

# THE SWALLOW AS HERALD OF THE DAWN IN ANCIENT EGYPT \*

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Spürtest Du je die Sehnsucht den Scharen der Vögel zu folgen, die im Herbst nach Süden ziehen? Dich von dem engen Flecken Erde zwischen Häusern und Äckern, wo müde Menschen freudlos ihr Tagewerk verrichten, zu erheben und auf jenem pfadlosen Weg der Sonne entgegen über Meere und Länder ihnen nachzuziehen...

Mancheiner vergisst nie, wie die Schwalben an jenem Tage, als sie sich zur langen Reise versammelten, zwitschernd den Giebel seines Elternhauses umflogen...

(Bengt Berg, *Mit den Zugvögeln nach Afrika*, Berlin 1925).

The above lines speak of the departure of the swallows from Europe for the land of the sun. In that country, Egypt, where the Sun was so greatly honoured, the swallow took up an interesting position in iconography, a detail of which is the subject of the present study. Ancient Egyptian representations of the sun-bark repeatedly show a little bird standing upon the prow, and that bird is clearly recognizable as a swallow <sup>1</sup>.

Since Egyptian iconography is always meaningful down to the last detail, we must presume that the presence of the swallow on the prow of the sun-bark is not simply ornamental. Yet I have not found any Egyptian text explaining this iconographical detail, nor indeed even mentioning it. For an explanation, we are thus forced to build up an hypothesis from other Egyptian material mentioning or depicting the swallow.

An Egyptian love-song <sup>2</sup> tells how the swallow disturbs the lovers

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<sup>1</sup> B. Bruyère, *La tombe n° 1 de Sennedjem*, Cairo 1959, pl. XXVII cf. B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1935-1940) fasc. III, Cairo 1952, p. 105-114.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Müller, *Die Liebespoesie der alten Ägypter*, Leipzig 1899, pl. 10, l. 6-8. A. Hermann, Beiträge zur Erklärung der ägyptischen Liebesdichtung. In: *Ägyptologische Studien* hrsgg. v. O. Firchow, Berlin 1955, p. 118-140.

early in the morning with its twittering. Various translations have been made of this song. My rendering is as follows :

The voice of the swallow says :  
 It's light already. Mustn't you go now ?  
 Don't, little bird. You bring dispute.  
 I have found my brother (*i.e.* lover) in his bed.  
 My heart overflows with happiness.  
 We say : I will not go away  
 As long as my hand is in your hand.  
 I still go for walks  
 While I am with you  
 To all the beautiful spots.  
 He made me the first of the maidens  
 And he does not pain my heart.

The twittering of the swallow announces the dawn. No wonder, then, that this bird is unfavourably regarded in love poetry. He is the spoilsport of love, for love and sleep belong to the realm of night. Yet reading between the lines, we already find valuable information here about the swallow in the sun-bark. The swallow in this love-poem is the messenger of light and day, announcing in his song the daily re-creation of the world by the light. The swallow seems to have had a function in Egypt comparable to that of the cock in some other cultures, where his crowing wakes the sleepers and drives lovers apart. Or rather, both swallow and cock sing the victory of light over darkness. In this context we notice that the swallow is apt to be depicted in the sun-bark when its occupants, *int. al.* the god Seth,<sup>1</sup> are engaged in combat with the powers of darkness, the dreadful Apopis snake.

That the swallow is not only a song-bird but also has very good powers of flight did not escape the notice of the Egyptians. In the Pyramid Texts we can already read that the dead pharaoh rose up like a swallow and flew aloft like a falcon (Pyr 1770) and that he goes to that great island in the middle of the field of offerings where the swallow gods have settled (Pyr 1216). In texts upon coffins (CT IV 23 a, b) the dead are spoken of as cackling like a goose, but flying like a swallow. A humorous drawing in the so-called satirical papyrus of Turin<sup>2</sup> shows a topsy-turvy world : A bird, in all probability a swallow, with widespread wings is trying to climb up into a fig-three by the

<sup>1</sup> H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, Leiden 1967, pl. VII, VIII, 1.

<sup>2</sup> E. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel*, Darmstadt 1968, Abbildung 8.

rungs of a ladder, while a hippopotamus gathers fruit into a bag in the tree-top. Reality is inverted here, for how did so aquatic an animal as the hippopotamus get up into the fig-tree, while the champion flyer is laboriously ascending the ladder one step at a time?

It would seem a playful irony of chance, that in hieroglyphic writing such a poor flyer as the duck should be the only bird to be shown in flight, while the swallow (the *wr* bird with forked tail) is shown standing. For indeed, the swallow stands upon the prow of the sun-bark. In a vignette belonging to chapter 86 of the *Book of the Dead* the swallow is also shown standing, upon a hillock of sand.

