

THE BIG, THE BIZARRE AND THE BEAUTIFUL

John Wyatt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward present the last instalment of their report revealing the bird species discovered at ancient Gebel el-Silsila.



ABOVE: A male Indian Blue Peacock in full display. Photo: Donna Wickerham via Pixabay

A large range of desert birds and diurnal raptors were visitors to the ancient quarrying site of Gebel el-Silsila (as we have seen in AE120 and AE121), their presence captured as images in rock inscriptions. We end our current series with eight further fascinating images, highlighting their overall relevance.

Vultures

Quarry 37 on the East Bank of the Nile has been dated to the Early Roman Period (Augustus-Claudius) and is dedicated primarily to Isis and Amun-Min, its stone being destined for Koptos. One small depiction of a bird

remains in the top right corner of an area which once held a now erased demotic stela (*below, left and right*). Close examination under magnification shows it has the heavy head, longish neck and hunched, semi-mantled wings of a vulture. Only four species of vulture - Egyptian, European Griffon, Lappet-faced and Lammergeier - have so far been positively identified as having occurred and bred in ancient Egypt. The first three were certainly mummified and depicted as hieroglyphs and/or deities. The fourth is only known from mummies.

The depiction now under consideration is almost certainly the European Griffon Vulture (*opposite, top right*), the

BELOW: An image of a standing vulture, part of what was once a stela in the Roman Period Quarry 37.

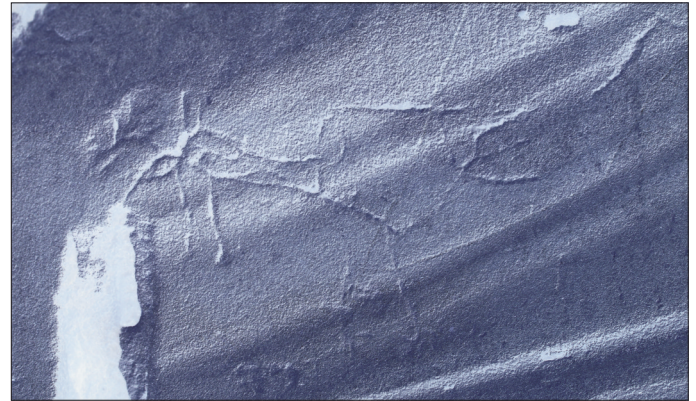




same species as the Nekhbet vulture in the nepty name. It is too large and has the wrong shape to be the Egyptian Vulture (Gardiner's G1 hieroglyph) while the head is too small for the Lappet-faced Vulture. The Cinereous or Black Vulture (now a winter visitor) and Ruppell's (Griffon) Vulture (an occasional wanderer from the Sudan) might also have occurred in the past but this remains unproven.

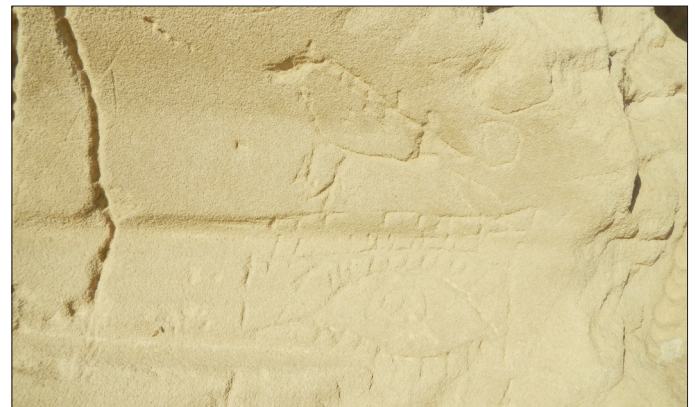
Only goddesses were ever depicted as vultures, usually in their roles as the Eyes or Daughters of Ra. Isis was one such goddess; perhaps this mark confirms her as the prime dedicatee of this quarry. The symbol for the Eye of Ra appears elsewhere here (*see top, left*) and in Quarry 36 on the West Bank to support this. Vultures are very maternal and their phenomenal eyesight is legendary.

