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THE VULTURE ON THE BONE PLAQUE FROM THE ORLAT CEMETERY

Among the most interesting artefacts found in the last century from archaeological excavations in Uzbekistan are Orlat bone plaques which were used as decorative belt buckles by K'ang-chü nomads, who lived along the borders of Sogdiana in the 1st–2nd century A.D. They were recovered by the Uzbekistan Art History Expedition of the Khamza Institute of Art Studies under the direction of Galina A. Pugachenkova in 1981 during the excavation of Barrow no. 2 at the Orlat burial ground, situated about 50 km north-west of Samarqand.¹

It must be noted that we are here dealing with two large plates and three smaller ones. Taken together they constitute a set in which both large plaques served as belt buckles, while the smaller pieces acted as pendants at the ends of hanging straps. The two larger plaques are decorated with splendid, multi-figured compositions: a bloody battle of heavily armed warriors on horse back or on foot appears on the left plate and on the right mounted hunters pursue wild rams, onagers and deer. On the three small shield-like plaques, there are depicted a single combat between two warriors on foot, two Bactrian camels engaged in combat, and a vulture, respectively.

Most of the scholarly interest in these pieces has focused on scenes depicting battles or hunting, such as military equipment or horse gear. Dozens of publications are devoted to these studies², including the camels in combat.³ On the other

¹ Pugachenkova 1984, 481–482; Pugachenkova 1987, 56–65; Pugachenkova 1989a, 122–154; Pugachenkova 1989b, 96–110.

² Since the bibliography of the Orlat plaques is fairly extensive, in addition to the abovementioned fundamental studies of G. A. Pugachenkova, only a few other works are here indicated: Brentjes 1989; Brentjes 1990; Tanabe 1990; Abdullaev 1995; Ilyasov, Rusanov 1998; Maslov 1999 (in Russian); Nikonorov, Khudiakov 1999 (in Russian); Iatsenko 2000 (in Russian); Litvinsky 2001; Litvinskii 2002 (in Russian); Ilyasov 2003; Mode 2006.

³ Korolkova 1999, 80, 89, 91, fig. 1: 4.

hand, the representation of the vulture that appears on one of the small plaques has largely been ignored by researchers. The purpose of the present article is to correct this oversight.

The fairly rare, if not altogether unique, representation of the vulture on the small Orlat plaque allows us to examine in greater detail the role that this bird played in the beliefs of many ancient peoples, notwithstanding its generally negative associations today.



Fig. 1.

One of the smaller plaques is decorated with the representation of a bird of prey placed in the right field of the composition. By contrast to the two other shield-like plaques, the image here is neither paired nor symmetrical, the bird is turned with its right side to the viewer and assumes the characteristic pose of a predatory bird pecking at its prey (Fig. 1). Much of the image is worn away through wear and tear of the belt. No traces of the engraving are discernible in the left field of the plaque so that it is impossible to discern whether there had

been another bird that had long ago disappeared through continuous use (as supposed by G. A. Pugachenkova). As a result, we are unable to decide whether we have an incomplete work, or whether the craftsman in fact made only a single bird. One cannot also exclude the possibility that the master himself removed the image. There is no trace of the depiction of the “prey”.

In spite of a certain conventionality, the skilfully executed representation allows us easily to recognize this image as a vulture. Although Galina Pugachenkova has correctly identified this species, neither she nor any other scholar of the Orlat plaques has examined this image in detail. It should also be noted that this realistic depiction of a vulture is a phenomenon unique in the early art of Central Asia.

Before we begin with an analysis of the representation and its semantics, it is necessary to address some points of terminology. V. D. Kubarev and D. V. Cheremisin, in their study devoted to the image of birds in the art of the early nomads of the Altai, rightly point out that there is general confusion in distinguishing eagles, vultures, and gryphons and this naturally leads to a number of terminological problems with respect to their identification.⁴ Accordingly, we note that the morphology of an image plays a significant role in understanding the semantics. In other words, the identification of an image must be the primary issue. Only after having made the proper identification of the bird which has been portrayed, can one then deal effectively with the issue of semantics. A typical example of the confusion that has been wrought is the term ‘eagle-vulture’ employed by V. E. Maslov for the bird image from Orlat.⁵ In scientific literature, the term ‘griffon’ often implies birds of prey with ears and crests that are not based on reality or are purely polymorphic mythical creatures⁶, which from an art historical point of view are usually called an eagle-gryphon or an eagle-headed gryphon.⁷ In the present article, the term of ‘vulture’ is restricted to real birds or their representation, while the depiction of birds of prey possessing ears and a crest will be understood as a ‘mythical vulture’.

The distinguishing features of the vulture are a large ‘bald’ head, a powerful, massive beak, a long neck with a ‘collar’ of feathers, and strong clawed feet, of which according to ornithologists there are twelve species in the Old World.⁸

In Central Asia, five species of vultures are found. Two of these – the Egyptian vulture and the Bearded vulture (or Lammergeier) – in view of their

⁴ Kubarev, Cheremisin 1984, 88.

⁵ Maslov 1999, 229.

⁶ Rudenko 1960, 285–291 (in Russian), fig. 145, 146; Artamonov 1973, 128–130, 134, 142, 143, 150, 153, 154, 156, 158, 160, 164, 166 (in Russian); Piankov 1976 (in Russian); Zaporozhchenko, Cheremisin 1997 (in Russian); on the origin of this name in the European languages, see also: Wild 1963.

⁷ Barkova 1987.

⁸ Ferguson-Lees, Christie 2009, 122–131.

appearance, do not correspond with our representation. The rest are the Black vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), the Griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), and the Himalayan or Snow griffon vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*). Black vultures (Fig. 2), according to ornithologists, in the territory of Uzbekistan make their nests in the mountains of Bukantau and Tamdytau of the central Qizilqum region, the mountain ranges of Pskem, Qurama, Ugam, and Chatkal in the Western Tien-Shan, in the Zaamin State Reserve and the mountains of Kugitangtau (Kuh-i Tang) and Babatag. The largest concentration is found in the Nuratau Mountains. The Griffon vulture (Fig. 3) inhabits approximately the same regions as the Black vulture. The Himalayan or Snow vulture, however, is much rarer in Uzbekistan as its habitat lies elsewhere: in the high mountainous regions of the Tien-Shan and Pamirs in the west, from the Nan-Shan to Tibet in the east, and the Himalayas in the south.⁹



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

It is difficult to identify accurately to which species of these three vultures the bird depicted on the Orlat plaque belongs. If, on the other hand, the proportions of the body are any indication, particularly the large head, then we have here a depiction of a Black vulture.

⁹ Bogdanov 1992, 195–196, 199–201, 205.



Fig. 4.

Evidently, the painted pottery uncovered during excavations at the site of Kara-Depe near the Artyk railroad station in Southern Turkmenia bore the earliest representations of vultures in Central Asia. Here, in levels belonging to the Namazga III period (late Eneolithic: late 4th – first third of the 3rd millennium BC), vessels were found decorated with representations of large birds in heraldic pose: their wings spread broadly and their head turned in profile (Fig. 4). In the majority of publications concerned with the excavations at Kara-Depe, these birds are called ‘eagles’.¹⁰ In this connection, it is necessary to note that most of the depictions of birds of prey in ancient art are impossible to attribute, since only the most general characteristics are rendered. This is why predatory birds are simply labelled ‘eagles’ (see, for instance, the series of depictions in the works of V. D. Kubarev and D. V. Cheremisin¹¹). The notion that the Kara-Depe birds more closely resemble vultures and not eagles is not an exceptional point of view. It is quite probable that the zoologist I. B. Shishkin is absolutely right when he writes:

“Although the bird is arbitrarily called an eagle by archaeologists, in reality it merely represents some sort of large bird of prey. Eagles for their part are universally regarded as most impressive. Examining the images on Kara-Depe pottery, one can think of the heraldry of Mediaeval Europe: on Kara-Depe ware there is a heraldic eagle. Nevertheless, these images remarkably resemble other birds – such as vultures with their long, bare, and occasionally slightly dropped necks. It must be remembered that vultures, especially in southern Turkmenia where the Black vulture and Griffon vulture are widespread, were commonly found near settlements where they fed on carrion so that they were an indispensable part of landscape. It is impossible, however, to attribute what kind of particular bird is represented in the Kara-Depe artwork”.¹²

Although the ‘heraldic pose’ is performed by many species of birds of prey, it is most characteristic of vultures (Fig. 5). The well-known naturalist I. I. Akimushkin thus wrote:

¹⁰ Masson 1960, 359, fig. 19, pl. XXI: 9–11; Masson 1982, 42, 62, pl. XXI: 29; Sarianidi, Koshelenko 1966, 47, 50.

