

THE DESERT BIRDS OF ANCIENT GEBEL EL-SILSILA

John Wyatt teams up with **Maria Nilsson** and **John Ward** to reveal for the first time the results of their investigation of over thirty different bird images found carved on the rocks at this important Egyptian quarry site.



Readers of *AE* will already know about many of the exciting discoveries made by Maria Nilsson, John Ward and their team at Gebel el-Silsila from their recent series of articles. Further research has been on-going off-site, during and before the lock-down, with an investigation of 102 photographic images of 34 possible bird depictions found there. What were those species? Why did the ancient Egyptians choose to depict these particular birds? Did they differ from the species depicted at other known sites to the north? What do they tell us about the various habitats once existing around the quarries throughout the seasons? What further information might they reveal about the lives of the people who lived and worked there?

Gebel el-Silsila

This archaeological site, covering some thirty square kilometres, is situated on both sides of the River Nile some 55 km south of Edfu. The 104 quarries date from at least the Middle Kingdom well into Graeco-Roman times and are known to have provided sandstone for almost all of ancient Egypt's greatest temples. This area has been one of the driest and sunniest places in Egypt for at least 4,500 years and is correctly classified as having a hot desert climate. Annual rainfall averages out as less than 1 mm although many years may pass between showers. It is not therefore surprising that almost all the reliefs of birds (none appear to have ever been painted) are weathered or otherwise damaged, making absolute identification rarely possible. The fact that they were also mostly done simply, quickly, not always accurately and with corrections, made for primarily industrial rather than artistic purposes, has

also added to that difficulty. Nevertheless, some diagnostic features do provide enough information to enable the identification of probable bird families and even, occasionally, individual species.

Ostriches

The preferred habitats of ostriches are open short-grass plains and arid semi-deserts. They are almost exclusively vegetarian but may eat locusts, grasshoppers and small reptiles when available. They get most of the liquid they need from what they eat so are not dependent on usual



water sources. The most likely species in ancient Egypt would have been the North African race of Common Ostrich, *Struthio camelus camelus* (see opposite bottom right), but the now extinct Arabian race, *S. c. syriacus*, could also have occurred in the Eastern Desert. The blue-skinned Somali Ostrich, *Struthio molybdophanes* (centre right) might also have reached this far north in the past, although there is as yet no firm evidence to support this. Somali Ostriches do, however, feature in tribute/offering scenes elsewhere.

At least two ways of portraying probable ostriches may have been used at Gebel el-Silsila. In Figures 1 and 2 (see top and bottom, right), quarry marks dating back to the early Roman Period, the bird has a very simplistic, horizontal, oval body with short, stubby tail; centrally situated, long, relatively thin legs; perhaps with two-toed feet; long, fairly thick neck; and a wedge-shaped head/bill. Whether there was any indication of a wing on the side of the body is hard to determine. A large, bulky-looking bird was clearly intended by the artist. There are, however, sufficient anomalies to make a categorical identification of ostrich difficult. Other species have been considered, such as storks, cranes, the larger bustards and the Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopicus*, but on the balance of probabilities, the provisional identification of the bird in these two images is Common Ostrich of the race *camelus* with probably a female being intended because of the shorter, less bushy tail.



OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP: The narrowest point between escarpments on Lower Nile at Gebel el-Silsila.
Photo: Maria Nilsson

BOTTOM: A male Common Ostrich (*Struthio camelus camelus*)
Photo: MathKnight
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THIS PAGE

TOP and BOTTOM (Figures 1 and 2):
Two Roman Period quarry marks with depictions of ostrich likely to represent a female Common Ostrich.
Photos: Maria Nilsson

CENTRE: The Somali Ostrich (*Struthio molybdophanes*).
Photo: David Bygott,
CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikicommons



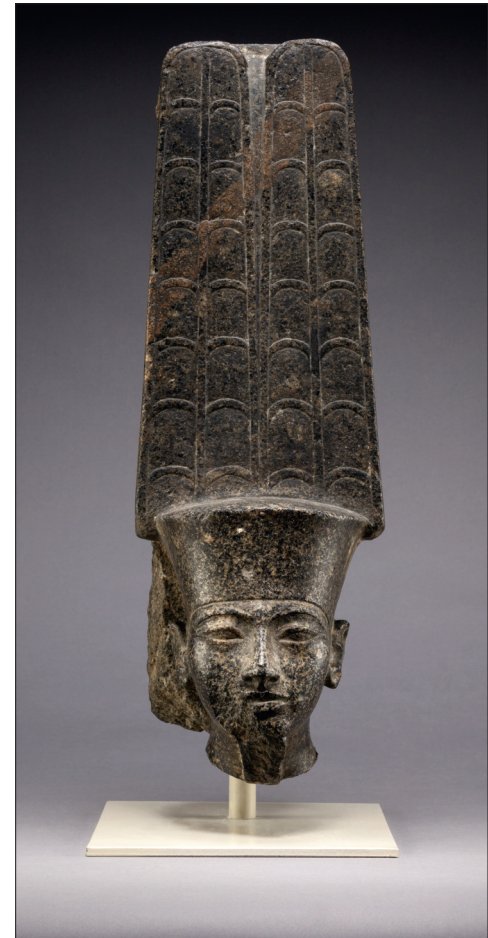
TOP LEFT (Figure 3)
 A third image of an ostrich, most likely representing a male Common Ostrich.
 Photo: Maria Nilsson

TOP RIGHT
 A New Kingdom head of Amun or Amun-Ra, wearing his double ostrich feather headdress. At Gebel el-Silsila he may be depicted as a complete ostrich.
 Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA)

BELOW
 Ma'at, Goddess of Truth, Justice, Morality and Balance, wearing her ostrich feather, from the Tomb of Nefertari.
 Photo: Angela Warlow

The second method of portrayal as in Figure 3 (*above left*), part of a rock art scene from the Middle Kingdom, was slightly more sophisticated, although there were again errors in neck, leg and tail lengths, the presence of a rear-pointing toe, and the size of the head/bill. However, the features and overall depiction of a bulky bird in part-display with raised wings suggests a male ostrich. Most bustards rarely raise their wings in display but use their tails (the larger species), necks, crests and chest feathers instead.

A few further points need to be made from these three pictures. Figures 1 and 2 seem to show a female ostrich, standing on or above what could be a Horned



Viper, *Cerastes cerastes*, still a common venomous snake in the area. Figure 3 by contrast depicts a victorious male ostrich standing on or above a horned quadruped. Ostriches do not eat large snakes but will kill them to protect themselves and their chicks. A rebus of the bird, snake and *ankh*-sign, as in Figure 2,



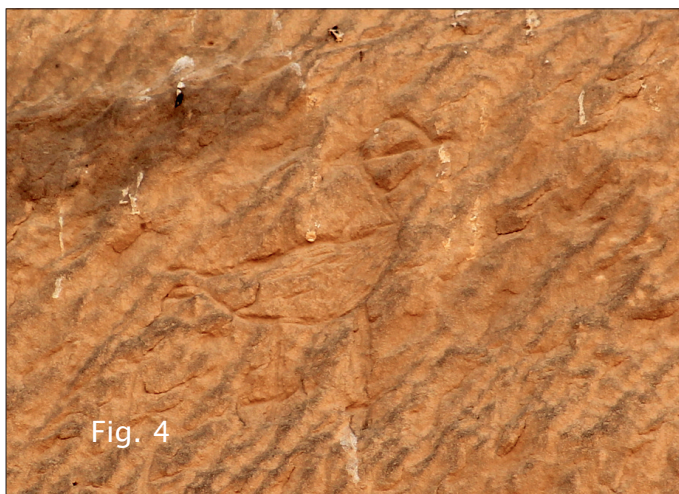


Fig. 4

therefore seems to indicate a deity 'safe-guarding' and 'keeping alive' the workers. Furthermore, a Greek inscription from this particular site describes Amun as "the great god of the quarry" so he was almost certainly that deity, and is usually depicted wearing a tall twin-plumed crown of male ostrich feathers (*see opposite, top right*). But was he here, especially in Figure 3, being depicted as the complete bird? Figures 1 and 2 apparently indicate a female ostrich, so were these artistic errors (not unknown in Graeco-Roman times), or an attempt to portray a guardian goddess in addition to the god Amun? The Greek, Roman and modern Goddesses of Justice – Themis and Dike, Iustitia and Lady Justice respectively – are all usually depicted carrying weighing scales, wearing a sword and standing on a snake representing evil and injustice. The similarities to the earlier Ma'at (the ancient Egyptian Goddess of Truth, Justice, Morality and Balance – *shown opposite, bottom*), are obvious. Her usual symbol is the ostrich feather of truth, albeit almost always from a male bird; is it possible that here she is also depicted as a complete ostrich? We may never know.

