



LUND UNIVERSITY

The raptors of Ancient Gebel el-Silsila

Wyatt, John; Nilsson, Maria; Ward, John

Published in:
Ancient Egypt Magazine

2020

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Wyatt, J., Nilsson, M., & Ward, J. (2020). The raptors of Ancient Gebel el-Silsila. *Ancient Egypt Magazine*, 21 (1/121), 26-32.

Total number of authors:
3

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

THE RAPTORS OF ANCIENT GEBEL EL-SILSILA

John Wyatt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward continue their examination of the bird species depicted at this major ancient quarry site.



ABOVE: A depiction of two raptor-like birds from Quarry 38 at Gebel el-Silsila.

The first article by our intrepid trio (in AE120) concentrated on the desert birds of ancient Gebel el-Silsila. This time they focus solely on raptors, those majestic, highly-skilled birds that arouse feelings of incredulity, awe, reverence, love, fear and even terror in equal measure. Of all the types of avian depictions in these ancient quarries, those of raptors or possible raptors were perhaps the most frequent. Why? Were raptors particularly common in this area? What, apart from being very visible and active, made them so important to local residents over a period of some two thousand years from the Middle Kingdom right through to Roman times?

It is estimated that some 15-20 species of raptor overall may have been resident in, or breeding visitors to, the Gebel el-Silsila area in ancient times with another 15-20

passing though on migration and/or wintering. The Nile Valley serves as one of the major bird migration routes linking Europe to Africa and huge thermals, which are regularly used by the larger migrating species such as pelicans, storks and raptors, sometimes in many hundreds, still occur here. But such assemblies are seasonal and for short periods so, most of the time, only one or two birds would have been around daily.

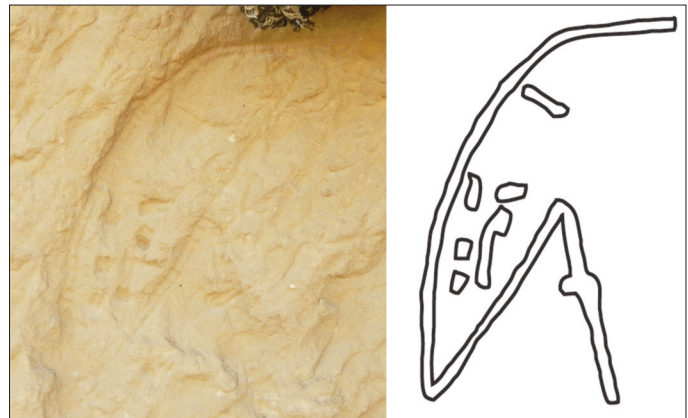
RAPTORS

A Raptor or Bird of Prey is loosely defined as any bird which hunts, carries off and/or feeds on other living creatures. It usually has unbelievably keen eyesight, a powerful, curved beak, strong feet equipped with talons and is an amazingly skilful flier. Raptors belong to one of

BELOW LEFT: A headless raptor standing on a plinth from Roman Quarry 24. The top part of the body has been lost due to quarrying of the stone.



BELOW RIGHT: A second headless raptor from Quarry 24 with outline drawing alongside. In this case, the image was never completed.



