle the animal mummies, which were literally called “god” (*ntr*), and enter the sacred space of the subterranean necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel.¹³ Kessler’s theories await further confirmation, but based on the incomplete nature of the data, it is likely that the royal house profited ideologically from their patronage of the animal cults and that the populace participated through priestly intermediaries.

Avian imagery found within the religious landscape of ancient Egypt across the millennia is an important element in the iconographic canon of divinities, as symbols of the postmortem powers of the deceased, and as living, breathing repositories evoking the divine presence on earth. Despite offending the tastes of certain foreigners visiting the country, the complex metaphorical associations created by Egyptian philosophers through the use of animal representation had an internal logic based on the empirical observation of the natural environment and the rationalizations created to explain the world around them. Just as the Egyptian hieroglyph for “god” was a flag (𓇑), whose waving denoted the invisible presence of deity, birds and their unique characteristics, provided a fertile source of imaginative religious associations that continued to be employed throughout Egyptian history.

NOTES

¹ Burkert 1985, pp. 64–66; Gilhus 2006, p. 102.

² Greek text and English translation in Oldfather 1967, pp. 96–97. Unfortunately, this concept was the only one applied in the attempts to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphic script from the fifth-century explanations of Horapollo to the seventeenth-century writings of Athanasius Kircher.

³ “Imagistic” used here in the sense of Ritner 1993, pp. 247–49.

⁴ Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, p. 1861. See also Quirke 2008, pp. 73–74; Hornung 1996, pp. 100–42.

⁵ M. Smith 2009, pp. 610–49; M. Smith 1979; Legrain 1890. To this can be added the so-called Book of the Ba, published in Beinlich 2000.

⁶ Assmann 2005, p. 92; M. Smith 2009, pp. 610–17.

⁷ Spiegelberg 1927, pp. 28–29; Broekman 2009.

⁸ Van Neer et al. 2004, p. 106; Linseele et al. 2009, pp. 119–20; R. Friedman 2011, pp. 39–40.

⁹ Ray 2011, p. 221; Spiegelberg 1928, pp. 14–17.

¹⁰ See Yoyotte 1959; de Meulenaere 1960; Holm-Rasmussen 1979; Ray 2002, pp. 121–22; Gorre 2009; Ladynin 2009, pp. 7–9. For statues showing Nectanebo II between the legs of the Horus falcon, see Metropolitan Museum of Art 34.2.1 published in Arnold 1995, pp. 44–45 (no. 50), and Musée du Louvre, Paris, E 11152. These statues can be compared to images known already in the Old Kingdom such as the statue of Khafre (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 14) with Horus stretching his wings around the head of the king (see fig. 4.4 in this volume) and the alabaster statue of an

enthroned Pepy (Brooklyn Museum 39.120) whose back pillar doubles as a *serekh* with Horus perched atop.

¹¹ The Alexander Romance refers to a collection of stories about Alexander the Great that circulated in antiquity, some of which show Egyptian connections (Jasnow 1997).

¹² Apis and Mnevis were sacred bulls deemed to be the earthly incarnations of Ptah and Re respectively (Dodson 2005, pp. 72–95).

¹³ Kessler 1989, pp. 299–303; Kessler 2010, pp. 269–70.

BIRDS IN CREATION MYTHS

Few of the surviving texts and images that relate the creation myths of the ancient Egyptians were composed for the sole purpose of describing how the world came into existence. In order to discover what Egyptians believed about creation, it is necessary to examine a wide variety of texts and images. What we call the “creation myths” of ancient Egypt consist of short episodes woven into larger contextual frameworks such as narrative literature, magical spells, funerary compositions, or temple scenes.

The Egyptian view of the cosmos begins with the god Nun, a personification of the primeval waters in which all the elements of creation were dissolved. From this primordial soup, the so-called creator god appeared, whom the Egyptians referred to as “the one who came into being himself.” No explanation is offered for the mechanism behind his appearance. In fact, in Coffin Texts spell 75, this god explicitly states “Do not ask how I came into being from Nun.” Depending on the source, this appearance occurs

either independently, upon a mound, in a rising lotus, or from an egg. Through the act of masturbation, spitting, sneezing, thinking, or speaking, this god created the elements of the cosmos, which the Egyptians presented as divine personifications of water (Tefnut), air (Shu), earth (Geb), and sky (Nut). With the earth and sky separated by the air, the creator god could travel by day in the form of the sun disk, thereby laying the physical foundations for the world as the Egyptians knew it.