Coursers

Figure 4 (*top left*) depicts what appears to be a medium-sized bird with the following: a round head; medium length, slightly de-curved bill; possibly large eye; broad eye-stripe from almost the base of the bill to the nape; thin neck; slightly downward sloping body; no breast band; a short tail broken by extended wing-tips; and relatively long, thin legs situated towards the rear of the body. A second pair of what could also be legs at the front of the body is confusing but possibly an artist's correction, as elsewhere in these quarries, or an indication that the bird was being shown walking. Most of these features, but not all, point towards a member of the *Cursorius* or *Rhinoptilus* genera of the family *Glareolidae* – the Coursers – which are plover-like birds of arid regions in Africa and South Asia, feeding mainly on insects, spiders and occasionally seeds. If this identification is correct, this would be the first known evidence that Coursers occurred in ancient Egypt. It would also raise the question as to why a species from this family was actually selected for depiction. A clue may lie in just one small aspect of familial behaviour: they often exploit burnt areas at dawn or dusk, so were they



TOP LEFT (Figure 4): Possibly a representation of a species of Courser (family *Glareolidae*).
Photo: Maria Nilsson.

TOP RIGHT: A cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*).
Photo: Frank Vassen CC BY SA 2.0 via Wikicommons

ABOVE: Temminck's Courser (*Cursorius temminckii*).
Photo: Bernard Dupont CC BY SA 2.0 via Wikicommons

seen, like the *Benu*-bird and Phoenix, as rising from the ashes or being reborn?

Four species of the genus *Cursorius* and three of the genus *Rhinoptilus* breed in Africa and all of the latter can probably be discounted from consideration here because of their larger size, breast bands, and different facial markings. Burchell's Courser, *Cursorius rufus*, can also be discounted because of its extremely southern distribution. This leaves as candidates: Cream-coloured Courser, *Cursorius cursor cursor* (*top right*), which still breeds and winters in Egypt and North Africa; Somali Courser, *Cursorius somalensis*; and Temminck's Courser, *Cursorius temminckii temminckii* (*above*). Somali Courser now occurs in Eritrea, Eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and South-east South Sudan southwards and possibly never extended as far north as Egypt. Temminck's Courser does, however, breed from Senegal to Ethiopia



TOP (Figure 5): Possibly a representation of a species of Pratincole. Nearby tool-marks do cause some confusion. Photo: Maria Nilsson

CENTRE: Collared Pratincole (*Glaucopis pratincola*). Photo: Steve Garvie CC BY SA 2.0 via Wikicommons

ABOVE: Black-winged Pratincole (*Glaucopis nordmanni*). Photo: Derek Keats CC BY SA 2.0 via Wikicommons

and, being a migrant, might have reached Southern Egypt in the past, although that is largely conjecture. Nevertheless, the length and width of the eye-stripe in the Gebel el-Silsila depiction do suggest this species rather than the more likely Cream-coloured Courser, so both remain as possible alternative identifications.

Pratincoles

Pratincoles are closely related to coursers and so are discussed here although they are often found in flat, open areas close to water and are not therefore true desert species. They feed on insects and behave like terns or swallows in the air and plovers on the ground. One possible example, Figure 5 (*top left*), comes from the main quarry, Quarry 34, but it is corrupted and confused by surrounding tool-marks so is capable of various interpretations of which a *Ba*-bird is one. Much more work needs to be done on this but the depiction initially appears to show a bird with: a somewhat upright stance; rounded head with possible open de-curved bill; slightly extended neck; long thin body; long tail/wings with stubby ends; a pair of shortish legs extending from the rear part of the body, and situated almost in line with the back of the neck; and feet with three forward toes, and without the hind toe found in pratincoles. The level of accuracy for depicting feet at Gebel el-Silsila was, however, never high. The face of the bird is distorted and what this is trying to indicate (sexual dimorphism, a facial/throat marking or a crest?) remains unclear.

