

## Ostrich Egg and its Symbolic Meaning in the Ancient Egyptian Monastery Churches

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### The Historical Origin of Ostrich Eggs in Ancient Egypt

Ostrich eggs have been known as a dietary supplement which contains a valuable amount of protein. This huge egg weights up to two kilograms and has a capacity of one liter or even more. The size of this kind of eggs equals the size of two dozen of hen's eggs<sup>1</sup>. The ostrich egg measures about fifteen by thirteen cm. The thickness of its layer is about two mm. Concerning the color of its smooth layer; it varies from tan to ivory<sup>2</sup>. The Greek philosopher Aristotle described the ostrich to be the bird who lays the largest number of eggs<sup>3</sup>. In addition, many Roman and Christian writers described the extraordinary proprieties of the

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<sup>1</sup> B. Laufer, "Ostrich Egg-shell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern Times", **Anthropology Leaflet**, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 1926 (1), no. 23, pp. 4-5; D. Conwell, "On Ostrich Eggs and Libyans; Traces of a Bronze Age People from Bates' Island, Egypt", **Expedition**, 1987, vol.29, no.3, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> **Ibid.**, p.30; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), pp. 5-6; J. Phillips, "Ostrich Eggshells", in P. Nicholson, I. and Shaw (eds.) **Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 332; P. Behrens, "Straussenei", in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), **Lexikon der Ägyptologie**, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1975, Band VI, col. 75; D. Ezz El-Din, "Ostrich Eggs of Predynastic Egypt", **Journal of the General Association of Arab Archaeology**, Cairo 2010, no.11, p. 42; B. Laufer, "Ostrich Egg-shell Cups from Mesopotamia; The Ostrich in Ancient Times", **The Open Court**, Cornell Studies in Philosophy, Chicago, 1926 (2), vol. XL, no. 5, p. 258; the egg-shell of the African type *Struthio camelu* varies from 1.91 to 1.98 mm in thickness; the length of the eggs varies from 140.01 to 156.76 mm. As for its width, it ranges from 121.02 to 138 mm. In *Struthio molybdophanes* species which are found in the Somali land, the thickness of the egg-shell reaches 2.02 mm; the length ranges from 146 to 159.95 mm, and the width from 119.50 to 125.4 mm; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 24; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 267; the ostrich bird was described by many Greek writers. For example, Herodotus was the first Greek writer who mentioned the ostrich and named this bird as "*the bird remaining on the ground*". In addition, Strabo talked about a small tribe near the Ethiopian city Darada called the *Struthophagi* meaning "*Bird-eaters*", referring to the ostrich. For further details see; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), pp. 21-26; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 266.

ostrich. For example, the Roman writer Pliny gave a full account about the ostrich in his *Natural History* confirming that this huge bird was able to eat any object<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Pliny mentioned that the price of the ostrich bird was valued in accordance of its weight. The eggs were also eaten and became involved in the royal menu of the Pharaoh<sup>5</sup>. A Christian source called the *Physiologus* describes the nutritional qualities of this egg. The *Physiologus* which dates back to the period from the second to fourth century A.D. mentions that the diet of ostrich includes iron and glowing coal<sup>6</sup>.

Beside its nutritional value, ostrich eggs were used for other purposes. Empty eggshells were decorated with painted or incised designs and placed in the tombs. This practice was found during the Pharaonic period and ancient Greece during its Bronze Age as early as fourth-second millennia B.C. In the first millennium B.C., eggshells functioned as grave goods by the Etruscans and Punic Phoenicians<sup>7</sup>. The ancient Egyptians imported the ostrich and its products from Libya, Nubia, and the land of Punt on the east coast of Africa<sup>8</sup>.

In some cases, ostrich eggs were emptied and functioned by this way as cups or containers for water, liquids, powders and body paints. This usage was commonly found in the places where ceramic vessels were not available<sup>9</sup>. The ostrich eggshells were

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259, 267; N. Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam", *Al-Masaq*, 2006, vol. 18, no. 1, (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09503110500222328> accessed 12 October 2014), pp. 34-35; Pliny described comprehensively the natural qualities of this huge bird which he terms *struthiocamelus* meaning "sparrow camel"; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), pp. 21-26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (2), pp. 258-259.