Within the framework of the Egyptian creation myths, birds appear on several occasions. In one telling, a goose lays an egg (see Catalog No. 1) on the mound which has risen from the primeval waters. From this egg, the sun god hatches in the form of a heron (see Catalog No. 2). This story, already present in the Pyramid Texts of the late third millennium BC, would have an important influence on the classical myth of the Phoenix. **FS**



1. OSTRICH EGG

Organic remains
 A-Group, ca. 3100 BC
 Qustul, Cemetery S, deposit 4
 Excavated by the Oriental Institute,
 1962-63
 15.4 x 12.7 cm
 OIM E21384
 Oriental Institute digital images
 D. 17994-95

This undecorated ostrich egg was excavated by the Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition from a deposit within Cemetery S at the Nubian site of Qustul, which lies just north of the border with Sudan.¹ Several important cemeteries from the A-Group period were excavated at Qustul, with Cemetery S containing the largest tombs equal in size and wealth to the famous Early Dynastic tombs at Abydos.² The egg is nearly complete with a small hole in one end through which it had been drained.³ Similar ostrich eggshells have been discovered at other sites throughout Egypt and Nubia (and throughout the Mediterranean), some dating back into the Holocene and continuing into the pharaonic period.⁴ A number of examples are decorated with desert animals and hunting scenes, paralleled in the contemporary artistic repertoire as represented on a wide diversity of media including rock art, tomb paintings, pottery decoration, and palette designs, among many others.⁵ The form of the ostrich egg was so valued that craftsmen produced imitation vessels made from stone or ceramics.

The definitive meaning of such ostrich eggs has been debated. Although ostrich eggs would have filled different functions within Egyptian and Nubian life, including utilitarian roles as potential food source, beads, or containers for liquids, the deposition of such items within the sacred space of cult sites, tombs, and “royal” cemeteries implies a symbolic function tied to prestige, power, and ritual practices.⁶ Religious correlations are demonstrated by several spectacular archaeological discoveries. Recent excavations of predynastic Cemetery HK6 at Hierakonpolis uncovered a large deposit of twenty-two ostrich eggshells.⁷ An ostrich eggshell was discovered buried inside a jar at the Nile Delta site of Tell el-Farkha as a potential foundation deposit.⁸ In a Neolithic tomb at Naqada, W. M. Flinders Petrie unearthed the remains of an individual whose missing head was replaced by a decorated ostrich egg.⁹

Support for the spiritual significance of the egg motif has been found by turning to religious literature from later periods of pharaonic history. In Book of the Dead spell 77 for “turning into



1, bottom

a falcon of gold,” the deceased recites: “I have risen as the great falcon which has gone forth from his egg.”¹⁰ The passage refers to one of the mythological accounts of the creation in which a goose, referred to as the “Great Cackler” (*Ngg wr*), lays the cosmic egg from which the sun god hatches and rises up to create the visible world.¹¹ Through means of this text, the deceased associated himself with the

sun god in the hopes of joining the solar-Osirian cycle, thereby ensuring his eternal existence in the entourage of the gods.¹² The egg, therefore, came to symbolize both birth and rebirth, an associated quality maintained into Egypt’s Coptic period, when it was connected with Christ’s birth and resurrection.¹³ Despite the difficulties of forming an understanding based on data from millennia later, most interpreters have assumed that similar intentions motivated the utilization of these ostrich eggs within sacred landscapes during the very foundation of Egyptian and Nubian civilization.¹⁴ FS

PUBLISHED (SELECTED)

B. Williams 1989, p. 103

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¹ B. Williams 1989, p. 103.

² B. Williams 2011, p. 87.

³ Kantor 1948, p. 46; Teeter 2011b, cat. no. 5.

⁴ Muir and Friedman 2011, pp. 582–88; Phillips 2009, pp. 1–2; Cherpion 2001, pp. 286–87.

⁵ Kantor 1948; Hendrickx 2000; Teeter 2011b, cat. no. 5.

⁶ B. Williams 1989, p. 10; Cherpion 2001, pp. 288–91; Muir and Friedman 2011, pp. 588–90.

⁷ Muir and Friedman 2011.

⁸ Ciałowicz 2008, pp. 31–32; Ciałowicz 2011, pp. 773–75.

