
SCENES OF LAPWING-BIRD IN THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMBS

By

Radwa Mohamed Aly Shelaih

Lecturer of Tourism Guidance

Faculty of Tourism &Hotels-Suez Canal University

مجلة كلية السياحة والفنادق ملحق العدد الأول يونيو 2017
الخاص بالمؤتمر العلمي الأول السياحة والآثار – الفرص والتحديات

SCENES OF LAPWING-BIRD IN THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMBS

*Radwa Mohamed Aly Shelaih*¹

Abstract:

The migration of birds to northern Africa during the winter is quite common in the Nile Delta. The arrival of these birds in the Egyptian skies fascinated the ancient Egyptians who include these species in the scenes decorating the walls of the temples and the tombs. Considering the fishing, clap netting and fowling scenes in the papyrus thickets in ancient Egypt, so many birds were depicted in these scenes such as: Hoopoe, purple Gallinule, Cormorant, Golden Oriole and Lapwing. These birds are shown in a very symmetrical manner. Rather than flying in various directions, they are arranged flying to the left and the right. Among these species the research focuses on the lapwing bird and its representation in the ancient Egyptian tombs, as most of scholars concentrated only on studying the religious symbol of the Lapwing and its relation with the royalty. The research aims to study the various scenes of the Lapwing bird in the ancient Egyptian tombs, to illuminate the characteristic behaviors of the Lapwing bird in these scenes and to understand the purpose from depicting the Lapwing bird in the ancient Egyptian burial tombs.

Introduction:

Ancient Egyptians applied the birds' ability to travel between worlds to their conception of death and men's fate after being buried in their tombs². Migratory birds also occupied an important place in ancient Egyptian symbolism³. The inhabitants of the Nile Valley were aware of the semiannual journey of several species of birds and differentiated them from the local birds by giving them specific names gS or xtyw-tA⁴. Their regular arrival twice a year may symbolize to the hope of new life after death⁵. The migratory birds became symbols of conquest of death⁶. In addition to giving ancient Egyptians hope for rebirth and afterlife, birds were also significant during their lifetime⁷. As the Lapwings which were depicted with raised arms in praise before the living Horus embodied by the king⁸.

Description of the Lapwing

The lapwings are species of crested plovers. The northern lapwing is one of these species which has been abundantly represented in both Egyptian art and hieroglyphs⁹. It is a well-known wader bird of the plover family, common in the temperate parts of the Old World¹⁰. It is a 28-33 cm

long bird with a 67-87 cm wing span¹¹. It can be identified by its rounded wings, short pointed bill, rounded head, long squared tail and especially by the long crest on its head¹². It is also the shortest-legged of the lapwings. Its color is mainly black and white, but the upper plumage is dark metallic alternating green and purple, under plumage is white, it has a black chest and Orange under the tail¹³. The lapwing has a black beak, brown legs and dark brown eyes. The male has along crest and a black head, neck and chest with a white face (fig.1). Females and young birds have shorter crests, and have less marked heads, but plumage is quiet similar¹⁴ (fig.2).

Distribution:

The lapwing breeds in parts of Europe, northern Asia, the Middle East and Morocco. It migrates in parts of Europe, southern Asia, the Middle East and North Africa during the winter. In Modern Egypt the lapwing is a winter visitor in the Nile Valley and Delta, the Faiyum, along the Mediterranean Sea coast, West of Alexandria, in the vicinity of the Suez Canal, and the Dakhla and Siwa Oasis. The lapwing inhabits open mudflats and lays its eggs on nests made of reeds and marshland plants in damp ground¹⁵. It eats small invertebrates picked out of the mud or soil¹⁶.

Etymology of the Name

The bird is called in English “**lapwing**”, or “**pewit**” (imitative of its cry), or “**green plover**” (emphasizing the color of the plumage)¹⁷.

In Arabic it is called "أبو طيط"، أو "الزقراق الأخضر"، أو "رسول الغيث" 18 . The scientific name of the northern lapwing is (Vanellus Vanellus) or (Vanellus Cristatus), which is Latin and derives from vannus a winnowing fan¹⁹.