<sup>6</sup> Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34; Conwell, *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p. 3; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (2), p. 258; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p. 16; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (2), p. 264.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p. 4; P. Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*, The American University Press, Cairo, 1988, p. 4; Behrens, *op.cit.*, col. 76; Conwell, *op.cit.*, p. 30; Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 332; W. Needler, *Predynastic and Archaic Egypt in the Brooklyn Museum*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, 1984, p. 306; Ezz El-Din, *op. cit.*, p. 42; O. Kaper, "Treasures of Dakhleh Oasis", *An Exhibition on the*

sometimes cut into beads and other smaller ornaments that were apparently used for amuletic purposes<sup>10</sup>. Arrow heads and potters' combs were sometimes made of the ostrich eggshells. Moreover, it was known that the ancient Libyans offered the Egyptian Pharaoh ostrich eggs as a kind of tribute<sup>11</sup>.

Ostrich eggs were connected with the concepts of prosperity, life, and resurrection of the Christ in the Coptic culture. This symbolism seems to have an Egyptian origin. In ancient Egypt, ostrich eggs appeared in the creation myth as a sign of life and rebirth<sup>12</sup>. In the Egyptian mythology, the ostrich is known to run around during sunrise, spinning and flapping its wings. In a text dating back to the New Kingdom (1552-1069 B.C.), the ostrich was described to dance greeting the sun rise everyday. This activity confirms the close relation between the ostrich and the sun cult, and accordingly to the concept of rebirth<sup>13</sup>. In the Egyptian religion, the ostrich was an emblem of goddess Imentet, deity of the dead and the west<sup>14</sup>. The Egyptian goddess was depicted crowned the hieroglyphic sign of the west *imnt* <sup>15</sup> which consists of a standard topped by an ostrich plume

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**Occasion of the Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project**, Egyptian Museum, Cairo, 3-6 June 2006, pp. 22-23; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 30-31; Phillips, **op. cit.**, p. 332; Needler, **op. cit.**, p. 306; Ezz El-Din, **op. cit.**, p. 42; Conwell, **op.cit.**, p.30.

<sup>11</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 30; Green, **op.cit.**, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 30; D. A. Agius, "Leave your Homeland in Search of Prosperity: the Ostrich Egg in a Burial Site at Quseir Al-Qadim in the Mamluk Period", in U. Vermeulen, and J. Van Steenberghe (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras*, **Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta**, Peeters, Leuven, 2005, vol. IV, p. 365.

<sup>13</sup> Houlihan, **op. cit.**, pp. 4-5; Behrens, **op. cit.**, col. 73; Ezz El-Din, **op. cit.**, pp. 47-48; for further detail see; Ch. Kuentz, "La danse des Atruches", **Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale**, Le Caire, 1924, Tome 23, p. 87 (Cairo Museum. Stela no. 34001).

<sup>14</sup> Green, **op.cit.**, p. 30; P. Remler, **Egyptian Mythology A to Z**, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2010, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> The name of this goddess was also written with this sign *imnt.t nfr.t* ; A. Erman, and H. Grapow, **Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache**, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1971, Band I, p. 87, no.9.

<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, ostrich feather was the emblem of the Egyptian goddess Maat, goddess of truth and was also worn by her as a headdress. Thus, the heart of the deceased was weighed against an ostrich feather during his final judgment<sup>17</sup>. Being a symbol of resurrection, ostrich eggs were discovered in the ancient Egyptian and Nubian tombs as a kind of funerary offerings<sup>18</sup>. It was believed that ostrich eggshells provided food for the deceased and thus symbolized resurrection and eternal life, a belief that continued to be found in the Muslims' graves<sup>19</sup>.

Ostrich eggs continued to have a precious value in the Greek and Roman world. The ancient Greeks offered ostrich eggs to their deities in the sanctuaries. In ancient Greece, these eggs were symbol for fertility and prosperity<sup>20</sup>. In Egypt, traces of ostrich egg-shells were discovered by F. Petrie in the temple of Apollo at Naukratis<sup>21</sup>. In addition to Apollo's temple, another temple dedicated to the twin brothers Dioskouroi was discovered in

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<sup>16</sup> Remler, **op. cit.**, p. 10; B. Lesko, **The Great Goddess of Egypt**, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1999, p. 268; another opinion says that this feather refers to the Lybian region which was the original cult center of Imnetet. It was known that the ostrich feather was commonly used by the ancient Lybians over their heads; R. Graves, **The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology**, Hamlyn, London, 1994, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Green, **op.cit.**, p. 30; the ostrich feather was attached to the necklace of the chief judges as a sign of his position; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 265; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 17; For example, there is an ostrich egg vessel that was discovered in the subterranean tomb of a woman in Dakhleh oasis. She is probably a relative of Khentika, Governor of the Oasis during the reign of Pepi II. This egg dates back to the Sixth dynasty (2460-2200 B.C.) and is preserved now in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo. The vessel was either a gift of the Egyptian Pharaoh to one of the members of the Governor's court, or a piece of local production. The latter assumption is more accepted because the decoration is not well executed as that of the alabaster parallels, and it does not bear any royal names. For further details see; Kaper, **op. cit.**, pp. 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Muslims used ostrich eggs in their graves to honor their dead. Therefore, ostrich eggs appeared being wrought near or above Muslim graves; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 47-63; Agius, **op. cit.**, p. 365; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 258; Conwell, **op. cit.**, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 19; For further details see; W. M. F. Petrie, **Naukratis**, Third Memoir of the Egypt Exploration Fund, Trübner, London, 1886, part 1, p. 14.

