The Egg and its symbolism in the Graeco- Roman period
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Abstract
The egg has its special religious symbolism during the Graeco- Roman period. It connected with creation; the egg in the ritual Egyptian methodology was a symbol of rebirth and renewal of life in the afterlife and new creation for the deceased. It is connected with Horus, the sun god and the ithyphallic god Amon as a symbol of creation. The egg also connected with royalty and sovereign, Geb was credited in antiquity with laying the egg from which hatched the sun, the celestial equivalent of the living Pharaoh. The egg also was used in the Egyptian conception as an protecting amulet, especially for ships and sailors. The egg was one of the main offerings for the deceased in Egypt and Greece, it was also depicted as sacred objects upon the altars in the tombs and mummy-coffins, that three rounded eggs are illustrated on an altar. Eggs have always been symbols of rebirth or regeneration.

The appearance of the egg in Egypt and the Hellenistic world was mainly attribute of the Isiac cult, the goddess who born Horus as a sun-god in the form of an egg, so the deceased hope to rebirth again in his tomb in the form of Horus as an egg. The egg also illustrated on the niches of the private houses of the followers of Isis near the Iseum of Pompeii. During the Christian period, the egg still has its main symbolic meaning as a sign of resurrection, the griffin’s egg, a common ornament in mediaeval churches, were hung up in the churches with other curiosities.

The egg appeared in the tombs of Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period as Tigrain, Kom el-Schukafa, Si-Amon and Akhmim as a burial symbol of the resurrection of the deceased in his after life.

Key words: Creation, Royalty, Amulet, Isis, Sailing

The Egg and creation
The egg played a very important role in both ordinary and religious life of the Egyptians from the pre-dynastic till the Roman period. The egg was named in ancient Egyptian language as ѕwḥt. The egg in the ritual Egyptian methodology was a symbol of rebirth and renewal of life in the afterlife and new creation for the deceased; that the egg was used to describe the baby in his mother's womb as ιmγ ѕwḥt. f. Chapter 22 of the Book of the Dead mentions that the deceased is rebirth again from an egg, as: “wbn.n.i m swhtmt t3 st3w” (I have risen in the egg that is in the land of mysteries (Quirke, 2013, p. 82). The Hermopolitan religious tradition implied that the world was created by an acted of primeval gods or by the sun-god who arose from the lotus or from the primeval egg which came from the depth of the primordial ocean (Marakhonova, 1993, p.278). In the Book of the Dead, according to the enemies of Re, it is mentioned that "who have cursed that which is in the egg", also in another mention "I keep watch over the egg of the great Cackler, or I am the egg which is in the great Cackler". The egg also is symbolically related to sex and generative power (Hussein, 2001, p. 29).

The deceased was identify with many gods, especially the sun god “O one who is in his egg, shinning in his disc” (Quirke, S., Op. Cit, Chapt. 17, p. 67), that the sun-god is emerging from “Itn” the divine “Golden Egg” (Goldwasser, 1997, p. 83). The egg was associated also with Horus (Iam risen, Iam risen, as a great falcon, going out from its egg) (Quirke., Op. Cit, chapter 77, p. 182; Morenz, 1975, pp. 463-464 ). It was also connected with Osiris NN (Bergman, 1970); according to Diodorus Osiris said “I’m the last son of Kronos and have emerged from the beautiful and noble egg” (Diod, 1, 27, 5). On the fourth register of the southern wall of the sanctuary of the temple of Hibis represents a crowned bird, perhaps Horus with two hawks heads.
squatting on a pedestal having two eggs before him, while on the fifth register depicts Re-Horakhty together with the eight (primeval deities) representing the creation myth. The egg also connected with god Thot as a creation god; the priest of Hermopolis believed that he was one of the divine who hatched the egg as a symbol of creation all the human beings (Goodenough, S., Egyptian Methodology, Singapore, 1997, pp.75-76); on the fifth register of the sanctuary of the temple of Hibis depicts two ibis-birds, one of them is squatting on sm tswy-sign with two eggs before him (pl.1).