⁹ Petrie and Quibell 1896, p. 28; Cherpion 2001, p. 288.

¹⁰ For text, see Lepsius 1842, pl. 28, BD 77, line 1. For translation, see T. G. Allen 1974, p. 66.

¹¹ For references to the “Great Cackler” (*Ngg wr*), see Leitz 2002, vol. 4, p. 367.

¹² Such is specified in more detail in BD 149, where the sun god is addressed directly: “Hail to you, this noble god in his egg, I have come before you so that I be in your following.”

¹³ Phillips 2009, p. 2.

¹⁴ Muir and Friedman 2011, p. 588; Dreyer 1986, p. 97 n. 389.



2

2. "THREE VIGNETTES,
THEBES, TOMB OF QUEEN
NEFRETERE, RAMESSES II,
1292-1225 B.C."

Nina de Garis Davies, ca. 1936

Tempera on paper

42.54 x 59.69 cm

Collection of the Oriental Institute

Oriental Institute digital image D. 17885

This tempera by Nina de Garis Davies depicts a scene found on the west wall in the antechamber of the tomb of Nefertari, queen of Ramesses II, in the Valley of the Queens (QV 66). Her tomb is justly famous for the remarkable preservation and vivid colors of the painted scenes decorating its walls. Due to the delicate nature of the plaster

and potential harm caused by salt, water, and temperature fluctuations, visiting the tomb is often restricted and conservators have worked diligently in an attempt to slow the rate of deterioration which has continued to plague the tomb over the last century.¹ Therefore, Davies's paintings are valuable not only for their artistic beauty, but in some cases they preserve a record of monuments now damaged or lost.

From right to left, the figures depicted are the goddess Nephthys in the form of a common kestrel, the *benu*-bird in the form of a grey heron, and the lion of yesterday.² The scene is well known as a portion of the vignette from Book of the Dead (BD) spell 17, which adorns the interior of Nefertari's tomb along with texts and scenes from various Book of the Dead spells and other funerary literature. BD 17 is one of the most frequently attested spells

in the Book of the Dead corpus and this long vignette highlights a number of important passages, characters, and themes mentioned in the text.³ The text itself is a complex and not completely understood compilation of interwoven narratives, glosses, and commentaries through which the tomb owners demonstrated their religious knowledge while identifying themselves as the creator god.⁴

Nephthys is shown here in the form of a kestrel with her name *Nb.t-ḥwt* “Lady of the enclosure” written in hieroglyphs on top of her head. In the original scene she stands at the head end of a funerary bed holding the mummy of Nefertari with Isis also in the form of a kestrel at the foot end. Isis and Nephthys were the principle mourners in the collection of Osirian myths, thus by extension for the deceased, and the piercing shrieks of birds of prey were thought to represent their wailing cries. The two goddesses are referred to as “screechers” (*ḥꜣ.t*) in Pyramid Text spell 535: “As the screecher comes, so the kite comes, namely Isis and Nephthys.”⁵ As the protectors of the deceased, Isis and Nephthys are commonly depicted as women with outstretched bird wings on the corners of New Kingdom royal sarcophagi.⁶ In a composition from the end of the fourth century BC called the “Stanzas of the Festival of the Two Kites,” two women who have undergone the ritual preparation of complete hair removal and had the names Isis and Nephthys written on their arms, don wigs, and carry tambourines while reciting the stanzas before Osiris.⁷

For the Egyptians and in the context of BD 17, the *benu*-bird ( *bnw*) is a symbol of the rejuvenation of the deceased, shown standing next to the funerary bier flanked by the kestrels Isis and Nephthys. The stories of the Egyptian *benu*-bird formed the inspiration for the classical story of the phoenix, a bird whose mythological life cycle ends in a fiery conflagration that resulted in the renaissance of the new phoenix rising from the ashes of the old.⁸ Tales involving the phoenix traveled far and wide throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Known as the “soul (*bꜣ*) of Re” or the “heart (*ib*) of Re,” the *benu*-bird had a

close association with the sun god and appeared on scarab-shaped amulets placed near the heart of the mummy often inscribed with BD 29B, which begins: “I am the *benu*-bird, the soul of Re, who guides the gods to the netherworld from which they go forth.”⁹ Through the spell of BD 83, a “spell for turning into the *benu*-bird,” the deceased sought transformation into the phoenix for the purpose of rejuvenation and affiliation with the gods.