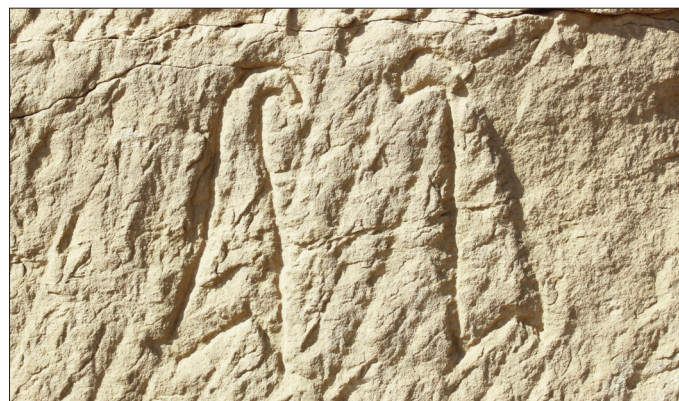
the three bird Orders, which have evolved from a common raptorial landbird ancestor: the largely diurnal Accipitriformes and Falconiformes and the mainly crepuscular/nocturnal Strigiformes. So far, 45 individual species have been identified as having occurred in ancient Egypt. The last Order includes only owls (7 identified ancient species). The Accipitriformes is a varied group consisting of vultures (4 identified ancient species), eagles (8), kites (4), harriers (4), hawks (3), buzzards (4) and Honey Buzzard, Osprey and Secretary Bird (1 each) while the Falconiformes were then represented by at least eight known species. Depictions of daytime raptors are fairly common at Gebel el-Silsila and can perhaps be divided into six categories (leaving out vultures which we will study in a later article).

1. Headless Raptors

Two depictions appear to be of headless birds but without heads for very different reasons. Both are from Roman Quarry 24. One (*opposite, bottom left*) is apparently standing on a decorated plinth, in spite of its legs being only faintly suggested, and has clearly lost its head and upper body to subsequent quarrying. The top third of the other (*opposite, bottom right*) was never finished, but a completed version nearby probably indicates what was intended. The tail shapes of all three birds and the decorated plinth of the first are, however, comparable with the stylised versions of other raptors at this site. To be more specific as to family or individual species is impossible although local factors suggest these might just possibly be falcons. This quarry was dedicated to the triad of Medamud (Montu, Raatawi and Harpocrates), so perhaps all these falcons represented the main god in his avian form.

2. Tailless Raptors

Although work is still required to confirm dating and that all the depictions are definitely of birds, at least six images suggest a series of one style, from something very simple and resembling a curved thorn (*top right*), to thorns with possible bird heads (*second and third down*), to a possible hawk or eagle-like bird head (*bottom right*), to a definite, possibly eagle-like head with partially spread, pointed wings (*bottom, left*), and finally to a positive head and upper body with virtually certain, partially spread, pointed wings (*overleaf, top left*). This last suggests an unidentifi-



ABOVE and LEFT: A series of images of tailless raptors:
TOP: A simple thorn-like shape.
SECOND and THIRD DOWN: The two thorn-like facing figures in each of these depictions have more bird-like heads.
BOTTOM: The image shows a bird with an eagle- or hawk-like head.
LEFT: The carving of a bird with a raptor-like head (possibly an eagle) and partially spread wings, shown alongside a drawing for clarity.

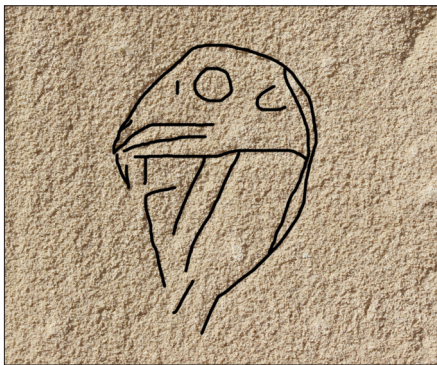


able falcon but the others are less distinct and could perhaps be any raptor with a smallish head, shortish beak and tendency to point its head upwards, such as Black Kites and Long-legged Buzzards.

However, the shape and angle of the pointed wings (*above left*) seem to suggest that the bird is 'mantling' or 'protecting' (*top centre*), along the lines of the famous statue of Pharaoh Khafra with a falcon on his shoulders (*top right*) in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. So perhaps every one of these depictions has, after all, a religious connotation and may simply be of the relevant falcon deity for each quarry: Horus, Pachimesen (*depicted below*), Horus Behedet, Isis and/or Amun.



Another new way of depicting the head of a probable raptor comes from Quarry 35 (*below*).