¹¹ Kubarev, Cheremisin 1984, fig. 1, 2.

¹² Shishkin 1977, 115.

“Using the ultraviolet light of the sun’s rays to kill microbes, vultures disinfect their feathers, ruffling them with wings half spread, exposing one side now the other. A special commanding pose impels all the birds in a flock to bath thusly in the sun. It takes only one vulture to fluff out its feathers, raising ever so slightly its wings, immediately followed by others that observe this visual cue”.¹³



Fig. 5.

In terms of the depictions of these birds, it is noteworthy that in all of Central Asia (I mean here Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) we have only Kara-Depe pottery and the Orlat plaque. However, in the adjoining territories, numerous depictions of vultures have been found, some of which are listed below.

According to T. Kawami, the gold vessel dated to the 12th–11th century BC from northwestern Iran – now part of the Miho Museum collection in Japan – depicts vultures, not eagles as others have argued, attacking gazelles.¹⁴ She bases her identification on the length of the birds’ necks.

The vultures depicted while feasting appear on a gold beaker dated to the second half of the 8th or 7th century BC (or possibly to the 9th–8th century) from Marlik. The vessel is decorated with a representation of the so-called ‘Goat Story’ where the fate of the animal from its birth to its death is depicted (Fig. 6). V. G. Lukonin considers this piece a vivid example of Iranian pictorial art that was created from a repertory of established artistic traditions from Assyria, Urartu, and other early Oriental centers. The motif of vultures pecking at their ‘prey’ first occur on Kassite cylinder seals of the 14th–13th century BC and appear on numerous objects,

¹³ Akimushkin 1973, 147.

¹⁴ Schätze 1999, 46–47, № 13.

including Hittite reliefs and silver plates of the 12th–11th century from Iran. In conjunction with E. Porada, V. G. Lukonin¹⁵ maintains that these representations symbolize a military victory, which explains why they accompany representations of warriors. One further example is the depiction of a vulture on an Assyrian relief portraying a battle scene from the palace of Tiglathpileser III in Nimrud,¹⁶ and now in the collection of the British Museum (Fig. 7).

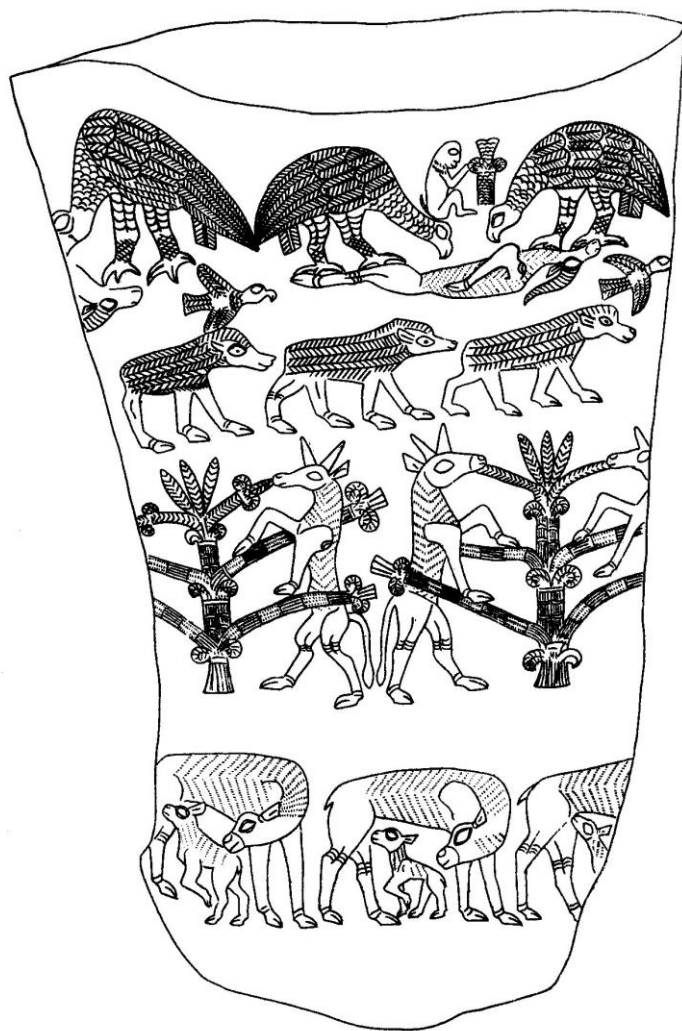


Fig. 6.

¹⁵ Lukonin 1987a, 226; Lukonin 1987b, 67–69; Lukonin, Iwanow 1996, 11–12.

¹⁶ Ivantchik 2001, fig. 132: 1.



Fig. 7.

It is worth noting that G. N. Kurochkin has argued for an earlier date for the Marlik vessel: the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. He further proposed that the spread of similar iconographic schemes and motifs moved not only from Western Asia to Iran and Afghanistan, as supposed by V. G. Lukonin and E. Porada, but they also circulated in the reverse direction. He contends that there are quite a number of representations of herbivores being torn in pieces by a pair of birds of prey (or rather, depictions of vultures tearing at the flesh of a herbivore), such as those depicted on a Kassite seal of the 14th–13th century BC and on a Late-Hittite stone relief from Kara-Tepe of the early 1st millennium BC to name but a few. The earliest of these compositions is found on a gold ‘teapot’ from the Astrabad hoard in northeastern Iran; the vessel dates from the 3rd or first third of the 2nd millennium BC so that the representation under consideration chronologically precedes the Kassite, Hittite, and other variations that originated in the western regions of Western Asia (Fig. 8).¹⁷ Here, one can also name the famous Stele of the Vultures, a Sumerian monument of the 25th century BC, celebrating a victory of the city-state of Lagash over its neighbour Umma. The stele is named after the vultures that can be seen in one of the depicted scenes: the birds devour corpses of the enemies of Lagash.

¹⁷ Kurochkin 1990, 47–49, fig. 3.

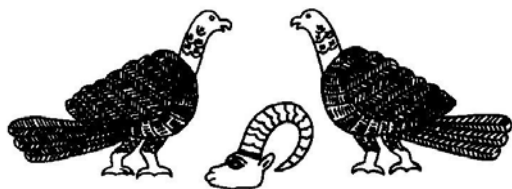


Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

A number of objects depicting the small head of a bird of prey, identified V. G. Lukonin as a vulture, are dated to the 7th century BC thus marking the formative period of Iranian (a silver disc from Ziweh) and Scythian (a gold sword scabbard from a Kelermes barrow) art styles.¹⁸ In addition to the representation of the small vulture heads on the sword sheath, Kelermes Kurgan 1 also yielded a gold diadem decorated with figures of 'predatory birds' standing with their wings spread or with their heads turned backward.¹⁹

On objects of the so-called 'Scytho-Siberian animal style', images of vulture-like birds, especially their heads, are quite numerous. For instance, they are found on grave goods from Saka burials of the 7th–6th centuries BC at the Uygarak cemetery. In Kurgans 33, 39, 69 and 83 various bronze parts of horse harnesses formed in the shape of birds or ornamented with small bird heads in the animal style were uncovered (Fig. 9). Moreover, a bronze dagger and bimetallic pickaxe decorated with a bird head were also found in Kurgans 25 and 84.²⁰ O. A. Vishnevskaja calls these representations 'birds of prey' without elaborating any further.²¹ For my part, I propose that these birds, characteristically portrayed in profile, with large round eyes and a powerful beak with a prominent cere, represent heavily stylized vultures.

Similar depictions are found among the Saka tribes, such as on the bronze plaques of the Tasmola culture in central Kazakhstan and on the gold plaques of the Chilikta culture in eastern Kazakhstan.²² The openwork gold plaques found in the Chilikta barrows were regarded by S. S. Chernikov as depictions of eagles with a wing raised above their head, whereas I regard them as vivid images of griffons sitting in their characteristically "hunched" posture with their head turned backward (Fig. 10).