In addition to being an icon of rejuvenation, the *benu*-bird figured in certain Egyptian cosmogonic stories. In Pyramid Text spell 600, the *benu*-bird is said to appear as the creator god Atum-Khepri at the beginning of time upon the primeval mound rising from the cosmic waters (Nun), probably inspired by herons wading in the marshes and pools of the Nile.¹⁰ This mythic episode was memorialized in the temple of the *benu*-bird in Heliopolis, where the primeval mound was symbolized by the pyramidal *benben*-stone and where the corpse of the sun god is said to reside.¹¹ The *benu*-bird thus represented the power (*bꜣ*) of the sun god as creator and the avian imagery further reinforced the metaphor of the sun’s daily “flight” across the sky. FS

PUBLISHED (SELECTED)

Davies 1936, vol. 2, pl. 93

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¹ Corzo and Afshar 1993.

² Davies 1936, vol. 3, pp. 180–81.

³ Taylor 2010, p. 51; Milde 1991, pp. 31–54; Saleh 1984, pp. 14–22.

⁴ Lapp 2006; Westendorf 1975; Rößler-Köhler 1979.

⁵ For text, see Sethe 1908, vol. 2, p. 219. For translation, see Faulkner 1998a, p. 203; J. P. Allen 2005, p. 102.

⁶ Hayes 1935.

⁷ Faulkner 1936.

⁸ Van den Broek 1972, pp. 14–32.

⁹ For the *benu*-bird identified as the “heart of Re,” see BM EA 7878 in Taylor 2010, p. 227 (no. 114).

¹⁰ Faulkner 1998a, p. 246.

¹¹ Van den Broek 1972, p. 15; Assmann 2005, p. 429 n. 19.

BIRDS IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

Religion penetrated every facet of ancient Egyptian life, from international politics to the family household. So thoroughly were religious beliefs assumed that the Egyptian language even lacked a word for “religion.” The ancient Egyptian religious system focused on a plethora of gods and goddesses, which at their core represented the cosmic and social forces in the universe. Worship of these deities involved a variety of rituals, many of which would have structured the patterns of everyday life. In death, Egyptians sought the company of the gods, thereby becoming powerful spirits to whom the living could appeal for redress of earthly grievances. Egyptian culture was entirely infused with this religiosity, offering ample opportunity for intimate contact with divinity in many ways.

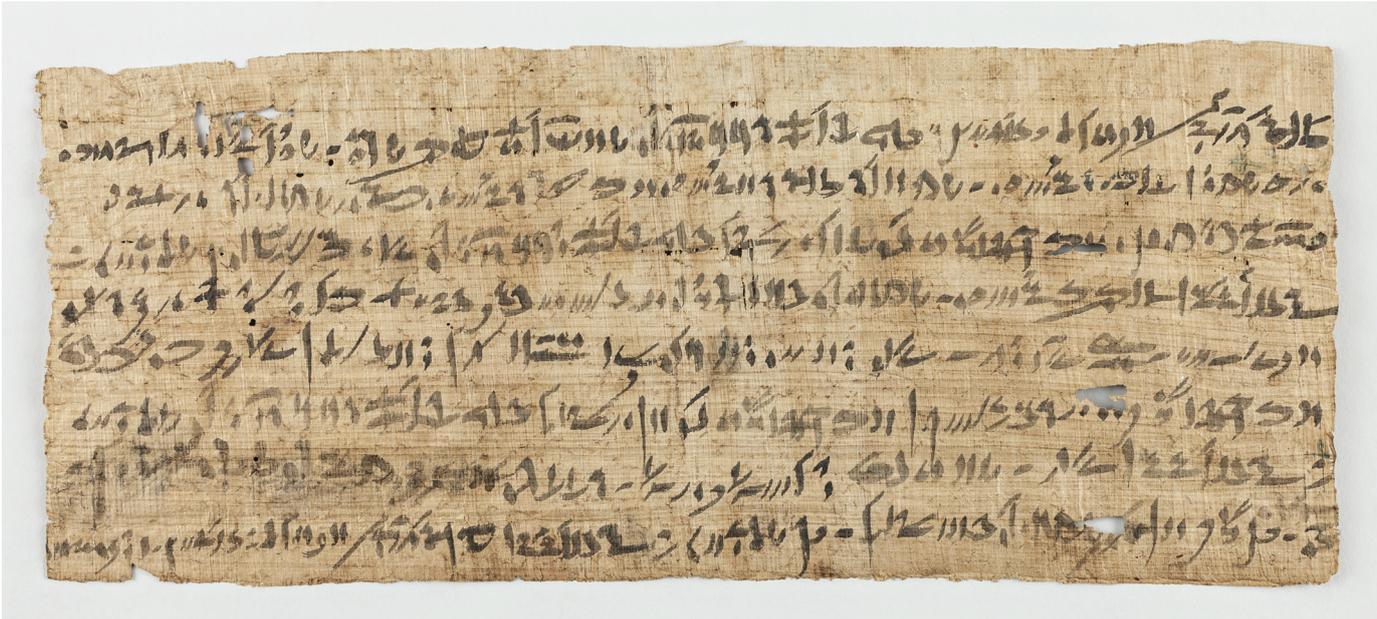
Birds formed a regular feature in the Egyptian natural environment and were therefore embedded into standard religious iconography. Statues (Catalog Nos. 3, 23, and 25), temple reliefs, and amulets (Catalog Nos. 7–9) often depict divinities with avian features or in complete avian form. These features evoked for the viewer the identity of the deities and alluded to their characteristic power, such as flight or

