



THE GEBGA BIRD IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

This research paper draws attention to the Gebga bird in ancient Egyptian beliefs. According to ancient Egyptian concepts, the Gebga is hostile to dead people. In addition, it was supposed to keep the bird away from the dead, as mentioned in some coffin texts. Furthermore, there was an account of destroying the writing tools of the Gebga. Some texts indicate that the Gebga-bird is the scribe of the god's court at which the dead is condemned. Therefore, the writing tools of the Gebga were eradicated by dead people so that the Gebga could give no evidence against them.

On the other hand, some texts mentioned that the dead are reincarnated as the Gebga, probably to prevent the associated negative aspects. Moreover, the Gebga-birds' vertebrae and eggs were used to medicate greyness. The current study seeks to clarify the nature of the Gebga-bird in ancient Egypt, its relationship with the deceased and other attributes. This will be accomplished by using an analytical-descriptive methodology.

KEYWORDS

Gbg3, G3bgw, bgt, ʿbk, kbk, ḥsf, sš n mʿb3yt,
Birds, Black Bird

المخلص

في هذا البحث، نُلفت الانتباه إلى طائر الجبجا (الغراب؟) في المعتقدات المصرية القديمة، وهو طائر معادٍ للموتى حسب المفاهيم المصرية القديمة، ويفترض أن يتم إبعاد هذا الطائر عن الموتى كما ورد في نصوص التوابيت. وهناك حديث عن إتلاف أدوات الكتابة الخاصة بطائر الجبجا؛ حيث توحى بعض النصوص أن هذا الطائر هو كاتب محكمة الآلهة، والتي أمامها يُحكم على الموتى. ويُدمر المتوفي أدوات الكتابة الخاصة بهذا الطائر، حتى لا يكتب الأخير أدلة ضده. ومن ناحية أخرى نجد بعض النصوص التي تتحدث عن تقمص المتوفي لهيئة طائر الجبجا. ربما لمنع بعض الجوانب السلبية المرتبطة به من قبل المتكلم (المتوفي) الذي يتقمص هيئته. كما تُستخدم فقرات وبيض هذا الطائر لعلاج الشيب. وتسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى توضيح طبيعة طائر جبجا في مصر القديمة وعلاقته بالميت وخصائص أخرى. سيتم تحقيق ذلك من خلال استخدام منهجية وصفية تحليلية.

الكلمات الدالة

sš n mʿb3y, kbk, ʿbk, bgt, G3bgw, Gbg3
الطيور، الطائر الأسود

INTRODUCTION:

Many birds played a role in ancient Egyptian beliefs. One of those birds is a bird called Gebga (*gbg3*), occasionally known as the "black bird". The name is commonly present in funerary texts. This bird-Gebga could be identified with the crow, although others

identify it with the vulture. This bird is hostile to the dead, according to what was stated in some funerary texts. Its hostility gives the impression that the bird is the recorder of the council of the thirty equipped with writing tools. The Gebga could be considered as dangerous as it can register the deceased among the condemned. Therefore, the deceased destroys those writing tools, particularly the ink cups. In addition, the frightening aspect of crows was sometimes a theme in ancient Egyptian art, as seen on the Battlefield Palette, which is in the British Museum, where crows are chopping at the bodies of dead men.

NAMES AND TITLES

The bird called Gebga  *gbg3* (Wb V, 165.2) is occasionally described as the "black bird" (Osing 1998, 128); it is to be found in funerary texts. It is also read as  *g3bgw* (Wb V, 155.1). Vandier (Vandier 1961, 224) stated that this bird does not seem to be a cuckoo *kk* (Wb V, 71.11); it could be a crow. In some coffin texts, the word *gbg3* is determined with the crow as a bird (CT VI, 318a, 318e). Others consider it a black vulture, as stated in the spell 205 of the coffin texts (CT VII, 144d). Faulkner translated the word *gbg3* as a vulture (Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin texts* 1973). This translation may not be accurate, as it does not suit the determinants. The correct translation could be "crow" (researcher).

