

## From an Immigrated Bird to a Deity: Pelican in Ancient Egyptian Sources

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### Abstract

This paper traces the role of Pelican in daily life and his influence in ancient Egyptian religion. His appearance in the wall of tombs and temple of the sun and also the reluctance of Egyptian to eat him save his egg. This immigrated bird was known in ancient Egypt since the Predynastic period. Although his short stayed in Egyptian land and rarely depicted in Egyptian tombs, regarded as a deity, and mentions more than once in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, and by one spell in the Book of the Dead. He had a magical powers and assimilated with resurrection and the birth of the sun.

**Key words:** pelican, bird, food, Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead.

### Previous studies

Generally, several studies has been conducting about birds in Egypt (Anani 1993; Bruun 1958; Whympers 1909; Shelley 1872), and some of these studies dealing with birds in ancient Egypt and dedicated their entire work to this subject like Houlihan (Houlihan 1986), and part of his second book about the animal world of the pharaohs (Houlihan, 1996). Bailleul-Lesuer, like Houlihan dedicated an entire work to the same subject (Bailleul-Lesuer, 2013). None of the previous works concentrated on a particular bird but comprehensive studies. So this paper is dedicated to draw an entire picture as possible of the pelican as an immigrant bird, his features, places of spread, his iconography, his role in social life with particular emphasize on the role of pelican in the religious life of the Egyptians.

### Introduction

Egypt is a destination of migratory flyway for birds. Twice each year, during the spring and fall, great numbers of birds pass through the country coming from Europe and western Asia. Some of these birds are drawn in particular, and pelican was one of these migratory birds (Houlihan 2001:169).The pelican (*gem'el el-bahher*, camel of the river) is principally remarked among the birds which frequented the Nile with their white and grey color (fig.1) (Lane 2000: 43; Anani, M.1993: Pl.52.5-6). Pelicans are a family (Pelecanidae) comprising eight species of fairly large that feed on fish, which they scoop from the water while flying low over the surface (Allaby 2006, 2010:1466, 28). The most common species in Egypt were; Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), great white pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*), and pink-backed Pelican (*Pelecanus rufescens*). These species glide with minimal energy expenditure on warm air currents rising from heated land surfaces (Collins 2002: 33).

The white pelican is a winter visitor in the Nile Valley and Delta, the Fayoum, in the Suez Canal area, and along the Red Sea cost (Shelley 1872: 293, Bruun 1958: 12, Houlihan 1968: 10, 12). In their flight they form an acute angle, like the common wild-geese (Russell 1835: 341). G. E., Shelley saw several thousand of white pelicans in 1870, below Edfu (Shelley 1872: 293-294). He also observed the Dalmatian pelicans in the Fayoum, his entire plumage white, with some exceptions"(Shelley 1872: 293). These birds were once common in the Nile Valley, but encroaching civilization has made them rare (Davies & Gardiner 1936: 83).

### Pelican's features

White or brown Pelicans distinguished by a large, elastic throat pouch. Some species are 180 cm. long, have a wingspan of 3 m, and weigh up to 13 kg. Pelicans inhabit freshwaters and seacoasts in many parts of the world; they breed in colonies, laying one to four eggs in a stick nest (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia 2006: 1446). The pelican has strong wings, furnished with thick plumage, with the feathers over the body of an ash-color. Its eyes are small, compared with the size of its head. It is slow in flight, and rises to fly with difficulty (Shaw 1823: 533-534). Immature White pelican is pale brown with lighter underside. Often in flocks. Lives on fish scooped into enormous bill (Bruun 1958: 12). General color of plumage a rosy white, beak grey, with a bright yellow pouch, and eyes was red (Whymper 1909:186). The entire plumage of Dalmatian Pelican is white with some exceptions (Shelley 1872: 293). Pelican now become locally extinct or are reduced to being extremely rare visitors (Houlihan 2001:169). Egyptian artisans created many naturalistic portraits of birds. Some seventy different birds can be identified in Egyptian iconography and numerous others from bone remains. Some of the birds routinely portrayed in art and hieroglyphs (Houlihan 2001: 169).

