



The Peacock in Coptic Funerary Art: Origin, Significance and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT

The Peacock was widely depicted in Coptic art, because it symbolizes immortality, resurrection and the glorified soul. This symbolism may be due to the legendary story which says that the flesh of the peacock does not decay. The study examines the depiction of the peacock in Coptic funerary art in terms of its origin, the symbolic meaning and general characteristics of the peacock in ancient civilizations. Peacock in ancient mythology, and how it was transmitted to Coptic art have been also discussed in the study. Emphasis has been placed on the depiction of the peacock in Coptic funerary art, such as Coptic sarcophagi, and Coptic funerary stelae preserved in various museums around the world.

The descriptive analytical method has been implemented in this study aiming to reach to the significance, importance and the symbolism of the peacock in Coptic funerary art. Based on the analysis of some Coptic funerary pieces preserved in various museums, the study resulted to the different forms, meanings and symbolism of the peacock in Coptic funerary art. The main purpose of this paper is to provide a new resource of the depiction of the peacock in Coptic art, and to give clear explanations of some funerary Coptic pieces depicting this bird that displayed in various museums around the world.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the ancient Egyptian time birds had great significance during lifetime and afterlife as well. Numerous species of birds had great significance and symbolism for ancient Egyptians. Ancient Egyptian artists paid a great attention to represent different types of birds on the walls of ancient temples and tombs such as species of ducks, geese and pigeons (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2013).

Ancient Egyptian art depicted different species of birds, but there was an absence of specific birds such as the peacock. Peacocks had appeared in Egypt for the first time in the Graeco-Roman

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period. Since then, the peacock with its extraordinary plumage has become one of the most common decorative elements in Greek art (Evans, 2012). In Roman art, the peacocks were depicted facing each other, and it is said that the peacock has become the favorite dish of the Roman emperors (Habib, n.d.).

Coptic art which was a folk art, was symbolic and had a tendency towards the use of geometrical lines and towards the miniatures (Hermania, n.d.). It is a rich art which includes almost all decorative elements; floral, geometric, numbers and creature's ornamentations including animals and birds. Copts followed the ancient Egyptians in using various bird species in their art. Therefore, birds played a vital role in Coptic art in general, and in symbolism in particular, as birds in early Christianity were symbols of the 'winged soul' and spiritual sublimity, or what was opposed to the material. Thus, in Coptic art, birds and their symbolism have become one of the most important features of Coptic art that distinguish it from other arts (Ferguson, 1989). Peacock was one of the most decorative elements in Coptic Art, because it was signifying immortality, eternity, resurrection and protection. Symbolizing immortality makes peacock imagery a funerary decoration on catacombs, sarcophagi and funerary stelae in early Christian time (Chapin & Pareja, 2020).

2. Peacock in Greco-Roman Civilizations

Peacock is considered one of the most sacred birds in different ancient religions and civilizations such as Persian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Hindu and Buddhism (Huber & Nauerth, 2018). It is also suggested that Peacocks were connected to the Minoan civilization and their artists in the middle of Bronze Age (Chapin & Pareja, 2020). That is, it holds several symbolic meanings in various civilizations which was usually derive from its beautiful plumage (Kang,2013)

The throne of Persian kings was called the "Peacock Throne", which represents that the peacock was symbolizing the Persian royal throne (Kang, 2013). In Persian art, two peacocks were represented on both sides of the Tree of Life which was symbolizing the man's dual nature (Cooper, 1978). In the fifth century BC, Peacocks were brought to Greece by Persians through diplomatic relationships between Greece and Persia (Chapin & Pareja, 2020). The ancient Greeks called it "the Persian bird", and it was traded between India and Persia. It is said that the soldiers of Alexander the Great were taken aback to a site of beautiful flocks of peacocks they encountered in India after their conquering to the Persian Empire. Then, Greek traders brought them from Asia as luxury gifts (Kang, 2013).

The earliest reference of the peacock is that in the myth of the Greek goddess Hera, to whom the peacock was one of her symbols. Hera was the wife and sister of Zeus, and the queen of heaven. She was also the goddess of childbirth and marriage (March, 2014). The myth says that Io (*Ἰώ*) was one of the priestesses of Hera with whom Zeus fell in love either because of her beauty, or the spells of Iynx. When Hera became suspicious, Zeus transformed Io into a white heifer to protect her from his jealous wife Hera. But Hera asked Zeus to give her the heifer, and she put the giant Argus in charge of her (Grimal, 1990). Some traditions give Argus one single eye, other give him four eyes; two looking forwards and the other two looking backwards, while others give him multiple eyes all over his body. He was appointed by Hera to watch over Io with his several eyes. Argus's eyes symbolize light, mystic eye, stability, spirit, protection, knowledge and awakening (Cooper, 1978; Green,2006). However, Zeus sent Hermes to kill him; it is said that Hermes killed him by throwing a stone, or by making him sleep with the Pan pips. When Argus died, he lost his

many eyes and couldn't watch Io. Then, to commemorate Argus's loyalty, Hera scattered his eyes in a big number on the tail of a peacock as a sign of gratitude, as well as to give her immortality. That is, Argus's eyes were reborn again because they were placed on the peacock's tail. According to this legend, the death of Argus and his loss of sight symbolize the pain and suffering, as well as rebirth (Grimal, 1990; Kang, 2013). Thus, the gorgeous peacock became one of the symbols of Hera, and her royal bird, while the plumage was representing the eyes of Argus that she used to watch over Io (Grimal, 1990; Green, 2006; Kang, 2013; March, 2014).

In Roman period, the Romans brought peacocks from Greece and they became popular exotic pets at the time. The peacock was associated with the Roman deity Juno, as Hera was identified in Roman times as Juno (Green, 2006; March, 2014). The peacock thus became the Juno's sacred bird, having the same significance as for the Greek goddess Hera (Arthur & Collins, 1913).

In the second century AD, wealthy Romans enjoyed peacock's flesh as a tasty food in luxury feasts. It signified the apotheosis of an empress and became one of the emblems of the Empress and Roman princesses. (Arthur & Collins, 1913; Cooper, 1978). Romans believed that the peacock bore the souls of empresses to their apotheosis (Green, 2006). According to Roman legends, the peacock's flesh does not decay, for this reason this bird was considered a symbol of immortality (Kang, 2013; Chapin & Pareja, 2020). Therefore, the peacock was often carved Roman tombs and funerary objects. From the Achaemenids in Persia, the Romans adopted fans or flywhisks made of peacock feathers which was a court ceremonial later reflected in Christian and Islamic royal courts. Moreover, the connections between Greece and Persia had resulted in adopting some cultural habits such as the usage of peacock fans in royal courts (Green, 2006).

In regards to Egypt, it is said that the Peacock was existing in ancient Egyptian times, but was not used in ancient art due to its throaty unpleasant voice which was considered as a source of bad luck and unhappiness (Hermanis, n.d.). However, according to the archaeological and artistic evidence, peacocks were unknown in Egyptian art till the Ptolemaic period as they were introduced by the Greek rulers in the third century BC. They were kept by rulers and wealthy people as pets, and also their meat was eaten (Auth, 2012). In Greco-Roman era of Egypt, the peacock was abundantly represented in art and archaeology, because it was connected with the rainbow in the sky. Greeks symbolized the four seasons of the year with four naked infants, while the Christians implemented this idea on Coptic coffins, except for the spring season which was represented by a peacock instead of the naked child (Hermania, n.d.).

3. Peacock in Coptic Art

From the Graeco-Roman art the peacock found its way to Coptic art and occupied a great place in Coptic art as a popular decorative element because of its magnificent beauty, and as one of the birds of the Paradise (Evans, 2012; Hermina, n.d.). St. Augustine said that the peacock's flesh does not decay after death for at least forty days, so it was considered a symbol of immortality, and eternity. It was also a symbol the Christ, the Savior, whose body did not decompose in the grave (Habib, n.d.; Hermania, n.d.; Kang, 2013). Moreover, the hundred eyes on the peacock's feathers symbolize the 'all-seeing' Church in Christian faith (Cooper, 1978; Ferguson, 1989).

The peacock also became a symbol of new life, and Christ's resurrection due to its ability to change its plumage every year with the passing of winter and the coming of spring, which is one of the reasons for the glory of its feathers (Arthur & Collins, 1913; Auth, 2012). When a peacock displays

its tail, it becomes like a cochlea, which is also made it a symbol of eternity (Hermania, 2011; Hermania, n.d.). Therefore, the peacock often appears in Nativity scenes in Coptic art (Ferguson, 1989). Thus, the peacock has played a vital role in Coptic art, as several artifacts, and archeological fragments representing peacocks have been discovered and displayed in Coptic Museum in Cairo, and other museums around the world (Attala, 1989; Hermania, n.d.).

The peacock was also depicted in Coptic churches as a symbol of Paradise and its gardens, chastity and purity, and on Coptic tomb stelae as a vineyard and the peacock in the middle (Hermina, n.d.). There are some discovered archaeological pieces representing the peacock as a symbol of the paradise, standing among vine-branches and birds (Fig. 1). The peacock is sometimes considered as a symbol of spring, because he regains its plumage by the end of the winter. Because of the beauty, purity and chastity of this bird, it is now depicted on the walls of the churches which represents the beauty and purity of the house of worship and pray (Habib, n.d.; Tawfik, 2022). According to the belief of the Bestiaries, when the peacock awakes, it cries in fear because of a nightmare shows that it has lost his beauty. Therefore, the Christian also has to fear that he might lose the God-given qualities of his soul (Arthur & Collins, 1913).

The peacock possessed associations with holy personages in Christian religion, as the resemblance of the peacock's tail when it is displayed to the nimbus of the Coptic saints makes this bird one of the attributes of Christian saints (Green, 2006). In this regard, the reason for association between the peacock and the saints maybe due to the belief that the bodies of both of them do not decay after death. There is also a symbolic association of the peacock feathers and the wings of the angels which is expressed in Coptic painting of angels with peacock feather wings in different sites of Egypt (Green, 2006; Tawfik, 2022).