From the Ur-Egg or the new life originated; the connection between the Ur-egg and the ithyphallic gods are distinguished, it connected with Ptah, who is represented on a fragment of a stelae upon a scarab, as primordial god with his phallus pointed in an egg, which is protected by an udjat-eye as a symbol of luck (Graefe, 1998, pp.117-124, pl.1) (pl. 2). The second register of the southern wall of the sanctuary of the temple of Hibis represents god Ptah sitting on his pottery wheel moulding an egg; a priest of god ptah is creating the human beings from the egg, by moulding the egg on the pottery wheel (pl. 3). God Amun, the king of the gods, is rising from the cosmic egg (Assmann, 1999, p. 188), also the inscriptions upon the temple of Khonsu at Karnak, dates back to the time of Augustus, refers to Ptah in the form of Amon as “Amon was... in that name of his of Ptah, called Ptah, who created the egg which came forth from Nun... as Ptah of the Hh-gods and the Nnw-goddesses, who created heaven and earth. He ejaculated and made (it) at his place in the lake .... He fertilized the egg and the eight came into existence from it in the district around the Ogdoad”. Ptah is standing before the inscription, and he is entitled as “Ptah, who created the egg, which emerged from the primeval ocean” (Graefe., 1998, p. 122, pl.1).

The egg as a symbol of creation is connected also with the ithyphallic figure of god Amun, who is entitled also upon the 2nd pylon of Karnak as” who had come from the egg” (Urk, VIII, p. 107,5; Graefec., Op. Cit, p. 122). The temple of Edfu inscriptions refers to “the isle of an egg” (de Rochemontaix, M and Chassinat, E., le Temple d’Edfou, Vol. (4), p. 140) as the place of the creation, while the Esna temple inscriptions again mention the cosmogonic egg from which the sun god emerged (Sauneron, S., Les Fetes religieuses d’Esna, aux derniers Siecles du Paganism, Cairo, 1962, p.262).

The Egg's connection with god Atum; the creation god of Heliopolis is illustrated on the sixth register of the northern wall of the sanctuary of the temple of Hibis represents the ithyphallic god Atum is carrying two eggs and behind him two hands in a nest built on papyrus and lily (pl.4). The text mentions "Atum who created the hawks' egg ....".

The Egg and Royalty

The egg has also its connection with sovereign and royalty (Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, p. 59); the egg was used in some terms to describe the king as "the beautiful egg of the god". During the Graeco-Roman world Thebes as the main-cult center was considered the egg of Amun (Wb, IV, 73). Geb was credited in antiquity with laying the egg from which hatched the sun, the celestial equivalent of the living Pharaoh. At Heliopolis he was worshipped as a bisexual god who was the one responsible for laying the Great Egg from which the sun god emerged at the dawn. It was believed that Geb and Nut produced the Great Egg, in which the sun god Re appeared as aphoenix. (Armour, R., gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt, Cairo, 1999, p.34) Geb’s daughter Isis was pregnant by her murdered brother/husband’s sperm, she stated in spell 148 of the Middle Kingdom Coffin Text as “I am Isis, Osiris’s sister, his seed is within my womb. It is as son of the foremost of the Ennead who will rule this land.... That a god’s form has congealed in the egg... know in your hearts that he is your lord, this god who is
in his egg, blue in aspect, the lord of the gods” (Kozloff, 2012, p.59.) (1). Thus, Geb had produced the sun but Isis now produced the living sun god.

The egg also attributed with god Sobek at Fayoum; most of the kings who worshipped him there, believed who was another form of the father god who emerged from the primeval ocean to lay his eggs on the bank in order to give birth to the world.

The Egg in the graves
Many real ostrich-eggs or models were deposited in Egyptian graves (Rodziewicz, 1990, p. 221) which range in date from Badarian to Gerzean or belong to the early Dynastic period of Nubia (Kantor, 1948, pp.46-51). The egg –heads limestone plaques were used as ex-voto from the 30th dynasty till the Ptolemaic period (Bianchi, 1981, pp.34-36). The egg also is connected with the children in their graves at Nubia, whether the egg was found inside the grave or decorated with the hands of the children, where their bodies were found in egg shells graves, this also found at Hierakonopolis, where areas of ostrich eggshell graves were found there with egg-shaped jars, that the ostrich egg as a symbol of rebirth (Muir and Friedman, 2011, pp.571-590, esp. not.3.) (2).

The egg was used as a decoration element and architectural motif; the egg contained the little bird inside it as the coffin contained the mummy. it was a main element in the scenes of Egypt of the New kingdom as the tombs of the Nobles as tomb-chapel Nachet, Menna, Horemheb and Neferhotep, it also appeared in the tombs of the Valley of the Kings as tombs Seti I, Ramses VI, Tuhtmosis III and Amenhotep II of it was used with the tongue as ornamentation of Ptolemaic Egypt, as in the Ptolemaic sanctuary at Hermopolis Magna from the time of Euergetes I (Wace, A et al., 1959, pl. 13,3) (pl. 5), was found also on limestone architectural fragments and painted stucco in the region of Basileia (Adriani, 1940, p. 51, No.18, pl. 18,2; p.52, No. 2, pl. 19,1; No.3, pl. 18,5; p. 53, Nos.5,6, pl. 19,4) (pl. 6), in the painted stucco decoration of a coffin from the Serapeum at Saqqara, and in the decoration of Tomb I at Moustafa Kaml necropolis (Adriani, Op. Cit, pl. 28) , in addition to it was used for decoration of funerary stelae and loculus slabs from other Hellenistic cemeteries of Alexandria (Brown,1957, pls. III,2, VI,1, VII, 2, IX, 1, XIII,1, XXI, 2), and it can be seen on Hadra vases (Guerrini,1964, pl. XV, B,24, pl. XVI, B,29). The egg and tongue ornaments occur in several mosaics outside Egypt at Delos and Pergamon (Daszewski, 1985, pp.49, 113).

The Egg as an amulet
The egg was used in the Egyptian conception as an protecting amulet, especially for ships and sailors, P. Mag. Harris 6 gives a good example of a ritual use of an egg designated to protect a ship, a spell is to be recited then over an egg of clay in the hand of a person on the front of a ship; then it is said “if he who is on the water (a crocodile) comes out, throw it into water (or, he is thrown into the water)”; this means that the egg and the spell are a defense against the crocodile. The Magical papyrus speaks also about the cosmic egg “great in heaven and great in the underworld (Lange, 1927, p.54).

1) He suggested that the egg that became a pharaoh may have been that of a goose, a kite, a falcon, a duck, or a vulture depending’s on the geographic location and the identities of the local deities. Ibid, p.64
2)The ostrich eggs were found on tomb and temples walls by the tribute-bearers from Nubia, Syria, Punt, and Lybians among their goods presented, the ostrich eggs were found also in Egypt in the graves of Naqada. While ostrich eggshells were discovered at Crete, Phillips, J., Aegyptiaca on the Island of Crete, a critical review, Vol (1), Contributions to the chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean 18; ÖsterreichischeAkademie der Wissenschaften, Denkschriften der Gesamtakademie 49. Wien, 2008, pp.148-149
The Egg in Hellenistic World

Eggs have always been Greek symbol of rebirth or regeneration (London, BM GR 1882.3-12.1). In Alexandria, fragments of ostrich eggs were found at Kom el-Dikka, in addition to an ostrich egg inside an funerary offering basket is now located at the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (Rodziewicz, 1990, p. 221; id., 1976, pp.169-210). In Archaic period at Greece, funerary offerings of eggs, either real or imitations in stone or clay, were common in Greece. It first appeared in geometric graves in the form of ovoid vessels equipped with lid and holes for suspension, some later examples retain the lid and ovoid shape while other are spherical, pierced only with a small hole in one end or both, and a few lack aperture. It was one of the attributes of the Dionysios’s mysteries (Kaplan, I., OP. Cit, p. 120) a late 5th century black-glazed cup with five eggs from a tomb on Rhodes (Kurtz and Boardman, 1971, p. 77), and appeared in the funeral scenes of the Classical Greece (Ibid, p.77). The egg was one of the main offerings for the deceased in Egypt and Greece, it was also depicted as sacred objects upon the altars in the tombs and mummy-coffins, that three rounded eggs are illustrated on an altar, beside a row of double-feather with sun disc, two cows, two goose, two baboons, two lions, and the emblem of Sechat on the mummy-coffin of Philadelphia University Museum (Kurth, D., Op. Cit, p. p.98, fig.7), in Greek relief the egg was also one of the chthonic symbols which was offered by the offerings-bearers (Guralnick, 1975, p. 183); it was also one of the food stuffs which was found in the pits or preys in which offerings were burnt and occasionally in the grave itself, that the deceased will eat it later, while the stone eggs (as on Rhodes and Thera) may be used as food substitute (Kurtz, D and Boardman, J., Op. Cit, p. 215). Ground lekythoi shows that the egg is a main offering inside the graves (Fairbanks, 1907, p.167).