However, in spite of the above and inconsistencies in the feet and tail, the depiction does suggest the outline of a standing pratincole. Only two species of African pratincole could have occurred in ancient Egypt: Collared or Red-winged Pratincole, *Glaucopis pratincola* (*centre left*); and Black-winged Pratincole, *Glaucopis nordmanni* (*bottom left*). The latter is a passage migrant heading south in autumn and returning north each spring. The former is still a summer visitor to Egypt from the south and breeds colonially, so therefore the more likely to have been present and seen regularly in the past. It is also known as ‘the swallow of the marsh’ and examples of this species having being used to depict the swallow hieroglyph (Gardiner G36) are



known from the Ramesseum and Medinet Habu at Thebes. The goddess Isis was also depicted as a ‘swallow’ so this could be a reference to her. There is insufficient evidence from the Gebel el-Silsila depictions at present to make a positive identification but, if a pratincole was intended, Collared Pratincole would appear the more likely being more common, depicted elsewhere and present for much longer each summer.

Bustards

Figure 6 (right, with details shown below) depicts an undecorated obelisk with two similar-looking ground-loving birds standing on either side of it, with tails fanned and facing each other. They appear to be of similar, medium to medium-large size, though much smaller and less bulky than an ostrich, and to have rounded heads; narrow slightly curved necks; quite long bodies/tails; fanned tails; medium length legs, situated towards the front of the bodies in line with the necks; and three forward-facing toes on each foot. There is an apparent difference in the head/bill shapes of the two birds which might be intentional, accidental, or the result of different styles. Almost all the above features, especially the three-toed feet and fanned tails, point towards these birds being possible bustards of the family *Otididae*.

Both Little Bustard, *Tetrax tetrax orientalis*, and just possibly Great Bustard, *Otis tarda tarda*, used to be winter visitors to the Delta until the mid-1800s AD, and probably appeared in ancient times, although there is no proof of this. They no longer occur. Both Houbara and Macqueen’s Bustards (*Chlamydotis undulata undulata* and *C. macqueenii* respectively – see *overleaf*) are still extant patchily in Egypt and inhabit arid, open, sometimes stony, sub-deserts and plains, feeding on both vegetable matter and insects/small reptiles. Until now, any evidence of a possible presence in ancient times has been lacking.



Fig. 6



TOP (Figure 6): A depiction of an undecorated obelisk flanked by two birds, possibly species of bustard.

CENTRE and RIGHT: Two details of the Figure 6 depiction showing the two birds in close-up. There are minor differences between the two in the shapes of the head and bill which could be intentional, accidental or due to different styles.

Photos: Maria Nilsson



ed. MacQueen's Bustard (*centre left*) was considered to be only a race of Houbara Bustard (*top left*) until recently, but now has full species status. More interestingly, the dividing line between the two species in Egypt was originally the river Nile, with the Houbara Bustard to the west and MacQueen's Bustard to the east. The males of both species rarely fan their tails in display, although the females may do so. Both sexes, however, do so when alarmed or defending their breeding territories or protecting themselves from predators. The depictions of both birds here do not appear to show any raised neck feathers or particular neck features, although the right hand bird might possibly do so. They are not therefore shown as displaying males, so could be non-breeding males or females.

But why two birds on opposite sides of an obelisk, and what was the intended symbolism, if any, of that? Was the obelisk acting as some sort of barrier or boundary – such as the Nile – between the birds? Had the original artist perhaps noticed that the two local species, separated by the Nile, were different in colouring, voice and behaviour, although otherwise very similar, and wished to record that? We may never know.

However, it is also possible that bustards, like ostriches, were portrayed in two different ways at Gebel el-Silsila. The bird in Figure 7 (*opposite top and centre*), from the nearby Quarry 24, is hard to distinguish from its background but appears to have an oval body, fanned tail, quite long legs, puffed-up neck with raised feathers pointing backwards and a wedge-shaped head with possible crown feathers. It could therefore be an alarmed male and either a Houbara or MacQueen's Bustard. The less rounded head could point towards the latter. The wedged head in the right hand bird in Figure 6 might therefore, after all, have been deliberate to suggest also a MacQueen's Bustard.