The name Lapwing derived from an Old English word “to leap” connected with “wink” meaning “to totter” or “waver”. The spelling was changed in Middle English by association with “lap” and “wing”²⁰. The bird was named from the manner of its flight upwards, downwards, and in circles²¹. It has been variously attributed to the "lapping" sound its wings make in flight, due to its large wings²².

Lapwing- Bird in Ancient Egypt

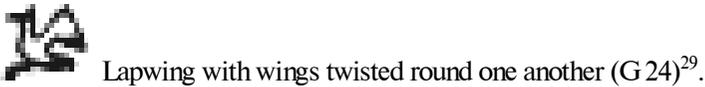
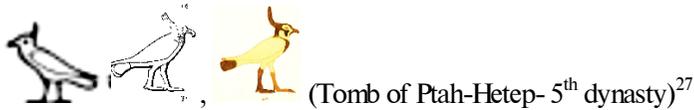
The lapwing is one of the earliest birds in Egyptian art being depicted both in hieroglyphs and reliefs from Pre-dynastic period²³ through to the Roman Period²⁴.

The ancient Egyptian name of the bird is unknown but the ancient Egyptians referred to as *rhyt* which presumed to be the name of the bird and

used as a sign for *rhyt* ,  “common people”, “mankind” or “subject people”²⁵.

The lapwing-bird was also the symbol of rule of Upper Egyptian king over Lower Egyptian people due to its habit of wintering in the Delta²⁶.

Lapwing in Inscriptions



In Old kingdom hieroglyphs  is sometimes found in place of  and

later  is of common occurrence³². On this appearance  there is an interesting comment that live ducks and other birds are frequently to be seen in the modern Egyptian markets with their wings twisted one around the other to prevent them from flying and walking³³.

Scenes of the Lapwing in the Tombs:

Tombs of the Old Kingdom

The depictions of daily life activities surviving on the walls of the private tombs testify to the continued interest of ancient Egyptians in these feathered visitors. As the Egyptian artists talented in observing nature, their love of detail in their art, have created the most magnificent images of birds. A scene from the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara dates

back to the 5th dynasty represents the deceased in a fowling scene and in front of him is an area above the papyrus plant alive with numerous birds distributed from their nests and safe hiding places among the stalks by hunters³⁴. Among these birds is the lapwing characterized by its long crest above the head, depicted with its wings outstretched forward and the feet are rendered when flying, as the artist tried to show the movement of the bird in flying (fig.3)³⁵.

One of the charming scenes is from the tomb of Nefer at Saqqara, which dates back to the 5th dynasty, it represents the daughter of the owner of the tomb facing toward the right viewing the activities of fowlers, and her left arm is raised holding a lotus blossom up to her nose. In her right hand, she clutches a lapwing by its wings. The plover was in all probability the girl's pet or plaything. Lapwing was rarely kept as pets in ancient Egypt (fig.4)³⁶.

Another scene from the tomb of Ptahhetep and Ankhethetep at Saqqara dates to the end of the 5th dynasty and the beginning of the 6th dynasty, birds are represented above the papyrus thicket flying in different directions, they are in three rows, among these birds in the upper row is the lapwing flying to the right with outstretched wings, and in the lower row is another lapwing bird flying to the left (fig.5)³⁷.

A scene from tomb of Hesi at Saqqara dates back to the 6th dynasty, it represents several rows of papyrus blossoms form horizontal border across the scene, birds are shown above the thicket in a symmetrical manner, arranged in two rows in the upper row at the beginning is a lapwing flying to the right, with outstretched wings and a butterfly is shown in front of it. Another lapwing is depicted on the lower row typical to the previous one in the upper row, but it is flying to the left (fig.6)³⁸.

Another scene from the tomb of Hesi similar to the previous one but the lapwing appears here in a different pose with its wings outstretched above the back (fig.7)³⁹.

In addition to visits made to the marshes for hunting or "sight-seeing," these journeys also possess religious or ritual significance, as the journey for the purpose of pulling papyrus for Hathor⁴⁰. This ritual scene appears here in the tomb of Iasen, located on the Giza plateau, in what is called the Western Cemetery; it dates back to the 6th dynasty, representing him performing the activity of sSS WAD ("pulling papyrus") and throwing a stem of papyrus, which he pulled from those around him. The setting is provided by a background of massive, serried papyrus stems rising far

above the water. Their umbels provide a home for thronging birds, insects, and attacking carnivores⁴¹. The lapwing bird characterized by its crest is perching towards the right side above one of these umbels (fig.8)⁴².

One of the most impressive scenes takes place in a papyrus thicket from the tomb of Nikauisesi, at Saqqara, Room I, east wall, it represents on the right side a lapwing chick hooping on a papyrus stem, as the artist tried to show the behavior of the bird which is looking frightened from the scene of attacking a genet to a nest in front of it (fig.9)⁴³.

Tombs of the Middle Kingdom

Using ancient colors as means of identification helped to show that two species have been used to depict the rekhyt-bird⁴⁴. There is another type of crested lapwing which occurs in Northern Africa but no longer in Egypt named the black-headed plover (*Vanellus tectus*)⁴⁵. A perfect representation of the bird can be seen in the top register of the south wall of the tomb of Baqet III at Beni Hassan⁴⁶ (fig.10).

Tombs of the New Kingdom

A scene from the tomb of Amenemhet (No.82), at Thebes, it dates back to the 18th dynasty, it represents a lapwing with outstretched wings flying above a papyrus thicket (fig.11)⁴⁷.

Tombs of the late period

A lapwing appears in a lime stone relief from the Theban tomb of Prince Mentuemhat which dates back to the 25th dynasty, and now in the Cleveland museum, resting among the stems and umbels of the papyrus thickets. It appears to be a female lapwing due to its short crest (fig.12)⁴⁸.

Conclusion

Birds' fascinated Egyptian artists and scribes, they observed the birds' characteristic behaviors, which became, in their imagination, representative of human reactions. The sociable behavior of the northern lapwing (*Vanellus Vanellus*) in the swamps, their mournful cry and energetic wing flapping during the breeding season, their nervous defensive behavior when under attack, came to symbolize the subordination of common people to the Pharaohs.

The lapwing was a stock item of scenes displaying a papyrus swamp especially in the Old Kingdom tombs more than in later tombs.

Through the previous scenes the lapwing has never shown captured in the clap-net as it symbolizes to the common people.

It appears to be used as children's pet in ancient Egypt (fig.4).

The artist shows the lapwing's different behaviors in flying, roosting and hooping when frightened of attacking.

The difference between the male and female adult lapwing and the chick lapwing appears in some scenes as in figs (3&9).

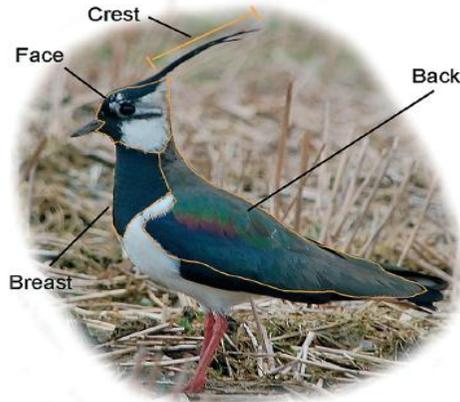


Fig.1 male northern lapwing

Schonert.B, et al “Plumage Ornaments in Male Northern Lapwings *Vanellus Vanellus*”: in *Ornis Fennica* 91, Bergen-Norway, 2013, p.81.
www.ornisfennica.org/pdf/latest/3Schonert.pdf



Fig.2 female northern lapwing

Whimper, C., *Egyptian Birds For The Most Part Seen in the Nile Valley*, London, 1909, pp.11-112.

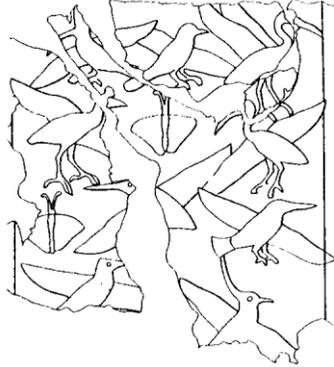


Fig.3 Tomb of Niankhamun, flying lapwin, south wall of the portico, lower register, right side.

M.Moussa.A., Altenmüller.H., *Das Grab des Nianchnum und Chnumhotep*, Mainz, 1977, abb.6.

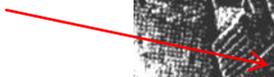
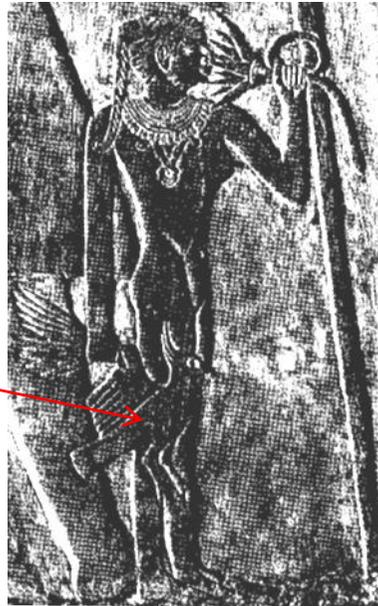


Fig.4 A relief of young girl clutches a lapwing from the tomb of Nefer at Saqqara, 5th dynasty.

F.Houlihan.Patrick, *Op.cit*, p.96, fig.132.

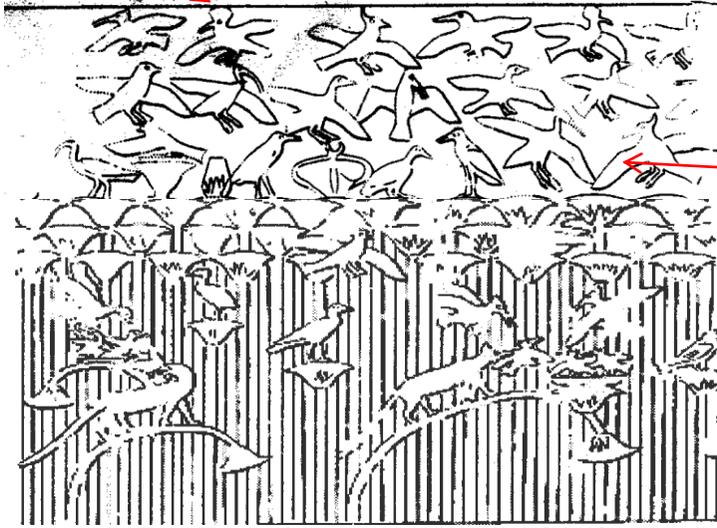


Fig.5 Tomb of Akhetep, east wall left half.

Davies, G., The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhetetep at Saqqareh, Part II, London, 1901, pl.xiii.

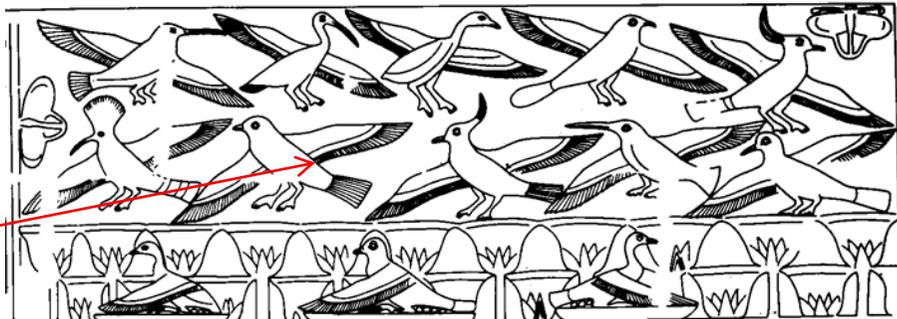


Fig.6 Tomb of Hesi, portico, south wall, east of entrance

Kanawati, N., Abder-Raziq, M., The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, vol.5, the Tomb of Hesi, ACE: Report13, 1999, pl.53.