Naukratis<sup>22</sup>. Ostrich eggs were used to be wrought form the ceiling of Dioskouroi temples in Greece (see p. 5).

### Ostrich Eggs in the Coptic Culture

The ostrich bird and its qualities were mentioned in certain biblical sources. According to Job's lamentation (30:29), the ostrich was regarded a wild animal which is tamed by Job as follows; "*A brother I have become to the jackals, and a companion to the young ostriches*"<sup>23</sup>. Prophet Micah (1:8) described the loud, mournful roar of this bird as follows; "*Like jackals will I mourn, like ostriches make lamentation*"<sup>24</sup>.

The eggs of this bird became connected to the female womb and motherhood in the Bible<sup>25</sup>. According to Job's comment (39:13-17), the ostrich lays its eggs in the earth and leave them to hatch themselves through the sun.<sup>26</sup> Job (39: 13-17) says "*The wing of the ostrich rejoiceth; but are her pinions and feathers kindly (or, as the stork's?) which leaveth her eggs on the earth and warmeth them in the dust and forgetteth that the foot may crush them or that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers: her labour is in vain without fear; because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath He imparted to her understanding. What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider*" The previous text includes Job's observation that the ostrich neglects her small hens by leaving them alone as they are simply protected by the power of God represented by the sun heat<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> For further details see; **Ibid.**, pp. 11-12; E. A. Gardner, "Excavations at Naukratis", **The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts**, (Apr. - Jun., 1886), vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 180-181.

<sup>23</sup> Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 10; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 262; (Job 30:29) .

<sup>24</sup> Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 10; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 262; (Micah 1:8).

<sup>25</sup> Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 34-35.

<sup>26</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 34-35; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), pp. 10-12; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 262; (Job 39:13-17); A. W. Steffler, **Symbols of the Christian Faith**, Eerdman Publishing, Michigan, 2002, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 35; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 34-35; (Job 39:13-17); Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), pp. 10-12; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 262; (Job 39:13-17) .

The female ostrich places her eggs in shallow pits or depression of soil that is scraped by the feet of the old birds. The eggs are brooded by the female ostrich during the day and by the father in the night. In some cases, the eggs are placed in the nests of the neighborhood. Spoiled eggs are broken by the parents and fed to the small ostrich hens<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the ostrich hatched its eggs by starring at them rather than by incubation<sup>29</sup> with the assistance of the daily sun heat<sup>30</sup>. Saint Augustine's words corresponds with this belief as follows; "*Let us place our egg, that is our hope, under the wings of that hen*"<sup>31</sup>.

The egg in general was a Christian symbol of resurrection. It referred to the birth of Jesus by Virgin Mary. The small hen broke out form the egg just like the Christ who broke forth from the tomb<sup>32</sup>. It was said that when Pontus Pilate asked Saint Mary the Magdalene how Jesus rose from the dead. She simply brought an egg and told him "*Tell me how a small chick emerges from this egg when it is born?*"<sup>33</sup>. The *Physiologus*, connects between the concentrated starring eyes of the ostrich and the concentration of the Christians during their devotion. The same Christian source relates between the hatched ostrich egg and the resurrection of the Christ. The *Physiologus* says; "*Since the ostrich knows her time, man ought to know his to a still higher degree: we have to look up toward heaven, forget worldly existence, and follow Christ*"<sup>34</sup>. Thus, the Christians believe that the egg contains the promise of a new life just like the seeds. Being protected by its shell, the small chick became a symbol for

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p.12.

الأنبا ساويرس، جبل قسقام، دير السيدة العذراء المحرق : قدس - تراث عبر عشرين قرنا من الزمان ، دير السيدة العذراء بالمحرق ، ١٩٩٠ ، الطبعة الثانية، ص ١١.

<sup>29</sup> Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p.12; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (2), p.262.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35; T. Y. Malaty, *The Church House of God*, St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, Alexandria, 1994, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., pp.158-159.

<sup>32</sup> Steffler, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35; Kaper, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>33</sup> Malaty, *op. cit.*, pp.158-159.