Other potential bustards in ancient Egypt might have been the large Arabian Bustard, *Ardeotis arabs* and the slightly smaller Nubian Bustard, *Neotis nuba nuba*, for which again there is no current evidence. Both of these are now sub-Saharan species living on desert fringes, including in north-central Sudan. As its crest and upper throat feathers are not always apparent, the Nubian Bustard gives the impression of having the roundest head of all the bustards and is also known to fan its tail in display and alarm. It cannot therefore be ruled out from being the Gebel el-Silsila bird. However it is a bigger, heavier-looking species than the one depict-

Conclusions

Desert bird species are depicted at Gebel el-Silsila in greater numbers than at any other known Egyptian site to date, perhaps because, being situated at one of the narrowest points of the Nile Valley, there was greater accessibility to both the Western and Eastern Deserts and their wildlife. While ostrich,

TOP

The Houbara Bustard
(*Chlamydotis undulata*).
Photo: Shankar S, CC BY SA 2.0
via Wikicommons

ABOVE

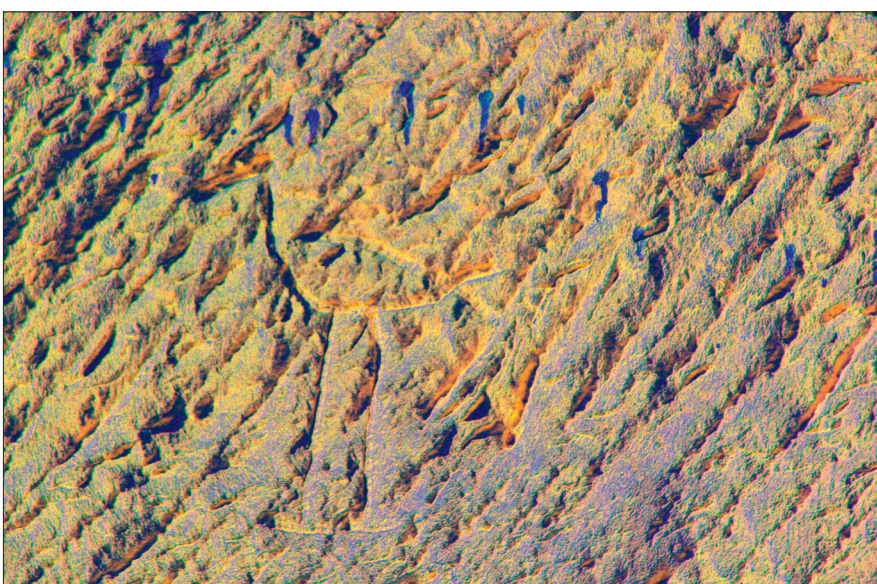
MacQueen's Bustard
(*Chlamydotis macqueenii*).
Photo: Kannan AS, CC BY-SA
3.0 via Wikicommons

Collared Pratincole and larger bustards were known from depictions elsewhere, those of the possible Houbara and Macqueen's Bustards and any Courser at Gebel el-Silsila could be the first ever evidence for their presence in ancient Egypt. The on-going examination of the other bird families depicted at the site has revealed further new species not depicted anywhere else, thus confirming the importance of the Gebel el-Silsila to Egypt's ornithological record. One group of desert birds depicted elsewhere but not yet found at Gebel el-Silsila, is the sandgrouse (*shown below*). Further research will be necessary to check these have not been over-looked and, if none are found, why they were not included.

It is difficult to deduce from the desert bird images alone the particular purpose for which they were chosen for depiction, but a Peacock in Quarry 34 might indicate that some were food items, and the frequency of falcons and other birds of prey, together with a probable Sacred Ibis, suggests possible links to deities, as previously suggested by Maria and John. The possibility that Amun and/or Ma'at are here depicted as complete ostriches would need to be reconsidered in that wider context. Watch this space!

John Wyatt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward

John Wyatt is an ornithologist and wildlife specialist, and has recently written articles for AE on Sobek and Anubis (AE116 and AE119). Maria Nilsson and John Ward are also regular AE contributors, sharing their discoveries at Gebel el-Silsila in a series of articles that began in AE113 and continues on page 34.



TOP RIGHT (Figure 7): This image is difficult to make out, but might represent an alarmed male Houbara or MacQueen's Bustard.

CENTRE RIGHT: Another version of Figure 7 using D-stretch software to enhance the image and make it clearer to see.

Photos: Maria Nilsson

BOTTOM RIGHT: Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*), which was thought to have become extinct in Egypt in the 1980s but was recently rediscovered in Minya province.

Photo: Rudraksha Chodankar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikicommons