The Sacred Ibis in Ancient Egypt

Species Information

Ancient Egyptians were familiar with three species of ibis: the sacred ibis, the glossy ibis, and the northern bald ibis. The three types are easily distinguishable by their morphological features, and can thus be separated for purposes of the discussion of a single species.¹ The African Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopica*, was very common in Ancient Egypt, but is now extinct in that part of Africa.²

There is some debate as to the homogeneity of the species, as it seems clear differences can be observed between forms in different areas, including body size, bill silhouette, and neck sacs. My focus here is on the species Lowe and Richards suggest calling *Threskiornis aethiopicus aethiopicus*.³ This species now ranges from Ethiopia all the way south to the Cape of Africa, and to the western extreme of the continent (see Illustration 1). It is migratory within this range, moving away from the equator – those north of it heading further north, and those south heading further south – to breed in the rainy season, and returning towards the equator early in the dry season.

The adult African Sacred Ibis is mostly white with some black on the head, grey in parts, and brownish yellow markings along the wing edges. Its long bill curves downwards in a crescent moon shape.⁴ It lacks the head crest that distinguishes the northern bald ibis, thus even a silhouette is sufficient for identification.⁵ It is a fairly large bird; males may weigh around 1.5 kilograms fully grown, with females slightly smaller.

The Sacred Ibis lives in groups ranging from just a couple to up to 300 individuals, usually inhabiting open areas near water, including grasslands, cultivated fields, intertidal areas, and human rubbish dumps. It feeds during the day, probing the soft mud of the moist habitat for grasshoppers, beetles, worms, and crickets. In wetlands or tidal areas it will also eat small fish. At night it may roost in trees, bushes, or even on the ground.

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⁵ Janak, p. 3.
It lays up to four eggs per clutch in large nests, and both parent birds are involved in the incubation of the eggs. When the young hatch, after around 28 days, both parents also feed and care for the hatchlings. The new ibis are ready to leave the colony at around 48 days of age.\(^6\)

**Archaeological evidence**

Evidence of the importance of the ibis in Ancient Egypt is abundant. Over five million mummified sacred ibises have been recovered from sites at Saqqara and Tuna-el-Gebel.\(^7\) At Tuna el-Gebel, many mummies have evidently been sent from elsewhere to be interred; inscriptions on ibis sarcophagi detail the location and person from which it had been sent.\(^8\)

An ibis cemetery was also reported at Abydos, containing around fifteen hundred mummified ibises. This cemetery also included preserved eggs of the species, as well as bundles of feathers and bones.\(^9\)

Despite the vast numbers of ibis mummies created by the Ancient Egyptians, it seems that great care was taken with them, and that each individual was treated with respect. Chemical investigations of the wrappings and tissues from animal mummies have revealed the presence of complex mixtures of balms comparable to those used for human mummification.\(^10\) The wrappings of those mummies recovered at Abydos also show individuality and care; as many as seventy types of bindings were recorded, geometrical patterns 'woven with the greatest skill and precision'.\(^11\) These elaborate wrapping patterns are characteristic of mummies from the Roman period.\(^12\)

Many ibis mummies have been examined radiographically and show evidence that food has been deliberately placed inside their bills or body cavities. This artificially provided food source suggests that the ibises were intended to survive in the afterlife.\(^13\)

However examination of some apparent ibis mummies have shown that they are 'fakes', or do not contain any actual animal material. These may have been cheaper alternatives for poorer pilgrims, or a result of a temporary scarcity of suitable live animals for mummification. Likewise some mummies outwardly represented as another species, such as a falcon, in fact contain the body of an

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\(^7\) Wade *et al.*, p. 1642.
\(^8\) D. Kessler & A. el Halim Nur el-Din, "Tuna al-Gebel: Millions of Ibises and Other Animals", in S. Ikram (ed.), *Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt* (Cairo, 2005), p. 125.
\(^11\) Loat, p. 40.
\(^13\) Wade *et al.*, p. 1646.
ibis. The mummies examined at Cape Town show that where the corpse is that of a complete animal, there is little to no physical damage, no broken bones. The presence of food in the gizzard indicates that death occurred on the same day as the meal. This may indicate the cause of death for these mummies was poison. In a great many cases, however, birds were killed by having their necks wrung.