An unusual portrayal of what could be a second vulture was also found in Quarry 36 (*see reverse image, above, right*). It was on the pillar supporting the renowned capstone (next to the Ramesside Nile Stelae) along with visitors' graffiti and the afore-mentioned sets of the Eye of Ra. It appears to show a running bird with partially raised wings, a long powerful neck, a very large head and powerful beak holding carrion. This image probably represents a Lappet-faced or Nubian Vulture (*see centre, right*) which was the avian species most frequently used to depict the goddess Mut, the consort of Amun and mother of Khonsu. This Theban Triad had attracted considerable attention here during the New Kingdom. Here, however it is more likely an association with Isis.



A Swallow

Isis was sometimes also depicted as a swallow, as this was one of the forms she was reputed to have taken in her mythical search for the body of Osiris. It is not therefore surprising that a probable depiction has been found in Quarry 36 (*see right*). The head of this bird is damaged but suggests that it was gently rounded with a small, pointed bill. The body is elongated, the legs towards the front, and



TOP LEFT: The Eyes of Ra carved into the rock in Quarry 37.

TOP RIGHT: European Griffon Vulture, the species thought to be represented in the image shown on an erased stela in Quarry 37 (*opposite, bottom left and right*). Photo: Pierre Dalous, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikicommons

CENTRE: The depiction of a running vulture from Quarry 36, shown as a reverse image for clarity. This is most likely a depiction of a Lappet faced or Nubian vulture (*shown below*). Vulture Photo: Anita Ritenour, CC BY 2.0 via Wikicommons

BOTTOM: A depiction possibly of a swallow, shown perched above the Eye of Ra, from Quarry 36.



ABOVE: Two species of swallow known to have lived in ancient Egypt: the Barn Swallow (left) and the Wire-tailed Swallow (right). Photos : Morhaf Aljaneer, CC BY-SA 3.0 (left) & Harvinder Chandigarh, CC BY-SA 4.0 (right), both via Wikicommons

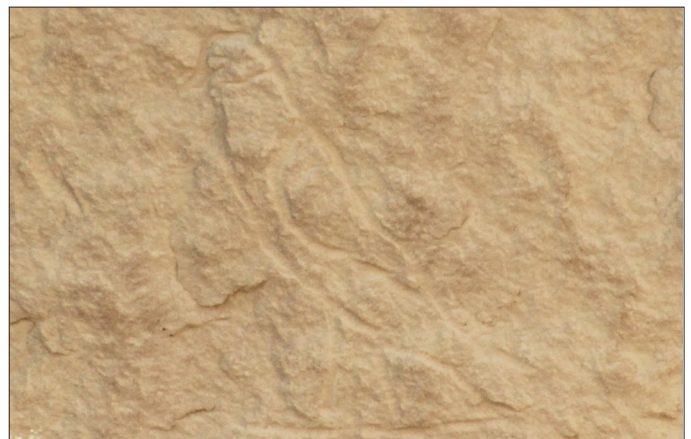
the long tail very clearly forked. A Barn Swallow (top left) should have been the most likely identification but for the extremely thin, flexible and lengthy tail streamers. A Wire-tailed Swallow (top right) is therefore marginally more likely even though there is no other evidence that this species ever occurred in Egypt; it is however still extant in the Nile Valley in northern Sudan, not too far south of the modern border and so, being an intra-African migrant, could well have been seen in Egypt.

