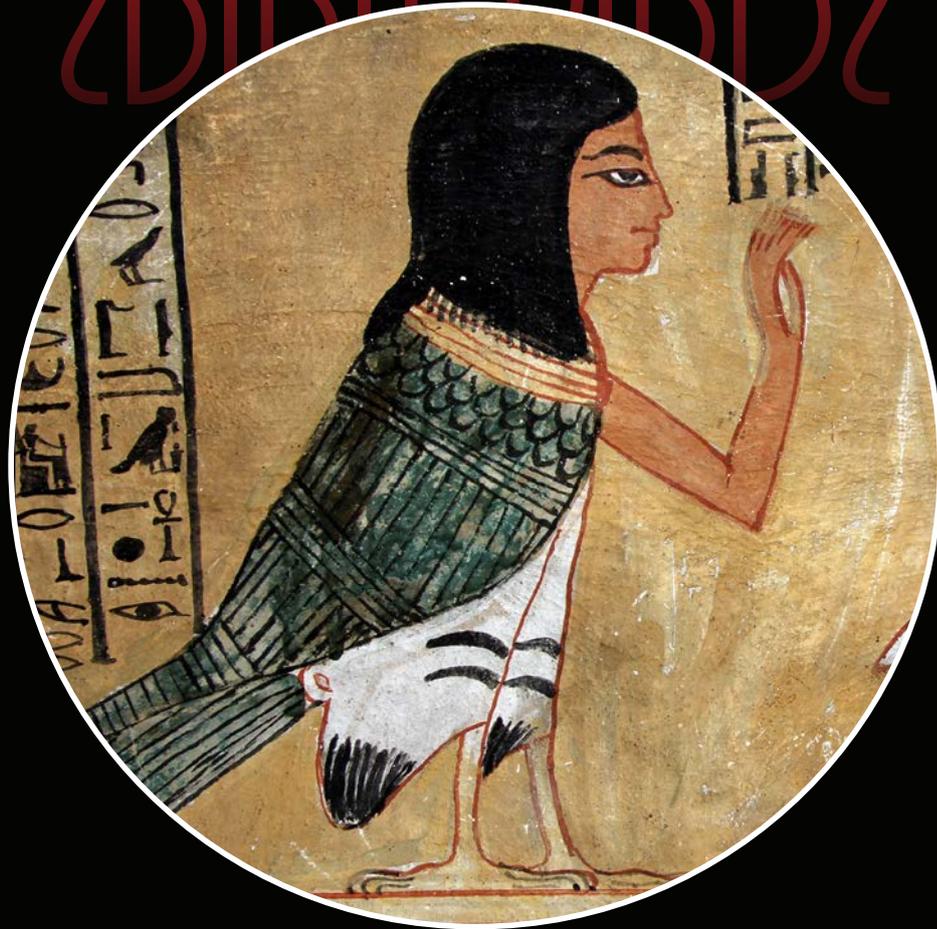


LESLEY JACKSON

SPIRIT BIRDS



Ancient Egypt was a land blessed with an abundance of birds. As well as the resident species, huge numbers passed through the country during the spring and autumn migrations. As the Egyptians believed that this world was a reflection of the divine realm, birds provided an important source of symbolism. Not only could they represent a specific deity, but also a number of concepts that were crucial to enjoying a successful afterlife.

This is the third of Lesley Jackson's four-part series on bird symbolism. Parts one and two were in issues #10 and #13 respectively.

(ABOVE)

THE BA-BIRD OF INHERKHAU PRAISES THE DECEASED (OUT OF FRAME) IN HIS TOMB (TT 359).
FOR MORE ON THE BA-BIRD, SEE PAGE 32. PHOTO © JAAP JAN HEMMES



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A scene from the tomb of Irynefer (TT 290) in the necropolis of the workmen's village at Deir el-Medina. Irynefer served under two kings: Seti I and Ramesses II (ca. 1279 B.C.), helping build the secret tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

Here the deceased stands in the solar barque worshipping the benu, one of the *bas* (physical manifestations) of the sun god of Heliopolis. Vignettes of the benu always show it as a grey heron, often wearing the solar disk.

THE BENU BIRD

THE BEAUTIFUL ORANGE-RED PHOENIX is a very well-known fabled bird. Some people would be surprised, or even disappointed, to learn that the bird which may have inspired the legend is the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinera*). How did a grey water bird transform into a self-creating fiery sun bird?

