

Original article

THE HIDDEN NEST OF HORUS THROUGH THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGIOUS TEXTS

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Abstract:

The paper addresses the nest of the child god Horus. According to religious texts, the nest of Horus was hidden by his mother, Isis, in the marshes of the Delta (Chemmis). The period of infancy of the child Horus was mysterious; it has not been highlighted well. The nest was hidden inside that dangerous place of Chemmis, and the child was raised and protected by his mother and by the help of other mother goddesses. Many religious texts revealed the role of the nest in creating, protecting, and regenerating the child god to be the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. Unfortunately, no illustrations were shown by the ancient Egyptian artists to the nest of Horus, neither on tomb walls nor temples. The paper addresses that hidden nest, depending mainly on texts, trying to answer and conclude why the ancient Egyptian artisans didn't clearly represent Horus as a falcon, nursing inside his sacred nest. It also sheds light on some figurative representations that may imagine the nest of Horus in order to estimate the idea.

1. Introduction

The representations of the Delta marshes (*3h-bit*)^(a), with all their diverse activities, were the most popular theme in tomb decoration from the old kingdom onwards [1-4]. Fishing and fowling scenes in the papyrus thickets of the swamps of Delta significantly affected different aspects of ancient Egyptian daily life as an essential part of the marsh's activities. These scenes were attested as early as the 4th dynasty and continued until the late period [5,6]. The tomb's owner was shown while boating in the marshland against a backdrop of papyrus plants among which small mammalian predators search for prey and the gathering of birds' care for their young^(b) [7-11]. Generally, the wild animals attacking bird nests were a key theme in the papyrus thickets, as the northern Delta lakes acted as a major refuge for many species of birds from the 2nd dynasty onwards [12-15]. The illustrated nests, fig. (1-a & b), might contain little birds or just eggs. Some birds were depicted while flying above the thickets in apparent disorder, some were shown attacking the mongooses or genets by pecking them [16], while others were sitting upon their nests, with the eggs below in an unusual posture, with their wings held out in front of their bodies [14,17-19]. Although these scenes might imitate the true nature and everyday life activities, they could have an important religious significance of the tomb representations, as the marshland, with its heavy thicket

papyrus, was the mythical place of birth, and of bringing up the child god Horus by his mother goddess Isis [20]. The child was hidden inside a nest in the marshes of the Delta to be protected from dangers. The image of a nest with chicks or eggs inside, being threatened by the attacks of different animals, represented the dangers that threatened the chicks during their nesting period and symbolized the various kinds of dangers that confronted the child god Horus during his nursing period in his nest in the marshes of the Delta [21]. The study aims to highlight an important notice that the ancient Egyptian artists depicted the falcon god Horus in the marshes of the Delta, whether alone or with his mother Isis, fig. (1-c). Still, they never represented the child god Horus -as a falcon- inside a nest. Was that on purpose or not?



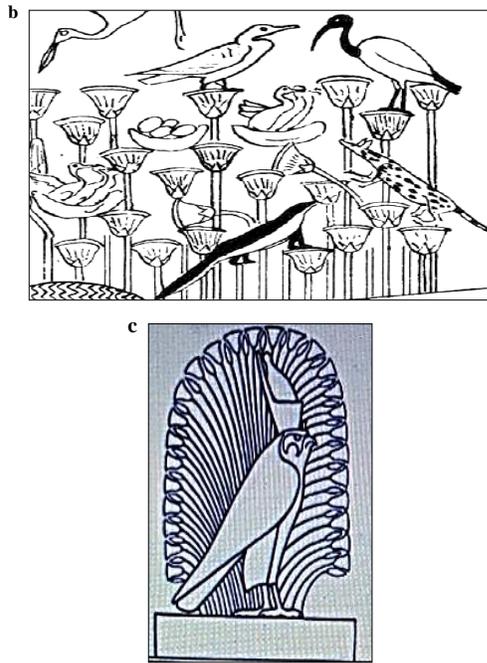


Figure 1 bird nests attacked by wild animals **a.** (After: Wolf, 1957), **b.** (After: Newberry, 1893), **c.** Horus inside papyrus thickets (After: Yoo, 2012).

