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## FEATHERS

الريش

*Emily Teeter*

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## FEATHERS

## الريش

Emily Teeter

Federn  
Plumes

*Throughout Egyptian history, feathers appear in purely utilitarian settings and also in ritual contexts where they ornament crowns and personify deities. Feathered fans were used to signal the presence of royal or divine beings, and feathers identified certain ethnic types. Feathers are known from representations and also actual examples recovered primarily from tombs.*

ظهر الريش عبر تاريخ مصر القديمة في سياقات نفعية بحتة، بالإضافة إلى بعض السياقات الطقسية حيث استخدم الريش لتزيين التيجان ولتمثيل الآلهة؛ واستخدمت المراوح الريشية للإشارة إلى وجود كائنات ملكية أو إلهية، كما ميز الريش بعض الإنتماءات العرقية. يعرف الريش من خلال ظهوره ممثلاً بمناظر بالمقابر والمعابد وأيضاً من خلال العثور على أمثلة حقيقية لريش تأتي أغلبها من المقابر.

**F**eathers appear frequently in ancient Egyptian iconography, they are referred to in texts, and they are incorporated into hieroglyphic writing. The prestige and value of feathers is attested by New Kingdom tomb paintings that show foreign delegations from Nubia, Libya, Asia, and Punt laden with exotic merchandise, including feathers (Davies, Nina de Garis and Davies 1933: pl. 9; Davies, Norman de Garis 1922: pls. 32, 43; Nicholson and Shaw 2000: 332). Most commonly shown are what appear to be the wing and tail feathers of ostriches and the wing feathers of falcons; however, it is often difficult to associate the representations with specific species of birds. Feathers were obtained by felling birds with bow and arrow and throw stick, by trapping birds with nets, and through trade.

*Feathers in Religious Iconography and Hieroglyphic Writing*



Figure 1. The goddess Maat, wearing an ostrich plume (*mꜣt*) on her head, being offered by Sety I. Abydos, temple of Sety I. Dynasty 19.

As a hieroglyph, the ostrich feather conveyed the phonetic value *šw*, and, when used to write a word, served as the ideogram for *šwt* (feather) and *mꜣt* (cosmic and societal order; fig. 1). It could also serve as determinative for *mꜣt*. The same sign was used to write the name of the gods Shu and Maat. In Late Period funerary papyri, a female figure with a head in the form of an ostrich feather may represent Maat or in other cases Imentet, the

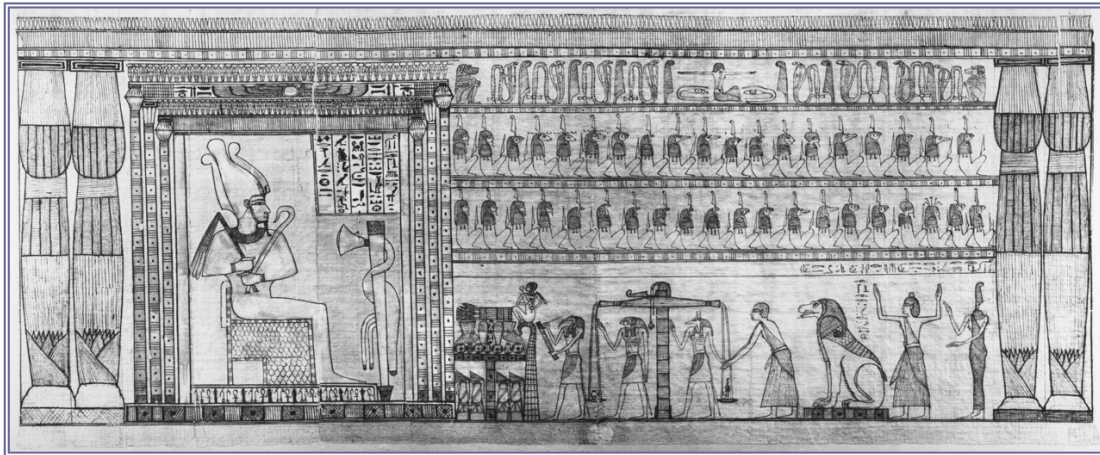


Figure 2. Chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead* showing judges with a *maat* feather on their head and a goddess with feather head, probably Maat, to the right. Ptolemaic. Oriental Institute 10486.



Figure 3. *šwt* fan over the barques of Khons and Mut denoting the presence of the divine images. Medinet Habu. Dynasty 20.

personification of the West (Seeber 1976: 143 - 144, figs. 23 and 24). In some vignettes of Chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*, the judges

of the deceased wear an ostrich feather on their head symbolizing their ability to determine the truthfulness (*maat*) of the deceased's confession (fig. 2). Feathers could be a distinctive feature of gods, such as Behdety, a form of Horus of Edfu, whose epithet is *šb-šwt* ("dappled of plumage") and who is represented by a winged disk.

Tall narrow feathers in sets of four are used as the identifying headdress of Onuris. A similar arrangement appears on crowns of Amenhotep IV at East Karnak where they may allude to his association with Shu. Less clear is the symbolism of two ostrich plumes that often flank the crown of Osiris and the single or double ostrich feather with a midrib that is characteristic of the *atef* crown and the crowns of Amun, Isis, the God's Wife, and some queens. Statues of Ptah and Menkaret from the tomb of Tutankhamen wear garments of feathers (Carter 1933: pls. LVb, LVII).

In the New Kingdom and later, the deceased may be shown grasping one or more ostrich plumes in each hand, and feathers may also adorn their hair, probably symbolizing that the deceased is imbued with *maat* (Teeter 1985 - 1986: 43 - 44). Many royal and private coffins of Dynasty 17 and the New Kingdom are covered with chevron patterns representing a mantle of feathers (*rishi*), and



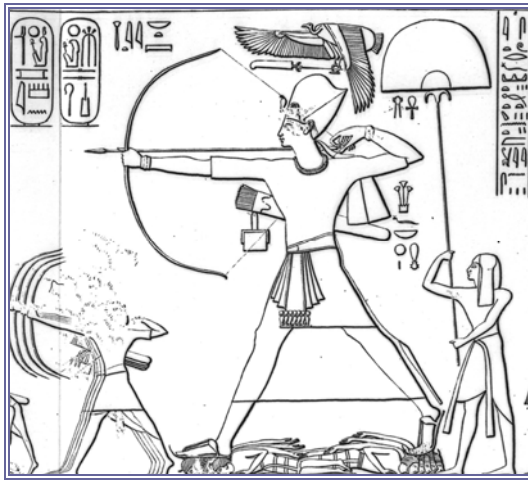


Figure 4. *sryt* military standard held over Ramesses III. Dynasty 20.



Figure 5. Fan (*bht/hw*) held by prince Ramesses behind his father Sety I. OIM 10507. Dynasty 19.

the feathered wings of the deities Nekhbet and Wadjet encircle the shoulders and chest.

Semi-circular feathered fans on long handles (fig. 3) were held over a divine presence or a divine intermediary to proclaim its presence in processions and festivals (Bell 1985). The phonetic value for “fan” was the same as for shade (*šwt*). In the New Kingdom, *šwt* became synonymous with the presence of the god, for example, “the shade of Ra had come to rest upon it” or the god’s shade “being upon his head” (Bell 1985: 33). A similar feather fan (*sryt*) served as a military standard for the army and navy (fig. 4; Faulkner 1941). A tall slender fan (*bht/hw* or *hwyt*) of a single ostrich plume accompanied the king or members of the royal family (Davis 1907: pl. 36) as a sign

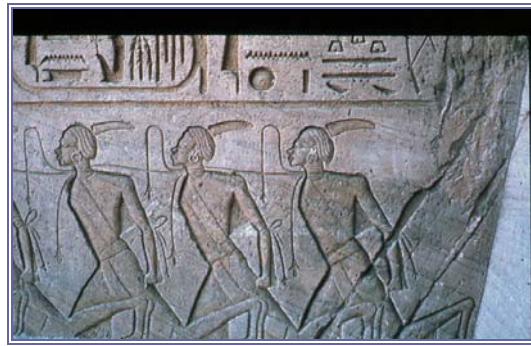


Figure 6. Bound Nubians with a feather on their heads. Abu Simbel. Dynasty 19.

of rank (fig. 5). “Fan bearer on the right of the king” was a prestigious title born by courtiers and princes. Horses who draw the king’s chariot often wear feathered plumes on their heads (Epigraphic Survey 1986: pls. 3 - 6).

#### *Feathers as Ethnic Designators*

Feathers that have been identified as ostrich were worn in the hair of Libyans and Nubians (fig. 6). This ethnic association of Nubians with the feather is so close that the text of a Dynasty 20 letter refers to an escort group as “feather-wearing Nubians” (Wente 1990: 38). A deposit of ostrich feathers from a campsite at tomb HK 64 at Hierakonpolis is related to both Nubians and Libyans. This group of deliberately arranged feathers was accompanied by an ostrakon that refers to the return of the goddess Hathor from the desert. The texts of the Mut Ritual and the Hymn of Hathor from Medamud (Darnell 1995: 69 - 72) relate that the goddess was escorted by Libyans and Nubians who offered her ostrich feathers. The HK 64 deposit has been interpreted as the remains of an annual celebration that heralded the return of the goddess.

#### *Archaeological Evidence for Feathers*

Only a few examples of feathers are preserved in the archaeological record, and there has been little effort to identify them precisely. What has been described as “large black feathers, possibly the wing or tail feathers of a crow or some such bird” were recovered from a tomb at el-Balabish (Wainwright 1920: 12).

Several examples of unidentified feathers, some bound with red-dyed leather (perhaps the remains of fans), were found in C-Group tombs (Firth 1912: 58, 59, 64, 86, 125). Feathers have been recovered from several New Kingdom tombs. The pillows used to pad the seat of a chair from the tomb of Yuya and Tuya contained what was described as “pigeon feathers” or “down” (Davis 1907: pl. 35; Quibell 1908: 52), and another in the collection of the British Museum is stuffed with “feathers of a waterfowl” (Budge 1922: 87). The tomb of Tutankhamen contained eight fans once trimmed with plumes. One fan ([no. 242](#)) had alternating brown and white feathers (Carter 1927: 46, pls. LXIa, LXII). Although the feathers were not identified by a specialist, their origin is described by decoration on the fan’s semi-circular “palm” that shows scenes of an ostrich hunt and by the inscription on its staff that states that ostriches were bagged by the king while hunting in the desert east of Heliopolis. Another fan from the tomb, [no. 245](#) (Carter 1927: 46, pls. LXIII, XLIIb), was fitted with white ostrich plumes. A hand fan, [no. 272a](#)

(Carter 1933: 34, 132, pl. XVIIa), was fitted with well-preserved whitish ostrich feathers that emerged from a shorter row of brown feathers. These fans from the tomb reflect the demand for, and popularity of, ostrich plumes. Carter no. 242 was fitted with 30 plumes, no. 245 with 41, and another ([no. 600](#)) with 48 (Carter 1933: 133, pl. XLIII). The use of ostrich feathers for these fans, which, according to scenes of royal processions, were held near the head of the king or the deity, may be due not only to the beauty and large size of the feathers, but also because the ostrich plume is the hieroglyph for Maat, the incarnation of truth and cosmic balance. A “carefully laid mass of ostrich feathers” (see above, *Feathers as Ethnic Designators*) was discovered in a round pit near the central heart of tomb HK 64 at Hierakonpolis (Friedman 1999: 103 - 104; Friedman et al. 1999: 21 - 22). Carbon dating has established a date of the Second Intermediate Period for the deposit. The cache tomb KV 63 in the Valley of the Kings has yielded at least ten pillows stuffed with yet unidentified feathers (see [Schaden](#)).

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For overall discussions of the use and symbolism of feathers, see Shirun-Grumach (1977), Fischer (1977), Behrens (1986), and Bell (1985). For fan bearers, see Pomorska (1987) and Chevereau (1994: 101 - 132). For descriptions and images of the fans found in Tutankhamen’s tomb, see the [Howard Carter Archives](#) at the Griffith Institute.

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## External Links

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