ferocity. The average Egyptian experienced his daily religion through household shrines, amulets, stelae, and the local priesthood. Although inner temple shrines and divine statues would have been restricted from the average person’s gaze on a daily basis, festivals and processions gave them opportunities to witness and participate in important public rituals.

In addition to adapting avian characteristics into iconography, priests dedicated themselves to the cults of living birds which served as animate vessels for divinity. Selected birds, such as the falcon of Horus at Edfu, would have been raised as the earthly incarnation of the god. Few birds were chosen for this service, but those that were had well-maintained lives filled with public appearances and elaborate burials at death (see Catalog No. 28). However, the majority of mummified bird remains derive from mass burials related to the cults of sacred animals (Catalog Nos. 30–32). Many animals were revered because of their association with a particular deity, such as the ibis with Thoth and the falcon with Horus. Millions of such birds were captured wild or domestically raised, mummified, and interred as an offering to their tutelary god in subterranean necropoleis. FS



FIGURE C26. A Ptolemaic king makes an offering before Horus and an enshrined falcon referred to in the text as the “living falcon upon the serekh,” from the temple of Horus at Edfu (photo by Stefano Vicini)



29, recto

29. DEMOTIC LETTER TO "THE IBIS, THOTH"

Papyrus, ink

Late Period, Dynasty 27, reign of Darius I,
between June 25, 502 BC, and July 24, 502 BC

Probably Hermopolis, Tuna el-Gebel

Purchased in Cairo, 1950; donated to the Oriental
Institute by Alan Gardiner via George Hughes, 1956