Fig.7, Tomb of Hesi, portico, south wall, west entrance
Ibid, Pl.54.

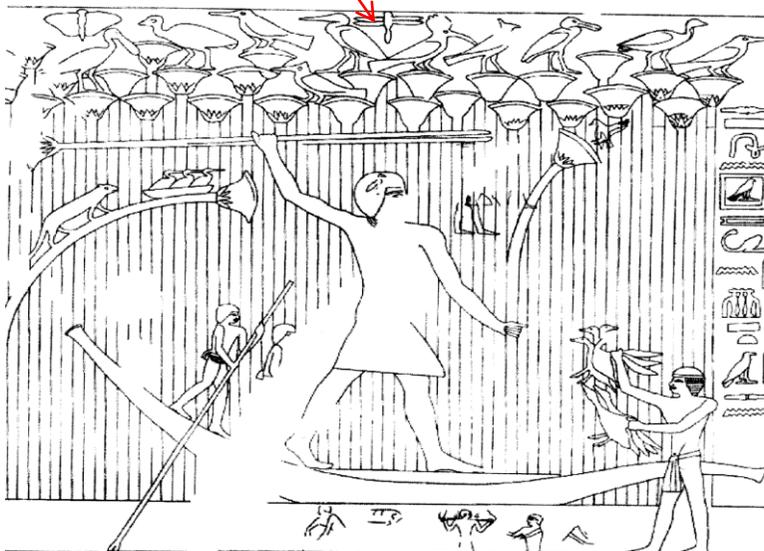


Fig.8 Tomb of Iasen (G2196), north wall.
Simpson, W.K., *Mastabas of the Western Cemetery, Part I*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1980, fig.30.



Fig.9 A lapwing chick, Tomb of Nikauisesi, Room I, east wall.
Kanawati.N, Abder-Raziq, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, Vol.VI, the Tomb of Nikauisesi*, England, 2000, pl.50.



Fig.10 A Comparison of the lapwing bird from the tomb of Baqet III at beni Hassan
With a live Black-headed plover (*Vanellus tectus*).
Bailleul- Leusuer., Rozenn, Op.cit, fig 9.11.

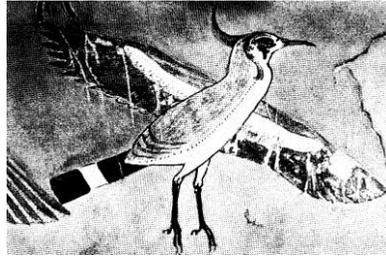


Fig.11 a flight lapwing from the tomb of Amnemhet, 18th dynasty.
F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, fig.137.



Fig.12 A lapwing in a lime stone relief from the Theban tomb of Prince
Mentuemhat, 25th dynasty.
F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, fig.137.