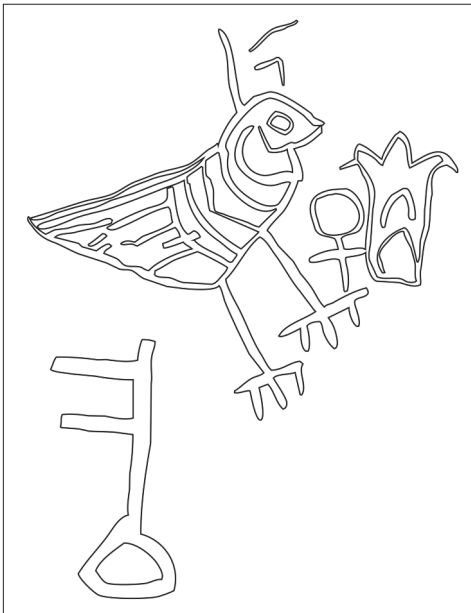
Falcon Substitutes

Previous research into bird hieroglyphs has shown that some are represented by more than one species, and that it is a common feature - such as a crest or tail-shape - which is more relevant than the species itself. However this does not explain the presence of two depictions in Graeco-Roman Quarry 34 on the East Bank. On the basis of other evidence, these should be symbolic representations of falcons; instead they appear to be a cuckoo and a Black-headed Plover.

BELOW LEFT: The European Cuckoo (top) mimics the Sparrowhawk (below) so it can be tricky to tell cuckoos and raptors apart from a distance. Photo: Chiswick Chap, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikicommons

BELOW RIGHT: An image of a bird, possibly a cuckoo, in Quarry 36, with an inverted photo of the same image below.





At first glance the first image (*opposite, below right with negative image below it*) suggests a raptor but on magnification, the body position, head angle, relatively small yet decurved bill, suggested collar, possibly spotted or streaked underside, drooping wings and perhaps semi-circular crest or sun-disk all indicate something else. If we ignore the crest/sun-disk for the moment, the most likely birds could be a Northern Wryneck or a species of nightjar or cuckoo. Only one such similar depiction is known - from the Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel. However, the beak of the Wryneck and the head of any nightjar would be clearly larger, thus the image is more likely to be one of the three cuckoo species recorded for Egypt. Furthermore, to confuse a cuckoo with a raptor is very easily done (*as shown below, left*) so it is not unlikely that a raptor could have been intended but the wrong species used in error to depict it.

The Great Spotted Cuckoo can be immediately eliminated because of its size, crest and different shape. The Common Cuckoo (a scarce passage migrant - *shown opposite, below left*) and African Cuckoo (a largely sub-Saharan African resident), do meet nearly all the criteria; they are almost identical and until recently were treated as one species. Mummified examples of the former exist and both look very much like raptors in flight and when sitting.

If we include the “crest/sun-disk”, then a hoopoe has to be considered, although it is highly unlikely. So we are back to a “falcon” with a sun-disk. It

seems very likely that, in this instance, the raptor-like Common/African Cuckoo was erroneously depicted as such.

The second image (*top right, with drawing top left*) should also be of Horus as a falcon, based on the double crown, water lily symbols and texts to Hathor and Horus surrounding it. However the stance, leg positioning, softer face, collar, crest and apparent lack of hooked bill all give it a greater resemblance to the *rekhyt*, which this far south would almost certainly have been based on the Black-headed Lapwing (*below*) rather than the Northern Lapwing. But if a *rekhyt*, why? The research into this continues.

ABOVE

A depiction of Horus as a *rekhyt* bird from Quarry 34, with a drawing (left) for clarity.

BELOW

A Black-headed Lapwing (*Vanellus tectus*) one of two possible species depicted by the *rekhyt* bird in the inscription shown above.

Photo: Bernard Dupont, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikicommons





ABOVE: A depiction of a “Snake Bird” in Quarry 34.

RIGHT: Two possible species that could be represented by the Snake bird above are the Greater Flamingo (*top right*) and the African Darter (*right*).