<sup>34</sup> Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), p.13. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

chastity and purity<sup>35</sup>. Aside from all other sorts of bird eggs, ostrich eggs were obviously connected with the resurrection of the Christ and his risen spiritual life<sup>36</sup>. During the Easter season, ostrich eggs became a part of the Coptic Church's celebrations of resurrection<sup>37</sup>.

Coptic monks had their own symbolic meaning for the sun heat which causes these eggs to hatch. They believe that the sun heat refers to the power of God whose glory ingrained the Christian values in the hearts of its believers. Another opinion rather believes that the sun rays which fall on the ostrich eggs symbolizes creation and light<sup>38</sup>.

Hanging ostrich eggs from the ceiling of the churches was adopted from the decoration of earlier Greek and Roman temples<sup>39</sup>. During the Græco-roman period, ostrich eggs, whether real eggs or artificial ones, were wrought from precious metals and became linked with many legends. For instance, the cult of the egg of the Dioskouroi was linked with the protection of Sparta. A great silver egg was hung by ribbons from the ceiling of the city's temple to the celestial twins<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34; Steffler, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35; Malaty, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159; Agius, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365; Steffler, *op. cit.*, p. 35; in modern times, the Christians follow the tradition of exchanging eggs especially red eggs between them. Since Easter celebration has not been attested in Europe since the nineteenth century A..D., the Christians in the west apparently involved the egg during their Easter celebration because of the Crusaders or even due to the commercial relation between Egypt and the west; A. J. Butler, **The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt**, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1884, vol. ii, pp. 78- 79; Steffler, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Green, *op. cit.*, p. 36; Malaty, *op. cit.*, pp.158-159.

<sup>38</sup> Agius, *op. cit.*, pp. 365.

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<sup>39</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, pp.77-79; Malaty, *op. cit.*, pp.158-159; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (1), pp. 3-4; Laufer, *op.cit.*, 1926 (2), p. 258; the twin brothers Castor and Pollux were known together as Dioscuri "sons of Zeus". They were sons of Leda the queen of Sparta from two different fathers. Castor was the son of Leda and Tyndareus king of Sparta. Polydeuces (Roman: Pollux) was the son of Leda and god Zeus who visited Leda one night in the form of a swan. Leda gave birth to the two brothers at the same time. Polydeuces together with his sister Helen were children of Zeus and Leda and appeared from one egg. On the other hand, Castor and Clytemnestra became the children of

An Arabic source described the purpose of hanging ostrich eggs in the ceiling of the churches as a symbol of spiritual dedication. This source is *Al-Jawharat Al-Nafisa* (the Precious Pearl) by the Syrian Orthodox Christian, John Ibn Sabaa Zakariah (fourteenth century A.D.). The *Pearl* connects between the symbolic meaning of hanging ostrich eggs and the concentration of the bird in gazing to its eggs before hatching. If this staring failed for one moment, the ostrich chick will simply die or weaken before hatching<sup>41</sup>.

Father Vansleb was a seventeenth century visitor who also described the Coptic custom of hanging ostrich eggs in the churches. He knew from an Arabic manuscript that the male and female ostrich hatches their eggs by using their eyes and starring to their eggs. He confirms that the ostrich eggs were placed in the Coptic churches to assist the priests to concentrate during their prayers and devotions away from any earthly problems<sup>42</sup>. By this way, the ostrich egg became a symbol of concentrated prayers

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Leda and Tyndareus. However, the four children appeared from two eggs in other stories. The first egg contained the children of Zeus; Polydeuces and Helen. The second egg contained Castor and Clytemnestra sons of Tyndareus who conceived the egg at the same night Zeus visited Leda. For further details see; P. Croft, **All Color Book of Roman Mythology**, Book Sales, New Jersey, 1989, p. 26; Remler, **op. cit.**, pp. 74, 87; H. J. Rose, **A Handbook of Greek Mythology**, Routledge, London, 1964, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 230-231; M. Lurker, **Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses Devils and Demons**, Routledge, London, 1989, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 97, 186; R. Graves, **New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology**, Crescent Books, New York, 1989, pp.188-190.