The appearance of the egg in Egypt and the Hellenistic world was mainly attribute of the Isiac cult, the goddess who born Horus as a sun-god in the form of an egg, so the deceased hope to rebirth again in his tomb in the form of Horus as an egg; so the egg was mainly joined to the Isiac cult. A terracotta depicts a man in Hellenistic custom is standing beside a small Corinth-column, while an egg upon it (pl. 7), this is similar, with small different details, to what is appeared in the wall-paintings in the sanctuaries of Isis in the Hellenistic world, the egg upon a column is also appeared on Etruscan mirror in the villa Giulia (Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, p. 121)

The egg was connected by the high priest of Isis in Rome, during the yearly festival of Isidisnavigium, a public festival attested from the 1st century A.D, at March 5 of every year, in which the lunching of a new ship by the high priest consecrated to Isis, decorated with Egyptian scenes using a burning torch, an egg and sulphur. The ship was then named and dedicated to Isis, on its sail a prayer was inscribed, asking for safe navigation during the new season (Lipka, 2009, pp.105-106). The egg also was a part of Isis cult meal with fish as depicted on the priest of Isis’s meal at Pompeii in 79 AD (pl. 9) (Witt, 1971, p.71, pl. 29).

The egg also illustrated on the niches of the private houses of the followers of Isis near the Iseum of Pompeii (Ibid, p.84), and a main attribute to the cult of Isis, that the egg was holding by her priests (Ibid, pp. 168, 213; Griffiths, 1975, p.261), and Plutarch’s legend about Isis’s pregnancy on the 6th day of Phaophi (3 October), she arises glad of heart that she holds inside her body the divine seed of her brother and that she is raising up the form of the god in the egg (Witt, p.213).

The Egg in Christian Period

During the Christian period, the egg still has its main symbolic meaning as a sign of resurrection, the griffin’s egg, a common ornament in mediaeval churches, were hung up in the churches with other curiosities. The griffin’s egg was merely brought by soldiers or pilgrims from foreign lands, and presented as offerings of devotion to the church; the marble eggs have been discovered in some early
martyrs tombs at Rome. Nowadays eggs are associated with the Easter-festival of the Christians (Butler, 1970, p.78).

The Scenes of the Egg in the Graeco-Roman Tombs of Egypt

1. Tigrain’s tomb
   The back wall of the left niche of the Burial chamber:
   The scene of the frontal semi-nude figure, with the two protecting male-figure and the two crouching jackals is closed off by stands that carry large, oval (elliptical), beribboned objects as an egg tied with fillets on alabaster pedestal that frame the whole scene (Venit, in: AJA (101), p.714, fig.11).

   The back-wall of the right niche of the burial chamber:
   The scene of the kneeling male figure with the palm branches, and the female pastophoros of Isis give him the grain fronds, an egg-shaped object tied with fillets set on the similar alabaster pedestal (Ibid, fig.15) (pl. 10).

2. Kom el-Schukafa
   The Pediment of the Pronaos of the main tomb
   Egg-ornaments decoration upon the pediment (Empereur, 1995, pp.162-163)

   The back wall above the sarcophagus of the burial chamber
   Egg-decoration is surmounting the upper part of the back walls of the sarcophagi of the burial chamber (Empereur, pp. 164-165) (pl.11)

3. Siwa Oasis
   Tomb of Si- Amun
   The ceiling
   In one of the solar boats that flank Nut on the tomb’s ceiling, Isis and Nephtys revering the morning sun (Kheber), constructed as djed pillar supporting an egg, which is resting upon its top, from which an image of a winged scarab emerges; Horus stands behind Isis (Fakhry, 1944, pp.154-55, fig. 34, pl. XXXI. A) (pl.12).