¹⁸ Lukonin 1977, 20, 24–25, 30, 31, 35, ill. on p. 23, 27.

¹⁹ Galanina 1997, 102, 134, pl. 7: 1 (a, c), pl. 8, 28, 29.

²⁰ Vishnevskaja 1973, 21, 29, 34, 53, 57, 59, pl. VII: 1, IX: 9, XIII: 2, XVIII: 20, XIX: 5, 6, XX: 1; XXVII: 1–7.

²¹ Vishnevskaja 1973, 112–114.

²² Kadyrbaev 1966, 400, fig. 65; Chernikov 1965, 33–34, pl. XIII, XIV, XXIII: 2.



Fig. 10.

The small head of a vulture decorates the hilt of a bronze single-bladed knife found in the kishlak (village) of Turbat in southern Kazakhstan and now housed in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Inv. no. SA-12209). B. Ia. Staviskii dated the piece to the 6th or 5th century BC and associated it with the Sakas of Chach.²³

There is yet another abundant classification of art objects of the Scythian/Sauromatian/Sakan type depicting 'carnivorous birds' or 'eagles' which, in my opinion, may be justly considered as vultures (it must be noted that when compared to actual birds – eagles and vultures – these images with their round heads, voluminous beaks, and large round eyes correspond exactly to vultures).

Other examples include finds from Kurgan 2 near the village of Zhabotin on the Middle Dnieper. There are birds of prey engraved on horn plaques. According to M. I. Viazmitina, they resemble vultures (Fig. 11). Other objects found were a pair of horn cheek-pieces with the head of an 'eagle',²⁴ carved on one of the ends, the famous gold 'eagles' from the Mel'gunov Kurgan of the 7th or 6th century BC,²⁵ a bronze Scythian pommel from the Ramenshchina Kurgans in the form of a bird's head with a huge beak and a 'collar' around the neck, the head

²³ Staviskii 1955, 125–126, 128, fig. 54: 1.

²⁴ Viazmitina 1963, 161, 163, fig. 2, 3, 5.

²⁵ Scythian art 1986, No. 19.

of a carnivorous bird engraved on a bronze mirror from the farmstead of Gerasimovka, as well as numerous other objects of gold, silver, bronze, and bone uncovered in various Scythian kurgans dated from the 7th to the 3rd century BC,²⁶ all of which contain features of vultures.

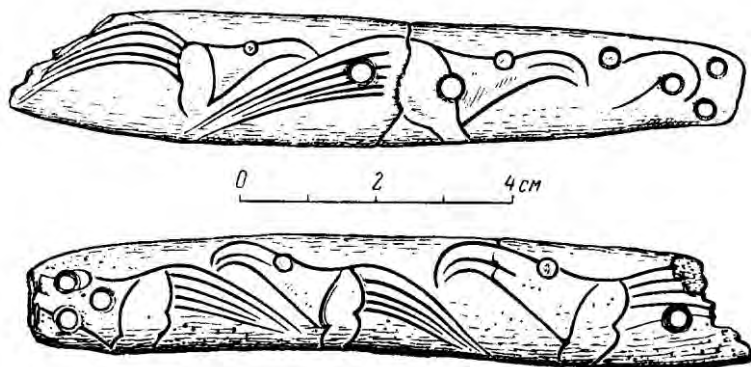


Fig. 11.

Representations of ‘eagles’ or other ‘predatory birds’ are found among the items in Sarmatian funerary complexes of the late 6th and 5th century BC.²⁷

The eastern area of the Scythian, Saka, and Siberian cultures has also yielded numerous representations of vulture-like birds. One such example is the gold quiver clasp with two heads of vultures found in the famous Arzhan Kurgan 2 (Fig. 12) dated to the late 7th century BC.²⁸ Researchers note that the magnificent assemblage of art wrought in the ‘animal style’ uncovered in the double ‘royal’ burial of tomb no. 5 manifests no traces of foreign influence. It seems that it contains only the figures of real animals: deer, horses, mountain rams and goats, wild boars, camels, antelope (goitered gazelles or saigas), panthers, and tigers.²⁹

²⁶ Scythian art 1986, Nos. 58, 91, 95, 96, 99; Stepi evropejskoī chasti 1989, 298, 299, pl. 37: 9, pl. 38: 1, 3, 6, 40, 42, pl. 39: 44, 49, 63, pl. 45: 1.

²⁷ Smirnov 1964, 216–223, 244–245, fig. 11B: 23, fig. 16: 1a, 1b, fig. 19: 5a, fig. 21: 1r, 1s, fig. 27: 9, fig. 77; Kadyrbaev 1984, fig. 1: 1, 6, 10–13, 23.

²⁸ Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2003, 137, Abb. 25; Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2006, 125, Taf. 36.

²⁹ Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2003, 158; Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2006, Taf. 5–7, 11–14, 19, 24, 25, 30, 38, 40, 43, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 67, 69, 72. In their publications, the authors have traditionally considered the depictions of predatory birds from burial 5 as griffon heads (Greifenköpfe), cf. the abovementioned clasp and ornaments of the quiver strap (Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2003, 137; Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2006, 125, Taf. 36, 37), although these depictions bear no particular traits of a gryphon. Regarding the four images of horses with which the head-dress of the ‘prince’ was decorated, the authors write: “On the backs of the horses, small curved protrusions are discernible. Since the clearly articulated manes of the horses end slightly before



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

Likewise in Tuva, vultures appear on gold objects called ‘cockades’. The images of three heads of birds of prey were found in Kurgan 2 from the burial ground of Duzherlig-Hovuzu I, as well as wooden figure of a ‘fantastic animal with the head of a bird of prey and the body of a snake’ from Kurgan 1 at the cemetery of Sagly-Bazhi II.³⁰ Both burial grounds are dated to the 5th–3rd century BC.

These images greatly resemble birds of prey that appear on bronze knives, *chekans* (pickaxes), celts, and other artefacts from the Tagar culture of the Scythian type located in the Khakass-Minusinsk Basin in the 7th–3rd century BC.³¹

An early figure of a vulture from the eastern borderland of the Scytho-Siberian world seems to be represented on a bronze clasp dated to the 9th–7th

these protrusions, it is reasonable to consider the latter not as curved locks of the manes but as small wings” (Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2006, 114). However, in my opinion, we are strictly dealing with a lock that was left from when the mane near the withers of the horse was trimmed. These locks probably served to make mounting easier; they are known through quite a number of ancient representations. This opinion is confirmed by the images of the other two horses decorating the headdress of the ‘princess’ in which the manes are shown as gently passing into locks that protrude over the withers (Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2006, 127, Taf. 45, 48). In other words, it must be stressed that in the animal art from the Arzhan 2 kurgan, no fantastic polymorphic creatures are depicted (cf. the same opinion in the final publication of the Arzhan 2 excavation results: Čugunov, Parzinger, Nagler 2010, 31).

³⁰ Grach 1980, 81, 112, 118–119, figs. 43, 68.

³¹ Zavitukhina 1983, 18–19, 80–91, 170, 172–184.

century BC and now housed in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Fig. 13).³²

Similar to the small Saka vulture heads from Uigarak noted above is a bird of prey portrayed on the unique woollen tapestry from the Shampula (Sampul) burial ground, 30 km south-east of Hotan (Hetian) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, excavated in the 1980s and 1990s. The vulture is part of a composition depicting a mounted archer hunting a fantastic animal which is described as a ‘winged goat with a horned human head’. The bird is shown flying over the horse’s rump and possesses the characteristic profile of a round head, a huge curved beak, and a large round eye (Fig. 14). Although E. Bunker believes that it is a hunting bird during a hunt in reality it is a typical vulture of the Scytho-Sarmatian type. One of the textiles from Shampula containing the same scene as described above and in the Swiss Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg has a radiocarbon date of 8 BC – 234 AD. It is presumed that Shampula was composed of descendants from the Sakas who had settled in the small oasis sometime between the first century BC and the first centuries AD whereupon they became preoccupied with goat-breeding and weaving.³³



Fig. 14.

Although many other examples can be easily cited, those that have already been mentioned suffice. It must be stressed that it is not my intention to assert that birds of prey on objects created in -the ‘Scytho-Siberian animal style’ are to be understood as vultures. Nonetheless, many of them can be considered as such, because they resemble Gyps vultures.

³² Mounted Nomads 1997, 56, No. 95.

³³ Bunker 2001, 20, 25–26, 38–45, figs. 7, 8.

It is evident that the presence of vultures in Iranian, Scythian, Sarmatian, and Sakan art is due to the shared notion among Iranian-speaking peoples of how to render these representatives of the feathery world.

Possibly, the special treatment of the vulture was related to the bird's role in the tradition of exposing the dead that was practiced by many Central-Asiatic peoples. It is this custom that became the basis of Zoroastrian funeral rites.

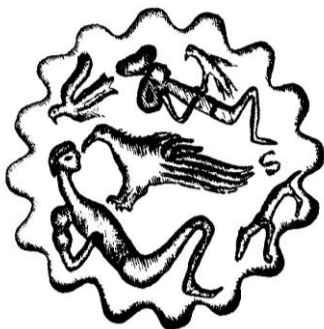


Fig. 15.

The copper-bronze seal from Bactria (most likely the result of clandestine excavations in northern Afghanistan) published by V.I. Sarianidi probably dates to the Bronze Age (Fig. 15). The piece is an excellent illustration of the ritual of exposing corpses with a dog, a vulture, and some smaller birds (kites?) about to begin devouring them. In the opinion of this scholar, some of the finds from the necropolis of Gonur “suggest the acquaintance by the ancient Margushians of the tradition of exposing the dead. However, it seems that this was practiced only by the royal family and, perhaps, by the aristocracy”.³⁴

Below is some information from the accounts of ancient authors. Strabo (1st century BC – 1st century AD) mentions the following in his ‘Geography’: “Caspians kill by starvation people over 70 years old and place their bodies out in the desert; then they watch them from afar: if they see them dragged from their biers by birds, they regard the dead as blessed, if this is done by wild beasts or dogs, less so, but if no animal drags them away, they consider the dead cursed’ (Strab. 11.11.8).

³⁴ Sarianidi 2006, 64, 65, ill. 11 (in Russian). Among the arguments enumerated by Sarianidi in favour of the practice of cleaning the skeletal remains, he includes the discovery of a burial in a large pithos containing an adolescent of 12–13 years of age whose skull and long arm bones were dyed black, “moreover, an outline of hair was clearly drawn on his cranium. This could have only been done after the skull had been completely cleaned. In addition, at the necropolis of Gonur were found the so-called fractional interments in the form of simple pits filled with carefully stacked long bones with a skull placed on the top of them” (Sarianidi 2006, 64, in Russian).

In the epitome of Pompeius Trogus as retold by Justin, we read of the Parthians: "They commonly dispose of corpses by leaving them to be torn apart by birds or dogs and only bury in the earth the bare bones" (Justin 41.3.5).

According to the Zoroastrian *Videvdāt*, the dead were supposed to be exposed "in the highest places where it was believed (that there were) dogs and birds devouring corpses" or in specially built structures called '*dakhmas*' where their flesh was consumed by carnivorous birds and dogs specially bred for this procedure".³⁵ In the third *fargard* of the *Videvdāt*, which is concerned with the strict cleansing measures applied to a person who alone has handled a corpse (an act that was considered one of the greatest sins), it instructs him to dispose of it in the following manner: (20) "And when he has grown old or decrepit... then the Mazdayasnians shall send some of the strongest, most vigorous and skilful in order, on the top of the mountain, to cut his head at the base; and they shall throw out the corpse to the vultures, the most greediest corpse-eating creatures of the Holy Spirit, with these words: 'In this act this man here has repented all his evil thoughts, evil words, evil deeds'. (21) If any other evil deeds have been committed by him then this punishment is the expiation of them, but if no other evil deeds have been perpetrated then he is absolved by his repentance, for ever and ever".³⁶ Thus, after the ritual killing of the sinner, it is the vultures that complete the process of purification. Having atoned through death for his sin, the violator of the ritual *immaculatio*, as suggested by the parting words that end this cruel rite, receives a postmortem forgiveness.

The practice of exposing corpses and the religious notions connected with it have been brilliantly analysed by Iu. A. Rapoport who examined the texts of the *Avesta* and other Zoroastrian writings, the accounts of Roman and Byzantine authors, as well as the ethnographic evidence.³⁷ For our purpose, some of his conclusions are important: it is not entirely correct to suppose that an exclusively mechanical function was assigned to dogs and birds in the funerary rite; i.e., their only purpose was the annihilation of the 'unclean' soft tissues. This supposition is inconsistent with the information we have about the relatives of the deceased who "were far from indifferent to what animals were involved and how soon they ate the corpse" as is clearly indicated by Strabo's statement noted above. The dogs and birds, to which the corpses were exposed, may have been considered totem animals so that by consuming the deceased they provided, to some extent, they provided continuity of the process which, according to totemistic notions, comprised the following: 1) the birth of a child is explained through the introduction of a totem into the body of a woman; and 2) death is considered the

³⁵ Kriukova 1994, 239, 242, 245, 249.

³⁶ Avesta 1998, 89; see also: Kriukova 1997, 198; Kriukova 2000, 125.

³⁷ Rapoport 1971, 23–37.

vehicle by which one is converted into a totem animal (i.e., the conversion, in this case, is realized through the ingestion of the corpse).³⁸

There is no doubt that the primary role in consuming the exposed corpses was fulfilled by the largest of the scavenging birds. These were vultures which even have their own peculiar specialization: some eat primarily muscles and skin (genus *Aegypius*), while others prefer to regale themselves on viscera (genus *Gyps*).³⁹



Fig. 16.

In India, for instance, where the Parsee communities still practise exposing corpses in *dakhmas*, the Gyps vultures are considered the main participants of the ‘ceremony’ (Fig. 16). A. Wadia, an architect who is a Parsee, has written on ‘silence towers’ or *dakhmas*. She noted that a positive feature of these birds is that, due to their physical features, they are unable to carry parts of the deceased in their beaks or claws, so consume everything on the spot.⁴⁰ This has given cre-

³⁸ Rapoport 1971, 26, 27.

³⁹ Kashkarov 1931, 413, 414, 415; Meklenburtsev 1982, 26; Bogdanov 1992, 203; Ptitsy 1999, 168.

⁴⁰ Wadia 2002, 335, note 2.

dence to the notion that during the ‘disposal’ of the corpses by the vultures, there is no defilement of the sacred substances (earth and water). The probability of such an occurrence would be considerable if the remains were dragged helter-skelter. Possibly, similar notions strengthened a positive affinity for vultures in Zoroastrianism. Nevertheless, it must be noted that in the fifth *fargard* of the *Videvdāt* there is the following special stipulation:

(1) “There dies a man in the depths of the vale: a bird takes flight from the top of the mountain down into the depths of the vale, and it feeds on the corpse of the dead man there: then, up it flies from the depths of the vale to the top of the mountain: it flies to some one of the trees there, of the hard-wooded or the soft-wooded, and upon that tree it vomits and deposits dung”.⁴¹

(2) “Now, lo! Here is a man coming up from the depths of the vale to the top of the mountain; he comes to the tree whereon the bird is sitting; from that tree he intends to take wood for the fire. He fells the tree, he hews the tree, he splits it into logs, and then he lights it in the fire, the son of Ahura Mazda. What is the penalty he shall pay?”

(3) “Ahura Mazda answered: There is no sin upon a man for any Nasu (carion) that has been brought by dogs, by birds, by wolves, by winds, or by flies”.⁴²

The activities of different species of vulture were fairly effective. As O. P. Bogdanov, Doctor of Biological Sciences wrote, a few Himalayan griffon vultures ingest a human corpse in half an hour and that of a yak in two hours.⁴³ According to V. V. Ivanitskii, Doctor of Biological Sciences, six vultures had once in only a few hours time ingested a boar’s corpse weighing 50 kg, “leaving behind a cleaned hide and skeleton”.⁴⁴ It was probably the speed and the efficiency at which vultures consumed a corpse that led believers to hold them in high regard and to view them positively. Pious Zoroastrians share a similar attitude of respect for dogs who also participate in this process.

