

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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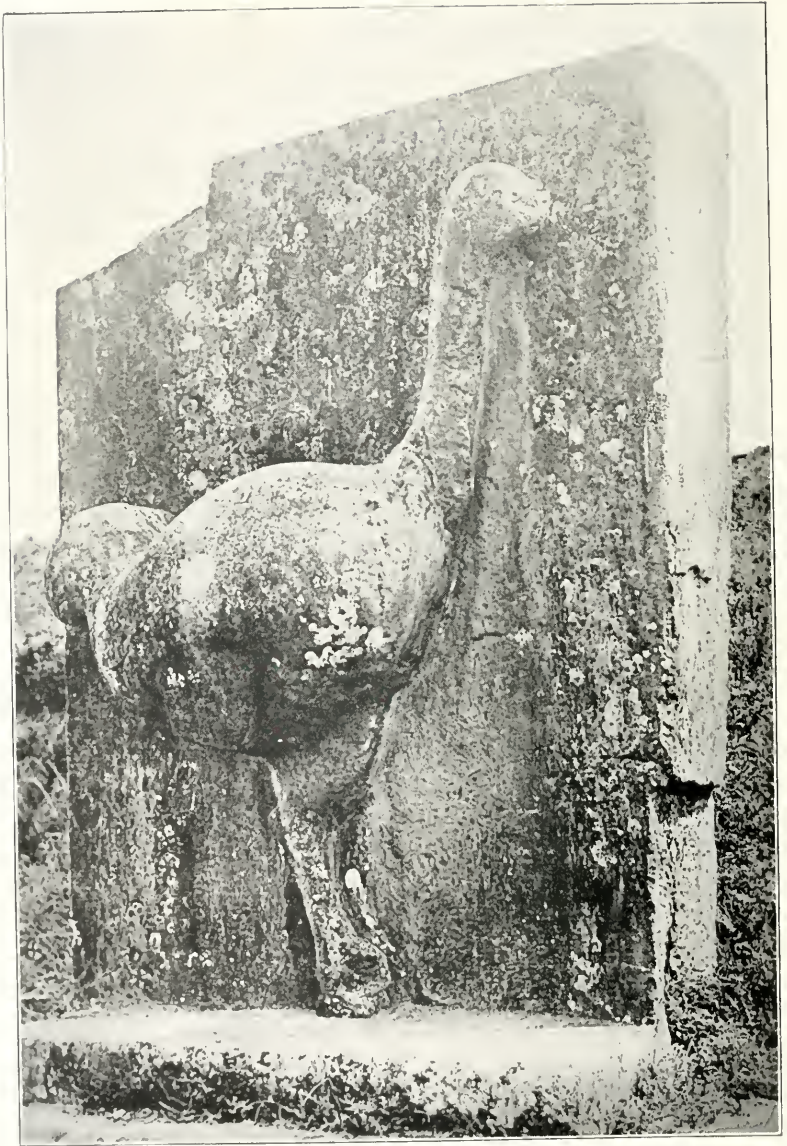
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*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## OSTRICH EGG-SHELL CUPS FROM MESOPOTAMIA

### THE OSTRICH IN ANCIENT TIMES

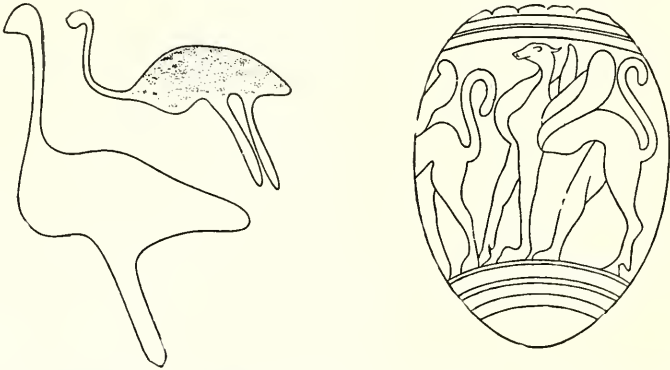
BY BERTHOLD LAUFER\*

IN THE course of the excavations undertaken on the ancient site of Kish in Mesopotamia by the Field Museum-Oxford University Joint Expedition, great quantities of fragments of ostrich egg-shell were brought to light by Ernest Mackay, archeologist and excavator, and together with other collections, mainly pottery, stone, and metal, were recently received in the Museum. As ostrich eggs were anciently sent as gifts from Persia to the emperors of China and formed an important article in the history of ancient trade, considerable interest was aroused by these egg-shell shards. T. Ito, a Japanese expert at treating and repairing antiquities, pondered for some time over the problem of matching and joining several hundreds of these pieces and finally succeeded in restoring three cups completely. The result of his patient and painstaking labor is shown in the adjoining illustrations. These restorations are true and perfect; that is, they consist of some eighty pieces each, accurately and perfectly joined, without the use of other substances or recourse to filling-in. Thanks to the admirable skill of Mr. Ito we now have these beautiful cups before us, exactly in the shape as they were anciently used by the Sumerians. These cups, almost porcelain-like in appearance, have the distinction of representing the oldest bird-eggs of historical times in existence, and may claim an age of at least five thousand years. Being the eggs of the majestic winged camel of the desert, the largest living bird, the fleetest and most graceful of all running animals that "scorneth the horse and his rider," they are the only eggs of archaeological and historical interest. But they are more than mere eggs; they are ingeniously shaped into water-vessels or drinking goblets by human hand, a small portion

\* Curator of Anthropology in Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

at the top having been cut off and the edge smoothed. They were closed by pottery lids overlaid with bitumen, one of the oldest pigments used by mankind. They are thus precious remains of the earliest civilization of which we have any knowledge. Some of the fragments are decorated with banded zones of brown color brought out by means of bitumen. The shell is extremely hard and on an average two millimeters thick.

The trade in ostrich eggs was of considerable extent and importance in the ancient world. They have been discovered in prehistoric tombs of Greece and Italy, in Mycenae, Etruria, Latium, and even in Spain, in the Punic tombs of Carthage as well as in prehistoric Egypt. We find them in ancient Persia and from Persia sent as tribute to the emperors of China. The Spartans showed the

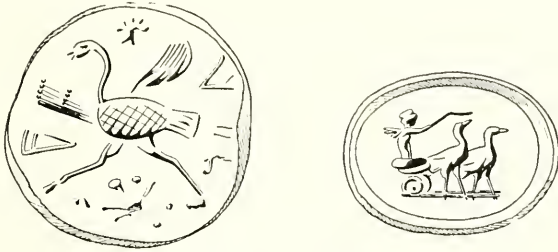


(Left) : BUSHMAN ROCK-CARVINGS OF OSTRICHES. (Right) : PAINTED OSTRICH EGG FROM ETRUSCAN TOMB OF ISIS, ITALY.

actual egg of Leda from which the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, were said to have issued; there is no doubt that the egg of an ostrich rendered good services for this pious fraud. In 1633, Peter Mundy, an energetic English traveller, saw ostrich (or, as he spells, estridges) eggs hung in a mosque in India. In 1771, General Sir Eyre Coote found the cupola of a Mohammedan tomb fifty miles northeast of Palmyra adorned with ostrich eggs, and at present also, devout Moslems of the Near East are fond of honoring the sepulchre of a beloved dead with such an egg which is suspended from a tree or shrub on the burial place. Even in the Christian churches of the Copts they are reserved for the decoration of the cords from which the lamps are suspended.

Pliny writes that the eggs of the ostrich were prized on account

of their large size, and were employed as vessels for certain purposes. The eggs were also eaten and found their way to the table of the Pharaohs. Peter Mundy (1634) found ostrich eggs, whose acquaintance he made at the Cape of Good Hope, "a good meate." The egg is still regarded as a rare delicacy in Africa. The contents

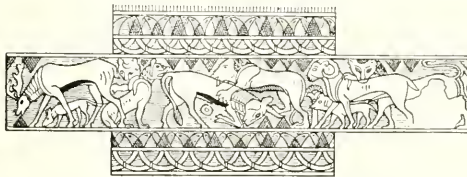


ENGRAVED GEMS.

(Left): RUNNING OSTRICH WITH SYMBOLIC DESIGNS. (Right): AMOR WITH A TEAM OF TWO OSTRICHES.

of one egg amounts to forty fluid ounces, and in taste it does not differ from a hen's egg. An omelet prepared from one egg is sufficient for eight persons. Cuvier, the French naturalist, remarks that an ostrich egg is equal to twenty-four to twenty-eight fowl's eggs, and that he had frequently eaten of them and found them very delicate.

Arabic poetry is full of praise for the beauty of ostrich eggs,



ENGRAVING ON OSTRICH EGG FROM MYCENAE, GREECE.

and the delicate complexion of a lovely woman is compared with the smooth and brilliant surface of an ostrich egg. The Koran, in extolling the bliss and joys of Paradise, speaks of "virgins with chaste glances and large, black eyes which resemble the hidden egg of the ostrich."



OSTRICH EGG-SHELL CUP FROM GRAVE AT KISH, MESOPOTAMIA. ABOUT 3000 B.C.  
In Field Museum. (Field Museum-Oxford University Joint Expedition,  
under the auspices of Captain Marshall Field.)



The ostrich is clearly represented on Assyrian seals and cylinders. One of these (Figure One) was the seal of Urzana, king of Musasir, a contemporary of King Sargon (eighth century B. C.), and represents Assur, king of the great Assyrian gods, with four wings, in the act of strangling two ostriches. On another seal (Figure Two) the god Marduk is shown in the act of executing vengeance on an ostrich. With his left hand he firmly grasps the bird's long neck, and in his right he holds a scimitar which will apparently be used to sever the bird's head. These illustrations apparently hint at a ritual act and seem to indicate that the ostrich was also a sacrificial bird and that its flesh was solemnly offered to the gods.



(Figure Two)



(Figure One)

#### ENGRAVINGS ON ASSYRIAN SEAL-CYLINDERS.

FIG. 1. ASSUR STRANGLING TWO OSTRICHES. FIG. 2. THE GOD MARDUK EXECUTING AN OSTRICH.

The ostrich was well known to the Hebrews, and as attested by several allusions to the bird in the Old Testament, must in ancient times have been frequent in Palestine. It is included among unclean birds in the Mosaic code, and its flesh was prohibited. This may hint at the fact that the ostrich had occasionally served as food to the Hebrews, although we have no positive information on this point. The Arabs of ancient and modern times feast on the bird; and as related by Leo Africanus of the sixteenth century, it was consumed in large quantity in Numidia, where young birds were captured and fattened for this purpose. Those who have tasted it state unanimously that it is both wholesome and palatable, although in the wild bird, as might be expected, it is somewhat lean and tough. The meat of domesticated birds, however, especially those fed on alfalfa and grain, becomes juicy and tender. Doctor Duncan, of

the Department of Agriculture, recommends it as a New Year or Easter bird.

Job laments, "A brother I have become to the jackals, and a companion to the young ostriches." And the prophet Micah exclaims in a similar vein, "Like jackals will I mourn, like ostriches make lamentation." The comparison alludes to the plaintive voices of these animals. The cry of the ostrich has been described variously by observers: some define it as a loud, mournful kind of bellowing roar, very like that of a lion; others define the common sounds of the cock as a dull lowing which consists of two shorter tones followed by a longer note.

The famous passage in Job is thus rendered in the Revised Version: "The wing of the ostrich rejoiceth; but are her pinions and feathers kindly (or, as the stork's?) which leaveth her eggs in the earth and warmeth them in dust, and forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers: her labour is in vain without fear: because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath He imparted to her understanding. What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider."

The observation of Job that the ostrich treats her offspring harshly does not conform with the real facts. The birds, on the contrary, are tender parents and feed and watch their young ones very carefully. The eggs are laid in a shallow pit or depression of the soil scraped out by the feet of the old birds with the earth heaped around to form a wall or rampart. The female incubates the eggs during the day, while the male takes her place at night. As eggs are sometimes dropped in the neighborhood of the nest or scattered around, the popular belief in the carelessness of the birds and in the hatching of the eggs by the heat of the sun may have arisen. Any eggs not hatched are broken by the parents and fed to the young for whom they display great solicitude, and whom they defend in case of danger.

As to Palestine, the ostrich still occurs in the farther parts of the Belka, the eastern plains of Moab, and is still obtained near Damascus. It is no doubt now but a straggler from central Arabia, though formerly far more abundant. The portion of the Syrian desert lying east of Damascus denotes the northernmost limit of the range of the ostrich.

From times immemorial the ostrich has been an inhabitant of Arabia. The valuable white plumes of the wings and tail are in



SKETCH OF OSTRICH BY ALBRECHT DURER, DATED 1508.

great demand among the Arabs for their own wants in the decoration of tents and spears of the sheikhs. Ostrich hunting is alluded to in early Arabic poetry and has always been a popular sport with the Arabs, who rely on the speed of their horses and run the birds down. As these are in the habit of circling their favorite haunts, the horsemen hunt in relays and are apt to overtake the birds by pursuing in a straight line.

There is a Moslem legend in explanation of the bird's inability to fly. "Once upon a time the ostrich was winged, and like other birds, was capable of flight. He once laid a wager with the bustard, but relying on his strength he forgot before rising to invoke Allah's assistance. He flew in the direction of the sun which scorched his pinions, so that he pitifully plunged down to earth. His progeny has since suffered from the curse which befell its ancestor, and restlessly roves about in the desert."

The ancient Egyptians received the ostrich and its products from Nubia, Ethiopia, and the country Punt on the east coast of Africa. An expedition to Punt, probably of a peaceful nature, is recorded on the wall connecting the two Karnak pylons of King Harmhab of the nineteenth dynasty. A relief shows the king at the right, holding audience, receiving the chiefs of Punt approaching from the left, bearing sacks of gold dust, ostrich feathers, etc. In the rock temple of Abu Simbel on the Upper Nile are represented scenes depicting a war of Ramses II against the Libyans and the Nubian war. In one of these scenes Ramses sits enthroned on the right side; approaching from the left are two long lines of Negroes, bringing furniture of ebony and ivory, panther hides, gold in large rings, bows, myrrh, shields, elephants' tusks, billets of ebony, ostrich feathers, ostrich eggs, live animals, including monkeys, panthers, a giraffe, ibexes, a dog, oxen with carved horns, and an ostrich.

Figure Three illustrates a very instructive scene. The man on the left leads a captured ostrich, grasping its neck with his right hand, while his left holds a rope slung around the bird's neck; this double precaution hints well at the strength of the powerful avian giant. The man on the right carries three ostrich feathers and a basket filled with three ostrich eggs. The ostrich was sometimes used as a riding-beast, as may be seen from the scene in Figure Four, taken from a Greek vase.

Ostrich feathers were worn by men in ancient Egypt, being stuck in their hair, and a religious significance was possibly connected with this custom. Such feathers are invariably found in the hair

of lightly-equipped soldiers of ancient times, and there is a hieroglyph showing a warrior thus adorned. An ostrich plume symbolized truth and justice, and was the emblem of the goddess Ma-at who personified these virtues, and who was the patron-saint of the judges. Her head is adorned with an ostrich feather, her eyes are closed, similarly as Justice is blind-folded. The image of this goddess was the most precious offering for the gods, and was attached to the necklace of the chief judge as a badge of office.



(Figure Three)

EGYPTIAN SCENE SHOWING A MAN WITH A CAPTURED OSTRICH  
AND A MAN CARRYING OSTRICH FEATHERS AND EGGS.



(Figure Four)

PAINTING FROM A GREEK VASE. CHORUS OF A COMEDY WITH SPEARMEN  
ASTRIDE OSTRICHES.

Subsequently when the insignia of the various ranks in the court ceremonial were regulated, the ostrich feather became the exclusive prerogative of the kings, and these and the princes of royal blood exclusively were permitted to wear it. Those decorated with the ostrich feather are designated as "fan-carriers on the left of the king" in the inscriptions of the monuments.

The princesses had fans made from ostrich feathers. In the tomb of the queen Aa Hotep, mother of Amasis I (about 1703 B. C.) was discovered a semi-circular fan decorated all over, with gold plates and provided along its edge with perforations for receiving the feathers. When the Pharaoh showed himself to the people, high dignitaries carried ostrich-feather fans attached to long poles alongside the royal palanquin.

Xenophon, when he accompanied the army of Cyrus through the desert along the Euphrates, in northern Arabia, noticed numerous wild asses and many ostriches which he calls "large sparrows," as well as bustards and antelopes; and these animals were sometimes hunted by the horsemen of the army. While they succeeded in catching some asses, no one succeeded in capturing an ostrich. The horsemen who hunted that bird soon desisted from the pursuit; for it far outstripped them in its flight, using its feet for running and raising its wings like a sail. This description is quite to the point. Macaulay said of John Dryden, "His imagination resembled the wings of an ostrich. It enabled him to run, though not to soar." The wings serve the ostrich, while running, as *poy* and rudder, and it has been observed that with favorable wind they are even used as sails. Xenophon confirms the fact that in ancient times the ostrich ranged right up to the Euphrates. The last record of ostriches in the region of this river was in 1797 when Oliver mentioned them in the desert west of Rehaba, about twenty-three miles due south of Deir-ez-Zor.

Strabo, the Greek geographer (63 B. C.-A. D. 19), speaks of a tribe of Elephant-eaters near the city of Darada in Ethiopia. Above this nation, he continues, is a small tribe, the *Struthophagi* ("Bird-eaters"), in whose territory there are birds of the size of a deer, which are unable to fly, but run with the swiftness of an ostrich. Some of the people hunt these birds with bows and arrows, others by putting on the skins of the birds. They hide their right arm in the neck of the skin, and move the neck as the birds do. With their left hand they scatter grain from a bag suspended to the side. They thus lure the birds, driving them into ravines where they are slain with cudgels. Their skin are used both as clothes and as coverings for beds.

This method of hunting by means of a decoy-bird is perfectly credible and universally employed. In South Africa the native hunters hide in a hole which they dig close to the nest of the birds. Having accounted for one bird, they stick up its skin on a pole

near the nest and in this way decoy another ostrich. Other tribesmen who keep tame ostriches avail themselves of the latter to approach wild ones and shoot them with poisoned arrows. The Bushmen hunted quaggas and ostriches by disguising themselves as ostriches, as shown in a Bushmen cave painting.

The ostrich was known to Aristotle as the bird who lays the largest number of eggs. He conceived it as a connecting link between birds and mammals. In a similar manner Pliny opens his book on birds with a tolerably exact description of the ostrich which he terms *struthiocamelus* ("sparrow camel"), and which he calls the largest of birds almost approaching the nature of quadrupeds.

Although the ostrich will swallow almost anything, it is by no means able to digest everything, as Pliny thought. It demands stones instead of bread and swallows them in the same manner as other birds do gravel. They act as mill-stones and assist the gizzard in its function. In the South-African ostrich farms a certain amount of bone and grit is supplied to the birds. Grit is so essential that in some parts of the country it is carted by wagon or by rail for many miles, as it was found that without it the birds could not thrive—in fact, could not exist.

The fondness for metals has obtained for the bird the name of the "iron-eating ostrich." In 1579 Lyly wrote in his *Euphues* that "the estrich diggesteth harde yron to preserve his health." In Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Jack Cade thus threatens Iden: "I'll make thee eat iron like an ostrich, and swallow my sword like a great pin, ere thou and I part."

The Romans indulged in roast-ostrich, and especially enjoyed the wings as a delicacy. Caelius Apicius, a renowned gormandizer at the time of Augustus and Tiberius, who committed suicide when he saw his fortune shrunk to two million and a half sesterii, has handed down several culinary recipes as to how to prepare good ostrich meat. The emperor Heliogabalus (A. D. 218-222) once served at a banquet six hundred ostrich heads, the brains of which were to be eaten, and was extremely fond of roast-ostrich. The usurper Firmus, who rebelled in Egypt against Aurelianus, performed the tour de force to do away with an entire ostrich in the course of a day.

The ostrich was first discovered for the Chinese by the renowned general Chang Kien during his memorable mission to the nations of the west (138-126 B. C.). He returned to China with the report that in the countries west of Parthia there were "great birds with

eggs of the size of a pottery jar." The "great bird" is the common name of the ostrich among all early Greek writers, while the name "camel-sparrow" or "camel-bird" is found at a later time in Diodorus and Strabo. When Chang Kien had negotiated his treaties with the Iranian countries in the west, the king of Parthia (called Arsak by the Chinese after the ruling dynasty, the Arsacides) sent an embassy to the Chinese court and offered as tribute eggs of the Great Bird. In A. D. 101 live specimens of ostriches, together with lions, were despatched from Parthia to China, and at that time were styled "Arsak (that is, Parthian) birds," also "great horse birds." On becoming acquainted with the Persia of the Sasanian dynasty, the Chinese Annals mention ostrich eggs as products of Persia and describe the bird as being shaped like a camel, equipped with two wings, able to fly, but incapable of rising high, subsisting on grass and flesh, also able to swallow fire. Another account says quite correctly that the birds eat barley. When an attempt was made in Algeria to domesticate them, it was found that they thrive well on barley, fresh grass, cabbage, leaves of the cactus or Barbary leaves chopped fine, and three pounds of barley a day was recommended for each bird, green food according to circumstances.

We have to assume that the live birds transported from Persia to the capital of China over a route of several thousand miles must have been extraordinarily tame, and it was a remarkable feat at that. These birds were kept in the parks of the Chinese emperors who were always fond of strange animals and plants. What is still more astounding is the fact that in the mausolea of the Tang emperors in Shen-si Province we have beautiful, naturalistic representations of ostriches carved in high relief on stone. The artists of the period doubtless received an imperial command to portray the ostriches of the imperial park in commemoration of the vast expansion of the empire over Central Asia during that epoch. As shown by their results, they did not copy any foreign artistic models, but they witnessed and carefully studied live specimens. Their ostriches, in fact, belong to the best ever executed and known in the history of art, and are far superior to any representations of the bird in Assyria, Egypt, and Greece, which are conventional and stiff. The Chinese ostriches are correct in their accentuation of motion and action. The formation and length of the neck allow the bird to turn its head completely around, a characteristic skilfully brought to life in stone by the unknown Chinese sculptor.