- ¹ Lecturer of Tourism Guidance Faculty of Tourism &Hotels-Suez Canal University
- 2 Bailleul- Leusuer., Rozenn, Between Heaven and Earth, Birds in Ancient Egypt, Chicago, 2012, p.16.
- 3 Ibid, p.16.
- 4 Ibid, p.16.
- 5 Hornung, E. & E. Staehelin, Skarabäen und andere Siegelamulette aus Basler Sammlungen, Mainz, 1976, p.135
- 6 Ibid, p.136.
- 7 Bailleul- Leusuer., Rozenn, Op.cit, p.16.
- 8 Ibid, p.16.
- 9 F.Houlihan.Patrick, The birds of Ancient Egypt, England, 1986, p.93; Griffin, K., "Images of the Rekhyt from Ancient Egypt" in: Ancient Egypt magazine, vol.7, No.2 Issue 38, 2006, p.45.
- 10 The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Vol.1, London, 1971, p.1570; قاموس أطلس الموسوعي إنجليزي-عربي، جمهورية مصر العربية، الطبعة الثالثة، 2003، ص.712
- 11 M.Perrins.Christopher, Op.cit, p.140, no.5.
- 12 F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, p.93.
- 13 Whimper., C., Egyptian Birds For The Most Part Seen In The Nile Valley, London, 1909, pp.11.
- 14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_lapwing
- 15 Nibbi.Alessandra, "Some remarks on two very early but enduring symbols in ancient Egypt", in: Late Prehistory of the Nile Basin and the Sahara, Poznan, 1989, p.341.
- 16 The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, Op.cit, p.953.
- 17 The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, Vol.1, Oxford University press, 1978, p.953.
- 18 Brunn.bertel, Baha el Din.Sherif, Common Birds of Egypt, 3rd edition, Cairo, 1996, p.28, pl.7;
- قاموس أطلس الموسوعي إنجليزي-عربي، ص.712.
- 19 Jobling, James. A., The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names, London, 2010, p. 397.
- 20 The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Op.cit, p.1570; Pearsall.Judy, The New Oxford Dictionary of English, New York 2001, p.1037.
- 21 M.Perrins.Christopher, The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Birds, The Definitive Guide to Birds of the World, Translated into Arabic By Yaziji.Adnan, London, 1990, p.140, no.5.
- 22 M.Perrins.Christopher, Op.cit, p.140.
- 23 See,for instance, the top register on the fragmentary mace-head of king Scorpion, now in the Ashmolean Museum: Griffin, K., Op.cit, p.46; Nibbi.Alessandra, Op.cit, p.340 (fig.2).
- 24 See, for instance, a frieze of rekhyt birds in the Temple of Deir el-Haggar- Dakhla Oasis: Griffin, K., Op.cit, p.49.
- 25 Dickson, Paul, Dictionary of Middle Egyptian in Gardiner classification order, Francisco, California, USA, 2006, pp.78-79; Shaw, I., Ancient Egypt A Very Short Introduction, Oxford, 2004, (Glossary) .
- 26 Nibbi.Alessandra, Op.cit, p.341.

- 27 Gardiner, A., Egyptian Grammar, 3rd edition, Oxford, 1976, p.470 (G 24); Davies, N de G., The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhethetep at Saqqareh, Part I, London , 1900, p.20 fig.84; 410; Wb, II, p.447. (8, 10); Dumas, F., Valeurs phonétiques des signes hiéroglyphiques d'époque gréco-romaine, Montpellier, 1988, p.326 (665, 675).
- 28 Murray, A.M., Saqqara Mastabas, Part I, London, 1905, p.41, pl.XXXVII.
- 29 Gardiner. Alan., Egyptian Grammar, 3rd edition, Oxford, 1976, p.470 (G 24).
- 30 Möller G., Hieratische Paläographie II, Leipzig, 1909, 200-209 (201).
- 31 AEO.i, 102*.
- 32 Ibid, 102*.
- 33 Ibid, 101*.
- 34 Donovan.L& McCorquodale, K., Egyptian Art Principles and Themes in Wall Scenes, 1st edition, Egypt, 2000, p.114.
- 35 M.Moussa.A., Altenmuller.H., Das Grab des Nianchnum und Chnumhotep, Mainz, 1977, abb.
- 36 F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, p.94, fig.132.
- 37 Davies, G., The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhethetep at Saqqareh, Part II, London, 1901, pl.xiii.
- 38 Kanawati, N., Abder-Raziq, M., The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, vol.5, the Tomb of Hesi, ACE: Report13, 1999, pl.53
- 39 Ibid, pl.54.
- 40 Kantor.H.J., Plant Ornament in the Ancient Near East, Chapter II: The Swamp Plants Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 1999, p.8-9. <https://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/HJKII.pdf>
- 41 Kantor.H.J., Op.cit, p.8-9.
- 42 Simpson, W.K., Mastabas of the Western Cemetery, Part I, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1980, fig.30.
- 43 Kanawati.N, Abder-Raziq, The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, Vol.VI, the Tomb of Nikauisesi, England, 2000, pl.50.
- 44 Bailleul- Leusuer., Rozenn, Op.cit, p.86.
- 45 Ibid, p.87.
- 46 Ibid, p.88, fig.9.11.
- 47 F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, p.96, fig.137.
- 48 F.Houlihan.Patrick, Op.cit, p.96, fig.136; The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1965, p.104, fig.3.