

Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

VULTURES: EXEGESIS OF A SYMBOL

Abstract: Depending on the different cultures and historical periods, vultures have been considered both impure or sacred. But, since they usually do not prey upon living animals, their symbolic dimension, associated to the idea of purification, is present in many myths, religions, burial praxis of ancient populations and remains in some religions today.

In the ancient Mediterranean civilizations, they have been carved in some of the most ancient bas-reliefs of the history by stone age people; were sacred to Egyptians, who even took them as symbol of gods; in the classical times they were supposed to be all feminine and breed by parthenogenesis, and therefore appreciated by some early Christian authors, who came to comparing them even to the Virgin Mary; they have been studied and described by ancient scientists, naturalists, philosophers, playwrights; involved in *many* of the most enduring Greek and Roman *myths* and *legends*; *many parts of their body were considered as a medicine or even a talisman for happiness; and they were so proverbial for Romans to become even one of the symbols of the founding of Rome itself.*

But they were also so fragile that perfumes, myrrh and pomegranates were supposed to be lethal for them

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“Vulture”, from Latin *vultur*, is the name given to two groups of scavenging nechrofagus birds of prey¹. Since they usually do not prey upon living animals (“nechrofagus” derives from νεκρός “dead” and φαγος/φαγεῖν “eat”) but feed on injured, diseased, dying or dead without getting sick thanks to their highly acidic gastric juices which are strong enough to kill most bacteria, vultures help to limit the transmission of pathogens in the environment².

For this reason they have been mostly seen as natural purifiers and considered sacred by many civilizations and, even though they were included into the list of the animals you shouldn't eat according to the purification laws written in the fifth book of the Bible³, their symbolic dimension, associated to the idea of purification, is present in many myths, religions, burial praxis of ancient civilizations and still remains in some religions today in the sky or celestial burials, for example, still practised by Tibetan Buddhists and by Zoroastrians in Iran, India and Tibet, where human corpses are offered to

¹ The New World vultures, including the Californian and Andean condors, and the Old World vultures. The ones of the Old World belong to the family *Accipitridae*, which also includes eagles, kites, buzzards and hawks, and are not closely related to the similar American *Cathartidae*. This contribution focuses on the vultures of the Old World and tries to investigate their significance and symbolism in the ancient Mediterranean civilizations.

² CRAMP 1980.

³ Lev. 11, 13; Deut. 14, 12.

vultures, which are considered the equivalent of angels⁴.

In classical times, Aelian reports about the *Vaccae*, a pre-Roman people, who were used to offer to vultures the corpses of the soldiers bravely fallen in battle⁵, but the practice was sufficiently well-known already in the 5th/4th cent. BC, for Diogenes the Cynic to turn it into a joke: after his dead, if dogs would tear apart his body, he would have a Hyrcanian funeral; if Vultures, Iberian⁶.

The etymology of *vultur* is not clear and probably derives from Latin *vellere*, meaning “to fleece, to rip”, but the 6th cent. scholar Isidorus from Sevilla gives another explanation and lets derive *vultur* from *volatus tardus*, “slow flight”⁷.

Reproductions of vultures are numerous in pottery, painting, jewellery, glyptics, bas-reliefs, and the most ancient vulture reproductions feature prominently in the sanctuary iconography of the early Neolithic culture of the Near East, like Jericho, and of Anatolia, like Çatalhöyük or Göbekli Tepe where, as an early form of sky burial, the deceased were deliberately exposed for being excarnated by vultures and other carrion birds. In Çatalhöyük a petroglyph from the 7th mill. BC shows griffons hovering over headless corpses⁸ and an extraordinary reproduction comes from the low reliefs of the sanctuary of Göbekli Tepe, massive stones carved in elementary anthropomorphic forms about 11,000 years ago, crafted and arranged by prehistoric people who had not yet developed metal tools or even pottery. In one of them, more precisely on the west-facing side of Pillar 43 of Enclosure D, more widely known as the “Vulture Stone”, is carved a vulture among other birds and a scorpion.

Speaking about vultures, the first civilization that usually comes to mind is the Ancient Egypt, where these birds were considered sacred, attributed to deities or even thought as deities themselves. A form of veneration consisted in catching and breeding them and after their death, keeping their mummified bodies in special catacombs such as the one named “of the Falcon”, excavated in Saqqara between 1969 and 1971⁹.