It is noteworthy that in the context of the Zoroastrian funerary rite there is a further example is found in which a dog or bird may be substituted for one another. It is known that after the death of a human, a ritual called *sagdid* (‘glance of the dog’) was performed “during which a dog by its stare must drive away the demon of the corpse’s putrefaction” (Fig. 16). At the same time, “equivalent to dog’s stare in its effectiveness is the shadow cast by birds when they fly over the corpse”.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, V. Iu. Kriukova does not define more precisely which

⁴¹ Translator’s note: Here and below, excerpts from *Fargard* 5 of the *Avesta* are quoted from the translation of James Darmesteter, *The Zend-Avesta, Part I*, Oxford 1880.

⁴² Kriukova 2005, 253–254.

⁴³ Bogdanov 1992, 205.

⁴⁴ Ptitsy 1999, 168.

⁴⁵ Kriukova 1997, 181.

birds were responsible for this act (possibly, her source lacked exact information). Listed below is a collection of some of the popular beliefs held by adherents who regard as a positive sign the shadow cast by a vulture.

It is easily imaginable that, in antiquity, people were highly impressed by the very arrival of vultures as if from nowhere, because these birds hover in search of 'prey' at a height of 3–4 km and thereby are undetectable at such a distance. Having caught sight of its prey, the vulture speedily dives with half-folded wings emitting a trembling noise. Immediately afterward, other vultures appear because while searching for prey they also observe one another.⁴⁶ From a religious standpoint, one can easily imagine that these huge birds descend onto the earth directly from the 'Upper World' in order to help the deceased to ascend to the Heavenly Abode. These birds acted as mediators linking the Lower and Upper Worlds, and thus the world of man with the other world. In this connection, B. I. Marshak's analysis is particularly apt for he mused that the well-known Sassanian silver dish depicting a bird of prey carrying a woman in its talons⁴⁷ represents an ascending soul.⁴⁸

Echoes of the veneration of vultures are found in the Zoroastrian text, the *Bundahishn* ('Primal Creation'), which contains references to the lost Avestan work, the *Damdad Nask*. It offers information on the creation of vultures along with all other creatures and explanations about their purpose:⁴⁹ "The Kahrkas, which is the vulture, is created for devouring dead matter; so also are the raven and the mountain kite...". Concerning the vulture it is stated "that, even from his highest flight, he sees a prey the size of a fist on the ground...". In addition, in the *Bundahishn* there is tale about the first humans, Mashye and Mashyane. They performed the first sacrifice: "and they made a roast of the sheep. And they dropped three handfuls of the meat into the fire, and said: 'This is the share of the fire'. One piece of the rest they tossed to the sky, and said: 'This is the share of the gods'. A bird, the vulture, advanced and carried some of it away from before them, as a dog ate the first meat".⁵⁰ It is remarkable, that here again, we encounter the vulture and dog as a pair which are now seen not within the context of the funerary rite but as consumers of the sacrificial meat, i.e. in the role of the gods' representatives.

⁴⁶ Kashkarov 1931, 415; Bogdanov 1992, 205; Ptitsy 1999, 168–169.

⁴⁷ Trever, Lukonin 1987, 89–90, 113–114, 126, pls. 57, 58.

⁴⁸ Marshak 2002, 144–146, fig. 13.

⁴⁹ Translator's note: A slight alteration (e.g. 'crow' replaced by 'raven') was made to coincide with the Russian translation as cited by the author. The English translation of the Avestan fragments is based on: E.W. West, *The Bundahis, Bahman yast, and Shāyast Lā-Shāyast*, Oxford 1880.

⁵⁰ Chunakova 1997, 285.

Most probably, the representation of the vulture under consideration, found in a nomadic kurgan with inhumations, was not linked directly with Zoroastrian beliefs (although other hypotheses are possible: for instance, if one supposes that the Orlat belt was ornamented by a Sogdian master for a nomad, then the appearance of a vulture may well have been connected with Zoroastrianism). However, as noted by Iu. A. Rapoport, the earliest Central Asian example of the rite of exposure is Strabo's account of the Massagetae (exposure was practised also by the Magians, Caspians, Hyrcanians, Parthians, Bactrians, and Sogdians).⁵¹ Strabo's information was based on the report of Hecateus of Miletus (end of the 6th, beginning of the 5th century BC). Thus literary sources and the presence of images of vultures on a variety of objects created in the Scytho-Siberian animal style, indicate that the ideas connected with these birds existed not only in Zoroastrianism, but also among the Saka and Massagetan tribes, descendants of which in our opinion were the nomads responsible for the Orlat cemetery.⁵² Apparently, the worship of the vulture by nomads speaking East-Iranian languages and burying their dead in kurgans derived from Iranian religious notions.

It must be emphasized that the worship of the vulture as it related to the funerary cult was neither a prerogative of Iranian-speaking peoples nor of Zoroastrianism. In this connection, it is important to keep in mind the remains of an early date that originated from Turkey. The materials concerned are those from the excavations of the famous Neolithic settlement of Çatal Hüyük. Here J. Mellaart uncovered sanctuaries from the 7th millennium BC decorated with wall paintings depicting huge vultures attacking much smaller decapitated human figures (Figs. 17 and 18). Beneath the floors of the dwellings and inside the *sufas* were found burials of human bones. Mellaart concluded that they had been cleaned of their flesh, probably by vultures.⁵³ He wrote that the Mother-Goddess of Çatal in her incarnation as death was associated with the vulture-scavenger, the 'cleaner' who carries a person into the other world and where she ensures his continued existence. The function of vultures as indispensable 'agents' providing the transition from death to life explains the symbolism on the wall reliefs found at Çatal Hüyük of female breasts with skulls of vultures inside of them with their beaks protruding instead of nipples.⁵⁴ Mellaart sees in these reliefs the manifes-

⁵¹ Rapoport 1971, 24–25.

⁵² Ilyasov, Rusanov 1998, 131.

⁵³ Mellaart 1982, 87, 92, 94, Fig. 35; Antonova 1990, 61, 63–64, Fig. 4. (in Russian). Ian Hodder argues against this supposition. He writes that the remains of the interred excavated on platforms at Çatal Hüyük do not prove the preliminary act of cleaning the bones (Hodder 2006, 125).

⁵⁴ K. Schmidt expresses doubts that we are dealing with representations of female breasts (Schmidt 2006, 197). However, none of the researchers doubt that vultures are depicted in sanctuaries or, according to a recent interpretation, in dwelling houses.

tation of the symbols of life and death. All these facts clearly indicate the especial importance that was attributed to the vulture about an otherworldly existence by ancient agriculturalists of Anatolia.



Fig. 17.

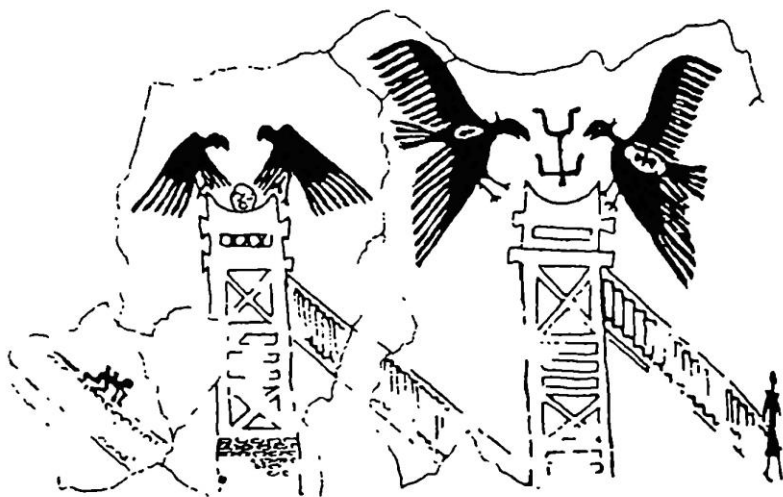


Fig. 18.



Fig. 19.

The antiquity of similar notions appears in the region we are considering as corroborated by the discovery of objects that are even earlier than those of Çatal Hüyük made at the site of Göbekli Tepe. Under the direction of the German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt, the oldest known temple installations were found dating to about 9600–8800 BC, perhaps coinciding with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period.⁵⁵ On one of the T-shaped supporting pillars, cut from limestone and covered with reliefs, there is the representation of a vulture in a “sitting position”

⁵⁵ Schmidt 2006.

with it wings spread (Fig. 19). The image from Göbekli Tepe is perhaps the earliest depiction of this bird.⁵⁶ At the site of Nemrik in northern Iraq, in levels dated to 7800–6500 BC, were found stone figurines shaped like rods crowned with the heads of predatory birds and other animals. The researcher who published them has no doubts that they portray various household gods, perhaps personal divinities of the heads of the families.⁵⁷ The Polish archaeologist S. K. Kozłowski considered one of these sculptures as a vulture, while he regards others as the depictions of a bird's skull, an eagle, and some sort of bird of prey. I surmise that the latter are images of idolized vultures (Fig. 20).

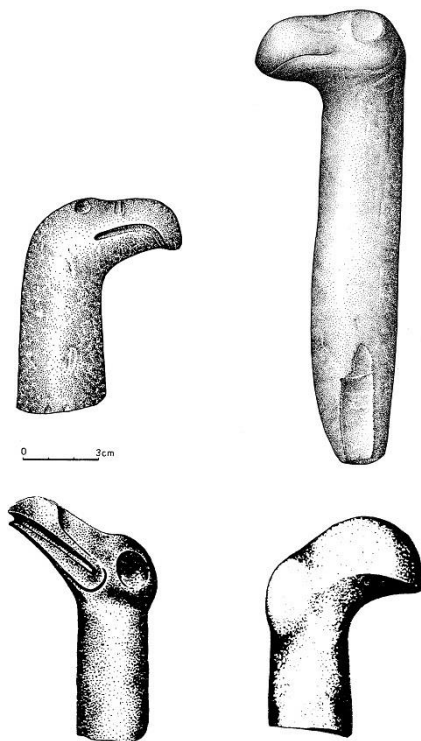


Fig. 20.

Another example of the role of vultures in funerary rites (a practice still extant) is found in Tibet.⁵⁸ The Russian Orientalist G. Ts. Tsybikov, who visited Tibet in 1899–1902, wrote thus: “In a mountain gorge, north of a monastery,

⁵⁶ Zick 2008, 15–17.

⁵⁷ Kozłowski 1997, 33–36.

⁵⁸ David-Neel 1991, 26.

there is a kind of a monastic cemetery where the dead are given over to vultures. The relatives or acquaintances of the deceased carry the corpse here and lay it on a special platform. Immediately, huge vultures and lammergeyers, greedy and accustomed to human flesh, come flying and start pecking at the corpse. To speed up its annihilation, the flesh of the deceased is cut into small pieces and its bones are pounded on rocks. All this is quickly consumed by the birds. Only the corpses of those without kith or kin are placed here intact and are turned into skeletons by the birds”.⁵⁹

The journalist V. V. Ovchinnikov, who visited Tibet in the first half of the 1950s, describes the same ritual (according to the recollections of a hunter named Zedeng, whom he met in the mountains, about the ‘funerals’ of his father): “Lamas lay the dead body on poles... and depart to the summit of the sacred mountain. There nobody dares to hunt or to gather medicinal herbs. On an horizontal platform procession is stopped. At its center is a white oblong flat stone covered with Buddhist sayings. The barrow is put down onto it. Several times, the blade of a long sword flashes in the sun and the corpse is cut into pieces. The lamas strike gongs. Suddenly, Zedeng saw gigantic grey vultures. Attracted by the familiar sounds, the birds spiral downward and, having surrounded the stone, began pecking at the corpse. The lamas promptly completed the ritual: they pounded the bones with stones and mixed them with specially prepared paste. After a few minutes, the sacred birds, flapping their wings, rose into the sky. The stone is empty. He breathed a sigh of relief: heaven had accepted the body of his father”.⁶⁰

The epithet ‘sacred’ employed by V. V. Ovchinnikov for the birds is quite relevant not only to the ceremony described, which was of a Lamaistic character, but it probably has pre-Buddhist origins. In Tibetan mythology, the vulture appears as a symbol of the pre-Buddhist Bon deities.⁶¹

The Black vulture, as opposed to the Griffon vulture and the Himalayan or Snow griffon vulture due to its dark-brown feathering and the presence of a ‘cap’ of fine feathers on its head,⁶² is in Central Asia called either *tasqara* (by Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Kirghiz)⁶³ or *ghajir*. *Tasqara* is a common term in the Turko-Mongol languages, because the Mongol variant – *khar-tas* – means ‘black *tas*’, which has the same meaning in Turkic languages. The name *ghajir*, as our inquiries have shown, is used, for instance, in the Urgut district of the Samarqand Province and in the southernmost Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan where in the Baysun district there is a mountain called *Ghajirqiya* (or ‘Vulture Slope’).

⁵⁹ Tsybikov 1981, 53.

⁶⁰ Ovchinnikov 1957, 33.

⁶¹ Mify narodov mira 1992, 311, 510, 622.

⁶² Bogdanov 1992, 193–198.

⁶³ Kashkarov 1931, 65; Moiseev, Kashkarov 1980, 43.

A variant of the latter name is *kachyr* which carries the meaning of ‘a kind of eagle – a fabulous bird believed to live 1000 years and feed on corpses’. This noun is adduced by L. Budagov in his glossary of Turkic dialects.⁶⁴ The Persian-Tajik name for the Black vulture is *kargas* (or *kalāḡ karkas*),⁶⁵ or *kerkes* as it appears in Turkic languages. It connotes ‘a fabulous bird feeding on corpses’ and by implication eagles.⁶⁶ “Karkas (*Pehl.* kargas, *Avest.* *kahrkasa-*, literally ‘hen-eater’) with a ‘gold necklace’ appears as the name for a vulture in the *Bundahishn*”.⁶⁷ The gold necklace apparently implies the collar of feathers on the lower part of the neck which has a hygienic purpose: “it keeps the blood from flowing down the neck”.⁶⁸

The Griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and the Himalayan or Snow griffon vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*) have a pale brown color and their head and neck are covered with white down causing them to appear very similar to one another. The latter, larger in size, is known in Central Asia as *qumoy*, *qumay*, *ghummay*, and in the Pamirs as *ak-koljir*, or ‘White vulture’ (possibly a variant of *kachyr* or *gadzhir*).⁶⁹ Because of their similar appearances, the local inhabitants apparently did not distinguish between the Himalayan or Snow griffon vulture and the Griffon vulture calling them both *qumay*. This term accepted in Uzbek and Kirghiz is probably derived from the Persian *khoma* (*khumo*), or *khomay* (*khumay*),⁷⁰ which means, according to dictionaries, “a fabulous bird, eagle of the highest breed, phoenix, paradise bird (it is believed that it never descends to the earth, constantly hovering in the upper layers of the atmosphere; if it casts its shadow onto someone’s head, that person will become a king, a fortunate man); the *Khomayun*, i.e. made happy, blessed, august, was the epithet of the Turkish sultans, emperors”.⁷¹ It also means “1) Phoenix (a fabulous bird which, according to popular belief, brings happiness to him upon whom its shadow falls); 2) Lammergeier”.⁷²

An example of the use of identical names for real and mythical (‘fabulous’) birds is observable in the name of *Simurgh* denoting, according to different glossaries, “a fabulous bird, large eagle, phoenix, griffon”,⁷³ “a fairy-tale bird, griffon, phoenix, lammergeier”,⁷⁴ “griffon, lammergeier, fairy-tale bird”.⁷⁵

⁶⁴ Budagov 1871, 7.

⁶⁵ Bertel's 1949, 120; Miller 1953, 398.

⁶⁶ Budagov 1871, 123.

⁶⁷ Chunakova 1997, 283, 292; Chunakova 2004, 89, 133.

⁶⁸ Akimushkin 1973, 147.

⁶⁹ Bogdanov 1992, 198–205.

⁷⁰ Simakov 1998, 8, 124, 189.

⁷¹ Budagov 1871, 315.

⁷² Miller 1953, 594; Starikov 1957, 621.

⁷³ Budagov 1869, 657.

⁷⁴ Iagello 1910, 881.

In Central Asiatic folklore, other ‘fabulous’ birds are known, yet through the “mythical looking-glass” real species – vultures – are discernible. An example is the fairy-tale *alp karakush* (‘a powerful black bird’) that is said to live for a 1000 years and feeds on cadavers.⁷⁶ This phenomenon reflects the ancient cult of birds of prey; the names of real birds over time became the names of miraculous and mythical birds and *visa versa*.

