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## **The Writing of the Birds. Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs Before and After the Founding of Alexandria<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** As Okasha El Daly has highlighted, *qalam al-Tuyur* “script of the birds” is one of the Arabic names used by the writers of the Ayyubid period and earlier to describe ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The name may reflect the regular choice of Nile birds as signs for several consonants in the Ancient Egyptian language, such as the owl for “m”. However, the term also finds an ancestor in a rarer practice of hieroglyph users centuries earlier. From the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods and before, cursive manuscripts have preserved a list of sounds in the ancient Egyptian language, in the sequence used for the alphabet in South Arabian scripts known in Arabia before Arabic. The first “letter” in the hieroglyphic version is the ibis, the bird of Thoth, that is, of knowledge, wisdom and writing. In this paper I consider the research of recent decades into the Arabian connections to this “bird alphabet”.

**KEY-WORDS:** hieroglyphs, Egypt, Alexandria, archaeology, birds

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## 1. Egyptological sources beyond traditional Egyptology

Whether in our first year at school, or in our last year of university teaching, as life-long learners we engage with both empirical details, and frameworks of thought. In the history of ideas, we might borrow the names “philology” for the attentive study of the details, and “philosophy” for traditions of theoretical thinking.<sup>2</sup>As the classical Arabic tradition demonstrates in the wide scope of its enquiry and of its output, the quest for knowledge must combine both directions of research in order to move forward.<sup>3</sup>Yet in the study of ancient history and archaeology, often we have looked only for details, or only for big ideas, each coming generation faces the task to combine both, requiring all the resources that a global library can provide, beyond dictionaries or encyclopaedias or the internet alone. At Alexandria, I would like to recall certain details from the last two decades of Egyptological study, with one eye on wider historical landscapes. I start from an ideal model for this kind of historical combination, the dissertation by Okasha El Daly, published ten years ago, on studies of ancient Egypt by Arab scholars from the early Islamic Caliphate to Mamluk.<sup>4</sup> El Daly demonstrates how strong interest in ancient Egypt flourished among Muslim scholars throughout the centuries of Islam, long before the decipherment of hieroglyphs in the early nineteenth century. Egyptology was not created by Europeans. I would reinforce this message with an important point of historical research by Anouar Louca. In the European tradition, historians of Egyptology have disagreed over who first decoded hieroglyphs in the nineteenth century: the English say it was the Englishman Thomas Young, the French say it was the Frenchman Jean-Francois Champollion, and the Germans remind them that the final stages of understanding the language were completed by the Germans Richard Lepsius and Adolf Erman.<sup>5</sup> However, Louca pointed out that the first of these Europeans to know the language, and from there to recognise how the hieroglyphic script worked was Champollion - and that his teacher in language was an Egyptian living in Paris, Father Yuhanna Chiftigi.<sup>6</sup> So the hieroglyphs were decoded by a combination of skills and resources that came together from the meeting of Egyptians and Europeans in cities with the funds and the historical traditions to support large libraries, collections for research, and networks of knowledge-seekers.

A particular highlight of the book by Okasha El Daly is his extensive coverage of the long list of writers known to have written in Arabic about those periods of Egyptian history that precede the Greeks and Romans. Beyond each known author and each of the surviving manuscripts, dozens of other authors and their works are cited, which are lost to us, or at least not yet rediscovered. Strikingly, in the list of authors and works at the end of his book, most extant manuscripts date not to the time of the author, but to later centuries, including copies from the 16th to 19th centuries AD, the period of Ottoman rule over Egypt.<sup>7</sup> In Egyptology, we have usually narrated in Orientalist mode how a science of Egyptology emerged within Europe out of a

<sup>2</sup>Following the tenth axiom of G. Vico, *La nuovascienza*, 1725/1744; on this approach in the writings of Vico and of Edward Said, see Hussein (2004), 143-144.

<sup>3</sup>Cf e.g. Rushid and Morelon (1996).

<sup>4</sup>El Daly (2005).

<sup>5</sup>Schenkel (2012).

<sup>6</sup>Louca (2006).