<sup>41</sup> Green, **op. cit.**, p. 35; Butler, **op. cit.**, pp. 77- 79; J. Cowan, **Desert Father: A Journey in the Wilderness with Saint Anthony**, New Seeds Books, Boston, 2002, pp. 104-106; J. Wilkinson, “Notes on a Part of the Eastern Desert of Upper Egypt”, **The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London**, Harvard College Library, London, 1831-1832, vol.2, pp. 30-31; C. Chaillot, “The Ancient Oriental Churches”, in G. Wainwright, and K. W. Tucker, (eds.), **The Oxford History of Christian Worship**, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. 136; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 34-35; Y. b. Abi Zakariyya Ibn Sabaa, J. Périer (trans.), “La Perle précieuse: traitant des sciences ecclesiastiques”, **Patrologia Orientalis**, 1922, Firmin Didot, Paris, vol. 16, pp. 753-755; Malaty, **op. cit.**, pp.158-159.

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<sup>42</sup> Malaty, **op. cit.**, pp.158-159; Cowan, **op. cit.**, pp. 104-106.

and devotion in the Coptic monasticism and symbol of resurrection in the Coptic culture.

Hanging ostrich eggs appeared in the churches of the eastern and southern Mediterranean region. It became an important architectural feature in many Orthodox, Coptic, and Assyrian churches in the eastern Mediterranean<sup>43</sup>.

### **Examples of Ostrich Eggs in the ancient Egyptian Monastery Churches**

Generally, ostrich eggs were either wrought freely from the ceiling of the churches or being used in manufacturing elaborate church chandeliers<sup>44</sup>. Ostrich eggs were hung in the churches before the iconostasis between the icons<sup>45</sup>. In some other cases, ostrich eggs were placed between the sanctuary lamps that were placed before the screen of the sanctuary or the *haikal*<sup>46</sup>. They were sometimes used for decorating the metal cords from which the chandeliers suspend<sup>47</sup>.

### **The Monastery Church of Saint Antony**

Encased ostrich eggs were found hanging from the ceiling of monastery church of Saint Antony in Egypt (figs.1.a.b.c). Ostrich eggs are located in front of the iconostasis as well as the aisles and naves of three chapels of the church<sup>48</sup>. Simple ropes were used to hang these eggs from the ceiling.

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<sup>43</sup> Butler, **op. cit.**, pp.77-79; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 4; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 258. Green, **op. cit.**, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 35; for further details see; G. Galavaris, "Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church: Candles, lamps and ostrich eggs", **Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies**, [The Centre for Byzantine Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, University of Birmingham](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/centres/centres-byzantine-ottoman-and-modern-greek-studies/), Birmingham, 1978, vol. 4, pp. 69-78.

<sup>45</sup> Malaty, **op. cit.**, pp.158-159; O. F. A. Meinardus, **Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity**, The American University Press, Cairo, 2002, p. 284.

<sup>46</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 284; Green, **op. cit.**, p. 35; W. Lyster, **Monastery of St. Paul**, American Research Center, Cairo, 1999, p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (1), p. 4; Laufer, **op.cit.**, 1926 (2), p. 258.

<sup>48</sup> Green, **op. cit.**, p. 35; Wilkinson, **op.cit.**, p. 30;

<http://anthonyofarabianstudies.blogspot.com/2011/08/sightseeing-sunday-august-14th.html> (accessed 22 December 2014, 12 AM); The sanctuary or the *haikal* of this church is divided into three chapels all of which are covered with a dome. The northern chapel is dedicated to Saint Mark, the southern one is consecrated for Saint Athanasius,

The monastery dates back to the fourth century A.D.<sup>49</sup>. Except the southern wall of the church, the building was reconstructed during the sixteenth century<sup>50</sup>. The church was apparently built during the reign of Julian the Apostate in the period between 361-363 A.D and lies in the eastern desert of Egypt in the Wadi Arabah or in the South Qalalah range<sup>51</sup>. Few years after the death of Saint Antony, a Christian community appeared around the settlement of the great hermit of whose religious reputation and faith spread widely<sup>52</sup>. This community began by the reign of Julian the Apostate between 361 and 363 A.D.<sup>53</sup>. Among the Christians who lived there, a woman called *Dydime* who was involved in certain commercial activities in this area. *Dydime* and the sisters Theodora and Tauris were responsible for lines of credits as well as the transportation of many goods. Among these goods were grapes, sandals, cakes, headbands, and ostrich eggs. These goods were mentioned in the two letters of *Dydime* which date back to the fourth century A.D.<sup>54</sup>.

### **The Monastery Church of Saint Paul**

The monastery church of Saint Paul contains another group of ostrich eggs that are placed in front of three sanctuaries. Like the monastery church of saint Antony, ostrich eggs are hung by simple ropes (fig.2).

By the sixth century A.D., the monastery of Saint Paul gained its fame in the eastern desert of Egypt side by side with the

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while the central chapel is dedicated to Saint Antony; O. F. A. Meinardus, **Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts**, American University Press, Cairo, 1989, revised ed., pp.27-28.