The grey heron is still seen in Egypt. They are large, long-legged birds, standing up to one meter in height, with a long straight bill. A crest of two long feathers adds to an elegant profile. They are frequently seen standing motionless in, or adjacent to, shallow water waiting patiently for their prey. Herons are solitary—an important characteristic for a self-creating and self-renewing symbol.

The Egyptians called this bird the *benu* , the sacred bird of Heliopolis, and considered it one of the *bas* of the sun god Ra, i.e. one of the forms that Ra could take. The *benu* was the manifestation of the sun god at the instant of creation, and no doubt one into which the deceased was keen to transform. 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.

There are spells in the funerary texts for being transformed into a *benu*, thus enabling the deceased to be reborn:



"I have entered as a falcon



I have gone forth as a *benu* bird. . . ."

(The Book of the Dead, Chapter 13)

Heart shaped amulets, inscribed with a spell, became popular in the New Kingdom. They were placed on the mummy to protect the heart. Some have the *benu* bird depicted on the front and spell 29B, from the Book of the Dead, inscribed on them:



"I am the *Benu*, the *ba* of Ra



who guides gods to the netherworld when they go forth. . . ."

(The Book of the Dead, Chapter 29B)

The presence of the *benu* bird aligns the deceased with Ra and the powers of regeneration and rebirth, as well with freedom of movement that any flying bird can symbolise. In the tomb scene opposite, the text above the heads of the two representations of Irynefer is a vignette from the Book of the Dead, providing a spell for becoming *benu*.

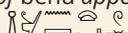
The heron's preferred method of hunting, perched on isolated rocks or standing in shallow water, suggested a link to the moment of creation when the primeval land first rose out of the pre-creation waters of *nun*, and life, in the form of the sun god, appeared. This sacred moment of creation was re-enacted each year when the waters of the Nile inundation began to recede, and land appeared from beneath the waters. From the Egyptians' point of view, the heron's association with the sun god and continual rebirth was a logical one. But how did the Greeks manage to reinterpret this as the phoenix?

Greek historian Herodotus, living in the 5th century B.C., said he had only seen the phoenix in paintings, "for it is very rare and visits the country... only at intervals of 500 years, on the occasion of the death of the parent bird... To judge by the paintings, its plumage is partly golden, partly red, and in shape and size it is exactly like an eagle." While that description sounds more like the Horus falcon than a heron, without knowledge of the heron's link with the inundation and the moment of creation it is easy to see how someone could envisage a self-generating solar bird to be a fiery-coloured creature.

When water levels or food supplies dwindle, herons move away in search of food, so the heron became associated with plenty. Chapter 110 of the Book of the Dead refers to the Field of Reeds (*sekhet-aaaru* , a lush, idealised version of Egypt, with boundless fields of wheat, intersected by waterways bursting with life. This place of abundance was symbolised by another heron: the "Heron of Plenty", who provided food for the spirits of the justified deceased.



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This beautifully-detailed image of *benu* appearing as a heron is from TT 359, the Theban Tomb of Inherkhau . Here the *benu* bird is wearing the Atef crown, therefore identifying Inherkhau with Osiris, as well as Ra. Accompanying this vignette is hieroglyphic text announcing the "Spell for becoming the *benu*, entering and going forth by Osiris, Overseer of the crew in the Place of Truth, Inherkhau, true of voice".



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Chapter 89 of the Book of the Dead allowed the *ba* of the deceased, after a day of enjoying the sunshine, to rejoin the mummy in the tomb. A vignette typically shows the *ba*, represented as a bird with a human head, flying over a mummy, symbolically uniting with it.

This scene comes from the Theban Tomb of Ameneminet

𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 (TT 277), a priest in the Memorial Temple of Amenhotep III during the 20th Dynasty.

Ameneminet's coffin has been placed on a funerary couch in the form of a lion. Beneath the couch are his funerary goods: four vases, a bag and some fabric. Hovering over the deceased is Ameneminet's *ba*.

THE BA BIRD

WHILE THE *BA* IS OFTEN DESCRIBED as the “soul” of a person, as already mentioned on page 30 it is probably more accurately described as a “manifestation” or “form” of the deceased. In effect, it is the essence of the person without any physical attributes or constraints.

In iconography, a person's *ba* 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.

Depictions of *ba*-birds vary, but they are often in the form of a falcon as this aligns the deceased with Horus. It is possible that the sight of swallows (or a similar species) nesting in tombs helped crystallise the concept of the *ba*-bird, with its freedom to leave the tomb, but always returning each night. This paralleled with the sun god Ra entering the underworld each night and reuniting with the corpse of Osiris, prior to the sun's rebirth at dawn. Naturally, there

are funerary spells for a human-swallow transformation:



“Spell for being transformed into a swallow.”