Figure.1: White and grey pelican



(Anani, M.1993: Pl.52.5-6)

Figure.2: Pelican of glazed pottery



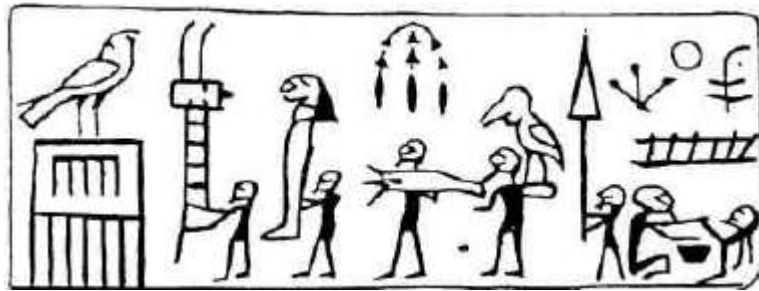
(Capart 1905: fig.150)

### Pelican in daily life

Pelican goes deep down in ancient Egyptian history to the pre-dynastic period, where the excavations at Hierakonpolis yielded a unique statuette, of a pelican in glazed pottery, now at Ashmolean Museum (fig. 2) (Petrie 1920:13, pl.IX.9; Capart 1905: 191, fig.150). And it was identified on an ivory wand from the Late Predynastic Period, now in the Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin (Houlihan 1986: 10). Pelican was also one of the cult objects carried in procession on a label of Djer from Saqqara (fig.3) (Emery 1972: 59, fig.21; Wilkinson 1999: 258; Cintron 2016). A fragment of limestone relief dates back to the Old Kingdom (fifth Dynasty) now in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, depicting three of these large, tame birds, slowly walking under the charge of their priest-keeper (Meek, 1999:44; Houlihan 1996: 142, fig.103). They are executed walking toward the right. All of the birds' keeper wear wigs and short kilts. They follow behind the pelicans with their arms outstretched, touching the birds' back, maybe to help guide them along. Probably these three birds were either White or Pink-backed Pelicans (fig.4) (Houlihan 1986:10, fig.11). Another relief fragment from the sun temple of Niuserre temple, a single Pelican is depicted swimming in a canal among a large number of fish which is being caught by fishermen using basket-traps. The pelican maybe waiting them in hope of obtaining an easy meal (fig.5) (Houlihan 1986: 10). The same details were repeated in the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty mastaba of Niankhkhnum and

khnumhotep at Saqqara, and in the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty mastaba of Mereruka and Mera at Saqqara (fig.6) (Morgan 1896: fig.518; Morgan 1938: pls. 43, 45; Houlihan 1986: 10, fig.13).

Figure. 3: Label of Djer



(Emery 1972: fig.21)

Figure.4: Priests leading pelicans in the sun temple of Niuserre



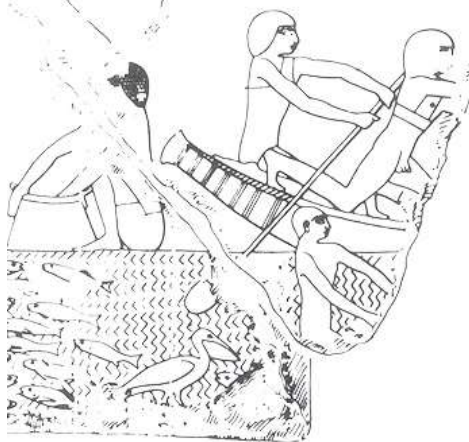
(Houlihan 1986: fig.11)

A scene in the new kingdom tomb of Horemheb in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty presents a unique group of five Dalmatian pelicans standing close together near a clap-netting scene. Eggs are also piled up in ceramic vessels or baskets near them, with handfuls of grass placed on top and underneath them to prevent potential breakage and keep them cool. These eggs, just like the birds, maybe were intended to be eaten (Baileul-lesuer 2013: 31; Houlihan 1986: 12-13; Alderd 1951:60, fig.61). The pelicans were probably obtained from a breeding colony (fig.7) (Houlihan 1986:12-13; Houlihan 1996:142, fig.103; Wilson 1958:148; Petrie 1910: 56; Davies & Gardiner 1936: pl. XLI; Wilkinson & Hill 1983: fig.31.6.4; Bouriant 1849-1903:pl.VI).

