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A statue of the goose of Amun



Fig. 1. Statue of the goose of Amun, FGA-ARCH-EG-0067.

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Today, the goose is sometimes considered a delicacy we like to roast for a fine end-of-the-year celebration dinner. But in Ancient Egypt, its fate was quite different. A remarkable statue in the shape of a goose, a masterpiece of zoomorphic sculpture that survives from antiquity, allows us to explore the relationship between the ancient Egyptians and the goose. A wild, migratory bird that was also domesticated and force-fed, it also became closely associated with the god Amun.

Statue of the goose of Amun

Egypt, perhaps from the region of Hermopolis
Third Intermediate Period, 1st quarter 1st millennium
BC.

Stuccoed wood, pigments, bronze
33,5 cm high, 13,2 cm wide, 38,8 cm deep
FGA-ARCH-EG-0067

Provenance

Ars Antiqua, Lucerne, 14.05.1960, lot n° 16 ;
Sotheby's, *Antiquities*, London, 10 December 1996, lot
n° 73.

The goose, a familiar animal to the ancient Egyptians

Throughout antiquity, the ancient Egyptians closely observed their environment and the animals evolving in their respective landscapes. From prehistory onwards, they gained detailed knowledge of nature and quickly integrated animals in their religious world. This is also true of birds. To a modern Egyptologist, not necessarily versed in ornithology, things can get a bit complicated. Indeed, in order to make sense of it all, it is necessary to distinguish between similar avian species and to recognise them, be it on decorated walls or as rarer three-dimensional statues (fig.1).








Fig. 2. Egyptian goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*.
© Wikipedia. Photographer: B. Dupont, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The goose – or more precisely Egyptian goose (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*) – statue¹, under discussion here is a superb example of bird sculpture. Standing, the goose has a very natural appearance, its head raised, its eyes attentive, and its neck harmoniously sinuous. It is captured in full motion, the thumb - or back finger - of the hind leg raised: it is about to move forward. The difference in colour of the materials used helps to bring the work to life, especially the contrast that the bronze legs, head, and neck, bring with the plastered wooden body. However, the plumage of the Nile goose is much more colourful in life (fig. 2); possible traces of

¹ The term 'goose' refers to several avian species that belong to the Anatidae family.



pigment visible on the stuccoed wood of the body, suggest that the statue may originally have been more colourful, but whether it truly mimicked the black, green, beige, white, and reddish hues of the goose cannot be determined.

This statue is an epigraph, so how can we be sure that it is indeed a Nile goose, and, moreover, a representation of the god Amun? As a matter of fact, several species of geese were known to the ancient Egyptians. As early as the Old Kingdom (2575–2135 BC), procession scenes show that five species were differentiated. However, making the link between hieroglyphic name, modern scientific name, and iconographic representation is no easy task. It seems possible for three of these species:  *trp*, the white-fronted goose,  *sr*, the greylag goose, and  *smn* the Egyptian goose. That leaves the  *r3* and  *hd* geese, which should probably be associated with the red-fronted goose and the bean goose.² What a barnyard!

The goose in Egyptian art and its deification



Fig. 3. The 'Meidum geese', tomb of Nefermaat and Itet, Meidum, Cairo Museum JE 34571/ CG 1742.
© Wikipedia. Photographer: Djehouty, CC BY-SA 4.0. Image cropped.

A painting from a wall of a funerary chapel (fig. 3), considered as one of the masterpieces of the Old Kingdom,³ was made for Itet, wife of Nefermaat, the eldest son and vizier⁴ of King Snefru (2575–2551 BC) and half-brother of the great king Khufu. The privileged position of



² White-fronted goose: lat. *Anser albifrons*, Scopoli 1769 / French: oie rieuse. Greylag goose: lat. *Anser anser*, Linnaeus 1758 / French: oie cendrée. Egyptian goose: lat. *Alopochen aegyptiacus*, Linnaeus 1766 / French: ouette du Nil. Red-fronted goose: lat. *Branta ruficollis*, Pallas 1769 / French: Bernache à cou roux. Bean goose: lat. *Anser fabalis*, Latham 1787 / French: oie des moissons.

³ In 2015, Egyptologist Francesco Tiradritti cast doubts on the authenticity of the piece, suggesting that at least the paint layer may not be (fully) original. His opinion, based on a visual analysis of the artwork and on high resolution images, has so far not been published in a peer-reviewed journal. No scientific investigation addressing this matter have been conducted by the Cairo Museum insofar as we know.