Echoes of the worship of vultures in Central Asia and Kazakhstan are traceable through ethnography and folklore. The ethnographer G. N. Simakov, who published a special monograph devoted to hunting with trained birds of prey, believes that analysis of field materials and literary information – in one way or another connected with birds of prey and falconry – imply the presence of a cult of predatory birds in the region, such as eagles, hawks, falcons, kites, vultures, etc. Vultures, along with other birds of prey, were considered totem animals.⁷⁷ G. N. Simakov writes that one of the characteristic features of totemism – communion with the meat of a totem – is preserved in “substantially altered form, having moved from the sphere of the totemic cult to a branch of traditional medicine”. He mentions with a reference to N. A. Zarudnyi that in Central Asia the cooked meat of the smallest species of vulture – Egyptian vulture – was used to treat women for infertility, while meat and viscera were used to treat indigestion.⁷⁸

The *Kumay* (*Khumay*, *Khubay*) is connected with a number of characters in Turkic mythology and epic: the dog Khubay-khus (‘Khubay-bird’) begotten by a vulture and the winged hound of epic hero Manas called Kumaiyk from which no beast is able to escape.⁷⁹ In the opinion of some scholars, it is even possible to trace the genetic ties of the Turkic goddess Umay to the Iranian mythological bird Khumay.⁸⁰

V. D. Kubarev and D. V. Cheremisin connect semantically the wolf/dog and vulture with the mythical vultures of the Altaic (Pazyryk) animal style. They accounted for this connection by the circumstance that the cry of the vulture was believed to resemble the barking of a dog, as well as by the fact that the images of wolves and dogs, as eaters of carrion, possessed a chthonic character that led to the emergence of the semantic series of ‘wolf – vulture’.⁸¹ The last supposition is acceptable, the more so, because, as mentioned above, there are examples where we find the established pair ‘vulture – dog’.

⁷⁵ Miller 1953, 301.

⁷⁶ Simakov 1998, 191.

⁷⁷ Simakov 1998, 22, 55, 268.

⁷⁸ Simakov 1998, 54 (in Russian). According to A. Brehm, the Sudanese ascribe medicinal properties to a vulture’s liver (Brem 1958, 509, in Russian).

⁷⁹ Borgoiakov 1980, 276; Kubarev, Cheremisin 1984, 93; Mify narodov mira 1992, 98.

⁸⁰ Borgoiakov 1980, 275; Sagalaev 1991, 76–77; Mify narodov mira 1992, 547.

⁸¹ Kubarev, Cheremisin 1984, 93–95, fig. 3.

The merging of functional and semantic features, as well as the laws of mythological thinking, according to which a supernatural creature, in this case a mythical vulture must possess uncommon external marks, apparently contributed to the emergence and use, along with realistic images, of the image of a vulture with ears and crested neck, widely known on Pazyryk works of art, items from the Siberian collection of Peter the Great, and other objects of the Scytho-Siberian animal style.

It is, however, impossible to accept the conclusion of Kubarev and Cheremisin about the opposition of the images of the soaring eagle and the scavenger vulture in the art and ideas of the early nomads of the Altay. These authors allege that the epithet 'soaring' is not applicable to vultures. They also argue that head dresses were ornamented with eagle figurines while vulture figurines were restricted to adorn horse gear.⁸² In their article, however, we can easily discern that many figures identified as eagles are in fact vultures which appear on many diverse objects. As to the image of a bird of prey soaring, if we are to trust to ornithologists, vultures surpass eagles and all other predatory birds.⁸³

It seems more correct to speak not about the opposition between the eagle and the vulture, but about each kind of bird represented in the animal style and, accordingly, in the ideology of ancient nomads, had its own sphere of mythological responsibility. Moreover, some of the characteristics of different types of birds of prey could duplicate each other (for example, both the eagle and the vulture are associated with heaven and royal authority). In the light of all that is mentioned above, there are doubts concerning the supposition of M. I. Borgoiakov that, due to the movements of the population and contacts in the Eurasian steppe, the earliest image of waterfowl (ducks, swans, etc.) had evolved into figures with eagle-like heads.⁸⁴ This author does not oppose the images of birds, like Kubarev and Cheremisin, but, on the contrary, he derives some images from other ones. It must be repeated that, most probably, each bird (or avian species) had its own role in the mythological picture of the universe so that it is senseless to consider the worship of predatory birds as a result of a transformation of the representation of waterfowl.

Today, it is extremely difficult to detect traces of beliefs related to vultures. As our inquiries among the population have shown, even in the rural regions of Uzbekistan, people are often quite vague about the identity of a particular bird. Nevertheless, we have succeeded in collecting some information which we present below.

⁸² Kubarev, Cheremisin 1984, 95.

⁸³ Ptitsy 1999, 168–169.

⁸⁴ Borgoiakov 1980, 275.

1. It is believed that a person who catches sight of the Himalayan or griffon vulture, sometimes called ‘*davlat-ghumoy*’, will acquire some benefit: power, wealth, etc. (informant – Abdulmannon Ruziev, b. 1965, native of the mountain kishlak of Vandob, Sherabad district of the Surkhandarya region). The Arabic word ‘*davlat*’ meaning ‘power’ and ‘state’, in Tajik and Uzbek languages has the same meaning of ‘wealth’, cf. ‘*davlatmand*’, ‘*badavlat*’ – ‘rich’.

2. There is the popular belief that the place where some animal has died is then seen by a vulture (*ghajir*) in his dreams; that is why, very early in the morning, the vulture flies in the right direction (informant – Uktam Bazarov, b. 1956, a native of the kishlak of Pashkhurt situated in the foothills of the Kugitang, Sherabad district of the Surkhandarya region).

3. Bones from vulture wings were used in manufacturing high quality flutes (*nay*). For this purpose the wings had to be placed for 40 days in marshy soil (*balchiq*), evidently to cleanse the bones of muscles and veins (informant – Kholbay Samadov, b. 1958, a native of the mountain kishlak of Yukori Machay, Baysun district of the Surkhandarya region).

4. Allegedly, the vulture is able to swallow stones smeared with blood. To catch it hunters employed the following ruse: after setting a lure in a selected spot, they placed the bait next to stones that are dipped in blood. After swallowing a quantity of stones, the bird is unable to fly and is easily caught. In this way, vultures were procured from which their wing bones were used for making flutes (informant – A. Ruziev).

Some of this evidence corresponds to information which can be gleaned from musicological literature. For instance, in his book about Uzbek instrumental music, F. Karomatov discusses a special type of long flute widespread in the mountainous districts of the southern regions of Uzbekistan and made from wing bones of the steppe eagle, although the very name of this musical instrument as cited by him – ‘*ghajir-nay*’ – speaks for itself.⁸⁵ Apparently, the decision about using of a vulture’s bones for making *gajir-nays* rested on its functional requirements, i.e., satisfactory length and strength. At the same time, it must be remembered that music and musical instruments have always been associated with the ritual and ceremonial side of life of ancient peoples. To some extent, this can have been reflected in the choice of materials for making different musical instruments. Thus one of the first researchers of the musical culture of the peoples of Central Asia V. Belyaev wrote: “... musical pipes originate from pipes made from animal and human bones. In this fact we... are dealing with religious links since pipes made from animal bones have a direct connection with totemic cults”.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Karomatov 1972, 57; see also Abdullaev 2001, 39.

⁸⁶ Belyaev 1933, 106.

It is here relevant to consult once again the study by F. Karomatov, who notes that the *ghajir-nay* (another name is ‘*cho’pon-nay*’, or ‘shepherd’s flute’) is called the ‘Mother of all the musical instruments’ and is regarded as a holy instrument.⁸⁷ Possibly, we are justified in supposing that the origin of the *ghajir-nay* and the ideas connected with it, as they are echoed in the popular expressions cited above, have ancient roots. It is probably just a coincidence, but one of the earliest instruments in the world, dated to the Upper Paleolithic some 35,000 years ago, is a flute found by German archaeologists in the cave of Fels (Baden-Württemberg, Germany) which is also made from a bone taken from the wing of a Griffon vulture (Gänsegeier).⁸⁸ Apparently, in the choice of material, its strength and dimensions proved to be of paramount importance.