2. Methodological Study

2.1. The hieroglyphic writing of the nest

The word used to express the word “nest” was written as  *sš* [22]. It is known from the old kingdom, as it occurred in the titles of those who were responsible for the marshland’s area to ensure enough fowl or fish for royal pleasure [23]. The title *imy-r3-sš* was “The overseer of the fowling pool/pond” or “The overseer of the department of fowling pools” [24,25]. The word *sš*, derived from the word *sš*, means “A bird or nestling” [22]. It was pronounced by Faulkner as  *sšy* [26, 27]. From the middle kingdom, it was referred to as a lake. It was also used to express the marshland, where bird nests might be found [26]. The sign of three ducklings inside a flat base-shaped nest ,  [26] without curvature, was sometimes interpreted as a lake with three ducks swimming in it [28]. However, the author suggests that it was a kind of nest dragged by the flooded Nile stream, as sometimes seen in lakes. The determinative used for the nest was like the basket shape, having a flat top, and a curve from the bottom. In Gardiner’s sign list (G 48), it was written as ,  *sš* “A nest in the marsh” in the form of a crescent. Sometimes, the nest contained one little duck, the crescent-like nest  instead of three ducklings [29,30]. The crescent-like nest was unknown before the 18th dynasty but was frequently used in the Late Period. From the 18th dynasty, two signs were added to the word:  and the determinatives, such as  and  (only the heads of the ducks appeared) [26]. In the Greco-Roman period, the nest was represented by the basket *nb* with details of its reeds and three falcons inside  [31]. As for the three ducklings (No. G48, 49) inside the nest, they were shown in various states of alarm due not only to the human hunter but also-

many tomb’ scenes- to the presence of mongooses and genets, who used to attack the nests to devour fledglings and eggs [16]. The birds were sitting in stylized, bowl-shaped nests perched precariously on top of papyrus flowers [30]. As the nest took different shapes, it could be summarized in tab. (1)

Table (1) the different shapes of a nest

The Shape of the Nest	Texts	Description	Date
	CT I, 96 c, 97 c; CT II, 135 I; CT IV, 58h, 63q	Three ducks’ heads protruding from a nest/ lake shaped (pool?) [50]	Old Kingdom
	CT VII, 144 L; CT VII, 149h	Three little ducks inside a basket-shaped nest	Middle Kingdom
	Dendera IX, 236, 5.	Three ducks’ heads protruding from a basket-shaped nest	
	CT IV, 63Q	Three little ducks inside a crescent-shaped nest	New Kingdom
	BD (Chap. LIV)	Three ducks in a rounded-shaped nest	
	E I, 16(4)	Three Falcons in a basket-shaped nest	Greco-Roman period

As for the species of birds inside the nest, most of the texts used the duckling bird to express the infant bird, or most likely the child god, and usually the little chick with a hovering wing or the duckling  *ḥ*, who gave the meaning of “little bird” or “child”^(c) [32]. The three ducklings together were shown with open beaks and spread wings [28]. It was the sign from which the word *ḥy* derived for a male [33]. It also means the male and female little birds and the young god, especially the god Horus, which could be concluded from religious and mythical resources [22,32]. For Example, in papyrus (Louvre 3079), Isis says:

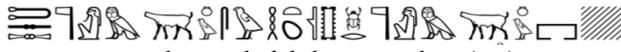
ir.n.i ḥi iw.i m ḥmt m-mrwt s^cnh rn.k ḥri tp ḥ

“I have made a male (although) I am (only) a woman in order to make your name alive on earth” [34,35]

Horus was qualified as “The lord of papyrus plant in the marshes” in his form as a *ḥ* bird in *Chemmis* [28,36-39]. In Dendera, both Isis and Hathor held the title “*s^cnh ḥ.s*”, which means “Who revives her child”, referring to their role as mother goddesses who took care of Horus, the child [40-41]. In sum, whenever the nest was mentioned, the determinative did not have a special character for the falcon god Horus’s nest. It was always written by the three ducklings or only one little duck. In the Ptolemaic period, three falcons were represented in most of the writings.

2.2. The symbolism of the nest in ancient Egyptian beliefs

The ancient Egyptians used the symbol in scenes and depictions to express their faith. The idea of expressing the creation of the child god was known with the sun-god, who appeared as a child, whether inside the disc or the womb of Nut and the sun-disc that contained the young *Khepri* in the early morning [42]. The idea of representing the nest of Horus was the same as representing the ancient Egyptian artists of the bird nests on the walls of tombs in fowling scenes. The artist meant that by the magical concepts, it was turning into a sacred reality and a fact. The nest was one of the most important and symbolic illusions, just like the sun disc and the womb of Nut. It had some relevant meanings to the beginning of life, protection, and regeneration. The nest was just like an egg afforded protection, care, and life to the germ. The nest is the place where eggs are laid and symbolizes the beginning of the world and life according to the creation myth. We read:



ts ntr m hnw swht kd -hpr ntr m hnw (sšy)...

 “The God has been knotted within the egg and has been created within the nest” [43-46]

The text describes the origins of creation, the existence of life from the egg of the Great Screamer Amon-Re^(d) [47-48], and the creation within the nest.

2.3. The mythical place of the nest

The mythical place that enhanced the nest of Horus was *Chemmis*, a place that had a very sacred and mythical role in ancient Egyptian life. It was mentioned as the birthplace of Horus in the Pyramid Texts (Pyr.519, §1214b-1215b) but without referring to his nest. The ancient Egyptians considered entering such a place guarantees a second birth and a new life. Illustrations show Isis suckling her child Horus inside this sacred place, fig. (2). The nest was mentioned in the Delta marshes in the following texts:

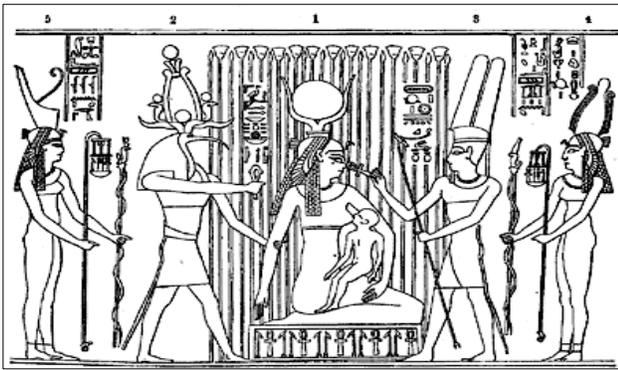


Figure (2) Isis suckling Horus in the papyrus thickets (After: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11277/11277-h/11277-h.htm> -19/8/2024)

2.3.1. The temple of Deir El Bahari

On the coronation of Queen Hatshepsut in her chapel in Deir El Bahari, she was suckled by the mother goddess Hathor [49], who was shown standing in front of the queen licking her hand. Hathor was described as the one who licked the infant Horus, referring to the queen as a newborn calf. The text reads:



hnm.(i) hmt.t m 'nh w3s mi irt.n.(i) n hr m hnw sš n 3h-bit

 “It is with life and dominion that (I) embrace your majesty, like that which (I) did for Horus within the nest of *Chemmis*” [50,51]

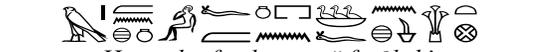
2.3.2. The temple of Edfu

After receiving the seed from Osiris, Isis bore the heir and gave birth to him in the nest of *Chemmis*, the place which was described as a solitary and unknown abode. Isis protected Horus in his nest during his childhood; she made him a protective amulet for the protection of his body. She repealed for him from those who overstepped his boundaries and the different hostile forces [52-55]



Ink 3st iwr.ti m t3.s hri k3(t) m Hr ntr ms n.i Hr s3 Wsir m hnw sš n 3h-bit

“I am Isis, pregnant with her child, bearing Horus divine, and I gave birth to Horus, the son of Osiris, in the nest of *Chemmis*” [56]



Hr m nhn.f m hnw n sš.f n 3h-bit

 “The falcon Horus in his childhood in his nest of *Chemmis*” [31]

The following texts refer to the role of the goddess *Wadjet* in protecting the child in *Chemmis*:



Nnw m 3h-bit W3dt ir s3 nhn m sš.f

“While the child was in *Chemmis*, the goddess *Wadjet* protected the child in his nest” [31]



Fnd.k sš n t3w

“Your nose is the nest of the wind”.

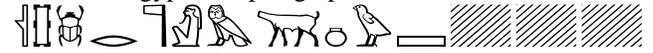
It perhaps refers to the prevailing north/south wind in Egypt, so Horus in the Delta (*Chemmis*) provides that wind [57].

3. The Role of the Nest of Horus Through Some Religious Texts

The earliest mention of the word “nest” in general goes back to the Pyramid Texts (T §221; P §443, §589; N §347) [58], but the nest of Horus was mentioned in the middle kingdom with the Coffin Texts, as we read:

3.1. Coffin texts

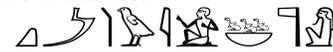
Many paragraphs in the Coffin texts had significant symbolism of the role of the nest in protecting little Horus from harm. The nest was the place where he was formed and created. In the nest, he grew up and was crowned to be the king of upper and lower Egypt. The paragraph reads:



Kd-hpr ntr m hnw (sšy)

“The god is formed and comes into being within the nest”^(c) [43-46]

The paragraph describes the origins of creation and the existence of life in the nest.



km3.n wi sš ntr

“The god’s nest created me”



sk.i m sš it.(i)

“I was strong while I was in my father’s nest”



Rdw ntr Wbn.ntr m sš.f

“The god grows up; the god rises up from his nest.”

The paragraph shows the role of the nest in raising Horus.



Ink b3 km3w nw ir st.(i) m hrt-ntr n m33 sš.(i) (n)sd3 swht.(i)

“I am the soul who created the Abyss, who made my seat in the realm of the dead; my nest will not be seen, nor my egg broken” [46]

From the previous paragraph, Was the nest intended not to be seen and hidden forever?

3.2. In literary sources

The early years of the king (as Horus) in literary sources, expresses by the nest, as the word nest occurs in a titular inscription of king Thutmose III (18th dynasty), who stated that:



Ink s3.f ʔt.n.f n wnn hr nst.f is kwi m imi sš.f

“I am his son (Osiris) who took position to be on his throne, while I was still in his nest” [59]

3.3. The book of the dead

In Chapter 134: Osiris Ani recites the spell of transformation into a heron, and he says:



*N m33.n.tw sšy n sd3 tw.n.i swht
ink nb hhw iri.n.i sšy.i m drw hrt*

“My nest will not be seen; the egg was not broken for me. I am lord of millions of years. I made my nest at the limits of heaven”

The paragraph describes the location of the nest to be at the limits of heaven as the nature of the falcon that flies very high in the sky and makes its nest in holes in the peaks of the mountains [60].

3.4. The temple of Edfu's text



*Wnp.n.f ʔt n thi sw rnp m3c šhm m ʔwy nsw m sš.f
rnn sw mwt.f r nsw*

“He is Horus, the victorious one, who took possession of the two lands in his nest, who was raised by his mother to (become) king of Upper- and Lower Egypt” [30].

3.5. The temple of Dendera's text

In a scene from Dendera, Isis is described as:



sʔnh ʔ3.s mki s3.s Hr m sš

“She revives her chick and protects her son Horus in the nest” [49]

3.6. The papyrus Leyden's text 346 II 5-III 4

The child Horus was referred to in the epagomenal days of the year; the most important of all five days was the fifth day, not surprisingly as the final epagomenal virtually transferred one to the next year (*wp rnpt*), the day's name was “*hwn imy sš.f*” means “*The child in his nest*” or “*bik 3h lmy sš.f*” “*The glorious falcon who is in his nest*” [61].

4. Some Similar Allusions to the Nest of Horus

The ancient Egyptians had the talent of expressing the idea through several symbolic allusions. Here are some of these sacred elements that give a resemblance to the role of the nest as metaphoric expressions:

4.1. Expressing the nest by the egg

There is a great similarity between the egg with a fledgling and the nest, as they both enhanced the same kind of bird

They both symbolize the place of the germ. The nest is also the normal place for the egg to be placed and the fledgling to grow up [62]. The determinative used for the word egg is the egg with the ʔ3 bird inside [63]. The nest and the egg are both considered the beginning of life, resurrection and survival. The two of them could figuratively represent the mother's womb, where safety and life are afforded [64]. Some Egyptian deities took the form of a bird, in chapter 77 from BD, the deceased compared himself with Horus, the falcon, saying: “*I am risen as a great falcon who comes forth from his egg*”. In chapter 170 of the BD, the deceased was equated with the falcon god Horus, who was in the egg: “*You are Horus in the egg*” (*Hr m-hnw swht*). The egg and the nest had the same function of protecting and giving life to the newborn Horus.

4.2. Expressing the nest by the sarcophagus

In Chapter LIV of the BD, the deceased invokes the sun god *Re* to watch over him while he is inside his nest (sarcophagus) until he revives again when the sarcophagus is opened, and he smells the fresh air again.



s3w tn r imy sšy.f nhn pr.f r.tn

“Watch over the little baby in his nest till he goes out to you” [60]

The nest is similar to a sarcophagus that enhance the deceased for a period of time till it revives a gain, released and became free.

4.3. Expressing the nest by the temple

The temple represents the primeval hill and the beginning of the world; it shares the same belief and results under the idea of the child god in his own universe (nest). In the texts of the Temple of Edfu, Horus-falcon, as a child, lived in a bird nest. He took possession of the two lands in his nest, and he was raised by his mother to become king of Upper and Lower Egypt [31]. The place where Horus lived was a nest, even in his temple in Edfu [57], as says:



sbh sš.n s3b-šwt

“Embrace the nest of the decorated of feathers (Horus Behdetite)” [31]

The reference here is to Horus the *Behditite*, it refers to the sacred place where the divine falcon was raised and cared for as the soul and image of the main god in the Temple of Edfu. The place where the bird was cared for was called “*Marw*”, which was the nest of the falcon^(d) [65]. Another example of the temple as the nest of the god Horus is the name of the goddess Hathor. It is a combined diagrammatic writing of the word for “*house*” or “*temple*”. *h.t* is the spelling of temple, and *hr* for “*Horus*”, as *ht-hr* . It means “*The mansion of Horus*” [66]. The name refers to Hathor as the mother of Horus, and may be explained by the Egyptian thought of the mother *h.t* as “*home*” or “*settlement*”, from which the child originates and belongs. It is the temple of Horus and the place that surrounds Horus with protection and blessing. Hathor is one of the goddesses most frequently found in the role of a nurse, both in human form and as a cow. *hwt-hrw* is the “*house/*

paragraph from the Book of the Dead, when Horus says: “*I am lord of millions of years. I made my nest at the limits of heaven*” [Chapter 134 BD]. Thus, this character might have affected the lack of representation of the nest of the falcon god Horus. According to the texts, the nest was in an isolated and very confidential place; it was intended not to be seen forever. *) The artist hid the scene of Horus’s nest so as not to be seen or reached as it was the desire of Isis, who insisted on not to reveal the secret of the nest eternally, and that was ensured by magical spells, as the paragraph in the Coffin texts [CT IV,63q] reads: “*I am the soul who created the Abyss, who made my seat in the realm of the dead; my nest will not be seen, nor my egg broken*” and [chapter 134 BD] that reads “*My nest will not be seen; the egg was not broken for me*”. The representation of the nest itself was never seen in tomb scenes or temples, suggesting that it was intentionally hidden by the power of magic. *) They hid the representation of the nest so as not to concentrate on the period in which the child was in his weakness and disability status, as he was the estimated king of Upper and Lower Egypt. *) Finally, the ancient Egyptian artists used to express metaphorically different religious themes and they expressed the nest that enhanced the child with some sacred signs as the author mentioned above, such as: the egg, the sarcophagus, the temple, and the *Wedjat* eye, and adding to that the sacred marsh land of the Delta (*Chemmis*) in whole, as that might be a metaphoric place to the nest of Horus.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the ancient Egyptian artists did not represent the nest of the child god Horus clearly, although it was mentioned several times in different religious texts. The nest was hidden by his mother, Isis, who hoped in that the nest would be unseen and hidden eternally. The nest was in an isolated and confidential place; it was intended not to be seen forever. One could read some figurative signs to refer to the nest as a place that could guarantee protection, caring, and rejuvenation for the child god Horus.

Endnotes

- (a) located in the north Delta near Buto; a marsh in Ancient Egyptian language was called *idhw*, while the papyrus thicket was called *dwt* papyrus-marsh, or *3h* the thicket of papyrus. This thicket usually full of different species of birds that are flying or nesting, and the predators such as the Egyptian mongooses are regularly tried to steal young birds from their nests and in return they are attacked by the parents.
- (b) The usual scenes show the deceased on a boat, before a full papyrus thicket, many birds fly above the papyrus plant, while a mongoose sneaking on a papyrus stalk to attack the nest. The Egyptian mongoose is customarily portrayed sneakily creeping up on bird's nest, usually filled with eggs or fledglings; the terrified parents often dive down in a vain attempt to kick off the mongoose and sometimes the young are pictured being violently taken off from the nest and devoured. This is entirely regular with the greedy behavior of this water-side inhabitant.
- (c) It also gives the meaning of “seed, offspring”.
- (d) The creator-God is always identified to be the one who emerges from his egg, i.e Re, Amun, Ptah, and Atum, etc.

it describes the mythical pregnancy of Isis with Horus, the seeds of Osiris, when he was shaped inside the womb. Isis speaks: *i ts irw m ntr m swht* means “I have moulded the shape of the god within (my) egg”.

- (e) Unfortunately, the word of the nest is omitted, but it is read by Faulkner as the nest *s3y* the word nest is restored from 149h.
- (f) Decorated of feathers one of the epithets of the god Horus in Edfou.
- (g) The Book of the Two Ways appears in some coffins of the Middle Kingdom. They describe a kind of road map of the Afterlife
- (h) One of the meanings of this last word is “hole” translate *b3b3* as “The eye socket” The Kahun Medical Papyrus, Column 1, 20-22.
- (i) The concept of the flight for resurrection is something, which goes back to the Old Kingdom. In the Pyramid Texts the king usually took the shape of a bird and used the abilities of this animal to ascend.

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