<sup>7</sup>El Daly (2005), Appendix 3, 185-194.

stagnant and ignorant age. In economic history, it may be that Egypt was in recession during the years when the French and English attempted to conquer Egypt between AD 1798 and 1807. However, preceding and following decades included the independent and powerful regimes of Ali Bey and Muhammad Ali, and so the image of unrelieved early modern poverty seems exaggerated.<sup>8</sup> In intellectual history, particularly the later of those manuscript copies indicate an uninterrupted interest in the topic of the pre-Greek past, continuing a manuscript tradition which overlaps with the start of European Egyptological research. Successive copyists of Abu al-Qasim al-Iraqi *Kitab al-Aqalim* have turned the Horus falcon into a black crow, but these images are still clearly legible as hieroglyphs to an Egyptologist today. We can immediately read two of the five titled names of kingship, that identify the ruler as king Amen-em-hat II, who ruled Egypt around 1875 BC: the Horus name Heken-em-ma'at "he who is endowed with Ma'at", and throne-name Nub-kau-ra' "gold are/of the ka-spirits of Ra".<sup>9</sup> Earlier manuscript images were likely still more accurate. Already the example from Abu al-Qasim illustrates the characteristic prominence of hieroglyphs in the form of birds. In his chapter on script and decipherment, Okasha El Daly lists among the names for the hieroglyphic script in early Arabic writings by Muslim scholars one which captured my attention: *qalam al-Tuyur* "script of the birds". Dr El Daly notes to me the classic instance of this designation in the celebrated account of the pyramids by the early thirteenth century AD Ayyubid historian Abu Ja'far al-Idrisi. Idrisi there cited an earlier writer for the presence of inscriptions on the pyramids, written in *qalam al-Tuyur* "the script of birds".<sup>10</sup>

Although pyramids and hieroglyphs are two of the most familiar features in our modern picture of ancient Egypt, the connection between them requires some explanation here. For, while there are many inscriptions in chapels and walls around the pyramids, at Giza and at other sites, the architects of the large Old Kingdom pyramids seem to have avoided inscriptions directly on their surface, as if any writing would interrupt the astonishing purity and accuracy of their geometry - still perhaps the purest geometric forms in the history of architecture. However, even if inscriptions were cut onto the pyramids themselves in the time of their construction, in later centuries some were added, and would have been better preserved and more clearly visible at the time of Idrisi and the earlier Arab historians. The most famous person in ancient times to add inscriptions to Old Kingdom pyramids is Kha'mwaset, son of king Ramses II, who lived 1,400 years after Khufu and the architects of the Giza pyramids.<sup>11</sup> As the director of the Memphis temple of Ptah, Kha'mwaset was responsible for constructing new works for his father, and for these he often used the blocks from disused buildings, in a long and practical tradition of recycling, shared by most human societies.<sup>12</sup> However, Kha'mwaset was a pious man and did not wish to destroy the memory of his predecessors: so he had inscriptions cut on the monuments from which he took stone, to immortalise the names of their kings. Today a visitor can still make out part of the inscription on the granite lower casing of the third pyramid at Giza, for king Menkaura'. At Saqqara, archaeologists have restored the surface of the pyramid of king Wenis, where the hieroglyphs finely cut in the limestone are better preserved. There are no inscriptions on the walls inside the largest pyramids, which date to the early part of the Old Kingdom, but the interiors of the late Old

<sup>8</sup>Cuno (1992), 43-44; Raymond (1995), 52-53, 121-122.

<sup>9</sup> British Library MS Add 25724, folio 21b, in El-Daly (2005), fig. 21.

<sup>10</sup>Edition Haarmann (1991), 65, line 14.

<sup>11</sup>Gomaà (1973).

<sup>12</sup>Malek (1992).

Kingdom pyramids teem with hieroglyphs, which give the words spoken at the funeral of the king.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that these inscribed chambers of the late Old Kingdom were accessible during the early centuries of Islam: as regularly with Egyptian hieroglyphs throughout their history, all these inscriptions are full of signs in the form of birds, mainly to give a sound. Script of the birds indeed seems an ideal name.