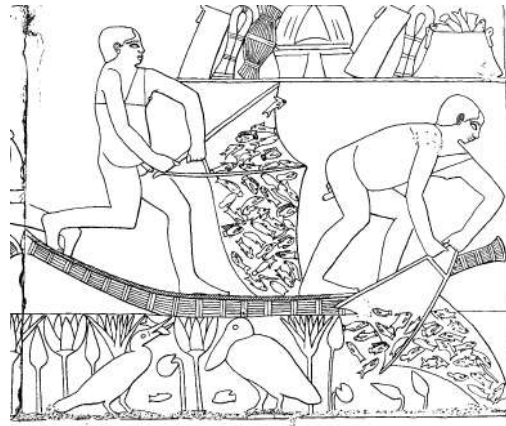
### **Pelican as a food**

The Ancient Egyptian were apparently, used pelican for food (Davies & Gardiner 1936: 83 vol.3, vol.1 pl. XLI; Bouriant 1849-1903:pl.VI). The Egyptians ate eggs of all birds, including those of pelicans, which have a fishy flavor. The Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Haremheb at Thebes has an illustration of a pelican and a basket of eggs (Alcock 2006: 75; Davies & Gardiner 1936:83, pl. xli). The Greeks and Romans did not eat pelicans, but the birds and their eggs were a favorite food in Egypt in spite of both having a fishy taste (Alcock 2006:71). Pelicans and their eggs possess an extremely low level of palatability, both having a strong fishy flavor. It is interesting to note that Horapolo (fourth century A.D) states that while Egyptian priests were supposed to abstain from pelican, it was consumed by other Egyptians (Houlihan 1986:13). Pelican and their eggs have very coarse and strong fishy flavor, so they requires much cooking, to overcome the greasy properties of its fish (Wilkinson 1741:228).

Figure.5: Pelican in the chamber of the Seasons fig.6: Relief from the tomb of Mereruka



(Houlihan 1986:fig.12)



(Morgan 1896: fig.518)

Figure.7: Dalmatian Pelican from the tomb of Haremhab



(Davies & Gardiner 1936: pl. XLI)

### Pelican in the afterlife

Albeit his short existence into the Egyptian land, he became a deity and played a noticeable role in ancient Egypt. Rare painting portrayed him in the walls of tombs and temples, but he had a religious position in both the Pyramid and Coffin texts. This position may be the reason behind the priests of the sun temple of Niuserre at Abu Ghurab, were kept a herd of pelican at the sun temple for religious reasons (Houlihan 1986: 10). Apparently the pelicans in captivity symbolically served the solar cult (Meek, 1990: 40). Henet is a pelican deity known from the Old Kingdom and venerated as a beneficial goddess (Wilkinson 2007:213). In the Pyramid Texts, for unknown reasons, she is called "mother of king" [PT 318 WT] (Allen 2013:Utt.318wt 4/511d; Sethe 1910:Utt.318/511da; Massiera 2013:Utt.318/511d; Wilkinson 2007:213).



Mwt pw n(y)t T Hnwt T pw sA.s

The pelican is Titi's mother, and her son is Teti

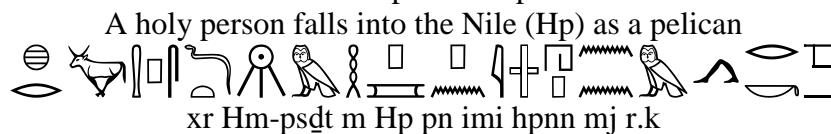
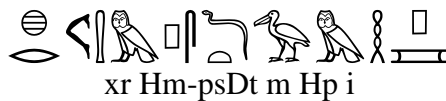
The pelican is a divinity must be assumed from this reference in the Pyramid Texts as the 'mother of the king', a role which in religious documents can only be ascribed to a goddess (Hart 2005:125), and suggesting a connection between the pelican and the royal cult (Wilkinson 1999:258). Later in the funerary texts she is said to prophesy a safe passage for the deceased through the netherworld [PT 254 WT] (Allen 2013:Utt.254wt 8/278b; Sethe 1910:Utt.254/278b; Wilkinson 2007:213).



sr Hnt pr psDt aHa wr

The Hnt-pelican will prophesy, the psDt-pelican will go up.

Henet also had a protective function apparently related to the pelican's ability to scoop up fish and other creatures regarded as mythologically hostile. The Pyramid and Coffin Texts had many utterances and spells referring to pelican, who had mythological associations with both the rising and the setting sun, and this no doubt was the reason the animals were kept at the solar temple (Houlihan 1996:142). The references to pelicans in the Pyramid Texts may be significant in this regard, emphasizing that the bird had a cultic symbolism in early times (Wilkinson 1999: 258). And he also had a protective symbol against snakes (Hart 2005:125). Utterances [PT 293 WTP] (Allen 2013:Utt.293wtp 6/435a; Sethe 1910:Utt.293/435a), and [PT 383 T] (Allen 2013:Utt.383t 3/671a; Sethe 1910: Utt. 383/671a; Mercer 1952: 383/671), in the pyramid Texts describe the Pelican as falling into the Nile.