27.0 x 11.5 cm

OIM E19422

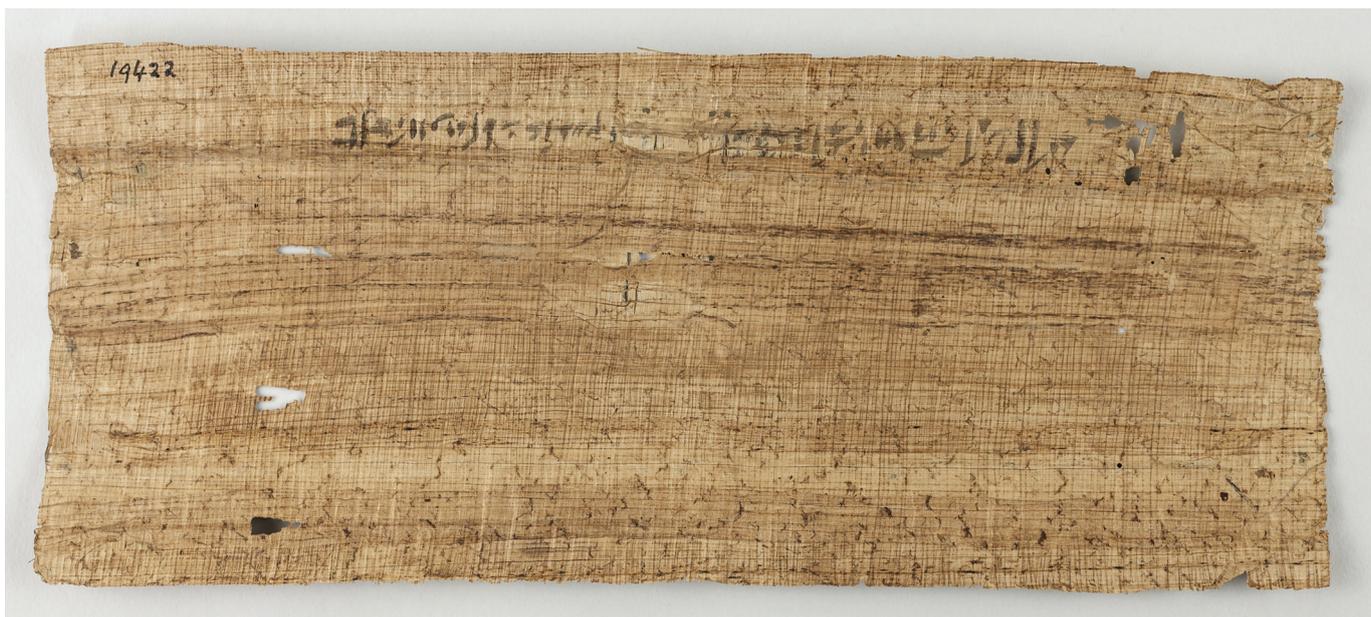
Oriental Institute digital images D. 17992-93

In ancient Egypt, people commonly sought out powerful individuals for the redress of legal, social, or personal grievances. Such individuals could be human or divine, alive or dead. Imploring departed relatives as intermediaries for real-world difficulties (an art which has been termed "necromancy") has a long history in Egypt with direct evidence stretching back into the Old Kingdom.¹ Letters written to gods, such as this papyrus addressed to "the ibis, Thoth," are direct descendants of similar texts previously presented to the powerful spirits (*ꜥh*) of deceased individuals.² In fact, petitions of this kind from the Greco-Roman period were sometimes addressed to Imhotep, the famous architect of the Third Dynasty king Djoser who became deified after his death and who

was honored in a shrine carved into the cliffs of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari.

The letter preserved on papyrus OIM E19422 was written in the Demotic script in eight lines on the recto and one line on the verso. It was composed in the reign of Darius I (522–486 BC) during the first period of Persian rule following the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses in 525 BC. It was written by a man named Efou (*ꜥw=fꜥw*), son of Hornufeshebe (*ꜥhꜥr-nfr-ꜥhꜥby*), who worked as part of the administration of a cult of the ibis, bird sacred to the god of writing and wisdom Thoth. The letter was presumably rolled up and placed somewhere in the galleries of ibis burials within the necropolis of Tuna el-Gebel as the papyrus's excellent state of preservation suggests.

The single line of text on the verso of this appeal preserves an address identifying it as "a plea of the servant Efou, son of Hornufeshebe, before the ibis, Thoth, twice great, lord of Hermopolis, the great god." The addressee is none other than a god of national importance, for Hermopolis was the most sacred city of Thoth in Egypt. Ibises from surrounding cities were sent for burial in the underground galleries of the animal necropolis and pilgrims traveled to pay their respects before this eminent deity. It is no accident that Efou writes to Thoth. As he tells us, he left his former work to perform services within the cult of the ibis. Efou probably rendered his duties to a smaller ibis



29, verso

cult outside of Hermopolis because he mentions that he has no supervisor before whom he could bring his appeal. Whether or not this statement is hyperbole can no longer be known. He then lists a series of injustices committed against him as well as the ibis cult, alleging that one Psentehe, son of Montuhotep, has stolen from him and the ibis cult, had his assistants harmed, and appropriated his stipend. As the source of his livelihood, E fou would have taken the theft of his income quite seriously. What truth may have been in these claims, we do not know, but the mention of crimes perpetrated against the very cult of the god addressed could not have hurt E fou's case. E fou does not seek for the god to harm Psentehe, but only asks to be protected from the latter's malice. FS