The *silhouette* of the Egyptian vulture¹⁰ was the uniliteral sign used for the glottal sound *aleph*, which is now the first symbol in the list of the 25 fundamental hieroglyphs compiled by Alan Gardiner in 1927. In the general Gardiner list, this vulture is indicated by G1, G2, G3, representing respectively an Egyptian vulture, two of them and a combination of G1 + G2.

*On the contrary, G14, G15 and G16 clearly represent a Griffon vulture*¹¹, depicted alone, alone with the flail or

together with a cobra¹².

Vultures in general are represented as a painting or reproduced as a relief on obelisks, tombs, temple walls and roofs¹³ and particularly the Griffon became the symbol of *Nekhbet*, an early pre-dynastic local goddess who was later the patron of Upper Egypt and one of the two patron deities for all the Ancient Egypt when it was unified. *Nekhbet* was depicted as a Griffon vulture, or, according to other interpretations as a Lappet-faced vulture or Nubian vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*)¹⁴, usually hovering, with her wings spread above the royal image, as patron of the Pharaoh himself. After the unification of Egypt, to *Nekhbet* was associated *Uadjet*, patron of Lower Egypt, whose symbol was the cobra. *Nekhbet* was also patron of births¹⁵.

A part from *Nekhbet*, other deities had vulture headdress: *Isis*, when she took on the traits of *Hathor*; *Satet*, the Egyptian goddess of the Nile; *Hera*, a Greek Olympian goddess, also honored in Egypt, who bears some resemblance to *Hathor*¹⁶ and *Mut*, whose name means “mother” and is written in hieroglyph by the vulture ideogram + the feminine sign¹⁷.

According to the Egyptian grammar Horapollo (5th cent. AD), also the 2 drachmas coins were symbolized by a vulture, because for ancient Egyptians the two lines, indicating the 2 drachmas, represented the Unit and the Unit is origin and mother of all the numbers¹⁸.

The Egyptian vulture hieroglyph meant also many other things, all connected to the zoological knowledges of the time and the supposed behaviour of the animal, considered by the Greek writer Plutarch “*the least harmful of all creatures, [...]... injures no grain, fruit-tree, or cattle, and lives on carrion. But it does not kill or maltreat anything that has life, and as for birds, it will not touch them even when they are dead, since they are of its own species [...]...*”¹⁹.

Keeping on with Egypt, there is an impressive iconographic evidence showing vultures: it's the so called “Battlefield palette”, also known as the “Vultures -”, “Giraffes -” or the “Lion Palette”, which probably is the earliest battle scene representation of all the ceremonial or ornamental cosmetic palettes of ancient Egypt²⁰. One face of this grey mud stone relief (in fragments) bears a scene showing the twisted bodies of prisoners and casualties of battle, preyed upon by vultures, (specifically Griffons) ravens and a lion. The palette dates back to the pre-dynastic period, more precisely to the last phase of the Naqada culture (Naqada III, from 3200 to 3000 BC circa). The two major pieces of this palette are held by the British Museum in London GB and the Ashmolean

⁴ PETER/SCHMIDT 2004; MARTIN 1996; PRESTON 1996.

⁵ Ael. *Hist. An.* X, 22. Cfr. the *stamnoi* by the Falisco painter of Bonn (BEAZLEY 1947).

⁶ Conrad Lykosthenes, *Apophtegmatum ex optimis utriusque linguae scriptoribus*, 988: “[...] Diogenem dixisse testatur, si canes cadaver suum dilacerarent, Hyrcanam fore sepulturam; si vultures Iberam [...]”

⁷ Is. *Etym.* XII, 7.

⁸ The head of the deceased was sometimes removed and preserved, possibly a sign of ancestor worship (LEHMANN 1977; MITHEN 2004; PETERS/SCHMIDT 2004; SCHMIDT 2009).

⁹ DAVIES/SMITH/FRAZER 2005; SCALF 2012.

¹⁰ *Neophron percnopterus*, a small vulture also called White scavenger vulture or Pharaoh's chicken (INGERSON 1923; THOMPSON 1895).

¹¹ *Gyps fulvus*, a typical Old World vulture in appearance, with a very white head, very broad wings and short tail feathers (CRAMP 1980).

¹² GARDINER 1957; GARDINER 1971; BETRÒ 1995; WILKINSON 2003.

¹³ Ael. *Nat. An.* X, 22.

¹⁴ Arielle P. Kozloff, for example, because of the blue-tipped beaks and loose skin of the birds, especially represented in New Kingdom art (see BAILLEUL-LE SUER 2012).

¹⁵ See note 57.

¹⁶ Ael. *Nat. An.* X, 22.