The peacock's quill as a symbol of immortality is considered as one of the emblems of St. Barbara, who was a daughter of a wealthy, pagan nobleman called "Dioscurus" (Kang, 2013; Cooper, 1978). She was tortured after converting to Christianity, and ended up being a martyr by beheading her father at the hands of her pagan cruel father (Butler, 1884). St. Barbara has a church dedicated to her honor in Old Cairo, near the church of St. Sergius and Bacchus. Both churches were built by Athanasius, who was the secretary of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Marwan (685-705 AD). The church was reconstructed in the eleventh century, and it was one of the most important churches in Cairo at that time (Maritou, 2007).

According to Butler, above the entrance of St. George sanctuary which was one of the remaining sanctuaries at St. Barbara church, there was a carving of two peacocks facing each other on opposite edges of a vase with a flower (Butler, 1884). In fact, some art works have been survived from the church of St. Barbara, and now preserved in Coptic Museum in Cairo. This wooden screen mentioned by Butler, is preserved now in Coptic Museum in Cairo, and considered one of the wooden masterpieces of the museum. The screen is carved in sycamore and cedar wood, and most probably dating back to the end of the tenth century, when the woodwork art was flourishing in Fatimid period of Egypt. This wooden screen contains 45 panels elaborately carved on a big wooden frame. This magnificent piece represents vegetal scrollwork occupies the background of the carved panels, while the foreground occupies by themes of daily life; musicians, hunters, riders, animals, and birds (Maritou, 2007; Pruitt, 2013). One of the panels on the right side of the screen contains two peacocks facing each other, were represented over heavy interlaced foliage background (Fig.2).

In Coptic art, when St. Barbara was represented with the peacock feather, it was a reference to her city 'Heliopolis' which was the city of the Phoenix that was used to be replaced by the peacock. It can be also suggested that the connection between the peacock and St. Barbara was due to the fact that the peacock was considered as a symbol of purity, chastity and patience, which are also the qualities that St. Barbara possessed when she refused to marry, and devoted herself to Jesus Christ (Habib, n.d.; Tawfik, 2022). Thus, St. Barbara was commonly depicted holding a peacock's feather which may have symbolized her arrogant cruel father, as arrogance and vanity are also considered of the characteristics of the peacock (Fig.3).

4. Peacock in Coptic Funerary Art

Many Coptic archaeological pieces dating back to the first centuries of Christianity were uncovered in Coptic cemeteries in Egypt, buried with the dead bodies in a good state of preservation that enabled the archaeologists to study these discovered pieces. This is due to the fact that the early Copts chose to dig their tombs in the dry sandy desert of Egypt far from the lands that were flooded with the Nile flood. Early Christians shared the ancient belief of the afterlife in a paradisaal region, and in heavenly spheres. Thus, during the first centuries of Coptic Christianity, every Copt was striving to live in afterlife the same life that he had before death, so the Coptic mother used to bury with her dead child wooden toys, ivory dolls and everything he used to play with in his life. Likewise, adornment combs, jewelry and all toiletry items were also buried with dead women in early Coptic times. Therefore, Coptic tombs were considered a great source of knowledge of Coptic art and its development over different eras (Hanna, 1931; Bianchi, 2001). Between the first and fourth centuries, Early Copts remained clinging to the idea of afterlife, and they continued to practice some ancient Egyptian funerary rituals such as mummification and ancient burial methods (Benazeth, 2008)

As it was mentioned above, the peacock was the bird of paradise in mythology and a symbol of resurrection in Coptic beliefs. Furthermore, due to the belief that its flesh does not decompose, it was considered a symbol of purity and immortality (El Kharat, 2008). Thus, the peacock has become one of the most important decorative features of the Coptic funerary art, as several stelae, coffins and funerary lamps carved with peacocks were discovered in different archaeological sites (Green, 2006). The following part of this study will illustrate some examples of Coptic funerary artefacts preserved in various museums in Egypt and abroad.

4.1 Peacock Coptic Coffin of Qarara

The village of Qarara is located in Middle Egypt, about 200 Km south of Cairo. In 1913, The campaigns undertaken by the Heidelberg and Freiburg uncovered a coffin with elaborated painted decorations in the rock-cut tomb section of the ancient Coptic cemetery of the archaeological site of Qarara named the "Peacock Coffin". In 1997, the Supreme Council of Antiquities carried out excavations in the site of Qarara, on the boundary of the modern Muslim cemetery which revealed several Coptic burials with a wooden coffin wrapped in linen cloth similar to the Peacock Coffin but without paintings (Fig.4). These coffins have raised triangular roof-like section at the head unlike most of the Coptic coffins that have been found in different parts of Egypt (Huber & Nauerth, 2018).

The Heidelberg peacock coffin which has been transported to Germany is dating back to the seventh– eighth centuries AD. Its decoration consists of two parts; a low elongated box and an

unusual convex lid with a roof-like extension at the head end. The whole surface of the coffin is elaborately painted in colors that can still be recognized. The faded areas of the patterns could be restored with certainty. Despite the restoration work carried out in 1984 in Stuttgart, and in 2000 in Paris, the coffin and its paint are fragile and brittle, making any transportation or display of the coffin in the future not possible (Fig.5) (Huber & Nauerth, 2018).

The coffin is decorated with floral designs, eight medallions on the lid, Latin cross between acanthus leaves on the front side of the roof and peacocks inside the medallions of the roof. The coffin box background is painted yellowish-white, while the floral designs represent green elongated curved vine branches end with flower buds painted red. The background of the eight medallions decorated the coffin's lid is painted brown-red. The decorative element that gave the coffin its name is the peacocks that flank the elaborated Latin cross and turned towards it. The peacocks are painted light blue on a yellow background. They are representing with a crest on their heads with a magnificent brown tail containing three lines of eyespots (Fig.6). The bird here is depicting holds a long beads necklace with its beak (Huber & Nauerth, 2018). Peacocks were represented here as a symbol of immortality and resurrection and the birds of Paradise (Benazeth, 2008).

The high-quality decoration of this coffin represents the high social status of its owner in life. The painted motifs including representing the peacock on the coffin strongly related to the Christian belief which suggest that the deceased might have been a high religious dignitary as well. The spatial distributions of the coffins and funerary equipment might be due to the chronological, social or economic aspect of these burials (Huber & Nauerth, 2018). Such painted coffins are considered rare in Coptic art, although a number of them were found in the oasis's region of Egypt. It is also suggested that these elaborated motifs are a copy or an imitation of a piece of textile (Benazeth, 2008).

4.2 Coptic Funerary Stelae Depicting Peacocks in Museums around the World

Coptic Stela goes back to Pharaonic and then Greco-Roman origins with new adopted Coptic decorative elements, and Coptic inscriptions. The function of the stela in Coptic era was still immortalizing the deceased name and evoking his memory (Benazeth, 2008). There are around 1,100 Coptic funerary stelae were found in different places all over Egypt (excluding Nubia).

The types of stones of which Coptic stelae were made were differed according to the sites in which they were found; limestone stelae were found in Saqqara, sandstone stelae were discovered in the region of Jebel El-Silsila between Edfu and Kom Ombo and Abu Fouda in Manfalout, granite stelae were found in Aswan, while most of marble stelae were found in Coptic cemeteries near to Minya region (Hanna, 1936). However, the most common stones of Coptic stelae were limestone and sandstone, due to the abundance of these types of stone in different places in Egypt (Pelsmaekers, 1991; Allen, 1936).

4.2.1 Coptic Museum in Cairo

A Coptic limestone stela (No.8558) dating back to the sixth-seventh century AD. It is approximately 64 cm high, and 33 cm wide (Fig. 7). The upper part of the stela is engraved with two peacocks standing on either side of the pediment of a chapel. The pediment shape stands on two palm-frond-shaped pillars. Inside the chapel, two fast-running deer are carved on a tangled

floral background. The central part of the stela is decorated with round arches resting on short palm-frond-shaped pillars, animal figures, a Byzantine cross and a shell. The lower part of the stela was damaged and had been restored, however a Coptic inscription in that part is still visible. The upper part of the stela is partly damaged which caused a damage of the Peacock's heads, but the body and the plumage with the remarkable peacock eyespots can still be clearly seen. The Representation of two peacocks at both sides of the chapel with eyespots all over their bodies show the peacock here as a symbol of protection and surveillance of the deceased after death.

Another limestone stela dating back to the sixth century AD, (No. 8586) was found in Luxor and preserved in Coptic Museum in Cairo. It is approximately 51 cm high and 31 cm wide. At the top of the stela there are two gazelles, flanking both sides of the pediment of a chapel. Inside the chapel, a peacock with stretching wings above its head was engraved in high relief. The pediment of the chapel is supported by two columns with two lotus flowers emerging from each capital. At the bottom of the chapel, the columns rest on one line of unclear Coptic inscription, most probably showing the name of the owner of the grave (Fig.8).

Stela (No.8036) in Coptic Museum is a sandstone stela, dating back to the sixth century AD. It belongs to the style of stelae of Esna in Upper Egypt (Fig.9). The stela is topped with a large round arch decorated with elegant floral designs, and rests on two columns with floral capitals. It represents two peacocks standing on both sides of the pediment of a small chapel in the middle. The chapel is decorated with laurel leaves and supported by two short columns with palm-shaped capitals (Benazeth, 2008). The two peacocks here symbolize resurrection, as well as, protection and surveillance due to the eyespots that can be clearly seen on their tails.

The three lines of Coptic Inscriptions carved within the chapel gives the name of the owner of the grave; 'Antaza', the month and day when she died. This small text reads: "One God, Atanaz, Parmouti (Baramudah is the 8th month of the Coptic Calendar) ²16" (Benazeth, 2008).

The two-sided stela (No.178) in the Coptic Museum is a limestone stela, dating back to the fourth century AD (Pelsmaekers,1991). On the first side, two saints; Victor and Phoebumon are represented raising their arms upward in an orant pose (Atalla, 1989). They were carved in high relief wearing military short garments, and belts around their waists. This military Roman uniform is covered with a sash that covers the right shoulder, while the left one remains uncovered. Despite their military clothing, it can be confirmed that they are saints, because they are carved on this stela with luminous halos surrounding their heads (Tawfik, 2022).

The other side of the stela is topped with a vegetal- shaped arch and a shell inside it. In the center, two peacocks turning to each other are carved between two columns with palm -leaf- shaped capitals. The peacocks stand on both sides of a cross, the bottom of which is missing. The peacocks

². Early Copts used the Pharaonic solar calendar with a little bit modification in their church. This calendar divided the year into twelve months and plus extra five days (*epagomenai*). Then, in November 284 (the Era of the Martyrs), Copts decided to start the Coptic calendar. The Coptic months are; **Tut** (September 11-12 to October 10-11), **Babah** (October 11-12 to November 9-10), **Hatur** (November 10-11 to December 9-10), **Kiahk** (December 10-11 to January 8-9), **Tubah** (January 9-10 to February 7), **Amshir** (February 8-9 to March 9-10), **Baramhat** (March 10 to April 8), **Baramudah** (April 9-10 to May 8), **Bashans** (May 9 to June 7), **Baounah** (June 8 to July 7), **Abib** (July 8 to August 6), **Misra** (August 7 to September 5) and **Nasi** (September 6 to September 10-11). (See: Malaty, 1988, pp.5-10)

are depicted here lacking any decoration, and even the usual decoration of eyespots is not present here either (Fig.10) (Tawfik, 2022).

A limestone stela representing two peacocks is also preserved in the Coptic Museum in Cairo (No. 8675). At the top, there is a pediment decorated with acanthus leaves on both sides, carved in an exquisite manner. Inside the pediment, there are two carved peacocks with thick tails traying to drink from a cup placed on a pedestal mounted on two Corinthian pillar (Fig.14). The lower part of the stela is decorated with a round arch with acanthus leaves ornaments, palm fronds and shell carved in sunk relief (Fig.11). The depiction of two peacocks eating or drinking from the same cup in the middle usually symbolizes a theme from the book of “Psalms”, where the believer yearns to heal his anger by drinking from the words of the Lord Jesus Christ (Tawfik, 2022).

The origin of the representation of two peacocks facing each other flanking an object in the middle is, most probably goes back to the Persian art, as Persians depicted peacocks symmetrically, one on each side of a Tree of Life. It is believed that representing the two peacocks in this manner symbolizes the duality and contrast of things in real life such as life and death (Kang, 2013). Perhaps this artistic idea was transferred from the Persian civilization to the Greeks until it reached Coptic art, to express the idea of life and death.

4.2.2 Luxor Museum in Egypt

There are two Coptic stelae depicting peacocks preserved in Luxor Museum in Upper Egypt.

The first one is a limestone stela dating back the sixth-seventh century AD. A standing fish was carved in the center which was an early Christian symbol of Jesus Christ in heavenly kingdom. Fish is also a symbol of the Blessed Supper and the miracle of Jesus Christ, who fed five thousand people with two fish and a few loaves of bread (Abubaker, 2011). Beneath the fish there is a representation of a bird which can be identified as a peacock, and an animal running behind the peacock. The peacock was represented with its long beautiful tail, and distinguished ringed eyes. The eyespots decorations can be seen on its body and tail. By representing the peacock with the fish, which symbolizes Christ, it can be said that the peacock here is considered as a symbol of eternity and resurrection (Fig. 12).

Another sandstone Coptic funerary stela, dating to the sixth-seventh century AD, is also preserved in Luxor Museum (Fig.13). The stela is topped with two decorated circular arches rest on three palm-frond-shaped pillars. Inside the arches a bird stretches its wings and tail. This bird could be identified as an eagle, or a peacock due to its long stretching beautiful tail. The representation of a peacock within the arches with stretching wings, and standing on a row of columns and crosses gives the impression as if it is on the top of the façade of a chapel or a church, making the peacock here a bird of paradise watching over the gates of heaven. Three lines of Coptic inscriptions showing the name of the deceased and the date of his death are carved at the bottom of the stela.

4.2.3 Museum of Fine Arts in Mosco

A culmination of Coptic funerary stela in the Museum of the Fine Art in Mosco (No.287), dating back to the sixth century AD. This fragment which represents a pediment shape is heavily decorated with acanthus-leaves ornaments. Inside the pediment, there are two peacocks with traces of colors, flanking a small column with a Greek-style water bowl above which. The two peacocks

approach their beaks towards the bowl to drink from the water. The depiction of the peacocks here trying to drink from one cup symbolizes that the believer yearns to heal his anger by drinking from the words of the Lord (Benazeth, 2008). The Coptic artist's ingenuity is evident here in depicting the foot movement of the peacocks, as he depicted the right peacock resting on the left foot, raising the right, while the left peacock rested on the right foot, raising the left (Tawfik, 2022) (Fig.14).