A demotic fairy-tale<sup>1</sup> relates how a swallow hatched its young upon the beach and entrusted them to the care of the sea while going to get food. But when the swallow had flown away, the nestlings were engulfed by the waters of the sea. In revenge for the rapine of its young, the swallow fills its beak with sand which it drops into the sea, and then fills its beak with water which it drops upon the sand. The swallow repeats this until it has sucked away the whole sea and filled it with sand. Greek and Roman authors<sup>2</sup> relate as a curiosity that every year in Egypt swallows build a wall against the Nile to protect the land from too much inundation.

It has been suggested that this story of the swallow and the sea originated from a desire to designate the essential quality of the swallow, which yet could not be clearly specified. It looks rather like a variant of what Eliade<sup>3</sup> calls the "plongeon cosmogonique". In many cultures there is a creator in human, animal or avian form who dives to the bottom of the primal ocean and creates the earth in the middle of the primeval waters with the sand brought up from the depths. Even though the swallow does not dive into the water, one can easily imagine it swooping down to skim the surface of the water, and picking something up from it or dropping something in. Perhaps we may link the story of the swallow and the sea with the above-mentioned drawing in the *Book of the Dead* showing a swallow on a sand-hill. Sometimes the sand-hill is replaced by a tomb building, but the significance of the latter is not only funerary. The sand-hill of the swallow is the primeval hill, the bit of earth that first came up in the water, rising up from the primeval waters and receiving the rays of the rising sun, as

<sup>1</sup> E. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Märchen*, Düsseldorf-Köln 1963, p. 126-127.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Hoffner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris I*, Prague 1940, p. 53 ss.

<sup>3</sup> M. Eliade, Le créateur et son "ombre", *Eranos-Jahrbuch XXX*, Zürich 1962, p. 211-239.

described in the doctoral thesis of professor de Buck.<sup>1</sup> The swallow stands upon the primeval hill. He need no longer skim over the waters, but has a place to stand upon earth. In the Babylonian tale of the deluge the first birds loosed from the ark are not only the dove and the raven, but also the swallow. Besides victory over the primal darkness, the swallow also signalises victory over the primeval waters.

The heading of chapter 86 of the *Book of the Dead*, illustrated by this vignette of the swallow on the primeval hill, states that it is a spell enabling the dead to appear as a swallow. This chapter belongs to a series of spells by means of which the dead may appear in the form of a god, a plant, an animal or a bird.

The Egyptians hoped and believed that after death they would not have to remain motionless in the grave and the netherworld, but by day would be able to leave tomb and darkness and go forth to see the sun. The Egyptian name for the *Book of the Dead* is *pṛt m hrw*, "Coming forth by day". To appear in the shape of a bird is pre-eminently suggestive of the desired liberty of movement. After death they hoped to appear as a living *Ba-soul*. Thus it naturally follows that in the *Book of the Dead* there is a special spell for appearing as such a soul-bird with a human head. The *Book of the Dead* also contains spells enabling the dead to appear as a phoenix, a swallow, a falcon and a heron. It need hardly be insisted on that phoenix, falcon and heron are sun-birds, as is generally agreed. It is supposed, however, that the specific wish to appear as a swallow rests upon the meaning of the Egyptian word for swallow (*mn. t*), taking this to be connected with the Egyptian verb "to remain" (*mn*).<sup>2</sup> We have, indeed, a *stela* showing a swallow receiving divine worship, with the text: "The beautiful swallow (*mn. t*) who remains and remains (*mn. ti*) in eternity".<sup>3</sup> Thus to appear as a swallow would mean: to become imperishable. Yet this explanation from the doubtful meaning of the Egyptian word for swallow seems to me rather laboured. And indeed, we may question whether the Egyptians hoped for imperishability. They hoped for continual renewal of life, and to be able to appear in various forms. Even less satisfactory is an earlier explanation<sup>4</sup> to the effect that

<sup>1</sup> A. de Buck, *De Egyptische Voorstellingen betreffende de Oerheuwel*, Leiden 1922.

<sup>2</sup> W. Barta, *Aufbau und Bedeutung der altägyptischen Opferformel*, Glückstadt 1968, p. 314 ss.

<sup>3</sup> A. Erman, *Sitzungsberichte Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 1911, p. 1096.

<sup>4</sup> L. Klebs, *Zeitschr. f. Ägypt. Sprache*. 61 (1926), p. 107.

the swallow was the favourite form of appearance for ladies of rank, because Isis changed into a swallow while searching for her husband Osiris, as Plutarch tells us. If three of the four birds mentioned, the Phoenix, the falcon and the heron are sun-birds, then surely one should begin by considering whether the swallow may not be one too. We have already seen that the swallow could have a place in the sun-bark, and was the messenger of light and day in love poetry. The wish to appear as a swallow seems to me inspired by the symbolic value of the swallow as bird of the sun. The text of chapter 86 of the *Book of the Dead*, at least the more original version of the text as preserved upon coffins, confirms this idea. This text begins with the words I am a swallow. I am a swallow, the father of Hededit, the daughter of Re (CT IV 33 c-d). The determinant of Hededit in hieroglyphic script is a bird, and Hededit may be translated as "bird of light".