El Daly has shown how Egyptologists need to become more attentive to the Arabic manuscript traditions that preceded them, and to accept the secondary place for European print languages in the future engagements with the Egyptian past. Gamal el-Ghitani offered them a way towards this relationship between different histories, in his pyramid-shaped account of a history of the pyramids, in which European Egyptology appears only marginally and as an anonymous presence.<sup>14</sup> His approach deftly reverses any foreign tendency to put the foreign first, and restores wider human relevance to the history of every part in the extraordinary past of Egypt.

## 2. Papyri from Saqqara and Tanis - late sequences of ancient Egyptian signs

We might start our enquiry at Saqqara, where the Step Pyramid, the earliest form of pyramid, was built in the Third Dynasty, about 2650 BC. Whenever we look at the archaeological sites at the edge of the desert, we can remember the lives of people in the majority of villages and cities, which may have been not at the Saharan fringe, but down in the floodplain, closer to the Nile river.<sup>15</sup> In recalling the range of ancient settlement locations, we may better appreciate the different mix of human experience in each of them. The Old Kingdom pyramids at Giza, Abusir, Saqqara, and Dahshur are a monumental reflection of an ancient concentration of power, population and palace arts, the centre or city which, from the New Kingdom at least, adopted the name of the Saqqara cult-centre for the Sixth Dynasty king Pepy I Men-nefer-Pepy “the pyramid enduring and beautiful of Pepy” – Memphis is the Greek version of the shortened version Mennefer.<sup>16</sup> Today we use the word “capital city” for such phenomena, but, at least in English, the term “capital” is so closely tied to modern nation-states, that it does not seem well suited to the conditions and human relations in other societies. A more appropriate term might be the ancient Greek metropolis - a cosmopolitan fusion of power and art, as Alexandria was in the age of the Ptolemies.<sup>17</sup> North of the Step Pyramid, from about 600 BC onwards, temples were built in front of catacombs of mummified animals and birds. In the 1960s and 1970s, an Egypt Exploration Society mission directed by Brian Emery, Harry Smith and Geoffrey Martin excavated in this area, and found hundreds of papyri in Greek, Aramaic, and in the Egyptian scripts demotic, hieratic and hieroglyphic.<sup>18</sup> Most of the dated papyri belong to the fourth century BC, the age of Aristotle, when the last Pharaonic dynasties kept Egypt free from both Persian and Greek domination for sixty years.

<sup>13</sup>English introduction and translation Allen (2005).

<sup>14</sup>al-Ghitani (1994); see commentary in El-Desouky(2004).

<sup>15</sup>Jeffreys (2007).

<sup>16</sup>Jeffreys (1985); Jeffreys (1998).

<sup>17</sup>On the cosmopolitan character of Alexandria in ancient times as documented through its museum collections, see Hassan (2002), and, into recent times, Ghoneim (1996), Awad (1996), and the critical reflections in Butler (2007) and Halim (2013); the term metropolis is explored in relation to ancient Egypt by Franke (2002).

<sup>18</sup>Smith (1974), Smith and Tait (1983), Segal (1983).

In 1983, Harry Smith and John Tait completed the first volume in the publication of these finds, selecting twenty-seven fragmentary papyri. Their final item is from the middle of a papyrus roll, bearing two teaching compositions of exceptional interest for the study of scripts in Egypt and beyond. In the first exercise, the sounds of the ancient Egyptian language – a close relative of Arabic within one of the broad language families of Africa<sup>19</sup> – are each aligned with one species of bird and one species of plant, on the pattern “the ibis (*hb*) is on the ebony-tree (*hbny*)”, “the goose (*smn*) is at the thorn-bush (*sry*)”. In the second exercise, the sounds are aligned with different birds and cities, inside and outside Egypt, on the pattern “a dove (*mnw*) went to Memphis (*mn-nfr*)”, “a phoenix (*bnw*) went to Babylon (*bbl*)”, perhaps in the sense “a bird flew home to its home-town”. Only twelve alignments are preserved in the first exercise, only five in the second, and so the two fragmentary series share only the letter d. However, that single item is enough to anchor them in one sequence, which then connects the Saqqara papyrus to another precious broken papyrus, found in the Eastern Delta at San al-Hagar.