Among the words denoting the crow is *bgt*, which came from The Crow Stela of the 1st Dynasty, from Abydos (Grimm 1990, 141, Abb.1). (fig.4)

In the Late Period, a new term appeared written in the Demotic script; this term is  *bk*, in Coptic 'abvk'; it refers to the crow bird (Černý 1976, 2) (Vycichl 1983, 4) (Störk 1984, 74) (Smith 1993, 68) (Vernus 2005, 365).

In the Greco-Roman period, the crow was known as *kkb* (Vandier 1961, 228) (Cauville, *Le temple de Dendara: les chapelles osiriennes* 1997, 295 (6), tf. 155) (Wassel 1990, 137). According to the papyrus Jumilhac, the *kkb*-bird is considered a beneficent bird similar to Horus of Leontopolis (Vandier 1961). Within the same papyrus, the bird is mentioned to guard the head of Osiris along with a jackal (Leitz 2002).

The bird had several other titles referring to his attributes, including:

- *sš n m^cb3yt* : a Scribe of the Council of the Thirty (CT VI, 318a).
- *hry i3wt šhmw* : Who is in charge of standards and Scepters (CT VI, 318a).
- *3bd Km* : Black Bird (CT VI, 318 h, n) (Wolterman 1991-1992, 122).
- *sdb.f m msktt* : an obstacle to him is set in the Night-bark (CT VI, 318q).
- *git hš* : Your dues are Faeces (CT VI, 295 j, VI 318m,r) (Leitz 2002, 308).

Gbg3-BIRD AS A MEMBER OF GROUP DIVINITIES

1- The Four (deities) guardians of the sycamore (*Fdw iryw nht*)

The Gebga bird was the second in a row of four birds acting as guardians of the sycamore. (Fig. 1) Ancient Egyptians identified several trees, many of which played a

role in faith, magic, as well as medicine. Among those sacred trees was the sycamore tree $\overline{\text{𓆎}} \overline{\text{𓆏}}$ *nht*. The word also means "refuge" when written with the house determinative instead of the tree $\overline{\text{𓆎}} \overline{\text{𓆏}} \overline{\text{𓆑}}$. It is not surprising that the Egyptians believed that a spirit or a goddess lived in a leafy tree with a well of water at its foot. The sycamore assumed a primary position in Egyptian mythology and eschatology (Buhl 1947, 80).



Fdw iryw nht: wdn.tw n.sn 𓀀 hr-tp t3, hsk.sn tpw nw hftyw nbw nw Wsir. Nb, kbk, sin, Ny-sndt

Four (divinities) guardians of the sycamore tree: they are presented with a vase of offerings on earth. They cut off the heads of all the enemies of Osiris.” *Nb, kbk, sin, Ny-sndt* (Cauville, *Le temple de Dendara: les chapelles osiriennes* 1997, 295 (6), pl. 155, 171) (Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara : les chapelles osiriennes* 1997, 159)

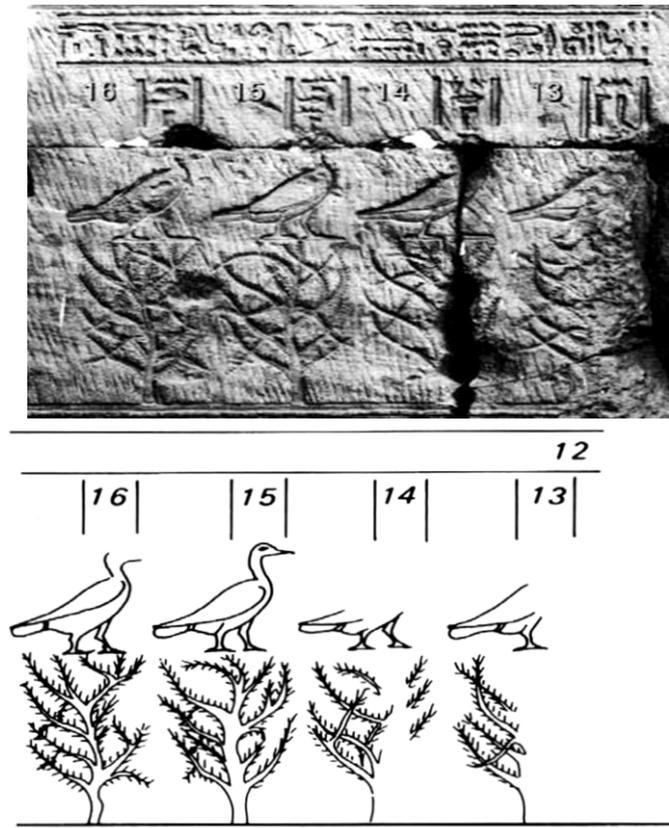
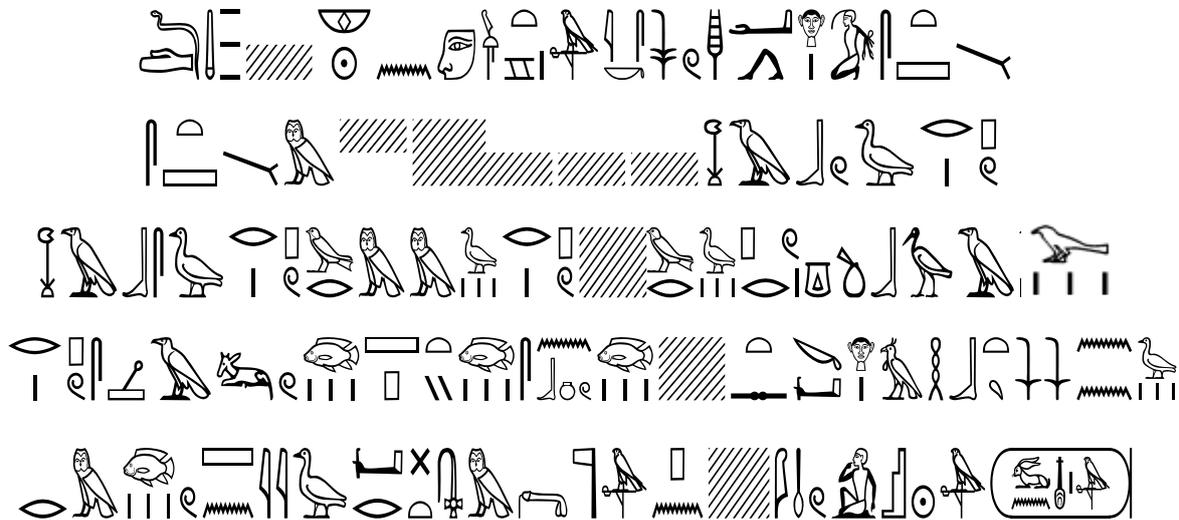


Fig.1: Four (deities) guardians of the sycamore.

(Cauville, *Le temple de Dendara: les chapelles osiriennes* 1997, pl. 155, 171)

2. Different birds embodying the god Seth

The Gebga bird was the fifth of eight different bird and fish species, which embody Seth and in whose neck are knives. After that, their necks are cut off, and they are put on the fire before Osiris:

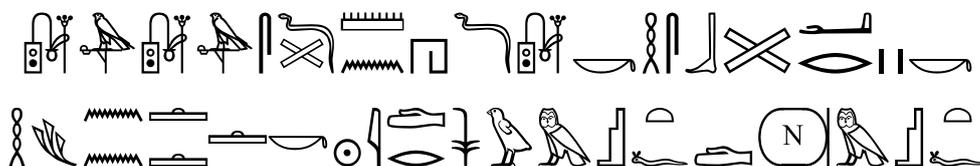


dd mdw....hb.n. hnty-imnty, isk sw ḥḥ hr (tw) stš stš mh3bw r-pw h3bs r-pw wrm r-pw wr r-pw gbg3w r-pw s3iw šptyw sbnw.....sft hr nhbt nn 3pdw rmw wšny, di r sdt m b3h nṯr pn...m3ḥ hrw Wsir wnn-nfr