   The western wall
   Si- Amun is venerating Isis, and offered six-jars of wine on an offering table, the Bennu-bird appear behind Isis, is crouching upon an egg (Fakhry, A., Siwa Oasis, p.142, fig. 22). The Bennu-bird is connected with the creation of world, as the ba of Re (pl.13)

4. Akhmim
   Tomb VIII (1)
   The eastern wall-beside the niche
   A mummified figure with a jackal-head is standing, an altar with three egg-shaped object upon it, behind him a Hieroglyphic column text, then the deceased in his white garment is adoring Osiris, an altar in between with two rounded-object upon it (Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, p. 177, pls. 99. b, 101.a) (pl. 14).

1) Irene Kaplan classified it as Tomb VIII, it is only one room with a niche, Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, pp.176-178, pl. 99.a
Plates

Pl.1 fifth register of the sanctuary of the temple of Hibis

Pl.2 the Ur-egg of Ptah

Graefe, 1998, pp.117-124, pl.1

Pl.3 The second register of the southern wall- Hibis temple
Pl. 4 the sixth register of the northern wall – temple of Hibis

Pl. 5 Wace, A et al., Hermopolis Magna, pl.13

Pl. 6 Adriani, A., Annuaire du Musee Greco-Romain (1935-1939), pl.XVIII,3
Pl.7 Terracotta- The Egyptian Museum, Kaplan, I, pl. 27 (a)

Pl.8 Etruscan Mirror, Villa Giulia, Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, pl. 27(b)
Pl.9 Remnants of the Isiac priest’s meal, the Iseum of Pompeii, Witt, R., Op. Cit, pl.29

Pl.10 Tigrain's Tomb

Kaplan, I., Op. Cit, pl. 56 a, b
**Pl.12** One of the six sun-boats painted in the ceiling at the two sides of Nut

![Image of a sun-boat](image1)

Fakhry, A., pl. XXXI

**Pl.13** Si- Amun adoring Isis who is followed by the Bennu-bird

![Image of Si- Amun adoring Isis](image2)

Fakhry, A., Siwa, p. 142, fig.22.

**Pl.14** Tomb IV

![Image of Tomb IV](image3)

Kaplan, I, Op. Cit, pl. 101,
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الملخص العربي

البيضه ومغزاها فى العصر اليونانى- الرومانى

البيضه لها مغزى دينى هام وتميز خلال العصر اليونانى الرومانى، ارتبطت البيضه بالخلق حيث ارتبطت في الميثولوجيا المصرية بالبعث واعادة الحياة للمتوفى في العالم الآخر. ارتبطت البيضه ببعض الآله المصرية مثل حورس – اله الشمس رع والآلهة أمون. البيضه لها صلة وثيقة بالحكم والملكية، حيث ارتبطت الآلهة جب ملك الأرض ببعض البيضات التي بزغ منها الشمس كرمز الحياة، لذا أصبحت البيضه تجسدى للفرعون المصري ملك الأرض.

ظهرت البيضه أيضا كتميمة للحماية على ظهر السفن للبحار. كانت البيضات أيضا أحد المرافق الأساسي للمتوفى في مصر واليونان. ظهرت البيضه كعنصر مقدس أيضا على سطح المذابح الجنائزية في المقابر وعلى سطح التوابيت، حيث ظهرت ثلاث بيضات على أحد المذابح كرمز للتجديد وإعادة الحياة. أرتبطت البيضه بشكل كبير داخل مصر والعالم الهلنستى بعبادة الآلهة آيزيس، التي أنجبت حورس كالمسيى شمسى في شكل بيضه، حيث يمنع من التوفى أن يعاد بعثة في شكل بيضه مثل حورس، تم تمثيل البيضه داخل النشاط في منزل كهنة السماك المرتبطين بعبادة الآلهة آيزيس.

استمرت البيضه كرمز للبعث والتجديد خلال العصر المسيحي، حيث ظهرت البيضه كعنصر زخرفي هام وأساسى داخل الكنائس التي ترجع إلى العصور الوسطى.

ظهرت البيضه في مصر داخل مقابر في العصر اليونانى – الرومانى مثل مقابر تيجران وكوك الشقاق ومقرة سي أمون وأنعم كرمز هام للبعث والتجديد للمتوفى في العالم الآخر.

الكلمات الدالة: الخلق- الحكم -تميمة- آيزيس- الأبحار