San al-Hagar is the metropolis of Egypt founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC, but this particular manuscript comes from a group of papyri written over 1,100 years later, in the period of Roman rule, the age of the historian Plutarch and Roman emperors such as Hadrian.<sup>20</sup> The group of papyri was found in a house in the city, along with a variety of objects in Egyptian and Hellenistic style.<sup>21</sup> The papyri only survived the wet Delta soil because the house was burnt, and the intense heat carbonised them in their storage baskets in the cellar under the stairs. Just as the papyri from the Saqqara cemeteries reflect the many languages of cosmopolitan Memphis, the San al-Hagar manuscripts include writings in Greek and in the Egyptian scripts demotic, hieratic and hieroglyphic. In 1889, the excavation director Flinders Petrie and the philologist Francis Griffith published the two most legible hieroglyphic papyri, which contain compendia of knowledge about topics such as geography, astronomy, mythology.<sup>22</sup> One of them includes a page directly relevant to our topic - language and script. Reading as usual in Egyptian from right to left, the columns of writing present a selection of hieroglyphic signs, each conveying a single “consonantal” sound, in the manner of Arabic letters: on each line, the hieroglyph is followed by its more cursive hieratic form, and then an explanation of the sign. For example, the sign “r” in hieroglyphic and hieratic forms is followed by identification as “mouth of a person”. The sequence of sounds in this table is the same as the sequence on the Saqqara birds papyrus, and enough of that sequence can now be put together to allow us to identify it. The result might surprise someone used to treating European alphabets as a norm:

\* the overall sequence is not Greek *alpha-beta-gamma-delta*

\*and it is not Latin *A-B-C-D*

Instead, as other researchers have pointed out, the sequence has its first home, outside Egypt but in the opposite direction, centuries before writers at Saqqara and San al-Hagar tried applying it to the ancient Egyptian language in the hieroglyphic script. It is the letter sequence of South Arabia:

from left to right in Latinised form: h r ḥ m w s r b š k n gh ḏ p ‘ayin g ḥ d y q

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<sup>19</sup> Blench (2006).

<sup>20</sup> For recent excavations at the site, see Brissaud and Zivie-Coche (1998, 2000). Into the Fatimid period, Tanis is celebrated as port of arrival for the hero in one of the *maqamat* of al-Hariri of Basra, no.41 al-Tanisiya.

<sup>21</sup> Petrie (1885), 41-50.

<sup>22</sup> Petrie and Griffith (1889).

from right to left in classical Arabic:<sup>23</sup> قیدخگعجغهرحموسریشکن

The most famous of the ancient South Arabian kingdoms is Saba, but Joachim Quack has argued that particular phonetic features of the Saqqara-San al-Hagar sequence are found in Ma'in, in the Wadi Jawf northwest of Saba.<sup>24</sup> These territories supplied large regions of Asia, Africa, and then Europe with vast quantities of incense, in long-distance trade routes through the Hegaz to Jordan and Gaza, and across the Red Sea to the Nile river ports Qift and Qena. Alexandria was the busy hub at the entry of this Asian and African trade into the Mediterranean worlds of Greek, Latin, Phoenician/Punic and other traditions. This trade is given a human touch, with names and life-story, in one further extraordinary find from Egypt, now preserved in the Egyptian Museum Cairo: the sarcophagus of Zayd'il bin Zayd, a trader from Ma'in. Thirty years ago, Abdel Monem Abdel Haleem Sayed of Alexandria University established a new translation of its inscription, where we read that "Zayd'il bin Zayd of the clan Zyren ... imported myrrh and incense for the temples of Egypt in the days of Ptolemy son of Ptolemy", and that he died and was buried in Egypt at the Serapeum.<sup>25</sup> From the reference to Ptolemy son of Ptolemy, this large-scale, long-distance trader from Ma'in in South Arabia was active in Egypt during the heyday of Alexandria and its library, in the period between the Saqqara birds papyrus and the San al-Hagar sign papyrus.

### 3. The birds chosen for letters

Returning to the Saqqara papyrus, we can review the birds chosen for the sounds in the South Arabian sequence, to see how each species relates to the use of signs in the original ancient Egyptian inscriptions. On the surviving portion of the papyrus, not one of the examples of birds with cities, and of birds with plants, corresponds to the regular sound-sign of the hieroglyphic script, as the following tabulation demonstrates.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, then, the Saqqara compiler played with uses from both script and art, rather than producing a simple or direct transfer of Egyptian sign usage into Arabian letter sequence.

<i>sound</i>	<i>bird: plants series</i>	<i>bird: cities series</i>	<i>regular hieroglyph</i>
h	ibis		shelter O4
r	<i>rd</i>		mouth D21
m		dove	owl G17
w	<i>wy</i>		quail-chick G43
s	goose		cloth S29 or door-bolt
O34			
b		phoenix	leg D58
k	cockerel		basket V31
n		vulture	water-line N35
p	quail		stool Q3
'ayin		song-bird (?)	arm D36

<sup>23</sup>From Farsi, using پ for p, and for hard گ.

<sup>24</sup>Quack (1993), updated with additional sources and discussion at (2003), with tabulation of sources at p.167 and summary of the Egyptian and South Arabian sequences at p.170.

<sup>25</sup>Sayed (1984).

<sup>26</sup>In this tabulation, the sound-signs are identified by their alphanumeric entry in the most widely-used Egyptological sign-list, in Gardiner (1957), 544-547.

ḥ	[incomplete]		lined circle (placenta?)
Aa1			
d	kite	kite	hand D46
q	sparrow		hill slope N29

The sequence starts with the ibis, ancient Egyptian *hb*. As Tait and Smith note in their edition of the Saqqara papyrus, the Greek writer Plutarch in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD also recorded that the Egyptian letter sequence began with the ibis. The ibis was used to depict Thoth, the divine force of wisdom, and this connection may be one reason why Late Period Egyptians were attracted to the South Arabian letter sequence in the first place. However, the diverse bird-life of Egypt included more than one species of ibis: the larger species is the Thoth bird, today named by scientists as *ibis sacer* “the sacred ibis”, while the smaller bird is the black ibis.<sup>27</sup> It is the black ibis, not the Thoth bird, which appears most often in hieroglyphic inscriptions, as it is used for the ancient Egyptian verb *gm* “to find”. The difference between the two species is small, and they may not be distinguishable in inscriptions without colour details. A more clearly distinct ibis species has feathers at the back of the head: this is used to write another pair of consonants, *alif* with *kha*, as in the first part of the name of king Akhenaten, and in the word *akh* “to be full of light” (Gardiner Sign-list G25).

For the consonant m, the Saqqara papyrus gives the bird *mnw*, “dove” or “pigeon”. The bird might have been as common in ancient as in modern Egypt, but it does not appear in use as a hieroglyph. The hieroglyphic script does, though, make use of a similar-sounding bird-name, ancient Egyptian *mnt* “swallow”, for the pair of consonants w+r, as in the ancient Egyptian word *wr* “grand” (Gardiner Sign-list G36). For understanding the choices by the Saqqara writer, it may be significant that this bird appears among the transformations of the human spirit in the afterlife, in the so-called Book of the Dead. Those transformations also sometimes include the goose, with mouth wide open, in the cackle that disrupts the dead silence at the start of time. The Saqqara writer chose for the letter s the word *smn* “goose” - of which there are so many varieties in the Egyptian countryside. Different species of geese and ducks are regular in hieroglyphic inscriptions for the pair of sounds s+*alif*, as in *sa* “son”, and as the determinative (the sign at the end of words) for a whole range of bird species (Gardiner Sign-list G38 white-fronted goose *Anseralbifrons*, G39 pintail duck *Dafilaacuta*). A deliberate difference from the regular pattern of writing is confirmed by other consonants in the series. The Saqqara papyrus writer has selected several names of birds, which are not found in hieroglyphs as sound-signs in the hieroglyphic script, and some of which are not attested as hieroglyphs at all (cockerel, song-bird):

*bnw* “phoenix” for b

*kymy* “cockerel” for k

*nr* “vulture” for n (the griffon vulture hieroglyph is used for *mwt* “mother”, and the head of this species is used for *nr* “fear”; for a separate species, the Egyptian vulture used in the script for *alif*, see below)

*p+* ‘*ayin+r*’ “quail” for p (in hieroglyphs, the quail chick is used regularly for w)

‘*anyny*’ “song-bird (?)” for ‘*ayin*’

*drt* “kite” for d (in hieroglyphs the kite-sign denotes the three consonants *tyw*; in the poetic visual arts, the piercing cry of the bird encouraged its use as image of Isis and Nephthys when they lament over their murdered brother Osiris)

<sup>27</sup>On bird species in relation to ancient Egyptian depictions, see Bailleul-LeSuer (2012).

*qsnw* “sparrow” for *q* (as Arabic *qaf*) (the sparrow sign is used in hieroglyphic script, not for a phonetic value, but as the end-of-word sign for words connected with trouble-making, such as ancient Egyptian *qsn* “difficult”).

Conversely, the Saqqara lists do not include some birds which do appear with the value of a single sound in almost every hieroglyphic inscription. For a sound corresponding in some part to *alifhamza*, the hieroglyphic script adopts the form of the Egyptian vulture (Gardiner Sign-list G1, the vulture species *Neophron percnopterus*, as opposed to the better known vulture species, the griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus*, Gardiner Sign-list G14). The absence of this hieroglyph is readily explained by the absence of the *alif* sound itself in these ancient Egyptian sound-lists which use the South Arabian alphabetic sequence. As South Arabian scripts include a sign for the sound *alif*, it is not clear to me why the ancient Egyptian writers excluded *alif* from their lists. Perhaps the omission is incidental, due only to the fragmentary condition of the papyri from Saqqara and Tanis. Possibly, though the sound was not considered an essential element for these Egyptian sound-lists at this phase in the history of the Egyptian language and scripts, when the most widespread spoken and written language was demotic. By contrast, the sound-lists in the South Arabian alphabetic sequence do include *m*, and yet the Saqqara writer chose to avoid a second widely used bird hieroglyph, the owl for the sound *m* (Gardiner Sign-list G17). In the plant list, the owl is replaced by a species not found in the hieroglyphic script at all, the dove (this part of the city list is not preserved). Evidently, one principle in choice of bird species is that the regular sign should not be used, perhaps as too obvious and so insufficiently poetic for this composition. A third bird hieroglyph, equally widely attested, is the quail chick *w* (Gardiner Sign-list G43). Possibly the unidentified *wy*-bird in the Saqqara list of birds on plants might be a quail chick. However, there it is said to be on the rose, where we might expect a species typical of a garden, whereas the habitat for the quail might more likely be the field. In sum, the dozen surviving examples from the two “alphabetic” series on the Saqqara papyrus include no certain instance of a bird species regularly used for one sound in the hieroglyphic script, in contrast to the several certain instances of bird species either used for other values, or not used as hieroglyphs at all. The composer of the two series seems to have drawn on less direct sources of imagery, in the move to populate trees and cities with bird life, even if the birds in the hieroglyphic script may have prompted this flight of imagination.

The earliest source for these sound sequences, is the fourth century BC Saqqara papyrus, from the century when Egypt moved from Thirtieth Dynasty rule to a final decade under Achaemenid Iran to the arrival of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great. The growth in trade would offer one stimulus for experiments in aligning the scripts from increasing volumes of connections, as between Memphis and Arabian cities. The same interregional economic horizon is the frame for a different experiment, expressed in the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the stelae set up for king Nakhtnebef (ca.380 - 363 BC) at the cities of Naukratis and Heracleion near Alexandria.<sup>28</sup> Here, the composer of the decree chose to spell out the sounds of words mainly in hieroglyphs that denote single sounds. Although the hieroglyphic script regularly includes 1-consonant signs, these are combined with signs for two and three sounds, and with signs that convey an idea. On these Nakhtnebef stelae, this flexible mixed system of signing gives way to a preference for the system of one sign for one sound, as found in second millennium BC scripts for Semitic languages in Syria and

<sup>28</sup>Yoyotte (2001); Bomhard (2012).



Lebanon, and their descendants in Phoenician and Arabic, and, on the northern side of the Mediterranean, in the Greek and Latin alphabets. Evidently the composers at the court of Nakhtnebef were responding creatively to their new wide script world.<sup>29</sup> Alongside the changes in government language and script, between Aramaic, Egyptian and Greek, the emergence of a south Arabian sequence in hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic Egyptian writings is a reminder that communication took place and changed also outside the palace and its offices. At the same time, within the attested ancient script world, the choice of birds as sound-markers seems a particular feature of Egyptian creative writing.<sup>30</sup> Further comparison with the archaeology and history of other literatures and arts may help define the particular contribution of each region, and the moments at which each found inspiration in the others.