Photos: Mike Prince, CC BY 2.0 (flamingo) & Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0 (darter), both via Wikicommons



The Snake-Bird

One of the stranger depictions of what appears to be a largish bird also comes from Quarry 34 (*above*). It has a tapering body, long fanned tail and moderately long legs with large, apparently unwebbed feet. It also has an amazingly long, snake-like neck without any obvious head, although this could be either the incomplete circle with a central dot which is one third of the way up the neck, followed by a long decurved bill, or a combined head and bill at the very end of the neck. If the latter, then it could suggest a Greater Flamingo (*top right*), although the body shape, leg length and excessive tail do not really support this. If the former, the legs, pronounced tail, bulky body and decurved bill might point towards a Sacred Ibis (*below*), but again the excessive length, shape and curve of the bill count against this.

There is however, a third possibility, arising from the serpentine neck. Although it is perhaps slightly too long, the feet unwebbed and the legs too centrally situated on the body to enable a categoric identification, altogether (and especially when the spread tail is taken into account), this depiction might be of a flying African Darter (also known as African Anhinga or Snakebird - *shown above*).

The Darter, although now only an accidental visitor, certainly occurred in ancient Egypt as it was depicted as a hieroglyph (a common variant of G35 meaning “to enter”) and was also known from art, mummies and bone

BELOW LEFT: The African Sacred Ibis. Photo: Dick Daniels, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikicommons

BELOW RIGHT: A depiction of a Sacred Ibis from Quarry 35.



remains. The Nile at Gebel el-Silsila would have provided the ideal habitat for this fish-eating species - but why was it depicted? The image is situated at the uppermost level of a corridor opening to the north, and the bird is oriented towards the Nile. This might indicate a protecting feature but could equally relate to the Nile, its inundation, or how the seasons determined the presence of the physical bird. The Darter itself does not appear to have had any links to deities or medical usage, but its eggs and flesh were eaten, in spite of it being widely considered a bird of ill omen.

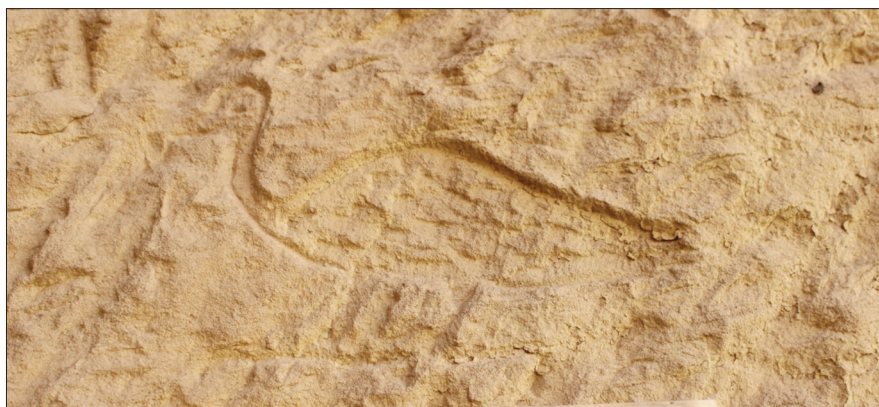
Ibises

There is, however, a definite ibis depiction to be found in Roman Quarry 35 on the West Bank (*opposite, below right*). It is shown standing on a water-lily and almost certainly represents the moon god Thoth as the species shown is clearly a Sacred Ibis (*opposite, below left*). Only three species of ibis are so far known from ancient Egypt but Glossy Ibis can be eliminated because of its thinner, more graceful shape and narrower bill, and Northern Bald Ibis for its definite crest.

Another very different and more simplistic depiction of a possible ibis may occur in the already mentioned, and neighbouring Quarry 36 (*top right*) but lacks enough detail for further consideration. Only the heavy body and strong, decurved bill suggest that this is what it might be.