Fig. 21.

Returning to the mythical Khumay (= *ghumoy*, *qumoy*), one of its important functions must be mentioned, namely its role as protector and bestower of royal power. In this connection, there is another interesting parallel that comes to mind, albeit remote in time and space from Central Asia, like the Anatolian vultures. In ancient Egypt, the goddess Nekhbet was worshipped as the patroness of the Upper (Southern) Egypt and the goddess of royal power.⁸⁹ The vulture was her sacred symbol, and it was in this image that she was often represented with wings spread over a Pharaoh (Fig. 21).⁹⁰ In many Russian publications, for an

⁸⁷ Karomatov 1972, 67.

⁸⁸ Eiszeit 2009, 324.

⁸⁹ Mify narodov mira 1992, 214; Dictionary 1995, 143.

⁹⁰ Karter 1959, pls. 18–20, 67: B, 72; Piotrovskii 1973, No. 5.

unknown reason, the kite is considered as Nekhbet's symbol,⁹¹ although the image of the bird often depicted on diverse objects and amulets, including the magnificent pieces from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamen (ca. 1342 BC), leave no doubt that we are dealing with some variety of vulture.⁹² Possibly, this was the result of an inaccurate translation from English. Yet another instance of confusion is the above mentioned Sumerian 'Stele of the Vultures', or 'Geierstele' as it is rendered in German, which is called 'Stele of the Kites' in Russian. Possibly, we are dealing with an even deeper terminological mess of some (or many?) Indo-European languages that arose at different periods of time. Thus, the aforementioned designation of the vulture in middle- and neo-Persian languages – '*karkas*' or '*kargas*' – is translated as 'hen-eater', a quality that is completely inadequate for vultures, although it is one of the most characteristic behavioural features of kites and hawks when hunting different gallinaceous birds.

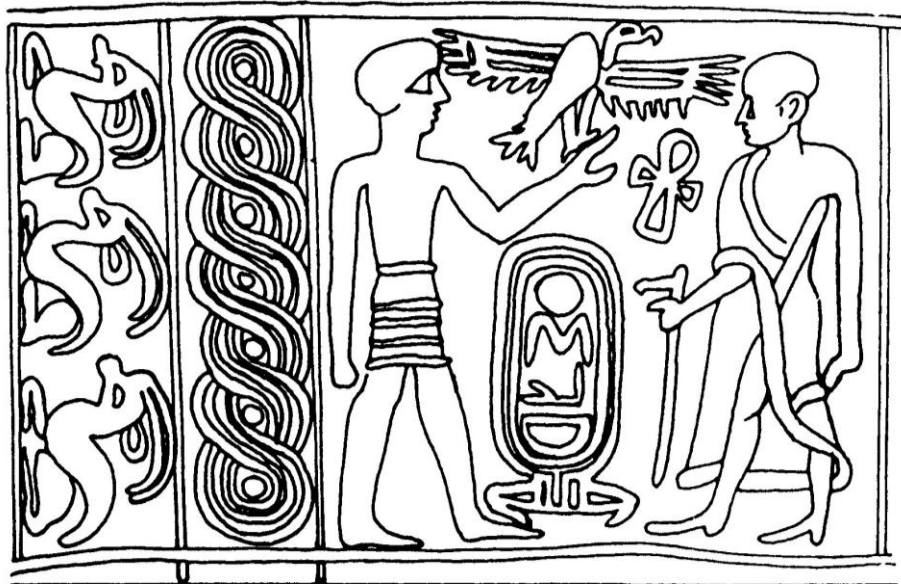


Fig. 22.

The head of a vulture (= goddess Nekhbet) often decorated the headdress of the pharaohs, the so-called crown of united Egypt, symbolized by a cobra representing Lower Egypt, and a vulture for Upper Egypt. Together they personified the protection of the gods of imperial authority. A similar ornament may be seen,

⁹¹ Karter 1959, 157, 165, 171, 172, 179, 229, pls. 94, 95; G; Piotrovskii 1973, 11, No. 17; Mify narodov mira 1991, 440; Mify narodov mira 1992, 214.

⁹² Karter 1959, pls. 79, 83–86, 94–99, 110; Piotrovskii 1973, Nos. 12–14, 28, 34.

for instance, on the famous gold mask of Tutankhamen.⁹³ Vultures with wings spread over various characters are represented on Syrian and Palestinian cylindrical seals of the second millennium BC⁹⁴ (Fig. 22).

The parallelism of ideas linking the vulture with royal authority, suggests that, in Central Asia, these notions possibly are rooted in antiquity. Naturally, it is difficult now to explain their origins. It cannot be excluded, however, that the royal status was conferred on to the vulture owing to its impressive size; in such cases, the dimensions are of significance. Indeed, all three types of vulture that inhabit Central Asia have a wingspread measuring two and one half to three meters making them the largest birds of prey in the entire Old World. There is certain logic to the fact that royal power was patronized by the largest feathered creature of heaven, although it does not possess the look of 'royalty' from the point of view of modern man.⁹⁵

In summing up our analysis of the representations of the vulture on one of the small Orlat plates and the possible motives of this image on the ceremonious belt, several conclusions may be proposed:

1) judging by the abundance of representations on objects in the Scytho-Siberian animal style, the vulture occupied an important place in the religious and ritual traditions of the Scytho-Sarmatian and Saka tribes;

2) apparently, the vulture symbolized the idea of death and the other world and was considered a mediator between the upper and lower worlds, between the real world and the one beyond, between life and death;

3) the presence of a vulture on one of the small Orlat plaques indicates that such views, albeit not directly connected with their funerary rites, in all probab-

⁹³ Karter 1959, pl. 88; Piotrovskii 1973, No. 17.

⁹⁴ Collon 1995, fig. 19; Keel 1995, fig. 17.

⁹⁵ Tangentially, it is worth noting that there is additional evidence concerning the existence of the cult of birds of prey among Sako-Sarmatian tribes. N.Ia. Bichurin described a popular belief according to which: "the *byurgut*, or *berkut* in Russian, is a black eagle two to three feet in height; it has extremely strong wings; this species of eagle is found in the remote mountains of Turkestan. Beyond Badakhshan in the west, these black eagles are still larger and fiercer when attacking. ... They are found in the mountains and sometimes are the same size as a camel. When this bird flies, people hide in their houses; not infrequently it steals horses and cattle. Feathers fall from its wings measuring eight to ten feet long" (cited in Simakov 1998, 188, in Russian). In connection with this impressive description, one of the most famous finds attributed to the Alans by the archaeologist E. I. Besspal'yi comes to mind. This concerns a magnificent ceremonial dagger from a hiding place in Kurgan 1 at the cemetery of 'Dachi'. The scabbard and hilt of the dagger are ornamented with splendid scenes of a huge eagle and a camel in combat (Besspal'yi 1992, 185–187, figs. 2, 11, 12, in Russian; Korolkova 1999, 89, fig. 1: 5, in Russian; L'Or des Amazones 2001, 214–217; Gabuev 2005, 15, in Russian). It seems that this is a depiction of the same eagle described as a '*byurgut*' – it is as large as a camel and is easily able to carry horses and cows in its talons. It is thus possible, that beliefs similar to those described by N.Ia. Bichurin were widespread among the Sarmatians and Alans in the 1st century AD.

ity, are preserved in the more recent period by the descendants of the Sakas – nomads who inhabited the northern edge of Samarqand Sogd in first centuries A.D. and who were responsible for the Orlat burials;

4) the appearance of the vulture connected with notions of death and the other world on the belt with depictions of heroic scenes of warriors and hunters (from a heroic epic?) is possibly due to the fact that the intention is to glorify not only the life of a hero(s), but also the end of life, here symbolized by the image of the vulture;

5) if we follow another explanation of the semantics of the Orlat representations (that is, if we assume that we are dealing with the adventures of a hero(s) in the afterlife (or the other world), then there is no better symbol for the latter than a vulture.

In conclusion, the study of the semantics of one of the representations on a plaque from an Orlat belt allows us to glean insight about the profound religious and ritual notions of the early peoples of Central Asia which long ago vanished, although vestiges of them are still discernible in popular beliefs⁹⁶.

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⁹⁶ This article was translated by A. Gilevich and proofread by Jeffrey D. Lerner.

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