#### 4. Birds as poetic imagery in ancient Egyptian painting and literature

In *Mantiq al-Tayr* “Conference of the Birds”, Farid al-Din ʿAttar relates a meeting of birds to select a ruler.<sup>31</sup> There the hoopoe, renowned as ambassador of Sulaiman to the queen of Saba/Sheba, encourages them to choose the Simurgh, a mythical Persian bird. To reach the home of the Simurgh, beyond Mount Qaf, the birds must cross seven valleys: quest, love, knowledge, peace, unity, wonder, and poverty. Thirty birds succeed in completing the journey, to see, at the end, his or her own image reflected in the Simurgh. Three thousand years earlier, and even farther beyond Mount Qaf, at Beni Hasan in Middle Egypt, the artists of the regional governor Khnumhotep created as microcosm of harmony a tree filled with different bird species.<sup>32</sup> The tree stands alongside an image of Khnumhotep, depicted at the exact moment of drawing tight the fish-trap, immediately above the opening to the space for eternal offerings to the spirit of the governor. A hoopoe is at rest in the tree, on the central axis of the offering-hall. Despite the distance in space and time, the tale and the painting share the central role assigned to the hoopoe. The Beni Hasan image thus hints at a world of meaning, not otherwise spelled out for us in ancient Egyptian writings.

From about 1500 BC onwards, ancient Egyptian manuscripts include depictions of the *ba* “soul” as a composite being, with human head to denote the main identity, and bird body to convey the primary attributes of free movement and belonging to the sky. For the bird species of the body, the ancient artists sometimes chose a vulture, sometimes a falcon. The hieroglyph for the pair of sounds *b+alif* is, instead, regularly, a jibiru (*Ephippiorhynchussenegalensis*, Gardiner Sign-list G29) throughout the history of the hieroglyphic script.<sup>33</sup> From the centuries before the first depictions of the *ba* as human-headed bird, a literary dialogue between an unnamed man and his *basoul* survives on a single papyrus, now preserved in the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection, Berlin.<sup>34</sup> The man is tired of life, and wants only the end, while the *basoul* tries to convince him to enjoy living and to leave death until its moment arrives. Their exchange of views ranges in tone across melancholy, humour, horror, bitterness, love of life, and sheer exhaustion, ending in two poems on life, among the most beautiful and powerful in any language. One has the refrain “Who do I speak to today?” paired with a catalogue of human evil:

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<sup>29</sup>Compare the observations already by Gunn (1943), 55.

<sup>30</sup>As argued by Quack (2003), 182-184, with particular reference to the *First Book of Cyranides*, a work attributed to a fourth-century AD Alexandria writer named as Harpocraton.

<sup>31</sup>English edition: Farid al-Attar (2005).

<sup>32</sup>Kamrin (1999).

<sup>33</sup>Beaux (2004).

<sup>34</sup>Allen (2011). The translations in this article are my own.

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“Who do I speak to today?  
I am burdened with misery, for lack of someone to trust  
Who do I speak to today?  
Strife has struck the land, there is no end to it”

The second contrasts its refrain “Death is in my sight today” with moments in life when we feel refreshed and revived:

“Death is in my sight today  
health to the sick,  
like going outdoors after grieving.  
Death is in my sight today  
like the scent of myrrh,  
like sitting under the sails on a windy day.”

The *ba* makes one last effort to convince him before terminating their argument with a declaration of brotherhood and patience:

“put your complaints on the pile,  
my own one, my brother.

...

when your body may touch the earth,  
and I may alight after you rest weary,  
so may we make a dwelling together.”

Here in words, as at Beni Hasan in the painting of the hoopoe, the Egyptian artist finds a way to express and resolve our life in images beyond the signs of a script. In the imagery of flying up and of alighting, perhaps we may find the inspiration for the Saqqara writer who saw hieroglyphs as a script of birds.

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S.Q.

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