

SADDLE-BILLED STORK (*BA-BIRD*)

طائر اللقلق (طائر البا)

*Jiří Janák*

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## SADDLE-BILLED STORK (BA-BIRD)

### طائر القلق (طائر البا)

Jiří Janák

Sattelstorch (*Ba*-Vogel)  
Jabiru d'Afrique (oiseau-*ba*)

*The ba, whose notion spanned from the divine to the manifestation of the divine, and from the supernatural (or rather super-human) manifestation of the dead to the notion of the soul (psyche) or reputation, counts among the most important Egyptian religious concepts. The term and its hieroglyphic renderings are attested for all periods of ancient Egyptian history. In the process of time the word ba was written with various signs, including that of a stork (G 29), a ram (E 10), and a human-headed falcon (G 53). Its representation with sign G 29—the saddle-billed stork (Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis)—is both the earliest and the most attested depiction connected to the religious concept of the ba. Thus it serves as a crucial witness to the original meaning and main aspect of the ba.*

تعد "البا" من أهم المفاهيم المتعلقة بالديانة المصرية القديمة، وهو ما تعددت أوجهه لتتضمن ما هو إلهي أو تظاهرة إلهية وتراوحت الأوجه تلك من التظاهرات الخارقة للطبيعة للمتوفيين إلى مفهوم الروح. ويظهر هذا المصطلح وطرق كتابته بالهيروغليفية بكل فترات التاريخ المصري، ولكن على مر الزمان كتب المصطلح بطرق عدة، منها باستخدام طائر القلق (G29) ، الحمل (E10)، ونسر ذو رأس إنسان (G53). وتعد الكتابة بطائر القلق (أبو ميه) (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*) هي أقدمهم وأشهرهم، ولذا تعد شاهداً أساسياً للمعنى الأساسي والوجه الرئيسي للبا.

**T**he *ba* (*b3*) is undoubtedly among the most important ancient Egyptian religious notions, although it usually lacks an accurate translation. All interpretations and verbal images that are commonly used to describe the concept of the *ba* (i.e., as the "soul") should be considered incomplete, since the original notion encompassed several different but interconnected aspects, spanning from the divine to the manifestation (*eidolon*) of the divine, and from the super-human

manifestation of the dead to the notion of the soul (*psyche*) or reputation (Žabkar 1968; Wolf-Brinkmann 1968; Borghouts 1982; Ockinga 1995: 82-102; Bonnet 2000: 74-77; Allen 2001; 2011: 6, 137; Assman 2001: 47, 112, 120-131, 161-163; Loprieno 2003: 200-225; Roeder 2005; Smith 2009b: 4-5; Janák 2011).

The term *ba* and its hieroglyphic renderings are attested for all periods of ancient Egyptian history, from the beginnings of the Egyptian writing system until the very dusk of the hieroglyphic script. Over the course of time,

the word *ba* was written variously with signs representing a stork (G 29), a ram (E 10), a human-headed falcon (G 53), and, in the Pyramid Texts (e.g., spell 1027b), a leopard's head (F 9). It remains, however, disputable whether the *ba* of this spell has the same meaning as it does in other contexts. The stork of the G 29-sign represents both the earliest and the most attested depiction connected to the religious concept of the *ba*. Fortunately, this *ba*-sign (G 29) can easily be recognized as the saddle-billed stork, *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis* (see figs. 1 and 2), since it usually shows the bird's most characteristic features: long legs, long neck, a strong and sharp bill, and most importantly, the presence of a wattle (under the bill) or a lappet (at its chest). This bird should not be mistaken for the (American) jabiru (*Jabiru mycteria*)—an error made by Gardiner in his *Grammar* (Gardiner 1950: 470).

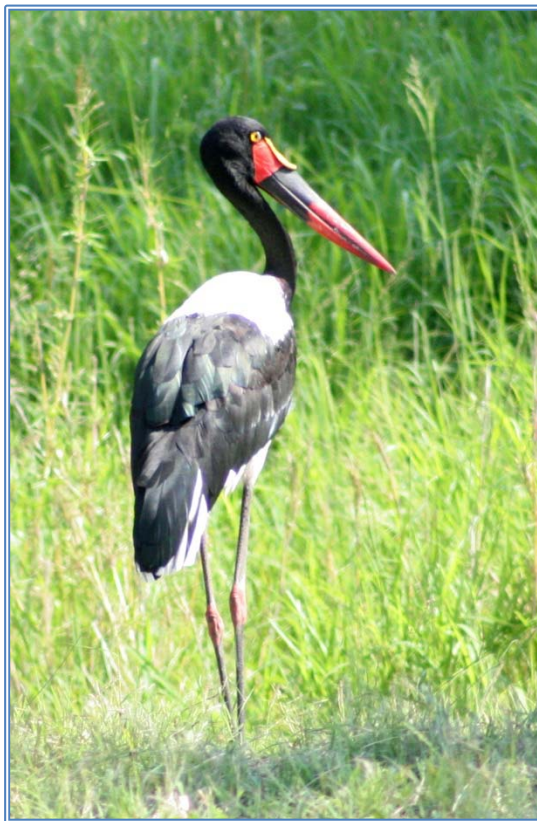


Figure 1. The saddle-billed stork.



Figure 2. A depiction of the saddle-billed stork.

The saddle-billed stork is a tall and majestic bird that can grow to a height of 150 cm, attaining a wingspan of up to 270 cm. White and black dominate its striking coloration. Its wings are mainly black, tipped with white feathers. The head and neck are completely black and feature a large, pointed bill, which is mainly red with a black band. A yellow frontal shield (called the “saddle”) at the upper end of the bill represents one of the most characteristic features of this bird. At the base of the lower mandible, where it meets the neck, the saddle-billed stork has the diagnostic small yellow wattle. All these characteristics (together with its specific posture and long legs) are usually present in its ancient Egyptian representations, and thus the saddle-billed stork can usually be easily recognized among other bird-signs. The bird is, however, depicted with varying accuracy in different historical periods (Keimer 1930; Janák 2011). These non-migratory birds prefer to breed in marshes and

water-lands, where they feed on fish, frogs, small reptiles, or even small birds. Nowadays, the saddle-billed stork is a permanent resident in sub-Saharan Africa; there have been no attested observations of this bird in present-day Egypt (Houlihan 1988: 23).

The impressive size and stately appearance of the saddle-billed stork, which was probably the largest flying bird of ancient Egypt, might have largely influenced its significance to the Egyptians. These characteristics might also have played a key role in connecting this particular bird with the *ba*-concept, since it seems only logical that such an impressive bird should represent an earthly manifestation of divine (i.e., heavenly) powers.

The earliest depictions of the saddle-billed stork in Egypt are attested on several knife and mace handles dated to the Late Predynastic Period. These images were rendered with great accuracy and they probably represent the earliest pictorial representations of the saddle-billed stork in human history. The best depiction is preserved on the so-called Carnarvon knife handle made of ivory (Naqada III; Bénédite 1918). On it a row of these birds can be observed together with two parallel rows of powerful wild animals (elephants, bulls, and lions). The first row or register encompasses eight saddle-billed storks with a giraffe between the first and second stork. A similar scene can be observed on earlier objects, such as the Davis comb (Naqada IIc/d; Dorman, Harper, and Pittman 1987; see fig. 3), where images of elephants, lions, bulls, hyenas or dogs, and antelopes or gazelles were engraved in five parallel registers, both on the front and the rear of the comb. On both sides, there is a row of five birds with a giraffe in between the first and the second bird. Four birds can doubtlessly be identified as saddle-billed storks, according to the presence of the above-mentioned characteristic features (the saddle, wattle, etc.). The last bird in both rows can only be described as a tall, long-legged bird with a strong bill (the yellow-billed stork?), since both the wattle and the saddle are missing.

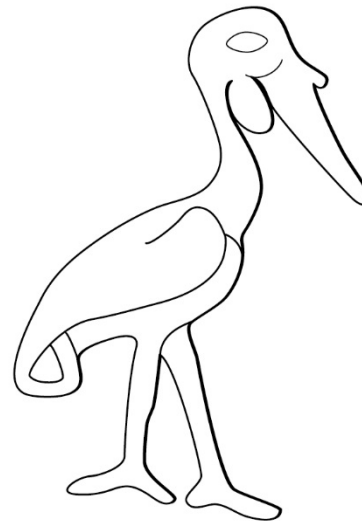


Figure 3. A depiction of the saddle-billed stork after the Davis comb handle.

The handle of the so-called Brooklyn knife (Naqada IIc/d; Needler 1984) also bears several registers of animals, including elephants, lions, bulls, jackals, dogs, rams, and birds. The birds (mainly saddle-billed storks, identified by their main features) are depicted in the second register. As in the two above-mentioned cases, a giraffe occurs after the first stork. These storks also occur within a row of tall birds (below a row of elephants and above lions) on the Pitt-Rivers knife handle (Naqada IIc/d; Petrie, Quibell, and Spurrell 1896). A similar pattern appears on a mace handle from Sayala in Lower Nubia (Firth 1927). This handle, dated to the Middle to Late A-Group (Naqada IIc-IIIa), was embossed with the shapes of several wild animals. At the top, we can see an elephant, a giraffe, and a large stork. Identification of the latter bird is, however, doubtful, since it was depicted with neither a wattle nor saddle. On the other hand, other features (posture, huge bill, long neck, etc.) and the context would suggest that this image represents a depiction of the saddle-billed stork.

The early representations of the saddle-billed stork among powerful animals in all the above-mentioned cases can by no means be regarded as coincidental. They suggest that this impressive bird made a significant impact on the mindset of the Egyptians, who consequently associated it with the idea of greatness and power. Moreover, we can assume that this association with power, greatness, and awe formed the basis of the relationship between the Egyptians' concept of the *ba* as the earthly manifestation of heavenly (i.e., divine and otherwise unseen) power and its hieroglyphic representation (Janák 2011).

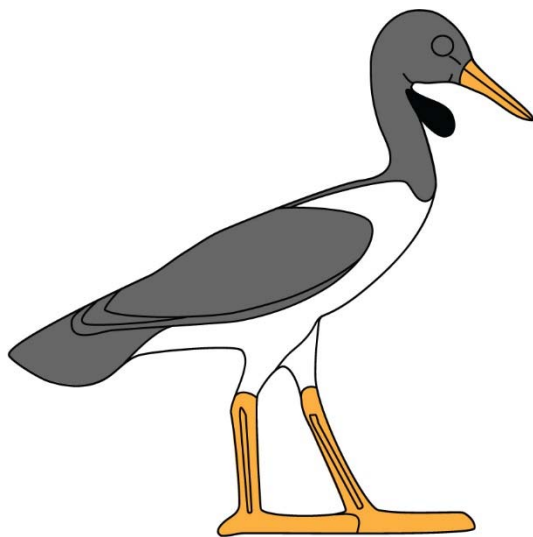


Figure 4. A depiction of the *ba* (a part of the *bꜣw*-sign) after the slab stela of Wepemnofret from Wepemnofret's tomb in Giza.

Early representations of the saddle-billed stork are also present on several of the famous bone labels from Tomb U-j at Abydos (Dreyer 1998: 118-122, 124-126, 128, 130, 141-142; numbers 52-58, 99-106, and probably also 127-129, X184, X188), where the bird can be recognized by its size, robust bill, and often by the "saddle" at the bill's upper end. As for the Early Dynastic Period, saddle-billed stork

depictions occur on several seals (Kaplony 1963: figs. 134, 145, 482), and an accurate, though fragmentary, representation of this bird is attested on a fragment of a large porphyry jar from Hierakopolis (Quibell and Green 1902: 48, pl. LIX.4). Fine images of the saddle-billed stork can also be encountered among hieroglyphs from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-Dynasty tomb of Khabausokar in Saqqara (Murray 1905: pl. 1). In the latter case, however, the representations tend to be schematized: the upper wattle is in its standard place, but the bill is shortened, as it is in later periods (Kahl 1994: 525-526; 2002: 131-132). In the pyramid complex of the 4<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty king Sahura, the execution of the *ba*-sign remains similar to the *ba*-hieroglyph in Khabausokar's tomb, though the position of the wattle differs slightly (Borchardt 1913: pls. 31, 35). An analogous depiction of this bird occurs on a slab stela from the tomb of Wepemnofret in Giza that was currently re-dated to the early phase of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Der Manuelian 2003: 32-39; see fig. 4). Representations of the saddle-billed stork become even more schematized during later phases of the Old Kingdom: its size and posture resemble those of a duck or goose rather than of a tall stork, its bill and neck are much shorter than on earlier representations, and the black (sic!) wattle "moves" from the base of the bill to the neck of the bird, and sometimes even to its chest (Keimer 1930; Janák 2011).

As for the artistic and hieroglyphic depictions of the saddle-billed stork, two facts are of particular importance. First, the best and the most elaborate depictions of the saddle-billed stork come from the earliest periods of Egyptian history. During the second phase of the Old Kingdom, the sign became schematized with the above-mentioned inaccuracies. From this period onwards, the schematized *ba*-sign remained almost unchanged. Second, there are no skeletal or other remains of the saddle-billed stork (e.g., mummified specimens) attested for any period of Egyptian history. Moreover, no artistic representations of this bird are present in any

scene where other birds usually occur (Boessneck 1988; Houlihan 1988: 25; Decker and Herb 1994; Ikram 2005: 153-154). These facts have led scholars to the conclusion that the bird disappeared from Egypt during the first half of the Old Kingdom, or its distribution area shrank to sub-Saharan regions, as happened to other animal species, such as the giraffe (Houlihan 1988: 25). This opinion can be supported by the lack of material, textual, and pictorial evidence for the presence of the saddle-billed stork in Egypt at least from the second half of the Old Kingdom and also by artistic and scribal inaccuracies in the writing of the *ba*-sign (Janák 2011; Janák 2013).



Figure 5. The hieroglyphic sign of the *ba* (G 53).

In this context, it is especially significant that the earliest attestation of the notion of the *ba* in association with a non-royal person comes from the final phase of the Old Kingdom (Žabkar 1968: 60-61, 90-91; Altenmüller 1993: 1-15). According to some scholars, the concept of the *ba* had changed after the collapse of the Old Kingdom (Žabkar 1968; Wolf-Brinkmann 1968), in keeping with the often discussed and still questionable phenomenon of the “democratization of the afterlife” (Smith 2009a). Although the “democratization” theory has not been fully accepted and may even be abandoned in future, it is noteworthy that the shift in the characterization of the *ba* from “the manifestation of the divine” to the more general “manifestation of any super-human entity” occurred at the very end of the Old Kingdom and during the First Intermediate Period. This was the time when the original link between the notion/sign and its earthly model (the bird itself) got lost after centuries of the model’s absence and of the sign’s degradation and schematization. The new understanding and interpretation of the *ba*-notion subsequently found its expression in a new hieroglyph in the time of the Middle Kingdom. The iconographical value of this later sign (G 53: a beast of prey with a human head; see fig. 5) stressed the new characteristics of the *ba*-notion (e.g., afterlife manifestation of the deceased, free movement, “migration” of the soul), which differed from the original aspects of greatness and power.

## Bibliographic Notes

Information on the saddle-billed stork’s appearance and behavior, as well as its current population, migration, or endangerments has been consulted with the latest version of the *BirdLife International* database ([www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)). For additional drawings of the saddle-billed stork and further information on its early through Old Kingdom representations, see this author’s article, “A question of size: A remark on early attestations of the *ba* hieroglyph,” in *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 40 (Janák 2011).

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Figure 2. A depiction of the saddle-billed stork. (Drawing by Lucie Vařeková.)

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Figure 5. The hieroglyphic sign of the *ba* (G 53). (Drawing by Lucie Vařeková.)