⁴ Highest official of the country's administration after the king. Nefermaat was, among other titles, « overseer of all the works of the king ». He therefore probably oversaw the construction of his father's pyramids.



these members of the royal family gave them the opportunity to have the decorations of their mastaba tomb executed by the best artists of their time. It shows six geese, arranged in two symmetrical groups, belonging to three different species.⁵ Four of the geese are shown in motion, the others with their heads lowered, pecking at the vegetation.

In this early period, scenes showing domesticated geese are mostly found in tombs. Their presence was intended to symbolically contribute to the provision of the deceased with funerary offerings in the afterlife. There are, however, slight indications that the  *sr* goose already gained a special status and was deified.⁶ As for the Nile goose  *smn*, it appears in the famous Pyramid texts, where the flight of the deceased king is compared to that of the bird.⁷


It was not until the Middle Kingdom (2135–1781 BC) that the  *smn* goose attained divine status, as indicated by the inclusion of this word in some personal names. In the 13th Dynasty (1781–1650 BC), the goose is associated with the god Amun for the first time, in the person of a woman called Semenet-Amon, « the *smn* goose of Amun ». ⁸ Later, in the New Kingdom, this link becomes much more obvious. There is first indirect evidence for the early part of the 18th dynasty (1550–



Fig. 4. Goose statue found in the burial chamber of Tutankhamun's tomb, shrouded in linen cloth.

© Griffith Institute, University of Oxford. Photographer: Harry Burton, <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/176-p0580a.html>.

⁵ For the identification of these geese, see ROMILIO, A., « Assessing 'Meidum geese' ».


⁶ VANDIER, J., « L'oise du Nil », p. 14 ; it seems that this goose was closely associated with Sekhmet.

⁷ Tpyr 302, §463 ; 573, §484 ; and 682, §2042. VANDIER, J., « L'oise du Nil », mentions a fourth occurrence, where the *smn* goose is sacrificed: Tpyr 419, §746.

⁸ RANKE, H., *Personennamen I*, 307 : 15. False-door stela, Cairo Museum CG 20724 ; see <https://pnm.uni-mainz.de/2/inscription/721>.



1291 BC): depictions of geese were mutilated during the reign of King Akhenaten, who had ordered the destruction of all mentions and images of the god Amun.⁹

In the tomb of Tutankhamun (KV62), a goose statue was found among the countless treasures buried with the king. It is coated in black resin, except the beak (fig. 4). The royal cartouche can be read in a short inscription painted on the base, but the names of either Amun or of the specific goose are lacking. Another statue with a similar shape was found in the Valley of the Kings, in the tomb of Thutmose III (KV34), who ruled just over a century earlier. Its base is not preserved, so that it is unfortunately again impossible to determine if a  *smn* goose of Amun was intended.

It is tempting to compare the FGA statue with these high-quality royal examples, but it is unlikely that the former can be attributed to the 18th dynasty.¹⁰ First, the identity of the species of the royal statues is questionable: both have a long, thin, and sinuous neck that may be more reminiscent of a swan's neck than of that of a goose. Second, the posture of the body differs markedly: these birds are shown grooming their breast plumage with their beak. Third, the different techniques used for creating these artefacts is significant: the two royal goose statues are entirely made of solid (?) wood, without any added bronze element.



Fig. 5. Left and centre: bronze statuettes of Amon in human form and as a ram, FGA-ARCH-EG-0022 and FGA-ARCH-EG-0019. © Fondation Gandur pour l'art, Genève. Photographer: André Longchamp. Right: quartzite statue of ram-headed Amun, AF 2577. © Paris, Louvre Museum. Photographer: Christian Décamps.

⁹ See for example the Theban tomb of Ramose TT55 (KUENTZ, C., « L'oie du Nil, p. 42, fig. 24 ; VANDIER, J., « L'oie d'Amun », p. 27-8, n. 6 ; de Garis DAVIES, N., *Ramose*, pl. XVI).


¹⁰ *Contra* BIANCHI, R.B., *Art & Magic*, p. 200-201; BIANCHI, R.B. and Ziegler, C., *Egyptian bronzes*, p. 60-61.



Fig. 6. Ostracon with priestess officiating in front of Amun as a goose, ÄM 3307.

© Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Photographer: Sandra Steiß, CC-BY-NC-SA.

During the following dynasty, Amun was reinstated to its full glory, but he is seldom associated with the goose. He is much more frequently represented as an anthropomorphic deity, as a ram, or as a mixture of both (fig. 5). In fact, anybody visiting the main temple dedicated to Amun, in Karnak (Luxor), would be unable to find a single depiction of Amun as a goose among the thousands of images of

that god. Although this peculiar iconography seems to have been shun in official religious buildings, statues, and reliefs, it flourished in the private religious sphere. There are several stelae dedicated by private individuals to Amun depicted as a  *smn* goose.¹¹ It is therefore not surprising to see the goose of Amun feature among the material discovered by archaeologists in the in the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina.¹² We can also note a delicate image on a white limestone chip, drawn first in red ink and overlaid by the final version in black ink: a woman holds a sistrum in her right hand and a *menat*-necklace in the left one; she is likely a priestess officiating in front of the goose of Amun standing on a rectangular base (fig. 6).¹³

A statue of a goose as an ex-voto for the god Amun ?

So, how can we interpret and understand the FGA statue? Was it a cult statue, like the goose on the ostracon described above? Probably not. Indeed, the crafting technique hints at a later date: New Kingdom goose statues are made of a single material, such as wood for the royal

¹¹ See KUENTZ, C., « L'oise du Nil », *passim*.

¹² ANDREU-LANOË, G., « L'oise d'Amun ».

¹³ BRUNNER-TRAUT, E., *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder*, pl. XXXI, n° 81; ANDREU-LANOË, G., « L'oise d'Amun », p. 35-6. The archaeological provenience of this artefact is unknown, but as mentioned by Guillemette Andreu-Lanoë, it likely comes from Deir el-Medina or the surrounding area.



ones (see above), or limestone.¹⁴ The only artefacts the FGA goose statue (and similar ones) can be compared to are statues of ibises. They have a body sculpted in wood (stuccoed, painted, or gilded) and a neck, head, and legs cast in bronze (fig. 7). These statues were meant to be ex-votos dedicated to the god Thot; they were deposited in vast necropolises together with hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of mummified ibises, in places such as Saqqara, Tuna el-Gebel, or Dra Abu el-Naga (Luxor), among others.¹⁵ Some of these statues had a hollow body and served as coffins for a mummified bird, but this was not necessarily the case.



Fig. 7. Statue of a sacred ibis, FGA-ARCH-EG-0038.
© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Longchamp.



Fig. 8. Statue of a goose of Amun, stuccoed linen and bronze, inv. E 26020.

© Paris, Louvre Museum. Photographer: Christian Décamps.

These ibis statues are generally considered to postdate the New Kingdom.¹⁶ They were most likely made during the 1st millennium BC, and are contemporaneous with the countless ibis mummies (Late Period – Ptolemaic Period, millennium 664–30 BC). A wood sample from the FGA statue was subjected to a carbon-14 test in 2000: the results indicate a date between 903–792 BC, the period covering roughly the middle of the 22nd dynasty (Osorkon I to Sheshonq III) and the beginning of the competing 23rd dynasty (Pedubast and Sheshonq IV). The FGA statue

¹⁴ For example, the group statuette with a male and female geese together with their offspring, made by the sculptor of Deir el-Medina Keni (BAYER, C. et al., *The sacred geese of Amun*).

¹⁵ See for example ROUSSI, A., « Ancient Egyptians mummified millions of birds »; WASEF, S. and LAMBERT, D., « Capturing the past »; WASEF, S., et al. « Mitogenomic diversity ».

¹⁶ See for example NASR EL-DINE, H., « Bronzes d'ibis ».



therefore appears to be slightly older than those of ibises.

Was there a catacomb where vast flocks of geese were buried in honour of Amun, as existed for Thot?¹⁷ It is a possibility, although archaeological evidence is lacking. At any rate, it ought to have been a less common occurrence or a less popular practice. Otherwise, we would surely know of a large number of goose mummies and ex-votos such as the FGA statue. Or, although this statue is not the only one of its kind, we only know of two or three similar ones. The Louvre Museum in Paris has the only other statue of a goose in a public collection (fig. 8).¹⁸ Just like the FGA statue, it is depicted in walking motion, as if about to take a step. There are,



Fig. 9. Statue of a goose of Amun, wood and bronze. Private collection. © Bonhams 1793 Ltd, 2010, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/17855/lot/49/?category=list>.

however, important differences: the body is not made of wood, but consists of a hollow, stuccoed linen envelope – but without a mummy inside. The bronze neck is joined to the body in a different way and the wing tips are raised, detached from the tail. This work is also quite remarkable for the highly detailed realism of the bronze parts.

There is a third statue,¹⁹ probably still owned by a private collector.²⁰ Closer stylistically to the FGA statue, the goose lowers its head slightly, and appears more static and rigid; the tail is thicker and raised. The details of the bronze parts are well executed, though coarser than those of the Louvre and FGA statues. The overall similarity between these three statues

¹⁷ Mummified geese deposited during the foundation ceremonies for the funerary temple of Thutmose III have been found (KUENTZ, C., « L'oise du Nil »); however, they cannot be considered as ex-votos to Amun.

¹⁸ Inv. E 26020. See VANDIER, J., « L'oise d'Amun »; see also the Louvre Museum digital collection: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010004176>.

¹⁹ In his addendum, Jacques VANDIER (« L'oise d'Amun », p. 41) mentions another goose statue that he saw at an antiquities dealer's gallery, without further information.

²⁰ This statue, known by Jacques VANDIER (« L'oise d'Amun », figs 9-11), was displayed in Essen in 1966, then sold at Christie's London on 14 April 1970, lot 43, and acquired in the early 1970's by Jay Ward; it was displayed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1974. It was later sold by Bonhams on 6 October 2010 (sale *Antiquities*, lot 49), and again by Rupert Wace at the TEFAF in Maastricht in 2011, to a "retired antiquarian" (MELIKIAN, S., « The Great Art Clearinghouse »).




suggests a certain chronological homogeneity, but this is not the case! The wood of the goose in private hands was also carbon-14 tested in 2010, and it dates to the 2nd-1st century BC: this goose is more than six centuries younger than the one in the FGA.²¹



Fig. 10. Goose of the god Amun, detail of the head (left) and of the leg (right), FGA-ARCH-EG-0067. © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Longchamp.



One can only admire the exquisite modelling of the bronze parts and the chiselling, which so realistically render the details of the beak and nostrils, or the scutes, claws, and fine webbing of the legs (fig. 10). It is evident that the craftsmen responsible for this work took great care in its execution, and that it is not the result of mass production: we are indeed in front of the statue of a deity!


The goose and Amun, a bond with obscure origins

The origin of the link between the  *smn* goose and the god Amun is not easily explained, as is often the case when one tries to explain religious phenomena. First of all, the goose has been associated to other gods: Sekhmet (see note 6, above), Atum, Geb, Seth, and even Horus. The roots of these various associations seem to go all the way back to the Old Kingdom, but they developed especially during the New Kingdom. However, the strongest association is with the god Amun, and among the geese, the Nile goose alone had this

²¹ Analysis conducted by the RCD Laboratory, Wantage, UK. We thank Francesca Hickin, Bohnams, for sharing this information.



privilege. The similarity between the names of the  *smn* goose and  *imn* Amun may have contributed to this association.

In some cosmogonies, the primeval god was born in Hermopolis (Middle Egypt) from a primordial egg, the egg of the 'great cackler, pleasant of voice - probably the  *smn* goose. When Amun gained prominence in the early New Kingdom, he was integrated into the Hermopolitan cosmogony, and thus, as he himself became considered a primordial god, would have been associated with that goose. As Jacques Vandier notes, however, there is unfortunately no definite proof that allows us to affirm that the goose - Amun link is Hermopolitan in origin; there are only a few textual clues, which have led researchers to keep an "extreme reserve" in their conclusions.²²

The FGA's statue of the goose of Amun is therefore both a masterpiece of three-dimensional ancient art and the witness of popular religious beliefs that remained on the fringe of state religion. And who knows, archaeologist may one day 'strike gold' and have the good fortune of finding a goose catacomb - perhaps in the region of Hermopolis? Such a discovery would no doubt bring to light a wealth of new information that would add to our scant knowledge, or even totally alter our understanding of this fascinating subject.

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Curator, archaeology collection

January 2022

²² VANDIER, J., « L'oise d'Amon », p. 23.



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