RECTO

A plea of the servant E fou, son of Hornufecbebe, before Thoth, twice great, lord of Hermopolis: My great lord, O may he pass the lifetime of Pre. From the month of Mecheir of regnal year 11 up to today, I perform the service of the ibis. I abandoned my (former) work. More than it, I prefer the work which pertains to the ibis. I have no supervisory personnel. If the heart is stout, then they will be protected before Thoth, twice great, lord of Hermopolis. I pray on account of Psentehe, son of Montuhotep. He does not perform the service of the ibis except for eating its food. And he does

not allow a guard over it either. He steals from me by force. Since year 17, he stole my money and my wheat. He had my servants harmed. He stole from me all that I have. About the burnt offerings, his heart is obstinate. If the heart is stout, then they will be protected before Thoth, twice great, lord of Hermopolis. As for Psentehe, son of Montuhotep, he has stolen from my life. He has cast me out of my portion. As the law, he acts for himself. Many things depart through his hand, which pertain to the ibis. Let me be protected from Psentehe, son of Montuhotep. Written by the servant E fou, son of Hornufecbebe, in the month of Phamenoth of regnal year 20.

VERSO

A plea of the servant E fou, son of Hornufecbebe, be[fore the ib]is, Thoth, twice great, lord of Hermopolis, the great god.

PUBLISHED (SELECTED)

Hughes 1958; Migahid 1986, pp. 38–44; Endreffy 2009, p. 244

NOTES

¹ Ritner 2002; idem 2008, p. 184; Gardiner and Sethe 1928.

² For example, the letter from a man to his deceased relative, who is referred to as a "powerful spirit" (*3h*), preserved on OIM E13945, published in Woods 2010, cat. no. 81.

BIRDS IN DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

Just as birds were part of daily life in Egypt they also had important roles in the afterlife. In many respects they played the same roles as they did in the world of the living. They provided food, and bird deities provided protection.

The bird deities usually involved in the protection of the dead are vulture goddesses (Nut, Nekhbet, Wadjet) and falcon gods (Horus, Sokar, Re). Falcon gods were especially important, because there was often a certain level of identification of the deceased with these gods. The king was protected by and identified with Horus in both life and death (Catalog No. 37) and he also became one with the sun god (Re, Re-Horakhty) and funerary gods such as Sokar (Catalog No. 35) in the afterlife. The protection of these deities was also extended to non-royalty. The sons of Horus, one of which took the form of a falcon, protected the internal organs (Catalog No. 36). Like many other cultures, Egyptians conceived of some of their

spiritual forms to be bird-like. One of these was the *ba*, which is most often depicted as a human-headed bird (Catalog No. 34). The body of the *ba* usually takes the form of a falcon.

Egyptians depended on the living to provide for them after death through funerary cults but they also took measures should the cult fail. They provided for their needs by the magic of images, such as tomb paintings and models. As fowl was a favorite dish, there were scenes of the capture of wild birds and the care of domestic stock. Models of the butchering (Catalog No. 38) and cooking of birds would magically allow the same processes to occur in the afterlife. The use of victual mummies (Catalog No. 40) created a continuous source of food. But these images and models often had a double purpose as the capture and killing of fowl acted magically to control chaos and to destroy evil forces (Catalog No. 38; see also Catalog No. 39). **RS**



34. BA-BIRD STATUETTE

Wood, pigment
 Late Period, Dynasties 25–30, ca.
 750–350 BC
 Dendera
 Gift of the Egypt Exploration Fund,
 1897–1898
 6.9 x 7.1 x 2.8 cm
 OIM E4461
 Oriental Institute digital images
 D. 17908–09

Small statuettes in the form of a bird with human head representing the *ba* (*bꜣ*) of the individual developed over the course of the New Kingdom, became increasingly common in the Late Period, and continued to be used in a modified form into the Meroitic period in Nubia (fourth century BC–fourth century AD).¹ They were often made of wood and brightly painted. The

Oriental Institute example is somewhat exceptional for its well-preserved paint, as the color decoration on many similar figures has faded away, and also for its unusual wig style.² The face is painted gold, the wings are given elaborate patterns of blue and dark blue, and the underside of the tail is red. A beautiful example from the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty burial of Yuya (KV 46) portrays the deceased with a black wig, red face and feet, yellow underbelly, white legs, green wings, and blue tail.³