<sup>49</sup> Chaillot, **op. cit.**, p. 136.

<sup>50</sup> Meinardus, **op. cit.**, 2002, pp. 259-260.

<sup>51</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 259; R. G. Coquin, and S. J. M. Martin, "Monasteries of the Eastern Desert", in A.S. Atiya (ed.), **Coptic Encyclopedia**, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1991, vol.5, p. 1650; Meinardus, **op. cit.**, 1989, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 5; Meinardus, **op. cit.**, 2002, p. 259; J. E. Goehring, "Ascetics, Society, and the Desert; Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism", **Studies in Antiquity and Christianity**, International Trinity Press, Harrisburg, 1999, pp. 18-26.

<sup>53</sup> Meinardus, **op. cit.**, 2002, p. 259.

<sup>54</sup> Goehring, **op. cit.**, pp. 24-25; for further detail see; B. P. Grenfell, and A. S. Hunt, **P. Oxy. 14. 1774**, Badé Museum of Biblical Archaeology, Berkeley, 1920.

monastery of Saint Antony<sup>55</sup>. The church of Saint Paul, or the Cave Church<sup>56</sup>, is the most ancient part and most spiritual of the monastery which houses altogether four churches<sup>57</sup>.

### The Monastery Church of Saint Catherine

In addition, sixteen eggs were hung in the nave of the monastery church of Saint Catherine in Sinai<sup>58</sup> (figs.3.a, b). Ostrich eggs suspend from the ceiling of the central aisle of the church in front of the iconostasis which was made by the monks in 1916 from gilded wood<sup>59</sup> from Crete<sup>60</sup>. Six large chandeliers and twenty smaller ones suspend from the roof of the church. All of them are made of brass, silver, or even gold<sup>61</sup>. These chandeliers are hung by another group of ostrich eggs. These eggs which are attached to the metal threads of the chandeliers played in fact a dual function. Beside their symbolic value, they

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<sup>55</sup> Coquin, *op. cit.*, pp. 1649-1650; Meinardus, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 33-35; Antoninus Martyr, a native of Placentia, visited the shrine between 560 A. D. and 570 A. D.; Meinardus, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 262-263; Lyster, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>56</sup> This nomination is due to the sanctuary of the church which was built into the rock cave where Saint Paul used to live. The remains of Saint Paul are still preserved in this place; Lyster, *op. cit.*, p. 42; Meinardus, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 33-35; Meinardus, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 262-263.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262-263; Meinardus, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 33-35; Lyster, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>58</sup> G. H. Forsyth, "The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian", in J. Galey (ed.), G. H. Forsyth, and K. Weitzmann (introduction), **Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine**, American University Press, Cairo, 1980, pl. 30-39; Green, *op. cit.*, p. 35; G. H. Forsyth, and K. Weitzmann, **The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: the Church and Fortress of Justinian**, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1973, vol. I, pls. 43, 57, 60, 85, 101; J. H. Wellard, **Desert Pilgrimage: Journeys to the Egyptian and Sinai Deserts; Completing the Third of the Trilogy of Saharan Explorations**, Hutchinson, London, 1970, pp. 25-26; W. F. Bassili, **Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine: a Practical Guide for Travelers**, Costa Tsoumas, Cairo. 1964, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 135; It is unclear whether the object hanging over the tomb is an ostrich or a ceramic egg. The later type of eggs was invented by the Muslims who used ceramic eggs imitating the shape of ostrich eggs; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 35, 39-42.

<sup>59</sup> Forsyth, *op. cit.*, pls. 30-39; E. Papaioannou, **The Monastery of St. Catherine Sinai**, The Monastery of Saint Catherine (ed.), Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1949, pp.18-19; Bassili, *op. cit.*, p. 135; C. Mango, "Justinian's Fortified Monastery", in O. Baddeley, and E. Brunner (eds.), **The Monastery of Saint Catherine**, Saint Catherine Foundation, 1996, p. 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Bassili, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

prevented the mice from climbing down the chains to drink the olive oil from the lamps<sup>62</sup>.

Other eggs hung in the additional chapels of the church<sup>63</sup> which is divided into three main aisles by two rows of twelve granite pillars<sup>64</sup>. Behind every aisle, there are three chapels and the vestry<sup>65</sup>. Beyond the north aisle, the three chapels are arranged from east to west as follows; the first one for Saint Antipas, the second one for Saint Constantine and Helen, and the final chapel for Saint Marina. Concerning the southern aisle, three other chapels are located beyond it. They are arranged from east to west as follows; the first chapel for Saint Anne and Joachim, the second one for Saint Simeon Stylites, and the third one for Saint Cosmas and Damian<sup>66</sup>. Other eggs hung above the tomb of Saint Catherine herself<sup>67</sup>.