**Role in Daily Life**

As early as the Palaeolithic period, we have evidence that the inhabitants of the Nile Valley were aware of the migratory patterns of birds and making use of them to the full. The diet of these early humans included waterfowl, hunted by teams and caught in clap-nets. The hunting of birds continued into the Old Kingdom and beyond, although it is unknown whether ibis were one of the species hunted for. Interestingly, although birds were eaten voraciously, it does not appear that the ancient Egyptians ate eggs. Eggs were instead used for medicinal purposes.

From the time of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty birds became increasingly important in cultic activities. The cult of the ibis had sanctuaries scattered throughout Egypt, with birds both raised in captivity and freely available from the wild. The raising of these birds must have required a great number of staff as well as subsidies from the state, making the ibis-raising industry a big employer of priests and economic driver for the ancient Egyptians. The same holds true for the industry of slaughtering and mummifying the birds, alongside other animals.

In the wild, ibises raise just one brood per year, but in captivity an attentive priest could remove eggs or chicks from parents making them breed again, obtaining up to three broods in a season. Private individuals may also have contributed to the mummy business by keeping ibises in an 'ad hoc' way to provision the temples, or by collecting already deceased birds to donate or sell.

By the later periods of the Egyptian civilisation, killing an ibis even accidentally was a crime punishable by death, although this clearly excludes those bred and killed for the purposes of votive offerings.

14 Cornelius *et. al.*, p. 132.
20 Ikram, p. 43.
Representations in Art

In ancient Egyptian art, images were thought to be imbued with life and meaning, a sculptor was called 'he who causes to live', and pieces of art preserved the existence of the being portrayed endlessly.\(^2\)

The sacred ibis is one of the earliest known and longest lasting symbols used in Ancient Egypt. It was originally the sign of one of the nomes of Lower Egypt before becoming a hieroglyph.\(^2\) The ibis or ibis-headed man was already the symbol associated with the god Thoth as early as the Old Kingdom.\(^2\)

Throughout the entirety of the Egyptian civilisation ibises were prevalent in both two dimensional and three dimensional forms of art, including as amulets to be worn as jewellery and faience (tin-glazed pottery) inlays.\(^2\) Reliefs were also common, as were figures of the god Thoth with an ibis head.\(^2\)

This relief (Illustration 2) of an Ibis from Upper Egypt in the 11\(^{th}\) Dynasty shows the Egyptians' typical observational skills in the behaviour of their subjects. The ibis is depicted in its natural wetlands, eating a small fish. The bill and feet here appear to retain pigment of an orange hue, which is particular to the northern bald ibis, however there is enough of the image to see that the bird lacks the crest of that species. The fish it is eating appears to be being swallowed head-first, which birds indeed do to avoid the spine from becoming lodged in their throats.\(^2\)

The oldest known depiction of the god Thoth in his ibis-headed form is in a rock relief from the Sinai, carved during Khufu's reign. The image shows the king defeating an enemy in front of this ibis-headed god. Although no caption remains specifying the god's identity, it is only in very rare cases that an ibis-headed deity is anybody other than Thoth.\(^2\)

Despite the wide range of possible habitats for an ibis in the wild, the ancient Egyptians almost

\(^2\) Clark, p. 181.
\(^2\) British Museum online collection, viewed 17\(^{th}\) April 2016, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/](http://www.britishmuseum.org/)
\(^2\) Stadler, p. 2.
invariably portrayed wild ibises in papyrus swamps. Ibises were often presented extremely accurately, including for the most part the pigments and colouration used. However sometimes an artist might prefer his work to be brighter and more eye-catching, also colours can fade and change over time; colouration should not be relied upon for identification of bird species in ancient Egyptian art.

References in Texts

The god Thoth, represented by an ibis or an ibis-headed man, was the god of scribes and writing and was thought to have invented letters. Perhaps for this reason the Egyptians named the first letter of their alphabet "hb", 'ibis'. His name, too, was represented by a hieroglyph of an ibis; this symbol may be one of the very earliest hieroglyphs known. Discussions of the ibis' position and significance in the Egyptian alphabet was undertaken by the Greeks, particularly Plutarch, who seems to have misunderstood the symbol. He equated the symbol with the Greek and Latin letter A, comparing the shape of a newly-hatched ibis to a triangle.

The Greek historian Herodotus relates a tale that the ibis prevents the arrival of 'winged serpents' who fly towards Egypt from Arabia. The ibises meet and destroy these serpents, and this is suggested as the reason the Egyptians revere the birds.

The ibis makes several appearances in the “Book of Thoth”, a work from the Greco-Roman period concerning initiation into the House of Life. It takes the form of a conversation between Master and Disciple, and at one point has the Disciple proclaim, 'I shall raise my hand to the great, great, great one, and jubilate to the ibis who tramples the turtle.' The students of the House of Life themselves may be called 'ibises' too.

Whilst references to the ibis as a bird in stories and myths are not common, many stories abound about Thoth, he of the ibis head. Perhaps the best known story in which he features is that in which Isis brought Osiris back to life and conceived a child; it was Thoth's spells which enabled her to do so. Thoth is also known for retrieving the Eye of Ra when it took the form of Tefnut and escaped into Nubia.

29 Houlihan, p. 28.
32 Ibid., p. 2.
33 Gaudard, p. 67.
36 V. Ions, Egyptian Mythology, (New York, 1982), p. 84.
As well as stories and myths, we have also recovered textual records of real ibises; we have papyri recording the transport of mummified sacred ibises from the Fayum region to Tuna al-Gebel for interment at a special burial site.37

**Role in Religion**

Herodotus reported the Egyptians as being scrupulous and sincere in their religious convictions, despite the usual Greek aversion to what they saw as animal worship. Ibises and other animals were venerated not simply as animals, but as 'the abodes of gods'.38 The votive animal mummies were likely not intrinsically divine; their importance was as a gift to the god, rather than an object of worship itself.39

The creation theory of the city of Hermopolis has several variants, all connected with the local 'primeval mound' in the sacred lake Sea of the Two Knives. This so-called Isle of Flames was where an egg was laid, in some versions by an ibis, which hatched to reveal Ra who was to create the world.40 This mound was also supposed to be the place where Thoth transformed himself entirely into the shape of an ibis.41

The earliest religious functions of Thoth the ibis-headed god were funereal; in the Pyramid Texts he is presented as a god 'willing to be the helper of the deceased kings'.42 From the very beginning of the New Kingdom tombs depicted the 'weighing of the heart' scene: the deceased is brought into the Hall of Judgement by Anubus, his heart placed in the balance to be weighed against the feather of Truth, and the ibis-headed version of Thoth writes down the verdict.43

As one of Thoth's sacred animals, along with the baboon, ibises became extremely common as votive offerings to the god. As discussed above, millions of ibises were bred, mummified, and dedicated to him in special sacred locations. It seems likely that, long before Herodotus wrote of Hermopolis, all dead sacred ibises were brought to that town for interment, but by his time just those birds used in prominent rituals were buried there. The town became the centre of the ibis cult.44

Ibises were closely connected with kingship and royal rituals, and with the divine nature of Egyptian royalty. Special ibises with specific markings would be released into the air to announce a

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37 Kessler & el Halim Nur el-Din, p. 125.
40 Ions, p. 29.
41 Kessler & el Halim Nur el-Din, p. 129.
42 Budge, p. 400.
43 Lurker, p. 128.
44 Kessler & el Halim Nur el-Din, p. 124.
coronation, and the birds were displayed on standard-poles as part of the Sed-festival, the yearly renewal festival of the king; on these occasions living ibises might also be displayed. The king was thought to transform himself into an ibis in order to become unified with the sun god. The ibis' visible cycle of life guaranteed the immortality of the king and gods of Egypt.45

**Conclusion**

The African Sacred Ibis was a common sight throughout ancient Egypt, both as a living part of the natural environment and as a symbol of something greater. As the symbol of and gift to Thoth it held religious significance, and perhaps because of that, as well as Thoth's association with scribes and writing, it also became a key part of the Egyptian alphabet. The sacred ibis was bred in special locations with care and attention, and after death was mummified and treated with as much delicacy as a human and buried at sacred sites. The bird was recreated as paintings, reliefs, and jewellery. It carried meanings or implications of birth and regeneration due to the Hermopolis creation story, and of protection as demonstrated in Herodotus' story of the flying serpents. The sacred ibis is now perhaps one of the most widely recognised animals associated with ancient Egypt, and although it is extinct in that country now, the ibis can still be found in many other countries around the world.

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