Here the heavier head is more rhomboid, less up-pointed and steeply angled at the rear of the crown. It has a powerful, snubbed and fairly short, decurved beak of which the heavy upper mandible has similarities to that of a parrot. The head might perhaps have a few crown or nape feathers and is above a quite thick neck. A large bird is being suggested. However, the above features probably rule out most of the possible vultures, kites, eagles, hawks, harriers and smaller falcons, leaving only around eleven possible species, of which either the Short-toed Eagle (*below*), Long-tailed Buzzard, Osprey or Barbary or Lanner Falcon might be marginally more likely. No more positive identification is possible.



TOP LEFT: A tailless raptor with wings held forward as if mantling.

TOP CENTRE and TOP RIGHT: A kestrel in mantling pose, as depicted in the carving to the left and in the famous statue of Khafra protected by Horus on the right.

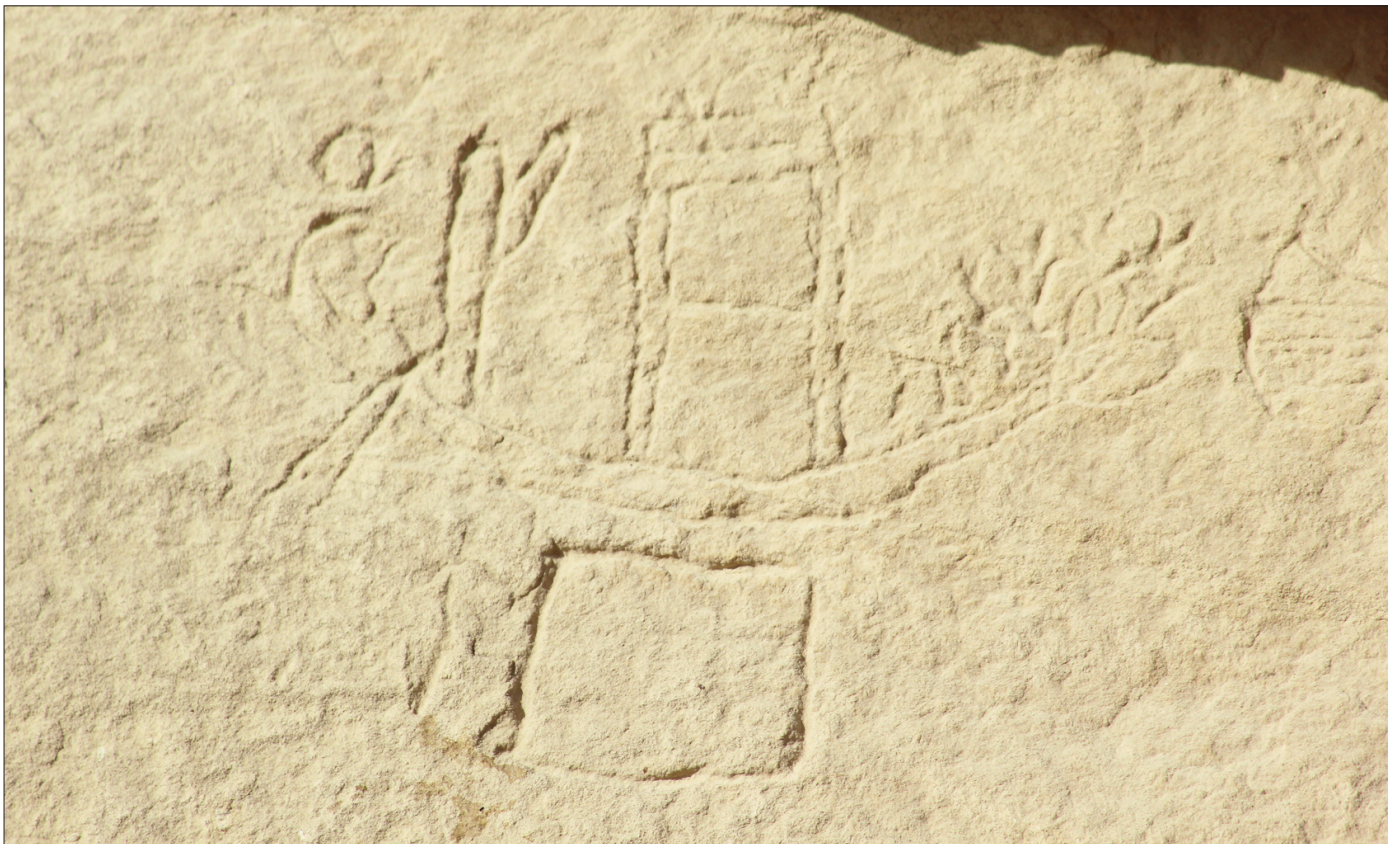
Kestrel image: Marlin Harms CC BY 2.0 via Wikicommons

ABOVE and RIGHT: A photograph, with a line drawing of the same image, of a probable raptor with a more rhomboid head. One possible species for this image is the Short-toed Eagle, shown right.

Eagle image: Lehava Kiryat Shmona CC BY 2.5 via Pikiwiki

LEFT: A falcon-headed figure wearing the double crown, seated on a throne, harpooning the defeated crocodile below. Its a stereotypical image of 'Horus the Victorious', as represented by the local quarry god Pachimesen.





3. Falcon Boat

In a splendid depiction of a falcon boat in the Roman part of Quarry 11 on the West bank (*above*), the falcon god wearing the sun disk and *uraeus* forms the boat's stern. Montu perhaps can be eliminated, as this depiction does not include his usual two tall plumes or moon-disk. The depicted god is almost certainly Pachimesen (*also shown opposite, bottom left*), the local version of Horus of Edfu, to whom that part of the quarry appears to have been dedicated. The possible falcon species concerned are discussed below.



4. Large Falcons

In addition to the boat image, there is a very traditional depiction of Horus wearing the double-crown of Egypt in the early Roman part of Quarry 34 (probably Augustine, c.30 BC - AD 14) (*bottom left*). It is not in colour but the hooded face and 'tear' lines of all falcons are nevertheless suggested. The stone extracted from this part of the quarry is known to have been destined for Edfu, so this illustration is almost certainly a valuable confirmation of that. But what species was/were being depicted?



TOP: A depiction of a falcon boat from the Roman part of Quarry 11. The deity shown is most likely the local falcon-headed god Pachimesen, also shown opposite below left.

LEFT: A traditional depiction of Horus dating to the early Roman Period.

ABOVE: Horus is often depicted with similar markings to the Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, which is known to overwinter in Egypt.

Falcon photo: Kevin Cole CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikicommons



Four large falcons are known to have occurred in ancient Egypt: the wintering Peregrine (*see previous page, bottom right*); the slightly smaller, resident Barbary Falcon (*top left*); the resident North-East African race of Lanner Falcon (*left*); and the even larger, wintering Saker Falcon. (*third down on left*). Horus has certainly been depicted elsewhere as having the blue-grey head of a Peregrine, but also as being red or white-headed. The Barbary has a red nape; the local Lanner, especially the juvenile, has dirty white sides to its head and whiter cheeks than the red-headed/cream-cheeked nominal Lanner found elsewhere; and the Saker has a much whiter head altogether. It is tempting therefore to suggest that the ancient Egyptians might have seen Horus as a combination of the Barbary and either Lanner or Saker to reflect the double-crown of Egypt, but there is no way of proving this; so the Horus Falcon was more likely to be any one, or a combination, of these species. Only major gods, such as Horus, Ra-Horakhty-Amun and Montu, were generally (although not always) represented as one of these larger falcons.