4.2.4 Louvre Museum in Paris

The Coptic funerary stela (No. E26910) is preserved now in the Department of Egyptian Antiquates in Louvre Museum in Paris. It was found in the city of Esna in Upper Egypt, and dates back to the ninth century (800-899 AD). The stela is carved with a braided pediment supported by two Corinthian columns. The pediment of the chapel is surmounted by two peacocks facing each other, with floral ornaments in the background (Pelsmaekers, 1991). The peacocks' tails are ornamented with the eyespot's motifs, which are skillfully executed. The eyes of the peacocks here are carved in a clear rounded shape through making two circles inside each other that reflect this bird as a symbol of protection and observation in Coptic art. In the middle, there is a geometric decoration consists of three circles engraved inside each other, surrounded by floral decorations.

At the lower part of the stela, three lines of Coptic inscriptions were carved within a frame between the columns, and another line carved at the bottom outside the frame. This text is a funerary text includes prayers for deceased who was a person called "Sabek", and the date of death. The text can be translated as follows: "There is only one God, the one who helps Sabek. The [month] of Parmouti (Paramudah in Coptic Calendar), fourth [day], first [year] of the indiction" (Louvre Museum, 1997).

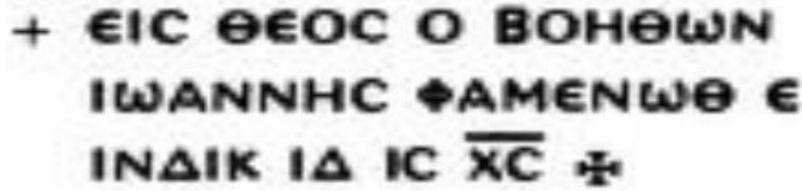
4.2.5 British Museum in London

British Museum contains several Coptic funerary stelae. Most of them are engraved with different types of birds including peacock.

The stela (No. EA54352) is a limestone Coptic stela, measuring 53.50 cm high, and 37 cm wide, and dating back to the sixth-seventh century AD. The stela was found in Egypt and transferred to the British Museum in London in 1919 (British Museum, 2023a). The stela is carved with a circular arch topped with the Greek egg-and- dart ornament frames the upper part of the stela. Two peacocks are carved on both sides of the top of a pediment directly below the arch. The Peacock's eyespots spread all over its body, producing an unusual shape for the peacocks. Probably the Coptic artist here wanted to grant the deceased the maximum protection, since the eye was considered a symbol of protection. Thus, the peacock in this gravestone symbolizes resurrection and protection. Inside the pediment, there is a shell, which is a symbol of the Greek goddess Aphrodite accompanied by the Greek Cross *pattée*, becoming a symbol of rebirth through baptism and resurrection (Gabra & Eaton-Krauss, 2006). The artist completed the decoration of this stela by representing an eagle in the center between some pillars that take the form of palm fronds, a symbol of protection. At the bottom, the stela is inscribed with five lines of Coptic text within a wreath (Fig.16).

Another limestone Coptic funerary stela with rounded top, dating back to the sixth-seventh centuries is preserved in the British Museum (No. EA665). It was found in Egypt and transferred to the museum in 1905 (British Museum, 2023b). The stela is carved with Cross *pattée* surrounded with vine leaves, between two palm tree – shaped pilasters performed in sunk relief. On both sides of the top of the pediment of the chapel, there are two peacocks carved in symmetrical way facing each other. The tail and the body of the

peacocks are engraved without the usual eyespots' decorations (Fig.17). The lower register is carved with three lines of Greek inscription within a wreath;



The text translated as “Single God, helping John, who died on the 5th (?) Phamenoth (Paramhat is the 7th month of the Coptic Calendar), in the 14th indiction-year, J(eu)s Ch(ri)s(t) (Hall, 1905).

4.2.6 Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York

A limestone funerary stela preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (No.08.202.10), dating back to the sixth-seventh century AD. It is a proximately 53.3cm high, and 38.1cm wide. As with most of the funerary stelae, this one shows a chapel with a pediment which is probably a visual reference to the paradise. In the center of the stela inside the sanctuary, there is a beautiful eagle with wings extended upward, carved standing on a shell (it may also be a peacock). Since the peacock is considered one of the symbols of paradise in Coptic art, the Coptic artist here represented two peacocks standing at the top on the pediment of the sanctuary as a symbol of protection and observation. There are three lines of Coptic inscriptions describing these birds carving in this stela as the guardians of the gate of heaven (Fig.18) (Metropolitan Museum, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The peacock was commonly represented in Coptic art as a symbol of the Christ’s resurrection, immortality, and new life. It was commonly represented as one of the most important decorative elements in Coptic art and architecture. The peacock was a symbol of protection, resurrection and eternal life in Coptic funerary art. Therefore, several discovered funerary stelae were decorated with this bird. Furthermore, some coffins carved with peacocks were discovered in ancient Coptic cemeteries scattered in different places of Egypt. The following table shows what can be concluded about the significance and symbolism of the peacock in Coptic funerary art;