### Conclusion and Results

Aside from some scholars that believe that ostrich eggs were rather an ecclesiastical ornament in the churches rather than having any symbolic value<sup>68</sup>, ostrich eggs represent the idea of rebirth and resurrection of the Christ in the Coptic Culture. Although ostrich eggs gained their symbolic value from the biblical sources; this type of eggs is regarded one of the cultural legacies in Egypt. It seems that the custom of hanging ostrich eggs, whether genuine eggs or ceramic ones, has a Greco-Egyptian origin.

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<sup>62</sup> This custom continued till the Nineteenth century churches as well as mosques. Many visitors described that ostrich eggs were attached to the lamps of these buildings to serve this purpose; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35; Forsyth, *op. cit.*, pl. 30-39; Forsyth and Weitzmann, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pls. 43, 57, 60, 85, 101; Wellard, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26; It is unclear whether the object hanging over the tomb is an ostrich or ceramic egg; Green, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> Bassili, *op. cit.*, pp. 134; Mango, *op. cit.*, pp. 72- 75; Forsyth, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> Papaioannou, *op. cit.*, pp.18-19.

<sup>66</sup> Papaioannou, *op. cit.*, pp.18-19; Bassili, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-135; Forsyth, *op. cit.*, p.61.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. 39; Green, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Forsyth and Weitzmann, *op. cit.*, pls. 43, 57, 60, 85, 101; Papaioannou, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26; Bassili, *op. cit.*, p. 144; It is unclear whether the object hanging over the tomb is an ostrich or ceramic egg; Green, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

The ostrich gained a special religious value in ancient Egypt and became a symbol of rebirth. In the Egyptian myth, the ostrich was described to greet the sun rise by flapping its wings and dancing during the daily sun rise. Thus, the ancient Egyptians connected between this bird and the sun and cult and the concept of rebirth. Moreover, the feather of this bird was used as an emblem for two Egyptian goddesses, namely Maat and Imentet. This feather appeared in the scenes of final judgment to represent Maat, the justice. In addition, the ostrich feather was placed at the top the headdress of Imentet, the Egyptian goddess of the west to represent her role as goddess of rebirth and eternal life; the concept which maintained in the Coptic culture in Egypt.

Concerning hanging the ostrich eggs in the ceilings of the cultic buildings such as; churches and temples, it was a custom that appeared by the Greco-roman period. Ostrich eggs suspended from the ceilings of the Greek temples such as that of Dioskouroi in Sparta. Traces of ostrich egg-shells were discovered in the temple of Apollo at Neucratis where ruins of Dioskouroi temple were found. Suspending ostrich eggs continued to be found in the churches, monasteries, and even the Muslim graves in Egypt.

According to Nile Green, he rather believes that hanging ostrich eggs in the churches is not a purely Christian antiquity. It must have been influenced by the Muslims who also hang ostrich eggs<sup>69</sup>. Green represents the monastery church of Saint Catherine as an example because of the existence of a Muslim pilgrim nearby the site<sup>70</sup>. However, this opinion is a topic of debate. It is not acceptable that hanging ostrich eggs is a Muslim invention in Egypt without having any historical origin. Since hanging the ostrich eggs in the cultic buildings has a Greek origin, it is more

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<sup>69</sup> Muslims used ostrich eggs in their graves to honor their dead. Therefore, ostrich eggs appeared being hung near or above Muslim graves; **Ibid.**, pp. 77-78; Conwell, **op. cit.**, p. 30; Agius, **op. cit.**, p. 365; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 47-64.

<sup>70</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 35.

acceptable that the Copts adopted this custom in their churches before the Muslims in their graves.

In the Coptic culture, ostrich eggs acquired its symbolic value from the natural prosperities of the ostrich bird. It is known that ostrich mother hatched its eggs by starring to them. In other words, concentrating the eyes on the ostrich eggs enables them to hatch and represent by this way the promise of a new life. In addition, the small hatched ostrich became the symbol of the Christ himself. The small chick broke out form the egg just like the Christ who broke forth from the tomb. The close connection between ostrich eggs and concept of resurrection was confirmed during the Easter season. Exchanging eggs became a tradition followed by the Christian during this season, a custom that integrates with the words of Saint Augustine. By this way, ostrich eggs became a symbol for concentration during devotion, as well as rebirth of the Christ.