"To speak about the feast of the Khenti-Amenti, who on a figure of Seth.... a *h3bw*-bird or a *h3bs* -bird or a *wrm* -bird or a *wr* -bird or a *gbg3w* -bird (There are) knives in the necks of these birds and fish. Their necks shall be wrung; they shall be given on the fire before this god.... Osiris *wnn nfr* triumphs" (Burkard 1995, 72, 305)

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE *Gbg3*-BIRD WITH THE DECEASED

The Gebga is a bird with a hostile nature. It is stated in many spells to keep this bird away from the deceased. There is also an account of destroying the writing tools of the Gebga bird. The Pyramid Texts (Pyr. 476) have the earliest example of the threat to eradicate the writing tools of hostile beings (Nyord 2015, 273-274):



sš sš sđ mnhd.k, ḥsb ḥr(wy).k hnn md3wt.k Rḥ idr sw m st.f d(y) N m st.f

"O Scribe, O scribe, smashes your palette, break your pens, tear up your documents, O Ra, and expel him from his place and set N in his place" (Sethe 1910, spell 476 (Pyr. 954 a-b, 955a)) (Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid texts: translated into English* 1969, 164)

Such threats increase in the coffin texts of the Middle Kingdom. The topic of the threat to scribes asking questions to destroy their device or to let them destroy their writing tools themselves has changed into sayings against a bird called Gebga (Schott 1968, 47). There is time and again talk of the destruction of the writing tools of the Gebga-bird.

Some texts, like (CT. Spell 688), give the impression that the bird is the Scribe of a court of the gods, before which the dead is condemned and where Ra is in control. The deceased destroys the writing tools of the bird so that the latter cannot write down damning evidence (Zandee 1960, 196). The following are several spells that refer to repelling the Gebga-bird and destroying its writing tools:

CT Spell 350:



*I k3w ipw hrw i3wt šhm (.i) (m) gbg3 hpw sw3 (.i) ʕr.k thth (.i) md3wt.k hr nn mr sp sn
dd.n.k iry.k r N*

"O Oxen who are on the Hills, I will have power over the Gebga's runner, and I will break your pen and crease your papers because of this double hurt which you have said you will do to me (N)" (CT IV, 385a-e)

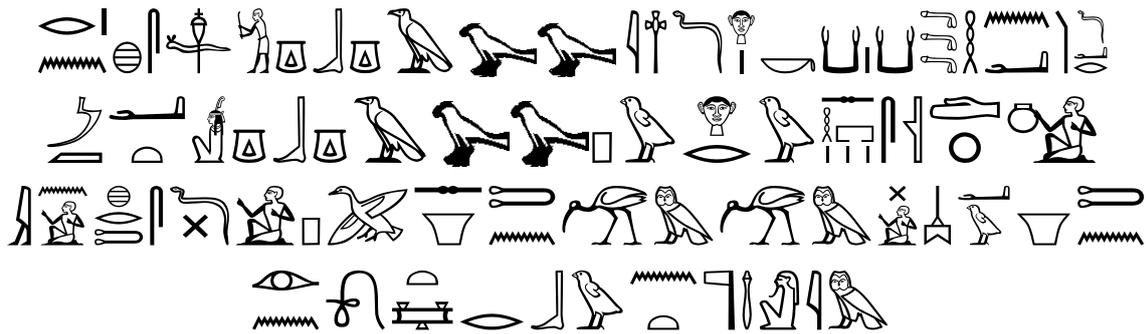
• CT Spell 397:



*In-m irf dd.f rn.k hr ntr pn šps, in wd3-ib sn n skr smsw, m33-ḥ3-f srs n.i ʕkn, ḥn.k m ʕnh,
mk wi i.k(w)I nn rs.n.f n.i dd ir.k ntr gbg3, skd (n.k) h, sd.i hn.k, ḥbs.i ʕrw.k, šnš.i
md3wt.k*

"Who will say your name to this great God? It is the adviser, that oldest brother of Sokar. *m33-ḥ3-f*, awaken *ʕkn* for me, as you are endowed with life; see, I have come. He will not wake for me. Say to him: (O) Gebga-god, I will build up your courtyard; I will smash your box, I will break your pens, I will tear up your papers" (CT V, 106 b-I; 107 a-i) (Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Coffin texts 1973, 27)

- CT Spell 425:



*r3 n ḥsf gbg3 ind-ḥr.k K3 K3w ḥnꜥ dꜥr (w) m3ꜥt gbg3wy pw ḥrw(y) shw skd I.n.i hr.t (n)
sd.i p3s.tn gmgm.i wdꜥw.tn ir n (.i) w3t r bw nt nꜥr-ꜥ3 im*

"Spell for Keeping away the Gebga. Hail to you, Bull of bulls and searcher of truth, two Gebga who are on the potter's stalls! (Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Coffin texts 1973, 253) I have come to you that I may break your water-pots, and smash your inkwells, for a path is prepared for me to the place where the great god is" (CT V, 269 a-f; 270 a) (Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Coffin texts 1973, 70).

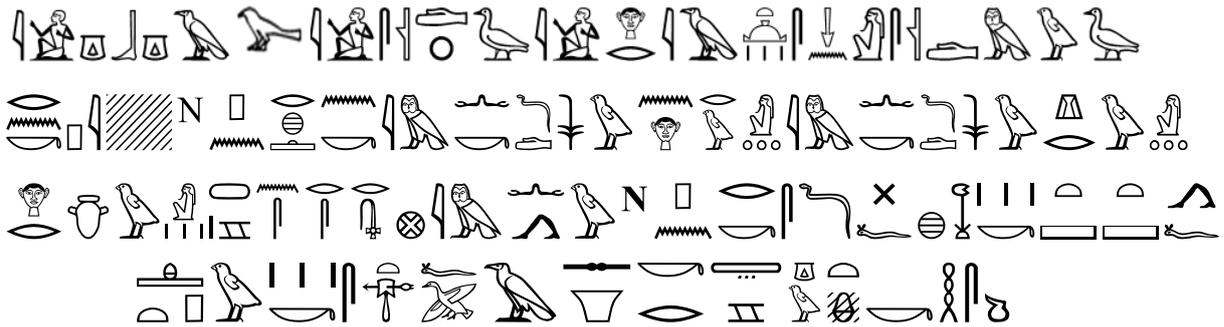
- CT Spell 430:



*ḏḏ mdw ḥsf gbg3 I wr mtwt ḥr i3wt.f šps nꜥr s3 ihm I.n.i r.k wr mtwt sw3.i ꜥrw.k gmgm.i
md3wt.k ḥr nw mr sp 2 in(w).n.i m-ꜥ.i m iw- nsrsr nt m-ꜥ.i m sḥt ḏ3ḏ3*

"Recitation to keep away the Gebga. O you who are greatly poisonous on your mounds, fair noble, son of an ihm-bird, I have come for you, O greatly poisonous, that I may break your pens and tear up your papers because of these double ills which I have brought in my hand from the Island of Fire, which were in my hand in the Field of ḏ3ḏ3" (CT V, 277a-i.) (Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Coffin texts 1973, 72)