The swallow is not only a songster and agile on the wing, it is also a bird of passage. In the winter he comes flying to Egypt from northern countries, and in spring he again passes through the valley of the Nile from the south. This flight from and to the distant unknown must have fascinated the Egyptians. A student who has wandered away may be compared to the swallow, flown away to the north with its young.<sup>1</sup> A funeral inscription of ancient Egypt says:

If it be that the blessed spirits are beatified  
Then my ba-soul will follow Hathor  
And appear as a swallow of the God's-land  
To sit under the myrrh-trees  
And appear as a living ba-soul  
To behold the sun in the morning.<sup>2</sup>

The swallow from the God's-land is the swallow from a distant foreign country. The mysterious land of Punt or the mountain range of the Lebanon are sometimes called God's-land.<sup>3</sup> As the swallow comes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Černý, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1955), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> H. Grapow, *Zeitschr. f. Ägypt. Sprache*. 77 (1942), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> *t3 ntr* is a region where heaven and earth come close (J. Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester* [ADAIK 7] Glückstadt 1970, p. 51). E. Edel has drawn attention to an Egyptian concept of the essential nature and the origin of birds of passage. They come from the dark and damp border region in the extreme north. There they are human-headed like ba-souls and speak together in the language of men. Once arrived in Egypt to eat herbs and food, they alight beneath the rays of heaven. Under the influence of these light-rays they change into true birds. (E. Edel, *Zu den Inschriften auf den Jahreszeitenreliefs der Weltkammer aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Niuserre*, NAWG, Philol.-

from a far country, so the Egyptian hopes after death, coming from afar, to sit as a swallow beneath the myrrh-trees of an Egyptian temple-garden. To sit as a swallow! Perhaps after all it is not quite fortuitous that the champion flyer and migrant is so often depicted standing or, if you will, sitting on the sand-hill and on the prow of the sun-bark. Clearly it was not flying itself, but the arrival after a long flight or readiness for a far journey that the Egyptian artist wished to denote.

Much could be said of the swallow's place in ancient Egyptian medicine. For instance, there is a ritual and a spell to transfer a children's complaint to a young swallow, who no doubt was to carry it far away. These matters, however, cannot be entered into here.

Neither can we discuss the connection of the swallow with Isis. Her appearance as a swallow in Byblos was referred to above. The Christian Minucius Felix<sup>1</sup> speaks of foolish ideas attached to the swallow and the *sistrum* of Isis and to the empty tomb of Sarapis or Osiris. Already 2000 years B.C. the appearing of Isis was compared to the coming of a swallow: "I cause her to come. Her coming is the coming of the great swallow".<sup>2</sup> We sometimes read beside the drawing of a swallow that it is a *ba*, *i.e.* a manifestation of Isis.<sup>3</sup>

Let us fly back to our point of departure: the swallow upon the prow of the sun-bark. It is my hypothesis that the swallow characterises the sun-bark as the ship of the morning which has just put forth, as the bark of the rising sun. The swallow, messenger of day and light, is still standing on the prow, singing his victorious song of creation. In a moment he will spread his wings for a long flight, and skim over the waters until he can settle upon the sand-hill, when the (re)creation of the world by light has been completed.

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Hist. Kl. 1963 n° 4, p. 105-111; H. Frankfort, *The Cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos*, London 1933, II pl. LXXXI).

We know that a child, or possibly a foetus, is sometimes shown upon the prow of the night-boat (J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Texts of Papyrus Leiden I* 348, Leiden 1971, p. 181 f.). Could the swallow on the prow of the sun-bark perhaps mean that the return of the *ba*-soul and its rebirth as a bird is now completed? In any case the foetus seems to betoken the night and the swallow the morning or day.

<sup>1</sup> *Fontes historiae religionis aegyptiacae* collegit Th. Hopfner. Bonn 1923, p. 295 = Minucius Felix, *Octavius* c. 22.

<sup>2</sup> N. de G. Davies, *Tomb of Antefoker*, London 1920, pl. XXVIII.

<sup>3</sup> A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *Mythological papyri*, New York 1957, pap. nr. 18, scene 5. In this edition of illustrated papyri there are many drawings of swallow in the sun-bark and on the primeval hill. On enquiry, Dr. B. J. Speak of the Observatory for Bird Migration in Arnhem informed me that, contrary to some current ideas, the swallows of Holland do not winter in Egypt. The swallows that pass through the valley of the Nile are from Russia and other parts of eastern Europe.