Peafowl

Although one of the world's three species of peafowl - the Congo Peafowl - does occur in the forests of the African Congo Basin, the evidence points to the species depicted in ancient Egypt as being the Blue Peafowl from the Indian sub-continent (*shown right and in full display on page 42*). This bird was probably unknown in ancient Greece before the conquests of Alexander and would have been introduced to Egypt from there by Phoenician sailors and/or the founders of the Ptolemaic Dynasty around 332 BC. It was described in ancient Sanskrit from around 1500 BC as a "killer of snakes", therefore a "guardian" species, and many major Hindu and Buddhist deities were later associated with it, as can still be seen from Asian temple art and architecture, mythology, poetry, and



music. Old Indian, Persian and Babylonian symbolism associated the peacock with paradise, the Tree of Life, immortality and the guardianship of royalty, and its tail with the cosmos as the vault of heaven dotted with suns and stars. In ancient China this bird represented fertility and in Greece, where it was believed the body did not decay after death, it symbolised immortality. In ancient Egypt, the peacock naturally became linked to the sun god Amun-Ra and, because of the many eyes in its

TOP
A possible Sacred Ibis from Quarry 36.

CENTRE
An image of an immature male or a female peafowl from Quarry 19.

BOTTOM
An Indian Blue Peacock in non-breeding plumage with a short tail similar to the carved image shown above.

Photo: Max-S via Unsplash



ABOVE

The peafowl rebus – two obelisks flanking an ankh sign found near to the peafowl (perched above the right-hand obelisk – for detail see page 47)

BELOW

An obelisk flanked by two birds, most probably bustards, as discussed in the first Gebel el-Silsila bird report published in AE120.



spread tail, to the all-seeing Eye of Horus. The ash from its burnt feathers is still used in different parts of India as a medicine to stop diarrhoea or to treat infertility.

Perhaps a little surprisingly, a definite representation of a female or non-breeding male Indian Peafowl has been found in Quarry 19 on the East Bank (see page 47). It stands above the right of two obelisks (shown above). Perhaps these obelisks and their combination with other birds (both here and with the bustards mentioned in AE 120 - see below) were inspired by the images of two small obelisks flanking centrally placed falcons which are to be found on all the nearby monuments dating to the time of Amenhotep III. The males of both these bird families, in display, angle their tails and/or wing, neck and breast feathers into the sun to ensure a more dramatic and eye-catching effect and to enhance their attraction to females. Coincidentally, Melek Taus, the central figure of faith in the ancient Mesopotamian-based Yazidi religion (and the emanation of God who created the cosmos from the cosmic egg) was

also often depicted as a Peacock.

Conclusions

Research into the birds of Gebel el-Silsila will continue for some time but it is already clear that several species depicted there were extremely rare in art, if not unique. What is also evident from the bird images alone - although there is much other supporting evidence - is that Gebel el-Silsila was not just a quarry site for major temple projects; it was also an important community with local, national and international links, especially with regard to religious beliefs, medicine and food. There are depictions of local deities with avian forms such as Pachimesen and similar national avian deities including Amun, Isis, Horus and Montu, some of which were later adopted into the Greek and/or Roman Pantheons. But birds linked to other beliefs, then or subsequently suggest that other religious influences were known: examples include the Cream-coloured Courser - a "sun-runner" to the Persian (and later Graeco-Roman) god Mithras; the Peacock to the Mesopotamian Melek Taus; and both the eagle of the Roman army and the Peacock again to early Christianity. It is also amazing how many of the depicted species from Egypt, Africa and the Indian Sub-continent - such as ostrich, bustards, coursers and the Indian Blue Peacock - were used for medicinal or magical purposes, or linked to the sun. Gebel el-Silsila was thus a cosmopolitan melting pot for beliefs which once blended, were poured forth again into Egypt and Europe with the quarried stone.

John Wyatt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward

John Wyatt, ornithologist and wildlife expert, and Maria Nilsson and John Ward, Directors of the Gebel el-Silsila Project, are regular AE contributors. Read more about the desert birds and raptors discovered at the site in AE120 and AE121. We continue our series revealing the chronology of the Gebel el-Silsila site in the next issue, with a focus on the Late and Graeco-Roman Periods.

All images by Maria Nilsson except where otherwise stated.