Ostrich eggs became a distinguished architectural element in the churches of the ancient Egyptian monasteries. This is due to the close relation between the symbolism of these eggs and monasticism in Coptic Egypt. In the monastic life, ostrich eggs represent a remarkable symbolic value. Besides being the symbol of the Christ resurrection, ostrich eggs helped in clearing the mind of the prayers to concentrate during their devotion away from any distraction leaving behind their back their earthly worries. Coptic monks believe that that the sun heat which helped in hatching the small ostrich hen symbolizes the power of God.

Since monasticism is a completely spiritual practice, ostrich eggs were intended to be hung in front of the sanctuary, or the *haikal* of the monastery churches to enable the prayers to concentrate during their devotions. Moreover, ostrich eggs are found in the additional rooms that are dedicated to certain holy figures in the monastery churches for the same purpose. These eggs were sometimes hung in the burial places of certain saints.

For example, ostrich eggs hang in the ceiling of the room that houses the corpse of Saint Catherine in Sinai.

Ostrich eggs appeared as an ornamental element in the earliest monastery churches of Egypt. The monastery of Saint Antony and that of Saint Paul represent obvious examples. According to the letters of *Dydime*, it could be assumed that ostrich eggs became one of the crucial goods that were especially brought to the monastery of Saint Antony. Ostrich eggs were used as a prominent architectural element with an undeniable symbolic value in the monastery church of Saint Paul, which lies in the same area of that of Saint Antony. In addition, the monastery church of Saint Catherine, houses another number of ostrich eggs. Despite of its elaborate decoration, the architect could not dispense using ostrich eggs in this church.

Ropes or simple metal threads were commonly used to hold ostrich eggs in the monastery churches. These eggs are threaded by ropes in the monastery of Saint Antony (fig.1.a), and the monastery of Saint Paul (fig.2). Simple metal cords were sometimes used to hang the ostrich eggs such as those found in the monastery of Saint Antony (fig.1.c) and the monastery church of Saint Catherine (fig.3.a). The simple shape of cords and ropes that were used to hang the eggs corresponds with the monastic life that depends on austerity and asceticism. In some cases, the metal cords which were used to hang the ostrich eggs take the shape of the cross. The monastery of Saint Catherine gives a clear example of this type of cords (figs.3.a, b). This combination between the ostrich egg and cross might confirms that ostrich egg was indisputably a symbol for the resurrection of the Christ. In addition, gilded ostrich eggs are used to make chandeliers in the monastery church of Saint Catherine (fig.3.b) and are apparently inspired from elaborate decoration of this church.

Concerning the date of the ostrich eggs in the monastery churches, it became a topic of debate by many scholars. This is due to the difficulty in determining the accurate material of the

discovered eggs; whether real ostrich eggs or ceramic ones. In the case of being original ostrich eggs, it might be assumed that these eggs date back before the Arab's arrival to Egypt. On the other hand, ceramic eggs imitating the shape of ostrich eggs were invented by the Muslims<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Spherical and oval ceramic eggs were manufactured imitating the shape of the ostrich eggs. However, they were manufactured smaller than the ostrich eggs and bigger than the hen's egg. These eggs were found in the churches as well mosques in Egypt during the Islamic period. For further details see; Green, **op. cit.**, pp. 47-64; Butler, **op. cit.**, pp. 77-78.



**Fig.1.a.** Ostrich eggs hanging in front of the altar and the iconostasis, monastery church of Saint Antony the Great, eastern desert of Egypt, fourth century A.D.

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<http://anthonyofarabianstudies.blogspot.com/2011/08/sightseeing-sunday-august-14th.html>



**Fig.1.b.** Fresco painting in the ceiling representing the archangels, ostrich eggs hanging in front of the altar and the iconostasis, monastery church of Saint Antony the Great, eastern desert of Egypt, fourth century A.D.

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**Fig.1.c.** Ostrich egg suspending in front if the sanctuary, monastery church of Saint Antony the Great, eastern desert of Egypt, fourth century A.D.

After:

<http://nahrelfedaa.yoo7.com/t3299-topic>



**Fig.2.** Suspending ostrich egg, monastery church of Saint Paul, eastern desert of Egypt, fourth century A.D.

After:

[http://mccombiefulbright.blogspot.com/2011\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://mccombiefulbright.blogspot.com/2011_11_01_archive.html)



**Fig.3. a.** Ostrich eggs hanging in the central nave of the monastery church of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Sixth Century A.D.

After:

E. Papaioannou , The Monastery of Saint Catherine, **The Monastery of Saint Catherine** (ed.), Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1949, p. 19



**Fig.3.b.** Chandeliers suspending from ostrich eggs, the central nave of the monastery church of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Sixth Century A.D.

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