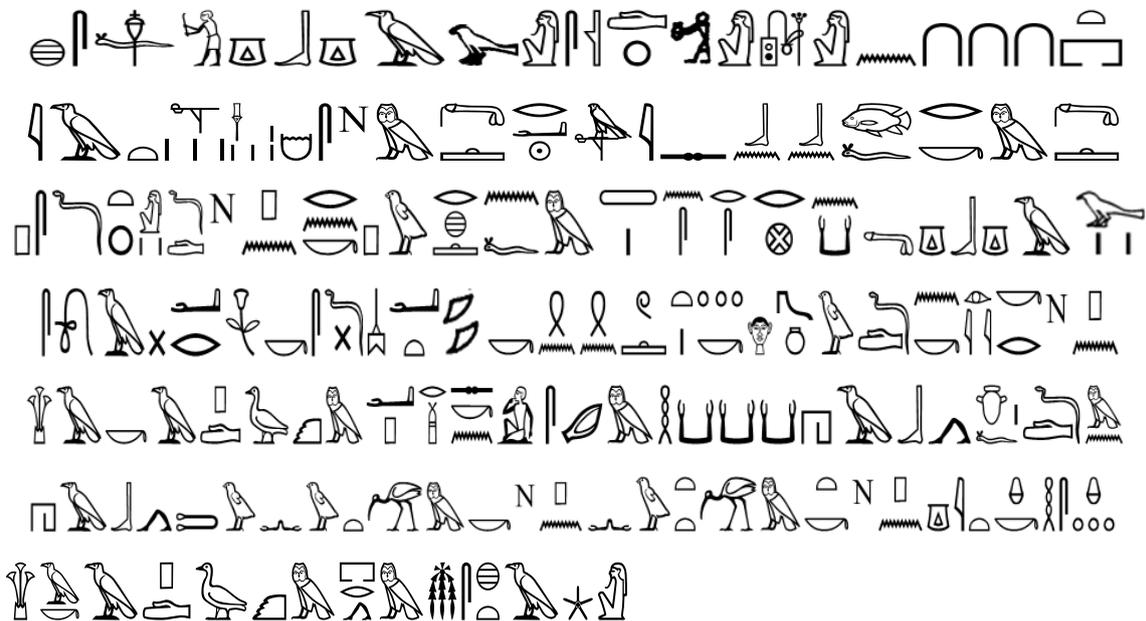
- CT Spell 667:



I gbg3 I skd (?) I hr i3wt sn skdmw rn.k pi....N pn rh(w) n.k, Im.k dd sw n hrw, im.k dd sw n hrw, hryw-ib nsrsr, im iw N pn r.k, sd.f h3w.k tštš.f htpw.k, st.f p3s.k r t3, gwt.k hs.

"O Gebga O Sailor-bird! O You who are on the hills, brother of the *skdmw*-bird! This name of yours [is the name of] N, whom you know, and you shall not tell it to those who are above, you shall not tell it to those who are below, who dwell in the Island of Fire. N shall not come for you, for he will break your bowls and smash your offering tables and strew your water-pot(s) on the ground; your dues are faeces" (CT VI, 295a-j)

- CT Spell 688:



hsf gbg3 skd sš n m^cb3yt, i3wt šhm.w hms N m-b3h r^c isbnbn.f r.k m-b3h psdty dd N pn rn.k pw rh(w) n.f m iw nsrsr n k3 gbg3wy, sw3 (.tw) r.k sd (.tw) wd^cty.k, šnšn (.tw) md3wt.k hr nw (w) n.k iry.k r N pn, h3.k 3pd km r pr skn, sdm hk3w h3bw ib.f, dd m n h3b(w) tw, n wt gm(w).k N pn, n wtt gmt.k N pn, git.k hs, h3.k 3pd km, pr m (mshtyw)

"To keep away the Gebga, a potter, a scribe of the court of the Thirty, (Responsible for) Standards and Scepters. N sits in the presence of Ra; he wanders towards you in the presence of the Two Enneads. N tells this name of yours, which he knows, in the Island

THE USE OF VERTEBRAE AND EGGS OF THE GEBGA- BIRD IN THE REMEDY OF GRAY HAIR

The Ebers Papyrus included remedies to stop the growth of gray hair, i. e. to prevent the grayness of the hair, for example: may use the turtle's shell and the vertebrae of a Gebga bird, cooked in oil and applied as follows:

- Eb 452:



kt p3kꜣt nt štyw bꜣsw n g3bgw psi hr mrꜥt wrꜥ im ʕš3 sp-sn

"Another remedy: the turtle's shell and the vertebrae of a Gebga-bird cooked in oil and used several times" (Drog Wb, 532) (Wreszinski 1913, 121 (64, 9-11), no.452) (Grapow 1958, 510, (Eb 452, 65, 9-11)) (Kamāl 1998, 418) (Kandil 2018, 87)

The eggs of the Gebga-bird (Wolterman 1991-1992, 122), oil, and Labdanum are cooked and applied as follows and can be used as well:

- Eb 453:



kt n tm rdi ḥpr skm mwt rmtꜣ k3t nt my.t swꜥt nt g3bg.w mrꜥt ibr snwꜥ psi rdi r tp n s r s3 mdd.f

"Another remedy: to stop the hair from going gray (to prevent the grayness of the hair) for both men and women: a cat's vagina, a Gebga-bird's egg, oil and labdanum cooked and used on the head after squeezing the mixture" (Drog Wb, 532) (Grapow 1958, 511 (Eb 453, 65, 10-12)). (Kamāl 1998, 418) (Kandil 2018, 88)

- Eb 457:



Kt snf n bꜣsw nw g3bgw rdi hr ibr m3ꜣ wrꜥ im, sti ʕ.f hr s3 n gryt ʕnꜥt, di.f r tp.f

"Another remedy: blood extracted from the vertebrae of a *g3bgw*-bird is added to a real labdanum and anointed with it after that he puts his hand on the back of a live kite, and then puts it on his head" (Wreszinski 1913, 122, (64, 16-18), no. 457) (Kamāl 1998, 418, no. 457).

THE CROW IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

The earliest depiction of the crow in Egyptian art dates back to the Predynastic Period. On the Battlefield Palette preserved in the British Museum in London (Peet 1915, 93, pl. XIV); on the palette's face, in the lower image field, two bird species are seen amongst the bodies of defeated foes: vultures and crows; both of them attack the deceased. The various crows chop the bodies of the dead men who lie with twisted limbs and arms tied on their backs. This is particularly clear in the case of the crow on the right edge, which pecks the eye of the dead bound man (Morenz 2014, 186) (**figs.2-3**). This gruesome aspect of crows was sometimes a theme in ancient Egyptian funerary literature, as previously mentioned.



Fig.2: The Battlefield Palette. (Peet 1915, pl. XIV)



Fig. 3: A detailed view from Battlefield Palette. (Peet 1915, pl. XIV)

There is also a crow stela from the First Dynasty from Abydos (Grimm 1990, 137). The crow's sign in this stela is a sign that oscillates between the image and the writing (Morenz 2014, 189) (**Fig. 4**).

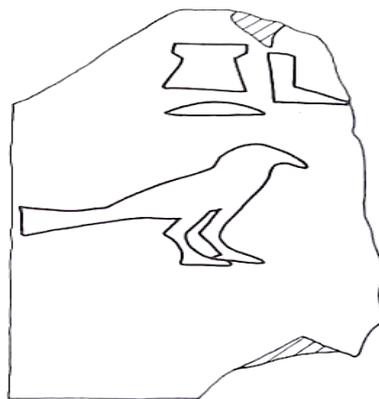


Fig.4: crow stela from Abydos (Grimm 1990, 137, fig.1).

On a pectoral from a 12th Dynasty tomb at El-Riqqa (Tomb No 124) (**fig.5**), two crows are depicted in a place where falcons are usually shown (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 133, Fig. 192) (Grimm 1990, 145, Tf.2) (**fig.6**). The existence of crows here might indicate that crow had little religious associations (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 145-146), or maybe the falcon here has been replaced by the crow (researcher).

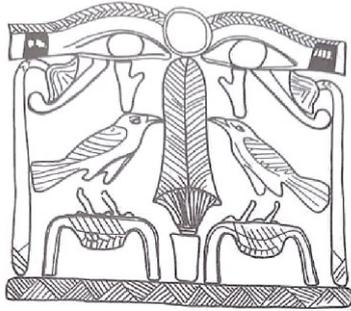


Fig.5: Pectoral depicting two crows.
(Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, fig.192)

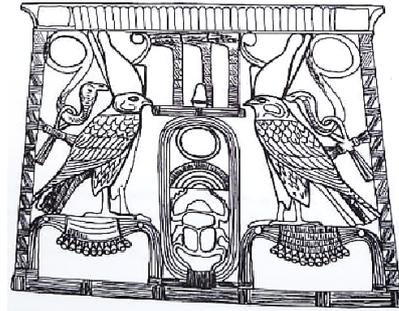


Fig. 6: Pectoral depicting two Falcons.
(Grimm 1990, 153, fig.2)