The original placement of this figurine is unknown, but depictions of the *ba* are known from other elements in the funerary assemblage. A wooden statuette found in the tomb of Tutankamun (KV 62) depicts the king lying on a funerary bed with a figure of his *ba* crossing wings with a falcon figure over his torso.⁴ A similar model made of black stone showing the *ba*-bird sitting next to the mummy was manufactured for a non-royal individual named Re from the Eighteenth Dynasty.⁵ These objects suggest that *ba*-statuettes were placed near the corpse, perhaps over the chest, as accoutrements applied to the coffin or sarcophagus,⁶ following the instructions in the rubric for Book of the Dead spell 89, the “spell for causing the *ba* to join to his corpse,” which states: “Recitation over a *ba* of gold filled with precious stones, which a man placed (on) his chest.”⁷ In fact, actual gold amulets representing the *ba* have been discovered in both royal and private burials.⁸ Alternatively, the *ba*-statuettes could have been simply left freestanding within the tomb or attached to a stela by a wooden dowel, a hole for which is preserved in the base of this example.⁹

Within ancient Egyptian philosophical tradition, human beings had several aspects to their existence including *ba* (𓂏 *b3*), *ka* (𓂏 *k3*), corpse (𓂏 *h3.t*), name (𓂏 *rn*), and shadow (𓂏 *šw.t*).¹⁰ Each of these elements symbolized the various relationships and abilities of the individual, both within this world and in the hereafter. The *ba*, most often represented as a bird with human head, was of paramount importance for it represented the individual’s power of mobility.¹¹ In particular, the power of flight, symbolized through the metaphor of the bird body, allowed for the deceased to travel in the company of the sun god during the daily solar cycle. Corresponding to the *ba*’s airy existence is the corpse, which was destined for

the netherworld, thereby complementing the solar-Osirian cycle with which everyone hoped to associate. Upon death, recitations during the funerary rituals sought to ensure that the *ba* rise in the sky and the corpse descend into the netherworld.¹² Separation of the *ba* and corpse was not permanent for the *ba* would reunite nightly with the corpse (as specified in Book of the Dead spell 89). The alighting of the *ba* onto the corpse is depicted in a miniature limestone sarcophagus model from the late New Kingdom which shows the *ba* seated upon the torso of the mummy with outstretched wings.¹³ Regeneration occurred through this reunion, just as the sun god Re’s reunion in the netherworld with Osiris provided the necessary conditions for his daily renewal, setting the divine precedent for Egyptian conceptions of existence in the afterlife. FS

NOTES

¹ Earlier pair and trio statues from the Old Kingdom have been assumed to fulfill a similar role, but this is far from certain. See Žabkar 1968, p. 76; Vandier 1958, pp. 85–88. An overview of the Meroitic *ba*-statues can be found in Török 2009, pp. 422–24, and Silverman 1997, pp. 306–07.

² See Lacovara and Trope 2001, cat. no. 7; von Droste et al. 1991, cat. nos. 111–14. A similar wig is depicted on a *ba*-statuette in the decoration of Theban Tomb 78 (Brack 1980, pl. 17).

³ Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 51176 (JE 95312), Quibbel 1908, p. 63; Bongioanni et al. 2001, p. 495.

⁴ Bongioanni et al. 2001, pp. 284–85; Wiese and Brodbeck 2004, pp. 120 and 194–95.

⁵ Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 48483, Newberry 1937, pp. 372–73, pl. 30; Hornung and Bryan 2002, p. 204.

⁶ A falcon statuette of similar shape and manufacture occupies this position on the famous Roman-period coffin of Soter (British Museum, London, EA 6705), as pictured in Riggs 2005, figs. 87–88.

⁷ This rubric is found in the famous papyrus of Ani, now in the British Museum (British Museum, London, EA 10470.17). For photos, see Faulkner 1998b, pl. 17.

⁸ Bleiberg 2008, p. 115; Andrews 1994, p. 68; Fazzini 1975, p. 126. Bronze statuettes are also attested; Roeder 1956, p. 399 and pl. 56.

⁹ Bács et al. 2009, p. 137; Riggs 2003, p. 193. Stela 54343 in the British Museum preserves a *ba*-statuette attached to the top (Munro 1973, pl. 20).

¹⁰ Zandee 1960, pp. 19–20; Assmann 2005, pp. 89–90.

¹¹ Žabkar 1968.

¹² Assmann 2005, pp. 90–96.

¹³ Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 48501, Newberry 1937, p. 380, pl. 30. Cf. also CG 51107 from KV 46, Quibbel 1908, p. 49, pl. 27.

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