5. Small Falcons

Goddesses like Isis and Nephthys, and minor gods, such as Sopdu and Sokar, are the deities that were usually depicted as one of the smaller, gentler, less heavy-looking species. Only Isis and Nephthys were depicted as the female Common Kestrel (*bottom left*), when shown guarding the

deceased in tomb scenes from the Eighteenth Dynasty onwards (*as above in the Tomb of Nefertari*). Examples of the resident male Common Kestrel, summering Lesser Kestrel, wintering Merlin and passage Eurasian Hobby, have all been identified from art, but representing gods – never goddesses.

Two scenes – two birds from Quarry 38, and an apparently crested bird from Quarry 34 – require comment. Quarry 34 contains considerably more quarry-marks than any other. Quarry 38 dates only from the Graeco-Roman Period. Both the falcons from Quarry 38 (*opposite, top right*) seem to be standing on similar mounds (perhaps the Benben stone) or plinths. The left-hand bird is in front of an altar or similar structure while the right-hand bird faces a risen *uraeus* (*see detail with line drawing,*

TOP RIGHT: Nephthys (*left*) and Isis (*right*) in the form of female kestrels, guarding the deceased Nefertari.
Photo: Rose Halsall.

LEFT: Three large falcons possibly associated with depictions of Horus. From top down: the Barbary falcon; a juvenile Lanner Falcon; and the white-headed Saker Falcon.

Photos:

- Barbary – Frank Vassen
- Lanner – Derek Keats
- Saker – Tony Hisgett

All CC BY 2.0 *via* Wikicommons

BOTTOM LEFT: A female Common Kestrel.
Photo: Dibendu Ash CC BY-SA 3.0 *via* Wikicommons



top left) Both therefore suggest religious connotations but exactly what is unclear. Could this quarry, like Quarries 35, 36 and 37, also be dedicated to Isis – which might therefore suggest that both falcons are female Common Kestrels? More work needs to be done on this and on the ‘crested’ bird from Quarry 34 (*shown right*). No falcon species anywhere in the world is crested so could this bird belong to another family altogether? Or could the crest be simply an artistic anomaly? The possibility of another family would appear to be slight, as almost all the features point to a small falcon, so could this be an unfinished sun-disk or, highly unusually, a sun-disk viewed side-on?



6. Eagles

One group of raptors, as yet possibly previously undiscovered in the art of ancient Egypt, is the large eagles. This is very surprising as their six-foot plus wing-spans and huge body size must have made them very obvious. Eight species have, to date, been identified

from mummies and bone remains – only one of which, the Short-toed Eagle (*shown on p. 28, bottom right*), might just possibly have been generally resident. The remaining six were probably just passage migrants and/or scarce winter visitors. Five of these species – Booted, Lesser Spotted, Greater Spotted, Steppe and Eastern Imperial – might have been seen occasionally at Gebel el-Silsila. Interestingly the Steppe Eagle (*peering at you below!*) is the national bird of Egypt



TOP RIGHT

A scene from Quarry 38 with two falcons. A detail from the scene on page 26 (top).

TOP LEFT

Detail of the right-hand bird from the Quarry 38 scene with line drawing to highlight the outlines. The falcon stands on a plinth in front of a *uraeus* snake.