"A servant (holy person), who belonged to the Ennead (pelican), (once) fell into this Nile. You who are in hpnn, come here."

Utterance [PT 226] describe the majesty of the pelican falls in water (Allen 2013: Utt. 226w, 4/226a; Sethe 1908: Utt.226/305a).



The majesty of the pelican falls in water.

The description of the Pelican falling into the Nile seems connected with the idea of scooping up in its prominent beak hostile elements under the guise of fish – a concept comparable to the dragnets and bird nets used for trapping sinners in the Underworld (Hart 1905:125). The following utterance [PT 387 T] (Allen 2013: Utt. 387t 1/680a; Sethe 1910: Utt.387/680; Mercer 1952: 387/680a), both the king and Pelican were fallen.



A Great One [the Majesty] is fallen, a servant (holy person) of the pelican or the pelican is fallen

While Pyramid Texts dedicated only for kings, some utterances had repeated in the Coffin Texts which benefited the ordinary people and had the same magical powers as it did in the Pyramid Texts. The deceased was the son of pelican as the king in Spell [CT 373 V73] (Buck 1954: Spell 374/73; Faulkner 1977:10; Massierra 2013: Pt.318/511d). The reference of the deceased as the son of pelican, equal him with the dead king.



My mother is the Pelican, and I am her son.












This formula applies only to the rebirth of the deceased by securing the maximum guarantees. In non-royal funerary papyri the Pelican has the power of prophesying a safe passage for a dead person in the Underworld as highlighted in the spell [CT 484] (Buck 1956:484/53; Faulkner 1977:177).



### Name of pelican in religious texts

Pelican was known in ancient Egyptian sources as (Hnt, Hnwt), and (Hm-psDt, psDt) this term refer to Sunshine-bird, Sunshine's Servant and viewed as an avatar and harbinger of the Sun (Allen 2005:442; Helck & Otto. et al. 1982:923-924). The following table is based on words extracted from the previous hieroglyphic sentences referring specifically to the pelican and appeared in the Pyramid Texts (PT) and Coffin Texts (CT), and Spell (68) in the Book of the Dead (BD) (Table 1).


Table 1: Name of Pelican

Pelican	Transliterate	Source
	psDt	PT 226
	psDt	PT 254
	psDt	PT 293
	psDt	PT 383
	psDt	PT 387
	Hnwt	PT 318
	Hn(w)t	CT 484
	Hnwt	CT 264
	Hnwt	CT 243
	Hn(w)t	CT 622
	Hn(w)t	BD 68






### Conclusion

The Pelican was unaccustomed to see frequently everywhere in Egyptian sky, or in its natural environment, because he was known as an immigrated bird, since the pre-dynastic period. Few depictions of pelican has been recorded in wall paintings. Some of his representation associated with the scenes of fishing, where he was seen swimming in a canal. Other scenes represented him calmly walking or standing by his keepers in the temple precinct. Most of the Egyptians reluctant to eat him, although they ate their eggs. Now locally extinct or become extremely rare visitors.

For unknown reason and maybe due to his unique features, the ancient Egyptian placed him among deities, and gain some influence in ancient Egyptian religion. The physical features of Pelican has its impacts in Egyptian sacred texts like; the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead, where he gains his protective function from his ability to scoop up fish and other creatures by his beak, which regarded as mythologically hostile, similarly the mouth of pelican associated with the tomb shaft, or referring to the doors of the tomb as stated before, and both connected with the realm of afterlife and resurrection and the birth of the sun. The water environment was regarded as his favorite domain inside sacred texts, as it was in everyday life. As for the words which represented and expressed him (table 1) , It reveals that only four of the names were written with determinatives

representing the pelican  two of them appeared in the pyramid texts as psDt, and the other two appeared in the Coffin texts as Hnt-Hnwt. Variant alternative of determinatives



were also appeared with the other names like  ,  for psDt, while  ,  for Hnwt. No concise determinative associated directly to the bird save  which represented the true image of pelican

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