(The Book of the Dead, Chapter 86)

It was considered essential for the *ba* to reunite with the body at regular intervals. To ensure this occurred, the vignette to Spell 89 of the Book of the Dead featured a *ba*-bird shown hovering over the mummified body of the deceased (see above).



“Spell for enabling the *ba* to rest on one's corpse in the god's domain.”

(The Book of the Dead, Chapter 89)

Tomb reliefs also show the *ba*-bird fluttering above the deceased in the tomb chamber (above) or outside the tomb as it returns to the body (see opposite).



Pictured is a vignette from Spell 92 from the Book of the Dead, titled, "Spell to open the tomb for the ba and shadow of the deceased, so that he may go forth by day and have power in his legs".

This scene comes from the Tomb of Irynefer (TT 290) at Deir el-Medina, the royal tomb-builders' village near the Valley of the Kings. Irynefer served under two kings: Seti I and Ramesses II in the early 19th Dynasty. It seems that Irynefer had a lot of talented friends in the village and his tomb is one of the most colourful there.

The detail (left) shows Irynefer's Ba descending from heaven to join its mummy in the tomb.



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(ABOVE and RIGHT) Irynefer's ba, wings folded, leaves the netherworld, represented by a black disk.

The dark silhouette standing in front of Irynefer's tomb chapel is his shadow (shwt 𓆎𓅓𓏏𓏏). In his book, *Middle Egyptian*, James P. Allen describes the shadow as "an essential adjunct to the body, since every body casts one. Because the shadow derives from the body, the Egyptians believed it had something of the body—and, therefore, of the body's owner—in it.

The shadow was said to accompany the deceased's ba when it emerged from the tomb each morning to share in the rising sun's rebirth.





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The vaulted ceiling of TT 219, the Tomb of Nebemmaat  at Deir el-Medina. Nebemmaat was a temple official during the first half of the 19th-Dynasty reign of Ramesses II. This tomb is one of a handful in Thebes whose scenes were painted with relatively few colours

(but to striking effect). The decoration is painted in yellow, red and black on a white background. Part of the text along the centre reads, , "He gives veneration to the akhs in the netherworld, peaceful are their bas in the west."



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. ROGERS FUND, 1923. ACC. NO. 23.2.7.

Ostriches were frequent subjects in Predynastic art, decorating clay jars and also hair combs made from ivory and bone.

This bone example, thought to be from Upper Egypt, may have been part of the funeral equipment of a member of an elite family.

In *The Scepter of Egypt: Part I (1946)*, American Egyptologist, William C. Hayes, wrote that “in the simple carvings and drawings of birds and beasts preserved to us from this era the salient features of each species are accented in such lively and accurate fashion that there is never any doubt as to what animal or bird is intended.”

Although the ostrich became extinct in Egypt in the mid-19th century, they were once abundant—particularly during the cultural period known as Naqada I (around 4000 B.C.). This was over a thousand years before Egypt’s first pyramids were built, and a time when Egypt’s western and eastern deserts were instead vast savannahs, teeming with game animals.

The grasslands also attracted people who herded and hunted them, and the cliffs of the Eastern Desert are peppered with Predynastic images of ostriches.

One scene also features the simple carved silhouettes of two men, each wearing tall twin plumes that tower above their heads. It is likely the men were hoping to gain the attributes of the animal that was formerly attached to the plumes. Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson explains that “in later Egyptian art, when worn by such gods as Amun-Ra, these plumes are clearly identifiable as ostrich feathers.” (*Genesis of the Pharaohs*, 2003.)

THE OSTRICH

THE OSTRICH IS A UNIQUE and memorable bird. Standing up to 2.75 m tall, with a long neck and legs, it has excellent stamina and can run at 50 kph, with short sprints of up to 70 kph. It also has a lethal kick aided by 10 cm long claws. Unlike other birds, ostrich plumage is soft and not waterproof. Although flightless, it may surprise some that the ostrich has rather large wings, with a span of over two metres. The birds use their wings for balance when running, for defensive or mating displays, as well as providing



“His (King Ahmose’s) rays are on faces like Atum in the east of the sky



when the ostrich dances in the valleys...”

(Karnak Stela of Ahmose, Egyptian Museum, Cairo)
Ostriches seen running around at dawn were thought to be joyously celebrating the triumphant rebirth of the sun.