¹⁷ During the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period (3rd millennium) also women holding religious offices and noblewomen could portrayed the vulture cap, but its use was limited to queens and goddesses in the Ptolemaic era again (4th cent. BC). Cf. JACQ 1994; DONADONI 1997.

¹⁸ Horap. *Hier.* XI.

¹⁹ Plut. *Rom.* IV, 93.

²⁰ The cosmetic palettes are archaeological artifacts, originally used in predynastic Egypt to grind and mix cosmetic substances. Later on they took on magic and symbolic functions.

Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford GB.

Almost the same scene is repeated in a stele of Sumerian age, called “Stele of Vultures”, a Sumerian monument from the Early Dynastic III period (the stele is dated to 2450 BC circa), celebrating a victory of the city-state of Lagash over its neighbor Umma²¹. The stele (fragmented) is now on display in the Louvre, Paris, F.

For many classical Authors²², vultures were all feminine and breed by parthenogenesis (from Greek παρθένος, “virgin” + γένεσις, “creation”), that is the natural form of asexual reproduction. The parthenogenesis of vultures would occur through specific winds: *Boreas*²³ (Βορέας), from North, the most violent, *Notos* (Νότος, in Latin *Auster*), the humid wind from South, and especially *Eurus*, (Εὔρος, probably *Vulturnus* for Romans), coming from East²⁴.

The god of these winds was *Vulturnus*, the Etruscan *Velthurna*, whose etymology clearly refers to vultures. These winds were harmful to vineyards and fruit trees, warded off by the *Volturnalia*²⁵ (Dumézil 1989) and well known by Roman soldiers. About them speak even Titus Livius and Appianus, referring to the battle of Canne (a major battle of the Second Punic War, that took place on 2 August 216 BC in Apulia, in south-east Italy), when Hannibal defeated the Romans also thanks to this wind, which was keeping on “ [...] blowing on Romans’ face, raising dust and blocking their view [...]”²⁶.

Even if in general these birds were not very well seen by Christians who compared them even to the devil able to smell the death (of the soul in this case)²⁷, vultures’ presumed asexual reproduction was highly appreciated by some early Christian authors, who came to comparing them even to the Virgin Mary²⁸.

Inspired by this strange way of reproduction, vultures became also symbol of the cycle of the year, because 365 days were supposed to be exactly subdivided in the presumed animal’s reproduction habit: 120 days of pregnancy, 120 days for rearing the chicks (belief that occasionally earned to vultures to become symbol of compassion and self-sacrifice too), 120 days devoted to themselves, and the last 5 days for another (asexual) mating²⁹.

Herodorus of Heraclea, a historian quoted in Aristotle³⁰, believed that vultures came from “some foreign country unknown [...]” and the Stagirite himself seems to recognize two species: “one small and whitish” (probably the Egyptian vulture - *Neophron percnopterus*), “the other comparatively large and rather more ashen-coloured than white” (the Cinereous vulture - *Aegyptius monachus*, one of the two largest Old World vultures, or maybe the Griffon vultur). But, although not considering it as a vulture, he probably describes the Bearded vulture too (*Gypaetus barbatus*), also known as the Lammergeier, “larger than the common eagle and

[...] ashen in colour”³¹, in Latin *ossifraga*³² (from *os*, *bone*, and *frangere*, *break*), to underline the habit of the Bearded vulture to carry too large bones in flight and drop them onto rocks below, for smashing them into smaller pieces³³.

In the Greek literature there is a curious story about birds of prey having such characteristic which can be occasionally played out by eagles as well³⁴: the Greek playwright Aeschilus was said to have been killed in 456 or 455 BC by a tortoise dropped by an eagle who mistook his bald head for a stone³⁵. Or may be Aeschilus’ *aquila* was actually a Bearded vulture, which often it was confused with

In all probability however, a real eagle was instead the one mentioned by the sources, telling the story of a white chicken dropped, still alive³⁶, from the beak of an *aquila*, and landed on Livia’s lomb. That was the legend about the foundation of *Villa Liviae*, also named *Ad gallinas albas*.³⁷

The frequent confusion between the Bearded vulture and the Eagle shines also through the etymology, as the Latin denomination *Gypaetus* is formed by the Greek noun γυψ (vulture) and αετός (eagle). This roots remains in the Italian Gipeto while Spaniards keep on calling it following the Latin acceptation: *quebrantahuesos*. The origin of Bearded (*barbatus*) derives from the bristles under the chin of the bird, which form a black beard that gives the species its English name.

Vultures shared with eagles *the gift of an acute vision*³⁸, *enhanced by an innate sort of prescience*: they were supposed to know some days in advance where to find food and this behaviour was proverbial for Romans who even speak about 3/7 days of premonition³⁹. Horapollo tells that ancient monarchs were used to send observers before battles for finding out which direction vultures were looking to: there would occur the fight⁴⁰.

From this belief and considering that vultures were among the attributes of Ares/Mars, in the Roman world derived two legends: the story about vultures rustling on the battle fields and following the army⁴¹ and the prophecy from which Romulus got to know to be predestined to found the new city, having seen more vultures (12) than his brother Remus (6)⁴².

Centuries after, being Octavian August considered as the second founder of Rome, the same prodigy occurred to him straight before and after being elected consul, while speaking to the soldiers⁴³ and this fact convinced Octavian to be the predestinated to a renewed monarchic power⁴⁴.

³¹ Arist. *De An. Hist.* VIII, 3. See also Ael. II, 46; XII, 4.

³² See also Plin. *Nat. Hist.* X, 3, 4.

³³ CRAMP 1980.

³⁴ CRAMP 1980.

³⁵ Val Max. *Mem.* IX, 12; see Plin. *Nat. Hist.* X, 3.

³⁶ The Bearded vulture feeds only on dead animals.

³⁷ Plin. *Nat. Hist.* XV, 40; Suet. Gal. I.

³⁸ Horap. *Hier.* 11.

³⁹ Plaut. *Trucul.* 337-338; Plin. *Nat. Hist.* X, 7; Is. *Etym.* XII, 7. See also Mart. VI, 62 and Mt. XXIV, 28.

⁴⁰ Horap. *Hiero* XI

⁴¹ Hom. *Il.* XVI, 836, XVIII 271; Arist. *An. Hist.* VI, 5; Ael. *Nat. An.* II, 46; Lucr. *Re. nat.* IV, 679-80; Ov. *Trist.* I, VI, 11-2. Bas. *Hom. Hex.* VIII, 7.

⁴² Liv. I, 7; XXVII, 11; Enn. *Ann.* I fr. 47, 72 - 76; Dion. Hal. I, 86; Flor. I, I 6; Ael. *Nat. An.* X, 22; Aurel. *Vict. Or.* 23; Plut. *Rom.* 93; Luc. *Phars.* VII, 337.

⁴³ App. 388; Dio XLVI 2-3.

⁴⁴ App. *B. Civ.* 3, 94; Svet. *Aug.* 95; Obs. *Prod.* 69; Dio XLIII 35, XLVI 2-3. Cf. CANFORA 2015.

²¹ WINTER 1985.

²² See, f.e. Ael. *Nat. An.* II, 46; Horap. *Hier.* XI., Plut. *Rom.* IV, 93; Amm. Marc. XVII, 4, 11, Is. *Etym.* XII, 7, but not Aristotle neither Pliny the Elder.

²³ Horap. *Hier.* 11.

²⁴ Ael. *Nat. An.* II, 46

²⁵ Col. *Re rust.* V, 5, 15.

²⁶ Liv. XXII, 46; App. *Rom. Hist.* VII, 20).

²⁷ Umbr. *An.* IV, 58.

²⁸ Orig. *C. Cel.* 1; Bas. *Hex.* VIII; Ambr. *Hex.* V, 20.

²⁹ Horap. *Hier.* 11.

³⁰ Arist. *Nat. An.* VI, 5 et IX, 11.

All this was connected to the particular form of divination *ex avibus*, called *auspicia* (from Latin *avis specĕre*, “to watch the birds”). This divination, taken by augurs, was based on reading flight and numbers of birds. Among the Romans, it was only a few birds which could give auguries⁴⁵ and they were divided into *oscines*, which were consulted for singing, and *alites*, which gave auguries by their flight. The most observed birds were ravens, crows, owls, belonging to the *oscines* and the eagle (*Jovis ales*), the vulture and the buzzard, belonging to the *alites*⁴⁶. Furthermore, there were the *sanqualis* and the *immusulus*, maybe the vulture’s chicks, whose identification and interpretation was unclear and that were said not not having been seen in Rome since the time of *Quintus Mucius Scaevola*, augur before 129 BC⁴⁷. Purposely about vultures was speaking Umbricius, “the most skillful among the aruspices” of the time of Pliny, that is the 1st cent. BC⁴⁸.

According to the hypothesis of Lanciani, a big archaeologist of the past, the *avis sanqualis*, meant as a juvenile of bearded vulture accordingly to Pline, could be the bird sacred to the god *Sancus*, an archaic god of trust, honesty, and oaths, probably derived from Umbrian influences⁴⁹.