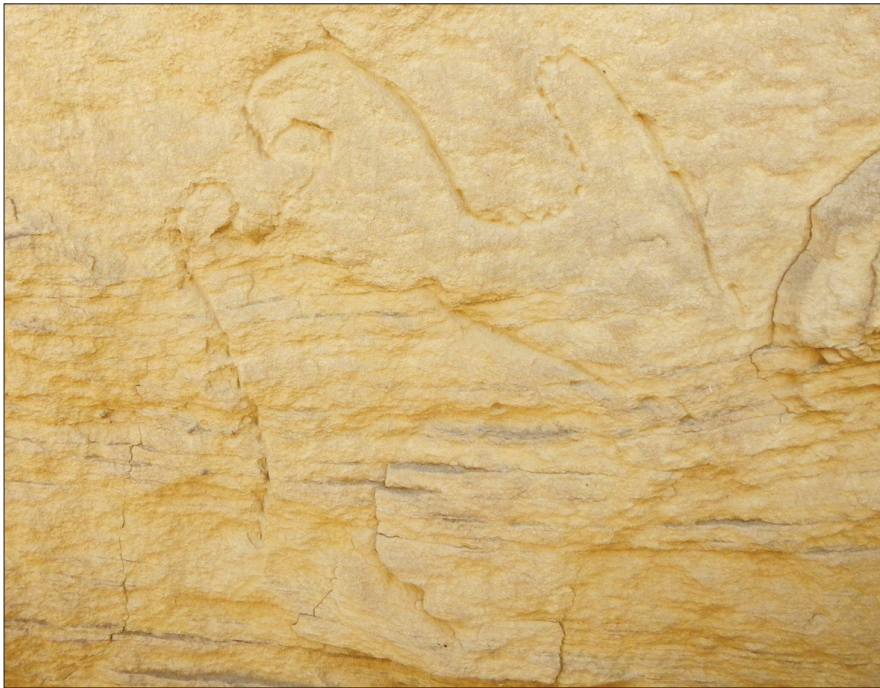
CENTRE RIGHT

The unusual ‘crested’ falcon from Quarry 34, which could possibly be a falcon wearing a sun-disk.

LEFT

The Steppe Eagle, the national bird of Egypt, although it is no longer resident.

Photo: Sumeet Moghe CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikicommons



ABOVE

Possibly the first complete ancient Egyptian depiction of an eagle, shown with head out-stretched and wings in the mantling position.

BELOW

The Short-toed Snake Eagle in flight. Images of Roman legionary eagles may show this species, although they could equally be any large and powerful bird of prey.

Photo: Rudraksha Chodankar
CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikicommons

even though it is no longer resident in the country!

To come across possibly the first ever complete ancient Egyptian depiction of a (probable) large eagle in Quarry 19 was therefore somewhat surprising (*above left*). This seems to show an eagle with head out-stretched and wings half-raised in the ‘mantling’ position, standing on some sort of pedestal. The style is not ancient Egyptian, but rather recalls that of the military standards of ancient Rome. It is situated in the early Roman section of this otherwise Eighteenth Dynasty quarry – likely from

the reign of Tiberius (c. AD 14-37) based on its archaeological and epigraphic context. Documents in Quarry 34 had previously indicated that an ‘ala’ (Roman allied military unit) could have been stationed in this southern area. Perhaps this eagle can therefore be seen as another indication of such a presence, and also as a symbol of the courage, strength and immortality of Roman legions. It has been suggested that the Roman eagle was the Golden Eagle but there is no certainty of this and, indeed, later sculptures in Italy depict it as a snake-eater making the Short-toed Eagle (*bottom left*) more likely. Most probably it was non-specific and could be any large and powerful eagle or aquiline bird of prey.

Conclusions

Of the many depictions of raptors examined, only one can be identified to species level with any certainty, while all the others become a choice between four or more species with similar characteristics. Many were linked directly or indirectly to deities at Gebel el-Silsila and/or the sites for which the stones were intended. Many certainly had religious connotations, but many also suggested birds ‘mantling’ and thus protecting the quarrymen. There would not normally have been many raptors about on a daily basis, so the ones that were seen must clearly have impressed those who saw them. These birds, like the sun, were the masters of the skies and their overall importance was reflected in the fact that such a large number (at least 45 species – almost every possible species from the Western Palearctic) have been identified from artwork, depictions of deities, hieroglyphs, mummies and bone remains.

John Wyatt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward

John Wyatt is an ornithologist and wildlife specialist. Maria Nilsson is Director of the Gebel el-Silsila Project with John Ward. All three are regular AE contributors. Read more about the Ramesside monuments of Gebel el-Silsila on page 12.

All images by Maria Nilsson unless otherwise stated.