Maat could be embodied as an ostrich feather fan, held before the face of the king, sitting resplendently with his regalia in a kiosk.

The above scene, featuring Amenhotep III wearing the blue khepresh crown (𓄿) comes from TT 226, thought to be the 18th-Dynasty Theban tomb of Heqareshu (𓂏𓂏𓂏),

who was "Overseer of the Royal Nurses". Two fan-bearers (out of frame) wave ostrich feather fans, wafting cool air past the nose of the king, and bestowing him with maat.

When discovered in 1913, TT 226 was in bad shape. This scene fragment was found lying (thankfully) face-down on the floor. It is now in Luxor Museum (Acc. No. J 134).

welcome shade for chicks.

Images of ostriches are commonly picked onto the rocks in the desolate valleys of Egypt's Eastern Desert, stretching between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Six thousand years ago, this was an open savannah and supported a wide variety of animals, including the ostrich, which fed on vegetation, insects and other small creatures.

In terms of potential symbolism, a number of features of the ostrich stand out: its size, powerful legs and stamina, as well as its lack of flight and soft plumage. We do not know what the ostrich symbolised in Predynastic Egypt, but as Egypt moved into recorded history, only one part of the ostrich was regarded as particularly special: its feathers.

Ostrich feathers are those used most frequently in ancient Egypt's iconography. Ostrich feathers adorn the crowns of gods such as Amun (see caption on page 36, opposite) and Shu, and were used in ceremonial fans. Shu was the son of the creator god Atum, and became the god of "luminous air, light-filled living space." (Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*.) Shu's name, 𓂏𓂏𓂏, was written with the ostrich feather hieroglyph, which may seem an odd choice, given it comes from a bird that can't fly. Thierry

Benderitter of *Osiris.net* suggests it may be because "the slightest movement or breath of wind will animate it." The ostrich's soft, wispy feathers would have made a pleasing metaphor for the associated concepts of emptiness, air and sunlight.

Ostrich feathers are probably best known for their association with *maat*. This was a wide-ranging concept that covered justice, morality and cosmic order, and applied in the divine and natural world as well as in human society. For the king, the preservation of *maat* ensured that the sun sailed across the sky every day and was reborn at sunrise, renewing the whole of creation.

Maat was embodied in the goddess of the same name, who wore an ostrich feather tucked inside a headband. So why use an ostrich feather for *maat*? John Darnell, Professor of Archaeology at Yale University, refers back to the word *shu* meaning "luminous

space". He told *NILE Magazine* that *maat's* feather may similarly have a solar connection, "as the sun is essentially the prime arbiter of cosmic order and equilibrium." Benderitter also suggests that the ostrich feather is "the only bird feather that is of equal width on both sides of its central axis, suggesting equity."



"The mountains of Manu receive you in peace



(and) *Maat* embraces you in all seasons. . . ."

(Papyrus of Ani, British Museum.)

The "mountains of Manu" were the mountains of the western horizon, and the junction between the earthly realm and the netherworld.



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TT 255 is the Tomb of Roy , who was a Royal Scribe during Horemheb's reign in the late 18th Dynasty. Pictured inside are Amenemipet and his wife Muty (whose

relationship to Roy is unknown) being welcomed into the afterlife by Maat (above). Maat's hair is dark blue to imitate the lapis-lazuli of which the hair of gods is made.

(OPPOSITE) For the pharaohs, this was their primary role: to deliver and maintain order in the world. Offering maat to a deity expressed the king's conviction to uphold the principles of cosmic order. Scenes featuring a non-royal person presenting maat to a god or goddess are rare.

One such example is in the Theban tomb of Irynefer (TT 290). Here the deceased is shown kneeling before an offering table which supports a figure of maat clutching an ankh. Irynefer offers the image of maat to Ptah (out of frame), the preeminent god of Memphis.

In theory at least, truth, justice and order governed the lives of everyone from king to peasant. For those who escaped justice in this life, there was still the Judgement Hall in the afterlife where the deceased's heart was weighed against Maat's feather of truth. The ostrich feather alone could represent both the goddess and the concept of *maat*.

Perhaps the size and appearance may have been the biggest factors for the use of the ostrich feather for *maat*. One could argue that using the heaviest feather to be found would be a distinct advantage when it came to improving your chances in the afterlife!



LESLEY JACKSON writes about Egyptian deities and is the author of *Thoth: The History of the Ancient Egyptian God of Wisdom, Hathor: A Reintroduction to an Ancient Egyptian Goddess* and *Isis: The Eternal Goddess of Egypt and Rome*.



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