| Theme | Date | Location | Commentaries |
|---|---|----------------------|---|
| Representing peacock on coffins, such as the Peacock Coffin of Qarara (Figs. 5,6) | 7 th -8 th century | Heidelberg -Germany | The peacock is depicted here at the top of the coffin, directly above the head of the deceased, which makes the peacock here a symbol of “Protection”. The peacock’s tail contains eyespots which are probably makes the peacock the bird that watching, observing and protecting the deceased. |
| Representing peacocks at the top, on both sides of stelae (Figs.7,9) | 5 th -6 th -7 th centuries AD. | Coptic Museum- Cairo | Two peacocks were engraved at the top of both stelae. Representing the eyespots on the peacock’s tail makes the peacock here a symbol of protection. |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | | | |
| Representing the peacock with stretching wings (Fig.8) | 6 th century AD. | Coptic Museum- Cairo | Representing a peacock stretching its wings up in the center of the stela may also refers to protecting the deceased. |
| symmetrical depiction of two peacocks and a cup between them (Figs. 11,14) | 6 th century AD. | Fig. 11: Coptic Museum- Cairo Fig. 14: Museum of Fine Arts- Mosco. | This Symmetric representation of two peacocks with a water pot symbolizes the believer or the deceased yearns to heal his anger by drinking from the words of the Lord. |
| Depicting the peacock with eyespots all over its body (Fig.16) | 6 th -7 th century AD. | British Museum- London. | In this stela, the Peacock's eyespots spread all over its body, producing an unusual shape for a peacock to grant the deceased the maximum protection, since the eyespots were considered as a symbol of protection. |
| Depicting three Peacocks or more peacocks in different positions (Fig. 18) | 6 th -7 th century AD. | Metropolitan Museum of Art- New York. | The two peacocks on both sides of the pediment at the top, and a stretching wings bird in the center were represented in this stela to guard the door of the paradise. That is, the peacock here is considered as a bird of the paradise. |
| A running peacock with eyespots on its body (Fig.12) | 6 th -7 th century AD. | Luxor Museum- Egypt. | This stela depicts a running peacock at the bottom with the eyespots almost all over its body, which clearly represents the peacock as a symbol of protection, guarding and surveillance in Coptic art. |
| Two peacocks at the top with eyespots on their tails (Fig.15) | 9 th century AD. | Louvre Museum- Paris. | The eyespots on the peacock's tail are clearly visible in this artefact, which symbolizes watching and protection. The peacocks' eyes are represented in a clear double-circular shape to confirm the idea of surveillance and protection. |

That is, Peacock was commonly depicted in Funerary art as a symbol of protection and surveillance. The representation of the peacock at both sides of the pediment shape is symbolizing the peacock as the guardian bird of the gate of the paradise. The peacock with eyespots decoration on its tail has become a symbol of protection and surveillance in Greek art, and then Coptic funerary art. Therefore, it can be said that the depiction of the peacock with eyespots on its tail in funerary objects symbolizes the protection of the deceased and watching out his tomb from any evil spirit might threaten him, as well as the protection of the gates of Paradise. Moreover, the peacock's symbolism of protection was enhanced by the depiction of the peacock's eyespots not only on its tail, but also represented spread all over is body.

Through the studying of some Coptic funerary objects shown in the table above, it can be concluded that, from approximately the fourth century, the Coptic artist represented the peacock as a symbol of surveillance and observation. It was also one of the birds of Paradise appeared clearly in Coptic art with clusters of grapes and vine-leaves. Thus, the peacock is considered one of the most important elements of Coptic funerary art, as it is depicted on many funerary artefacts preserved in various museums around the world, which require further study and research to

provide scholars and researches in history, art and archaeology with more useful scientific resources.

6. References

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Figures

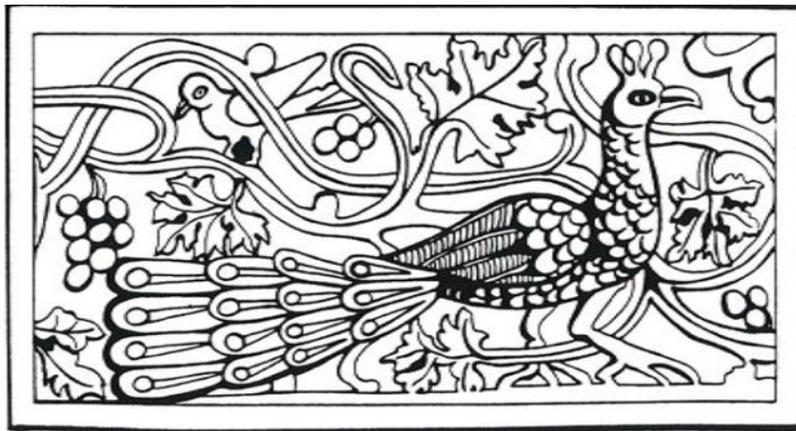


Figure 1: Fragment of a limestone- frieze showing a peacock among vine-leaves and birds, symbolizing the paradise, 5th century, Coptic Museum in Cairo, No. (4656) (Source: Attalla, 1989)



Figure 2: A wooden Screen From the Church of St. Barbara Depicting Birds including Peacocks, Coptic Museum, Cairo (Source: Moraitou, 2007, fig.13)



Figure 3: St. Barbara Icon representing her holding a Peacock's feather, St. Barbara Church in Old Cairo (Source: The Author).