The ancient Egyptian artist seems to have been aware of a bird's nature eating fruits from trees and grain from fields. In some scenes, the fruit of the doum palm tree is seen being stolen by crows from trained monkeys on an ostraca from Deir el-Medina (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 132-133, figs.187-88) (Auth 2012, 78). (**Figs. 7, 8**)



Fig.7: Ostraca from Deir-el-Medina.
Ramesside Period. (Houlihan, *Harvesters or Monkey Business?* 1997, fig. 4)

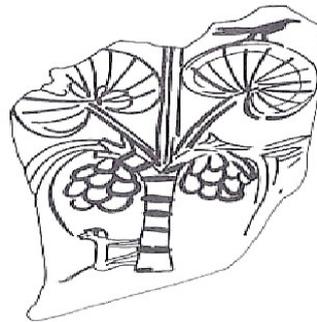


Fig. 8: Ostraca from Deir-el-Medina.
Ramesside Period. (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, fig. 188)

The crow is often seen in Egyptian art in a comic context. A small scene depicting a crow trying to steal fruit from a tree in an amusing way can be found in the "Erotic and Satirical Papyrus" from the Twentieth Dynasty. The scene is unusual because the crow uses a ladder to climb the tree rather than soaring up to the branches to reach the fruit. A hippo is already in the tree, possibly protecting the fruit from the hungry bird or gathering the ripe fruit in a basket. (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 132-133, fig. 189) (**Fig. 9**)



Fig. 9: The crow bird climbs a ladder to reach the tree's fruit in a comic mode.
(Abdelhakim 2020, 45)

On the Limestone Ostraca from Thebes (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 133, fig.191), which is currently on display at the Museum of Art and Archeology in Missouri (Columbia), a crow and a hippo appear together once more. On the crossbar of a kind of scale, it shows an upright hippo wearing an apron opposite a crow. The beam is passed through the eyelet of a post in the form of the ankh sign that protrudes vertically from the floor. Under the beam, on the ground, is a cat with its right front paw raised to the right, and an owl is to the left under a hippo, which can be interpreted as a speech gesture - perhaps talking to another animal. A conversation is also indicated by a crow's open beak and a hippo's movements, which include holding its left foot to its mouth and extending the other (Braun 2020, 286, fig.180) (**Fig. 10**). Houlihan (Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* 1986, 133) views the earlier scene as a scale and surmises that it is a parody of the weighing of the heart in the Book of the Dead, whereby instead of heart and feather, hippo and bird are weighed against each other. While the owl and cat, as judges, control the outcome of the weighing.

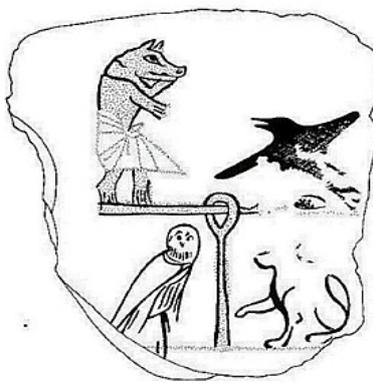


Fig. 10: A Hippo and a crow on a Scale. (Braun 2020, 286, fig. 180).

CONCLUSION

Going through the evidence, it is clear that the Gebga bird is a crow, not a vulture, as translated by some scholars. The Gebga bird acted aggressively with the deceased, and according to certain funerary texts, this is the reason why this bird must be repelled. The deceased must destroy the writing tools of this bird so that the latter does not write evidence against him, as some texts give the impression that this bird is the scribe of a court of the Thirty at which the deceased is condemned. The Gebga bird has other important attributes. He was one of the (divinities) guardians of the sycamore tree. The Gebga was one of a group of different birds that embody the god Seth. The eggs and vertebrae of this bird are used to treat gray hair. Having some religious attributes did not prevent the ancient Egyptian artist from expressing the Gebga as a bird like any other bird that seeks to acquire food or represent the bird in comic scenes that may have hidden messages.

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