In mythology, vultures were symbol of divine castigation: for having harassed Leto, one of Zeus’ lovers, the giant Tityos was stretched out in Tartarus and tortured by two vultures who fed on his liver⁵⁰ and they also appear in another intricate legend, where Zeus transformed two enemies - Aegyptius and Neophron - into vultures: the former became a Bearded Vulture, and the latter an Egyptian Vulture⁵¹.

In spite of these mythological aspects, seeing *vultures in dreams was a good sign for potters, tanners and dyers, but it was inauspicious for physicians ad patients*⁵².

And speaking about ancient medicine, which was often mixed with superstition, it was said that persons carrying the vulture’s heart were protected against the wrath of kings and that the smell of burnt vultures feathers were able to repel serpents⁵³. On the contrary, perfumes, myrrh and pomegranates were supposed to be lethal for them⁵⁴.

Vulture’s crop and intestine were good for patients suffering from poor digestion or colics, no matter if dried and taken in drink but simply hold in the hand while eating or worn as an amulet. Against head aches a very good remedy consisted in using the bird’s brain mixed with oil and cedar resin robbed on the suffering head or straight inside the naris⁵⁵; or the *oesipum*, a sort of greased amulet formed by the bones of the vultures head. The vulture’s gall, mixed

with leek-juice and a little honey, was very good for the cure of webs, films, and cataracts of the eye. To pick the teeth with vulture’s feathers (that, at the beginning of the 4th cent. AD were sold for 6 *denarii* each bunch of 25⁵⁶), was however considered productive of a sour breath⁵⁷. And feathers were also good for women during births if kept under their feet⁵⁸.

The information given by Pline about the amulet found continued throughout the centuries and was still remembered, even if modified, in the 15th cent. *Hortus Sanitatis*, an early printed book on natural history, attributed to Johannes de Cuba. Johannes speaks about a *quadratus*, *quadros* or *quarridos* supposed to be found in vulture’s head⁵⁹ and be an amulet for happiness.

And for concluding one more step back, long about 35,000 years this time, with the mention of a vulture-bone flute discovered in 2008 in a Stone Age cave in Hohle Fels, in the hills west of Ulm, southern Germany. It is likely the world’s oldest recognizable musical instrument: with five finger holes and a V-shaped mouthpiece, the almost complete bird-bone flute - made from the naturally hollow wing bone of a Griffon vulture - is just 0.3 inch (8 millimetres) wide and was originally about 13 inches/34 centimetres long⁶⁰.

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- ⁴⁵ Cic. *Div.* II, 34.
⁴⁶ Cic. *de Div.* II, 34. Voir auss *Plut. Rom.* 93. Cf. BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ 2003.
⁴⁷ Plin. *Nat. Hist.* X, 8.
⁴⁸ Plin. *Nat. Hist.* X, 7.
⁴⁹ LANCIANI 1893.
⁵⁰ Hom. *Od.* XI, 576-581, Ovidio , *Metamorfosi* 4. 453 ss. Properzio *Elegie* 2. 20. According to Virgil (*Virg. Aen.* VI 595 ss.), and Seneca (*Sen. Her. Fur.* 747 ss. and *Ph.* 1229 ss) it was just one vulture. See also some versions of the myth of Prometheus (Luk. *Dial.* V).
⁵¹ *Ant. Lib. Met.* V. See also the infernal demon represented by Polignotus in the painting *Nèkya* as reported by Pausania (*Paus.* X, 28, 7).
⁵² *Artem. Orn.* II, 20.
⁵³ All the following information about remedies from vultures are from Plin. *Nat. Hist.* XXIX 24, 36, 38 and XXX 10, 16, 27, 36, 44, 49. See also *Ser.* 848; *Plin. Juv.* III 31, 2; *Sext. Plac.* XXIII, 6 and *Ael. Nat. An.* I, 45.
⁵⁴ *Ael. Hist. An.* III, 7; IV, 18; VI, 46.
⁵⁵ See *Marc.* I, 81; *Sex Pl.* XXIII, 2.
- ⁵⁶ *Diocl. Ed.* XVIII, 9.
⁵⁷ But fortunately to use a porcupine’s quill for that purpose greatly strengthened the teeth and did not have the same effect on breath ...
⁵⁸ See note 14.
⁵⁹ *Hortus Sanitatis* II vol. CVI.
⁶⁰ WILFORD 2009.

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