Figure 4: A wooden coffin wrapped in a linen, Muslim cemetery in Qarara (Source: Huber & Claudia, 2018, fig.26)



Figure 5: The Heidelberg Peacock coffin shows the colorful decorations, 7-8th centuries (Source: Huber & Claudia, 2018, fig.9)



Figure 6: The Peacocks were represented inside medallions (Source: Huber & Claudia, 2018, figs.9,19)



Figure 7: Limestone stela with Peacocks at the top, Coptic Museum, 6th – 7th century, No. (8558) (Source: The Author).



Figure 8: Limestone Stela showing a peacock in the middle, 6th century, Coptic Museum in Cairo, No. (8586) (Source: The Author).

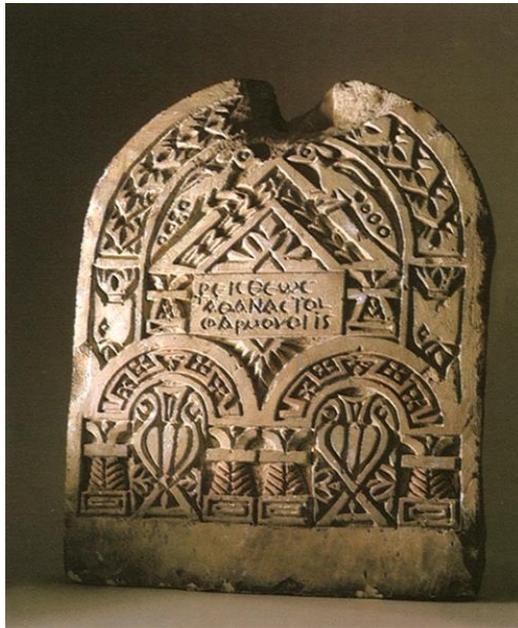


Figure 9: Coptic Stela, 5th-6th Century, Coptic Museum in Cairo, No. (8036) (Source: Benazeth, 2008, pl. 119)

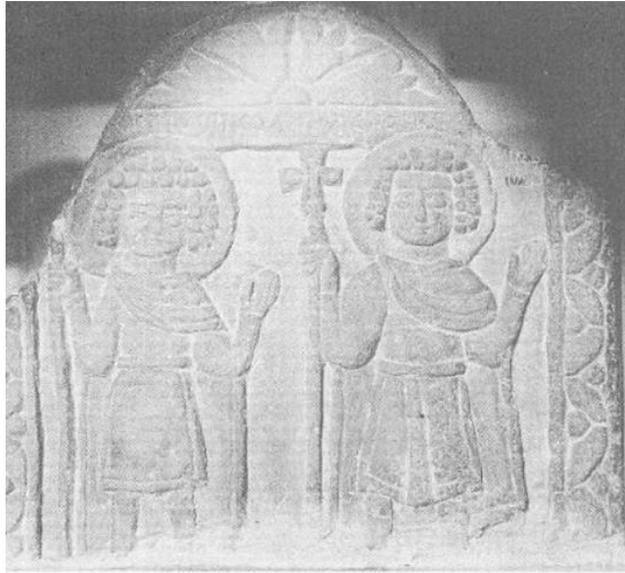


Figure 10: A limestone Stela with one face depicting two peacocks turning to each other (top). The other face depicting two holy persons in orant pose (bottom), Coptic Museum in Cairo (Source: Pelsmaekers, 1991, p. 2150).



Figure 11: Funerary Stela representing two symmetrical peacocks drinking from one cup in the middle. Coptic Museum of Cairo, No. (8675) (Source: Crum, 1975, Pl. XLVII)



Figure 12: A Limestone Stela depicting a peacock, 6th -7th centuries, Luxor Museum (Source: The author)



Figure 13: A Limestone Stela depicting a peacock in the middle, sandstone, Luxor Museum (Source: The author)



Figure 14: A Limestone-fragment of a funerary stela, National Museum of the Fine Art, No.(287), Mosco, 6th century, (Source: Benazeth, 2008, fig.119)



Figure 15: Coptic Funerary Stela in Louvre Museum in Paris, Department of Egyptian Antiquities. Two Peacocks were sculpted at the top, 9th century, Limestone, Louvre Museum, Paris. No. (E 26910). (Source: Louvre Museum, 1997: Online)



Figure16: Limestone Coptic Stela with Two Peacock at the top, British Museum, No.(EA54352). (Source: British Museum, 2023: Online)



Figure 17: Coptic Limestone Stela carved with two peacocks at the top, 6th-7th centuries, British Museum, No. (EA665).
(Source: British Museum, 2023: Online)



Figure 18: Limestone Coptic Stela representing two peacocks at the top, 6th -7th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gallery 302 (Source: The Met, 2023: Online)